
Hey Baby! Teaching Short and Fast Songs in the ESL Classroom

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This is the third 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) issue 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 and above levels.

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.

This article deals with short and fast songs. It begins with a short discussion on how to acquire song lyrics, gives a definition of short and fast songs,

continues with five techniques that are compatible with short and fast songs, and concludes with a reference list of short and fast songs. The fourth and final article in this series will discuss long songs.

How can I get the lyrics to songs?

Lyrics are the words to songs. English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers enjoy an environment rich in English language input, including English language songs from the popular media. For those of us teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language), especially those teachers who are not bilingual, acquiring song lyrics may be a problem.

It is, however, necessary for teachers who want to use songs in their classroom to have the full lyrics or words of the song. There are at least two good reasons for having the exact and complete lyrics to any song you use. First, if you know ninety nine percent of the lyrics, but do not know one word or phrase, that is exactly the word or phrase your students will ask you about. The second reason is less pedagogical and more social. Many songs have lyrics that may be offensive to you and/or your students. This is especially true of certain types of rock songs.

If you come across what you consider to be this type of song, you have options. For example, you can explain the lyrics, you can ignore them, or you can refuse to use the song in class. You can't exercise

any of these options, however, if you are unaware of the problem. Following are some ways to acquire song lyrics:

1. Buy records, tapes or CDs that have the lyrics printed inside. In the case of tape cassettes, these printed lyrics are very small but they can be put on a copy machine and enlarged. In many cases these lyrics contain mistakes so be sure to check them carefully.
2. Listen to the song and write the words yourself. There are many songs that are slow enough for you to do this and many singers who sing quite clearly.
3. Ask your friends to help you when you can't catch a certain line or phrase. While it might be asking too much of your friends to transcribe the lyrics to a complete song, most people will help you with a difficult line. Write out the lyrics and put blank spaces where you can't catch the words. Ask your friends to listen and tell you the parts you can't catch.
4. Use songs that have had the lyrics printed. There is, for example, a paperback book that can be purchased of all the Beatles song lyrics.
5. For the latest hit songs, there are various magazines which feature song lyrics. These magazines specialize in the latest rock, punk, etc. types of music.
6. Buy ESL song collections that have a song book with lyrics, such as the BBC *Songs Alive* which features ten traditional English songs. All the songs in this collection are songs that

tell stories and BBC has a video tape in addition to a very good audio tape.

7. Get together with other teachers and share your work. Listen and transcribe a song, make a copy and pass it around and another colleague does the same. Gradually you can acquire a fairly good collection. You might be able to contact teachers at other schools or coordinate your efforts through a professional teaching association such as JALT (The Japan Association of Language Teachers), TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) or IATEFL (International Association of Teachers English as a Foreign Language).
8. Assign students the job of writing the lyrics. This can be done either in class or for homework. you can help them by listening to the song and reviewing their work.

Short and Fast Songs

What is a short song? The average song is from three and a half to four and a half minutes long. A short song is three minutes or less in duration. Short and fast songs, then, are songs that typically have one verse with no repeating phrases or refrains and have a quick tempo. Two examples are "My Favorite Things" and "I'm on Fire."

Some techniques, typically those that do not depend on listening, work with any type of song. Other techniques work well with one type of song but not another. For example, *The Cloze Passage* works well with short and slow songs but

frequently does not work well with short and fast songs because the tempo of the short and fast song does not give students enough time to fill in the clozed passage.

A Possible Plan

This article will explain five techniques that can be used with short and fast songs. *Did You Hear It* works with all types of songs and introduces a song by means of preteaching vocabulary, *Vocabulary Song* provides students with the lyrics by means of listening. *Definitions* works with vocabulary and *Song Lists* make use of the fact that many songs include the names of objects or events and uses them for an easy discussion. For a higher level discussion use *Theme Words*.

Did You Hear It?

This technique works with the skills of listening and vocabulary and is a simple to prepare exercise that asks students to distinguish between what they did hear and what they did not hear. It can be used from very low to low intermediate students quite well.

