
Hey Baby! Teaching Long Songs in the ESL Classroom

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This is the fourth in a series of four articles on using popular songs in the second language classroom. The first article, "Hey Baby! Teaching Songs That Tell Stories in the ESL Classroom," appeared in the *TESL Reporter*, vol. 23, no. 3 (July 1990) and featured four techniques: (1) *Tell Them A Story*, a way of introducing a story song; (2) *Strip Songs*, a listening technique that provides students with the lyrics; (3) *Paraphrasing*, a writing and discussion technique that uses paraphrasing as a way of working with vocabulary and meaning; and finally, (4) *Point of View*, a discussion technique for students at the intermediate level and above.

The second article, "Hey Baby! Teaching Short and Slow Songs," appeared in vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1990) and featured five techniques: (1) *Drawing the Song*, a drawing technique which gave several ways of using drawing to work with vocabulary; (2) *Pictures*, a way to work with pictures to introduce vocabulary; (3) *The Cloze Passage*, an overused but effective listening and/or prediction technique that provides students with lyrics; (4) *Song Cards*, a listening and physical manipulation technique that gives a way to reinforce vocabulary; and (5) *Song Word Puzzles*, another vocabulary enrichment technique.

The third article, "Hey Baby! Teaching Short and Fast Songs," appeared in vol. 24, no. 1 (January 1991) and featured five

techniques: (1) *Did You Hear It?*, which can be used to introduce a song by preteaching vocabulary; (2) *Vocabulary Song*, which can be used to give students the lyrics by means of listening; (3) *Definitions*, which makes the matching of words and definitions into a game; (4) *Song Lists*, an easy discussion technique; and (5) *Theme Words*, a higher level discussion technique.

This fourth and final article deals with long songs. It begins with a short discussion on the distinctive features of song, gives a definition of long songs, and concludes with four techniques that are compatible with long songs.

What Makes A Song A Song?

Although songs have elements in common with speech and poetry, they are a unique form. Both songs and speech are vocally produced, are linguistically meaningful and have melody. Both songs and poetry use words to convey meaning, both are usually written down before publication, both can be put to music and both can be listened to (e.g. a poetry reading for poems and a concert for songs).

Nevertheless, songs have their own identity and they function differently than speech or poetry. It is possible to note at least three features of songs. (1) Songs convey a lower amount of information than poetry. Even though poetry can be heard, we usually read it which permits

longer and more dense information. (2) Songs have more redundancy than poetry. Songs achieve redundancy by devices such as borrowing of lines from other songs, proverbs, catch phrases and cliché as well as alliteration. It is this high degree of redundancy that makes songs sound so simple, especially as compared to the complexity and subtlety of poetry. The simplicity of songs is not, however, a weak point. Because a song is heard for a short time, simplicity, redundancy and a certain "expectedness" contribute to our understanding. (3) Songs have a personal quality that makes the listener react as if the song were being sung for the listener personally. We are joined through the direct quality of the song words (unlike a movie actor in a film talking to another actor) to the singer and through the singer to others in the audience even if we are at home rather than at a concert. Thus songs have a socially unifying feature for the selected audience. Songs create their own world of feeling and emotion and as we participate in the song, we participate in the world it creates. As Mark Booth states, "the song embodies myth and we step into it." (Booth 1976).

What are Long Songs?

Long songs represent the majority on Top 40 charts. They are usually four minutes or longer in duration. Most long songs are fast. As an example, think of almost any Madonna song. About twenty or twenty five per cent of long songs are slow, however. For example, Billy Joel's "I'm in a New York State of Mind." Long songs are not divided into long, fast songs or long, slow songs because the tempo does not seem to have any effect on the techniques. Techniques that work with long, fast songs are equally effective with

long, slow songs. Frequently long songs are not very easy to sing and present a series of images rather than tell a story. For many of our students, these songs are the same as rock songs.

A Possible Lesson Plan

Long songs are so numerous and they have so many possible thematic variations that it is difficult to recommend techniques that will be compatible with all long songs. What follows is a general technique for getting lyrics to songs when the lyrics are not easy to understand titled *Pop Songs: When Words are Impossible to Catch*. Following that is a possible lesson plan for lower level classes and consists of *All Purpose Questions* (before listening questions) to introduce the song. *Vocabulary Song*, described elsewhere (Griffie 1991) to give students the lyrics. *Mistakes Change Everything* gives students additional practice with vocabulary and structures and *Vocabulary Association* outlines an easy discussion technique.

Pop Songs: When Words are Impossible to Catch

Many popular songs are sung in such a way that the words difficult to catch but it is often just this kind of music that students most want to listen to. Rather than using only slow and easy to understand music in your classroom, this technique makes it possible to play music with difficult to catch lyrics. Before you begin obtain the full lyrics of the song and prepare them to be handed out. Students will have the full lyrics in three steps. Step one is to listen to the song with no text or preparation. The student's level of understanding will be close to zero. Ask

what words they could catch. Step three is to play the song again but this time read a line before playing the song. In other words, read a line and play a line. Students will not understand all the vocabulary nor will they retain much in long term memory, but they will understand and recognize that what you are saying is indeed what is being sung. Step three is to pass out the full text and have the students listen again while they are looking at the lyrics. In three short, simple steps you have taken the students from almost zero to full understanding. Finally, discuss vocabulary, idioms, grammar and any other questions.

