

A Musical Approach to Listening Comprehension: Using Popular Songs in an ESL Classroom

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Introduction

Using songs in class is a popular technique among ESL teachers. Many teachers have tried using songs in their classes at least once or twice. I myself have used many American and British popular hit songs and found that students loved them. However, sometimes it seems that the technique is SO popular that teachers neglect thinking about why they use songs, what songs should be used, and how to use the songs effectively. If teachers decide to use songs, they must have a good reason for it; they should not do any teaching activity aimlessly. This paper attempts to review existing literature about the use of songs, especially popular songs, in an ESL classroom, and give justification for it. In addition, some practical activities using songs will be suggested. Songs can be used to teach many aspects of language, such as phonology, vocabulary, syntactic structure, and culture. However, focus will be mainly on the use of songs for teaching English listening comprehension.

What Is Listening Comprehension?

Takefuta (1984) draws our attention to what Palmer pointed out in as early as 1936: speech is no more than a series of rough hints which the hearer must interpret. Contrary to very clear and enunciated pronunciation in most ESL listening tapes, authentic speech heard in everyday life is “a series of rough hints” containing reduced forms, ellipses, redundancy, repetition, etc., which the listener must decode. To use terms by Brown and Yule (1983), listening comprehension means “a process of arriving at a reasonable interpretation of what the speaker intended to communicate in the context in which the verbal message occurs”. By “reasonable interpretation”, they emphasize that even native listeners do not comprehend 100 percent what they hear. They do not try to understand the “literal meaning” of all the words that the speaker says, but what matters is the “speaker’s intended meaning” (pp. 56-57). To grasp what the speaker intend to convey, the listener must utilize stereotypical knowledge in terms of speaker, listener, place, time, genre, topic and co-text, in order to construct expectations (pp. 60-63). In other words, listening comprehension is by no means a passive skill as it was thought to be in the earlier days.

As to development of ESL/EFL listening comprehension, Taylor (1981) identified five developmental foreign language listening stages:

Stage 1: Stream of sound (zero comprehension of content)

Stage 2: Isolated word recognition within the stream (minimal comprehension of general content)

Stage 3: Phrase/formula recognition (marginal comprehension of what is heard)

Stage 4: Clause/sentence recognition (minimally functional comprehension of content)

Stage 5: Extended speech recognition (general comprehension of unedited speech)

(pp. 41-42)

It must be useful to provide learners with materials that are adequate for their proficiency levels. For example, materials that put special emphasis on particular sounds and suprasegmentals. However, as Brown and Yule (1983) pointed out, these five stages may not be interpreted as a suggestion that ESL learners should recognize all words that are contained in speech. Rather, these stages explain learners' development of association between linguistic recognition and meaning (listener's intention). In the case of ESL teaching, it is necessary to provide learners with materials and instruction that are most adequate to the learner's current proficiency level.

Actually, regarding the relationship between linguistic units (words, phrases, structure, etc.) and processing of meaning, Richards (1983) explains that syntactic knowledge enables the listener to chunk incoming discourse into segments or constituents. Segmentation helps propositional identification, which in turn leads to understanding of illocutionary force of utterances in context.

In summary, it seems that not only linguistic knowledge but also strategies to utilize context play an important role in listening comprehension. In addition, it could be assumed that, in order to have learners acquire listening proficiency that will work in real-life communication, it is necessary to employ authentic materials, as well as non-authentic ones that are especially designed for teaching listening comprehension.

Songs as a Type of Material for Teaching Listening Comprehension

Justification

Let us consider how songs, including popular songs, satisfy the two important factors as listening materials that we saw in the previous section: authenticity and context. First, Jolly (1975) and Zola and Sandvoss (1976) point out that "the relationship between song and speech is a close one (Zola and Sandvoss 1976: 33)", since both song and speech are "on the same continuum of vocally-produced human sounds (Jolly 1975: 11)". Song and speech are produced to communicate some intention, emotion, or thoughts in a linguistic form, that is, in terms of structure, rhythm, tone, etc. They are different in that song is "distorted" as words are conveyed in melodies. However, it is certain that song is a kind of linguistic behavior that human beings produce vocally, as well as conversation, lecture, chant, sermons, and so on. Probably any culture would have songs, whatever the styles are. Presenting songs in class seems as reasonable as presenting radio programs, since both are authentic texts.