Before you begin, list some words from a song e.g. key vocabulary or structure words. Keep the words in the same order as in the song. In other words, list words from the first part of the song first and list words from the middle and end of the song later. This makes it easier to follow and find the words. Be sure to add several distracters sprinkled throughout the list. After students have the list, play the song and ask students to circle or check the word on the list if they heard it.

Extensions

1. Instead of listing key vocabulary, list

grammatical structures (e.g. prepositions, verbs), events that happened in the song or sounds (e.g. all words beginning with an /r/ or containing an /r/ sound).

2. On the board write sentences such as "Could you say that again, please?" and "How do you spell it?" Then dictate the word list to the students. Make sure you say the words in a normal way and not clearly or slowly. The point is to encourage students to ask you for help.

Vocabulary Song

This technique works with the skills of listening and vocabulary and can be used with any song to introduce or review vocabulary and idiomatic phrases.

Before you begin, write out the lyrics and have copies ready to hand out. If you are using this technique independently, play the song with preparation or handouts. Tell the students to listen to the song and that you will give them the words in a minute. If you are using this technique in conjunction with another technique such as *Did You Hear It?* omit this step and give the students the lyrics. Tell them to listen and circle any word or phrase they don't understand. After listening, ask students what they circled and discuss.

Extensions

1. As an option, ask students to circle words they do know. Have the students tell you or each other what the word means. Then listen again and with another colored pen underline or circle words they don't know.
2. Write the vocabulary words or phrases on cards and save them for review.

3. Use the above cards for a circle conversation. Everybody sits in a circle. The teacher turns over a card. One by one every student makes a sentence. No questions allowed. Either use the vocabulary directly in a sentence or use it as a theme. For example, if the word is "love", students can make up a sentence which includes "love" or can talk about something they love without necessarily including the word.

Definitions

This is a vocabulary exercise which makes the matching of words and definitions into a game and is appropriate for low to intermediate classes.

Before you begin, select the vocabulary you want to test and write out definitions. If you haven't worked with song before, play it for general effect. Hand out the lyrics and deal with any vocabulary questions. Divide the class into pairs or teams. Read a definition of any word in the song; the first team to raise their hand can answer. The correct answer is the word in the song that fits the definition. Give one point for each correct answer. As an example, here are some words and definitions from the song "The Interview" from the ESL songbook *The Back Home Companion*. Make definitions that fit your class. About fifteen to twenty make an interesting game.

| <u>Definitions</u> | <u>Words in the song</u> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a very high hill | mountain |
| a very big, modern aircraft | jumbo jet |
| a person who drives an airplane | pilot |

Song Lists

Many songs describe or list events chronologically. A simple but effective exercise is to have students listen to the song and as they listen, make a list of the items or events they hear. By doing so, you can practice listening, writing, discussion and grammar. This technique works with all songs and at all student levels from very low to intermediate. For a beginner class you can stop after the listening portion, but for a more advanced class you can continue by discussing the list and then asking students to apply the list to their lives.

Before you begin, find a song that lists a series of events, objects, etc. and write them for your reference. There is a short list of songs that can be used at the end of this technique. Below is part of a list of times and actions from Chuck Berry's song "Reelin' and Rockin'". One way to use this would be to write the categories "time" and "action" on the board. Write in the action column and ask the students to listen to the song and write in the times. Alternatively, write the times and ask students to listen and write in the actions.

| <u>time</u> | <u>action</u> |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| 9:21 | at a rock and roll dance |
| 9:32 | dancing |
| 9:43 | etc. |

To continue this listening exercise and transform it into a more individual exercise, write out some times and events from your own schedule and title it "My Schedule." Explain your schedule to the students and then ask them for their

schedule. You can change the tense by specifying today's schedule, yesterday's schedule, tomorrow's schedule. You can list various times and ask students what they are doing at that time or make it easier by giving events such as get up, come to school, eat lunch, etc and ask them what time they do it.