Extensions

1. In step three, instead of passing out the full lyrics, pass out a clozed form of the lyrics. You have many options as how much to cloze. For a low class, cloze easy to catch words; for a slightly higher class, cloze full phrases or every 5th word. For a high class give only the first two or three words in each sentence.
2. After completing step three, have the students turn the complete lyrics over, listen and fill in a clozed passage. You will have to decide how many times to listen. Then compare their cloze lyrics and the full lyrics that you previously gave them. Students will be able to see for themselves what words and phrases they cannot hear.

All Purpose Questions

This technique works with all song types and is a collection of questions divided into pre-listening questions, while you listen questions, and follow up questions. These questions can be used to

(1) introduce a song, (2) quiz students on their reaction to a song, (3) gage their grasp of content, or (4) work on grammar points such as future and past tenses. Before you begin look at the questions below and decide which ones to use. Be selective, don't try to use them all. Tell the students the name of the song and any additional information you know that you feel might be helpful. Then ask the questions, write them on the board, or pass them out. Play the song and discuss the answers.

Before Listening Questions

1. What type of music do you think this will song will be? rock, country, folk, etc.
2. Do you expect the singer will be man/woman; over 30/under 30; U.S., British, etc.
3. Is this song going to be happy or sad?
4. Will the song be fast, moderate or slow?
5. What are some of the words you expect to hear?
6. In one word or phrase, what is this song going to be about?
7. Do you think you are going to like this song?

While Listening Questions

(These questions must be based on the actual lyrics of the song.)

1. Check or tick (✓) all the . . .
2. Write down all the . . .
3. Answer these true-false questions.
4. Count the times you hear . . .
5. Did you hear _____ or _____?
6. Listen and tell me who, what, when, where, why, did, is, are

After Listening Questions

1. What kind of music was this?
2. How did you feel while you listened?

3. What did you think about while you listened?
4. What words do you remember now?
5. Would you like to listen again? Why or why not?
6. Would you like to listen to another song by the same singer or group?
7. Did you notice how you moved your body when you listened?
8. How would you describe this music?
9. Have you ever heard this song before? This type of song? Where?
10. What do you think the singer/group looks like?
11. If you had to give this song a new title, what would it be?
12. What happened in the composer's life to make him/her write this?
13. What is one word (in this song) that best describes it?
14. What is the one word or what are some words (not in the song) that best describes it?

Mistakes

This is a technique which raises the consciousness of students about their mistakes and was inspired by the mistakes I found on record album lyric sheets. It works with all songs and with all class levels. Before you begin, think about common mistakes your students make such as spelling, singular and plural agreement, verb tenses, omitted and incorrect prepositions. Insert the mistakes in the lyric sheets you prepare for handouts. In class hand out the lyric sheets containing the mistakes. Listen to the song and ask students to underline unusual, ungrammatical items or things that just don't make sense. Include some lines with no mistakes.

Extensions

1. Hand out the lyrics before you listen and ask the students to underline the mistakes. Discuss any mistakes the students find. Then play to verify or find additional mistakes.
2. Use this technique as a initial diagnostic test early in the semester. Include as many common mistakes as you can. Hand out the lyrics, but don't discuss them. Listen and ask students to underline. Count and tabulate the mistakes. This will give you an idea of what students can and can't hear and where you might want to work. Do the same song with the same lyric mistakes at the end of the semester to measure improvement.

Vocabulary Association

This technique works with vocabulary through word association. Individual words from a song are selected. Students are asked to list additional words that they associate to form word families. This helps students remember vocabulary in groups rather than as isolated units. Select a song and make a list of the vocabulary you want to work with. Sometimes it's helpful to select words that focus on a content theme or structures e.g. nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions or negatives.

Before you begin make your vocabulary list available to students for example, dictate the words for spelling practice. Then hand out the song lyrics. Listen to the song and ask students to circle the words in the lyrics from the list as they hear them sung. Then ask students to write two or three words they associate with each word on the original list.

Word from Song	Example Associated Words
black	night, big, lost
give	present, like, action, ribbon

Finally, have students compare their lists and discuss them.

In Conclusion

Our young students are the new generation. They were born at a time in which most of them, no matter where they were born, know each other's songs, and English language songs lead this movement. Songs are part of what makes a generation a generation and the current generation is a global generation rather than a parochial one. The world is evolving a common culture and pop songs are its backbone. By using pop songs in your classroom, you and your students are participating in the emerging world culture.

Acknowledgements

I learned *Vocabulary Association* from Kaye Wilson.

References

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About the Author

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