Besides authenticity, lyrics of songs are an organized form of context. A song is made to be coherent and complete itself, and provides sufficient context for understanding. These characteristics meet the claim by Brown and Yule (1983) that listening comprehension is a reasonable interpretation of speech in context (pp. 57-58). Therefore we could justly assume that songs will make good listening materials.

Songs express human emotions. It directly appeals to people's feelings. Finocchiaro (1964) and Berghouse (1975) strongly recommend using songs in every class of English for children for the purpose of developing their emotions. If songs are good for emotional development of children, they could be good for adults as well.

With reference to popular songs, Dubin (1974) emphasizes that popular songs are a part of modern culture and especially so to younger (and younger-at-heart) generations, from which many students come. Lyrics of popular songs are linguistically authentic, as they are what songwriters and singers want to say using English, but not for the sake of teaching English. These songs have something that appeals strongly to people. Sometimes understanding English popular song is a learner's principle interest or reason for learning English, as well as understanding movies and books. This may be more true in EFL situations like Japan, where people have little opportunity to use English in everyday life. Hopefully, using materials in class that students are interested in will aid motivation.

If there still exists prejudice among teachers that popular songs are "bad" music, it is a great shame. Popular songs are definitely a part of culture in our age. It would be a loss not to utilize authenticity, contemporariness and the attraction that popular songs have in English classes.

What Teacher Can Do with Songs

Songs have many advantages as materials. Some articles and reports of teacher's practice found in ESL journals provide us with some of the advantages of using songs, in English teaching as a whole, and not only in listening comprehension (Richards 1969; Dubin 1974; Jolly 1975; McCready 1976; Rees 1977; Monreal 1982; McLean 1983; McDonald 1984; Nambiar 1985; Everett 1987; Richard-Amoto 1988).

Teaching sounds. Songs can be used to teach individual sounds of English which are not found in learners' native language. Besides, songs present phonological phenomena that occur in speech, such as reduction, assimilation, contraction, etc., which have often been neglected in listening materials so far (for summary of study and teaching of reduced forms, see Brown and Hilferty, 1986).

Teaching rhythm and stress. This is particularly useful for learners with an L1 that is very different from English. For example, English is a stress-timed language, while Japanese is syllable-timed. Japanese learners of English will be made to recognize the differences between the two languages with the help of the rhythm of the songs. The number and combination of vowels and consonants that are assigned for one musical note are obviously different.

Teaching vocabulary. A song is a message or story, and is written and organized so that listeners can understand the content well. This can be a great advantage for L2 learners, too. Learners can learn new words, idioms and collocations in context. Besides, often they will find different words and phrases that are used to describe the theme in the song, which will lead to vocabulary building.

Teaching grammar. Sometimes teachers find it hard to locate songs suitable to teach

particular grammatical structures. But if they find one, the song will present very good examples. For instance, some teachers suggest that “Leaving on a Jet Plane” can give many clear examples of the present continuous tense.

Presenting culture. Songs provide students with cultural information about the country where the songs were produced. Popular songs may be subcultures themselves.

Reinforcing practice. Listening to songs can make listening comprehension practice more pleasant. It may be more interesting than listening to dialogues repeatedly. For speaking, too, songs are useful. Singing along is a good natural choral activity, unlike choral repetition of dialogues.

Motivating learners. As mentioned earlier, many learners are interested in popular songs. They have many chances to hear American or British hit songs on the radio or as background music in a shop. When they listen to songs, they naturally feel like knowing what the songs are about. Using materials that learners are interested in will, hopefully, motivate learners and promote their participation to class.