My Schedule

| time | action |
|------|---------------------|
| 8:00 | get up |
| 8:07 | first cup of coffee |
| etc. | etc. |

Extension

Instead of listing things mentioned in the song, ask students to list grammatical structures. For example, verbs and tense or prepositions and objects.

A Short List of Songs That Can Be Used With This Technique

1. "Rockin' and Reelin'" by Chuck Berry from the album *The Best of the Best of Chuck Berry*, Gusto Records GT-5-0004. This song gives a series of events at a dance party times and what the singer was doing at each time mentioned. Ask students for their schedule.
2. "You Bring The Hot Dogs" from *Carolyn Graham's Turn of the Century Songbook*, Regents Publishing Co. This song gives a list of food for a picnic. Ask students ten things they like to eat on a picnic.
3. "My Favorite Things" from the album *The Sound of Music*, RCA RCP-1558. The song mentions things the

singer likes. Ask students what flowers, food, things they like.

4. "Big River" from the album *Johnny Cash Greatest Hits*, CBS 25AP 2256. The song mentions six US cities. Ask students to list six cities they like and tell why.
5. "Moonlight in Vermont" from the album *Willie Nelson Stardust*, CBS FCT 35305. The song mentions several items in a winter landscape. Ask students to list as many things about winter as they can.

Theme Words

Many songs have a fairly obvious theme and you can find a song on almost any theme imaginable. This technique creatively deals with that fact and allows you to use a song's theme for class discussion. This discussion technique works with all types of songs including the short and fast type which is the primary focus of this article. Although based on listening, it is a discussion technique and works best with high beginner to intermediate students.

Before you begin, select a song that has a theme you want to discuss or one that supplements the text unit you are teaching. Brainstorm idiomatic phrases, sayings, proverbs, etc that illustrate the theme and print them on cards. Following are some themes, example songs, and some phrases.

THEME: Home

POSSIBLE SONG: "Isn't It Nice to Be Home Again" by James Taylor from the Album *Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon* WB M5 2561

POSSIBLE PHRASES: Home sweet home, homesick, home is where the heart is, you can't go home again, there's no place like home, make yourself at home, home away from home.

THEME: Crazy

POSSIBLE SONGS: "Crazy" by Willie Nelson, or "You May Be Right" by Billy Joel.

POSSIBLE PHRASES: Crazy about you, —ing like crazy, drives me crazy, that's crazy, crazy in love, crazy like a fox

Select a song, present it or review it. Hand out the cards with the idiomatic phrases and sayings which illustrate the theme. Ask students to work in pairs or groups to decide what they think the phrases mean. Students can pick a phrase that interests them or you can divide them in another way. But normally each pair or group of students works with one card. Continuing in groups, ask students to come up with a situation in which they could use the phrase they are working on and write a 2 or 3 line dialogue that clearly shows the meaning. Finally, focus on one phrase. Ask students to use pencil and paper and draw something that illustrates the phrase. For example, if you used the phrase "it drives me crazy" students would draw one thing that bothers them or drives them crazy. Put all the pieces of paper in a box. Pick out the drawings one by one and guess who's it is and why.

Acknowledgements

I learned about *Did You hear It?* from Steve Lander and *Theme Words* from Joanne Sauber.

A Selection of Short and Fast Songs

- Julie Andrews. "My Favorite Things." *Sound of Music* RCA RCP-1558
- Bing Crosby. "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." MCA VCM-1501
- Ella Fitzgerald. "I Get a Kick Out of You." *Dream Dancing* Pablo MTF 1097
- Waylon Jennings. "A Legend in My Time." *The Taker/Tulsa* RCA PK-1695
- Carl Perkins. "Blue Suede Shoes." *Original Rock & Roll*. GT5-6251
- Linda Ronstadt. "Am I Blue." *For Sentimental Reasons*, Elektra 6047-4-E
- Bruce Springsteen. "I'm On Fire." *Born in the USA* CBS QCT 38653
- Hank Williams Jr. "My Girl Don't Like My Cowboy Hat." *Montana Cafe* WB 25412-4

About the Author

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