Adding variety to lessons. It is good for teachers to look for materials from a wide variety of sources, which will make classroom activities more attractive, varied and provide learners with chances to contact real-life verbal styles. For students as well, songs can offer a change of pace, and therefore help them enjoy lessons.

Reducing anxiety. Above all, songs entertain learners, and make them feel relaxed. It is reasonably assumed that atmosphere in a classroom promotes learners’ language acquisition (for example, see Krashen 1983). Singing along can break learners’ inhibitions toward speaking, too, as it enables shy people to sing hiding behind other classmates. In addition, singing together is expected to create a sense of solidarity among students, which will create in turn a comfortable classroom atmosphere.

Helping remember language. With melody, it becomes easy to remember lyrics. Later on, when learners hear the melody or sing it, chances are that they will remember at least some of the words.

Introducing varieties of English. Songs are also helpful in presenting different regional or ethnic varieties of English to learners. In this sense, it will be more interesting to use not only American popular songs, but also those from different countries, sung by different types of singers.

Increasing common sense. This is a neglected advantage in any ESL literature for some reason, but in fact this is not negligible. Unless they have some trouble with auditory and articulatory organs, almost all people will know at least several songs, and can sing some of them, although words may not be perfect. Song is a part of our world knowledge. Unlike knowledge such as computer science, which is very specific to only certain kinds of people, song is a common skill which is shared by many people. Therefore, it should be useful for learners to get to know some songs in the target language. Knowing English songs will add variety and enjoyment (hopefully) to learners’ musical knowledge, and enrich their social life.

Some of the items mentioned so far are directly related to listening comprehension, such as teaching of sounds, teaching of rhythm and stress, and introducing different varieties of English. The others may seem less related to listening, but could indirectly influence learners' listening proficiency, for example, through learner affective variables such as motivation.

Things to Consider

Before using songs in class, teachers need to consider some matters. Some conditions may make it hard or impossible to use particular songs in a particular classroom. The following is a summary of the literature mentioned before.

Learners. The teacher should examine vocabulary and idioms that are used in the songs to see if they are adequate for their students' proficiency level. Some cultural things may also need to be taken into consideration.

Content of songs. The teacher may find the content of the songs undesirable for some reason, for instance, because they are morally or pedagogically problematic, or because the songs do not seem to interest students. Linguistically, certain songs have distortion of sound or syllable for musical effect and rhyming. The decision is up to the teacher whether or not to use the songs, or find something else.

Logistical matters. The teacher needs to have a large stock of recorded songs with transcribed lyrics. It is a good idea to ask students' help. They will probably have a wide variety of audiotapes, records and compact disks (even music videos and laser disks) in their possession already. The teacher may also want to check the length of the songs to see if they are suitable for the class period. Using songs requires other things such as a tape-recorder in good condition, a soundproof classroom where students' singing does not bother other classrooms and which is free from outside noise.

Sociocultural constraints. In some cultures, certain types of songs may be taboo. In that case, the teacher has to think how to deal with it, whether to challenge the taboo, or to give it up.

Techniques of Using Songs for Teaching Listening Comprehension

This section is aimed at introducing some techniques useful for teaching listening comprehension in class. In planning classroom activities, however, the teacher should consider the relationships between the goals and objectives of the particular program, and between the materials and actual teaching, etc. Using these considerations the teacher should decide what songs are used, and how they are presented (for more information about the elements of a language program, see Brown 1990).

Selection

Besides consideration of consistency among elements in the program, the teacher should look into the things to consider listed in the previous section. In addition, some other kinds of filters may be used to choose songs.

Songs that are sung with clear pronunciation are preferable, but they do not have to be in "standard American English" or "RP", from the point of view of recognizing different varieties.

The teacher should find songs that carry specific phonological features to be taught in a certain lesson, and will be likely to find the task very difficult. Dubin (1974) compares this location process to finding a four-leaf-clover. The teacher's steady, continuous effort to locate adequate songs for teaching objectives, and collaboration with fellow teachers will reduce these difficulties. And, it is a good idea to let students suggest songs. This method not only gives the teacher more chances to select nice materials, but also provides students a sense of contribution and participation in class. The students who contributed the songs are of course happy to hear their favorite songs in the classroom, and other students also feel more interested in these songs than they would with teacher-made materials.

Techniques

Here are just a few examples of classroom techniques useful for listening comprehension practice.

Rearranging. This is an activity that is designed to have learners grasp streams of lyrics. The teacher cuts off lyrics line by line, and mixes them. Students must rearrange lines in order while listening to the song. This activity could be done using big flash cards each of which has a line of lyrics written, so that learners can work together. Or the teacher may prepare handouts with mixed lines printed, so learners individually work on the task.

Filling-in. Students are given a handout with lyrics with blanks on it. They listen to the song and fill in blanks. The teacher may focus on particular phonological features when creating blanks. For example, blanks can be particular consonants or vowels, reduced forms, words that rhyme, etc.

Sentence dictation. Songs can be used as sentence-level dictation (Nambiar 1985:81). However, as it is technically difficult to play back just one line, it would be a good idea to give a transcript of the song lyrics with some LINES missing and have students listen for and fill in the missing sentences.

Retelling. Students are required to listen to the song, and tell things about it-what the song is about, who did what to whom, what kind of mood this song expresses. This will make an excellent combination of listening comprehension and speaking exercises (Dubin 1974:4).

Complementary Activities and Follow-ups

These are some more small activities that can be used along with the techniques mentioned above.

Motivating. Before playing the song, the teacher is encouraged to talk about the song so that learners are interested in the song and motivated to do the following activities. This will also make a valuable listening practice to students. If the teacher has the students talk about whether or not they know the song, how they got to know it, how they like it, it will be a good interaction exercise.

Introducing related vocabulary. As a post-listening activity, more words that have some connection with the content of the song could be introduced. It is good timing to do so, as learners are motivated.

Translation. After listening, students may go for translating words. One idea that the author suggests is to pick out parts of good translations from as many students as possible and put them together to make a composite translation of the whole song.

Discussion. As a communicative exercise, it would be useful to have a discussion session after tape listening. Students and the teacher could express their feelings toward the song, give opinions about whether or not they liked it, or criticize it.

Singing along. Singing along could be regarded as a must in activities using songs. Singing is expected to help students better understand phonological features that are presented with the song, and to promote their listening abilities and productive skills such as pronunciation. As mentioned earlier, singing is useful as natural choral practice, for creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere, and lowering students' anxieties.

Conclusions

As we have seen, it seems that songs can be good materials for teaching ESL listening from the point of view of theories on language learning, and of listening comprehension pedagogy as well. Language teachers' intuition seems to have been correct—it works!

However, it is a matter of course that whether or not using songs can be really effective depends on a reasonable relationship between the objectives of the course, the materials and proper presentation. The teacher must do careful planning before introducing songs in class.

There is one thing that all literature has failed to mention, however: evaluation. It is not clear how song advocates evaluated learners' progress after teaching with songs. As evaluation is also an important element in the process of language teaching, it is strongly hoped that appropriate and efficient systems of evaluation especially designed for teaching with songs are developed.

In this paper, the use of songs, particularly of popular songs, in teaching English with an emphasis on listening comprehension was discussed. Teachers who have had used songs would recognize that collecting useful songs is a very hard, time-consuming task. There are some books available to ESL teachers containing collections of songs for classroom use. However, they are not necessarily all-purpose songbooks. For example, young adults sometimes do not care for nursery rhymes; sometimes it is only the teacher that finds them interesting as cultural information. Songs specifically designed for English classrooms may be useful, but somehow they tend to be boring for students at intermediate levels or higher. It would be very profitable if teachers shared their ideas about which songs to use and how to use them, and compiled a collection of useful, musically oriented, classroom activities (for example, see Rosen and Fukuda 1982, 1983, 1985; Kanzaki 1988). Every year a great number of popular songs are produced. It would be a shame if we did not utilize them as English materials.

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