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

Dale T. Griffiee, University of Pittsburgh ELI, Japan

This is the second in a series of four articles on using popular songs in the language classroom. The first article, titled "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.

This article deals with short and slow songs. The third article in this series will discuss short and fast songs, and the final article will discuss long songs.

Short and Slow Songs

Short and slow songs are songs that have a slow tempo and last less than three to three and a half minutes although many short and slow songs may be much shorter. Short and slow songs usually have only one or two verses with no repeating refrains. They rarely tell stories although they may have complex imagery and vocabulary. Short and slow songs are popular with language teachers because teachers believe they are easy to teach and easy for students to understand. I have even attended song presentations where the presenter suggested that only short and

slow songs were suitable for the language classroom. See the end of this article for a selected list of short and slow songs.

A Possible Lesson Plan

Teachers sometimes wonder how many techniques should be used to teach one song. This question can be answered only by the teacher in the classroom, who is in a position to take into account variables such as time available, student interest and the object of the lesson plan. This article will explain five techniques from which classroom teachers can choose. *Drawing the Song* and *Pictures* introduce and preteach vocabulary, *The Cloze Passage* gives the lyrics to students by means of listening, *Song Cards* and *Song Word Puzzles* both offer additional ways of working with vocabulary and grammar. (While I find short and slow songs to be very helpful for listening and vocabulary work, I don't usually select them for use with extended discussions. For a discussion technique, see the technique *Point of View* in the first article in this series, which is suitable for all types of songs.) The first two techniques, *Drawing the Song* and *Pictures*, should probably be done first, but the remaining three techniques could be done in any order. Although *The Cloze Passage* and *Song Cards* are recommended for use with short and slow songs, the remaining three techniques can be employed with any type of song. I will use the short and slow song "I Left My Heart In San Francisco" to illustrate the techniques.

Drawing The Song

This vocabulary technique builds the skills of listening, grammar (prepositions of location) and to a lesser extent, discussion. It can be used with very low to intermediate level students. This technique doesn't have steps but it has several alternatives.

One alternative is for the teacher to draw objects mentioned in the song, writing the name of the item under each drawing. In the song "I Left My Heart In San Francisco," this procedure would result in a drawing such as the one below:

Another alternative for a higher level class, or as a review, is to have the class listen to the song and then ask students to draw a scene from the song or a scene they feel is suggested by the song. The pictures they produce can then be discussed in small or large groups.

A third alternative is to dictate the drawing to the students using prepositions of locations such as above, over, next to,

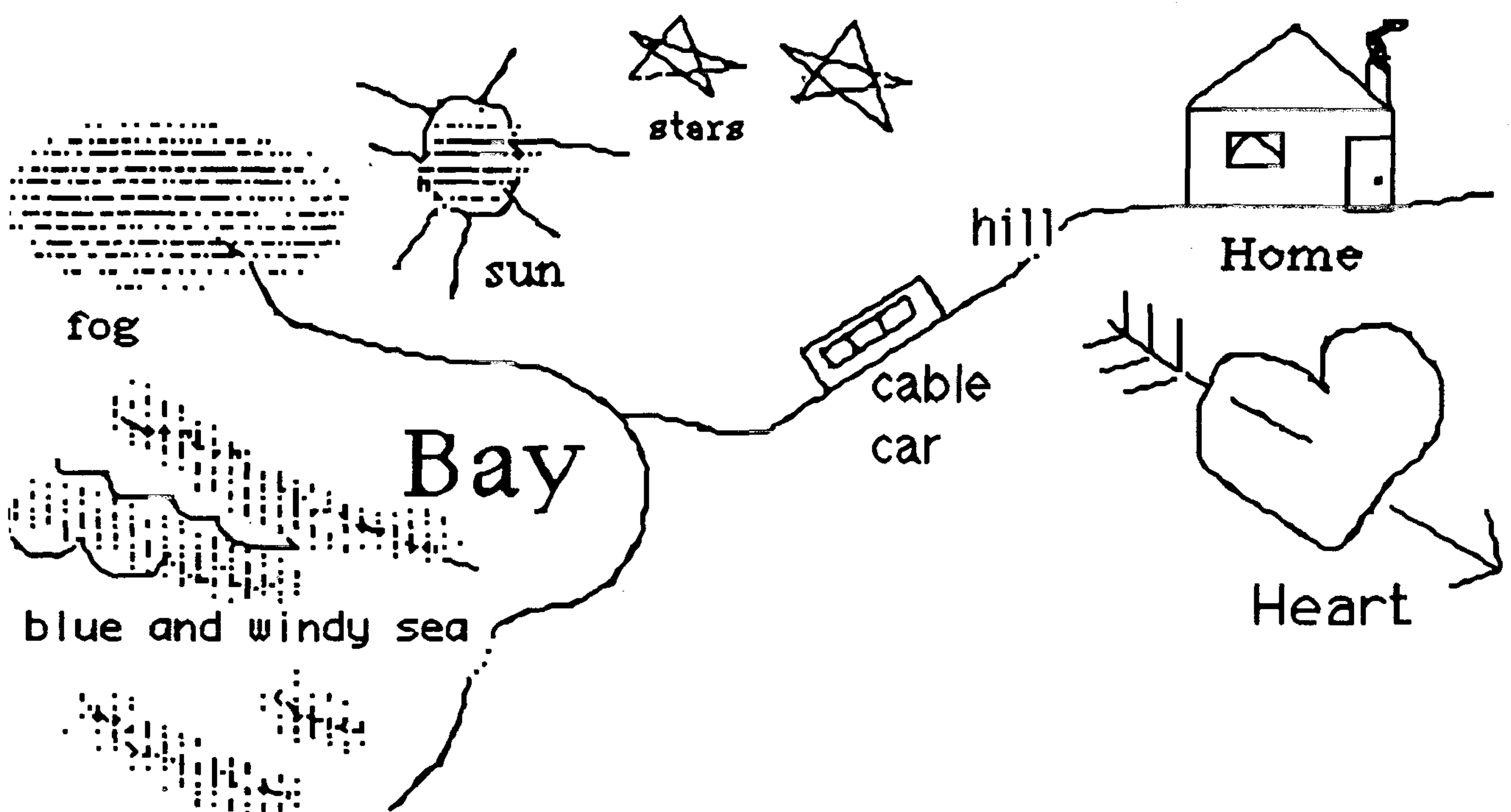
slightly to the left, etc. For example, "draw a hill and at the top of the hill draw a house and under the house write the word *home*."

A final alternative is to ask students to draw their personal responses to a song. For example, after they listen to a song such as "The Marvelous Toy," students can draw a favorite toy they had as a child.

Pictures

Like the previous technique, *Pictures* works with all songs to introduce vocabulary and practice listening and limited discussion. It is based on the assumption that pictures from magazines, travel brochures or calendars create strong images of the song and help students remember vocabulary. It can be used with very low to intermediate level students.

Make a list of all the vocabulary in the song that could be illustrated by a picture (e.g. objects, locations and cities). Decide if you want to list the vocabulary on the



board. Collect corresponding pictures and show them to the class as they identify the vocabulary items. A short discussion can be conducted while showing the pictures using questions such as, "Do you know what this is?" and "Have you ever been here?" If you want to use the song again, store the pictures in a safe place such as a clear plastic folder so repeated use does not damage them.

Extensions

1. Show the pictures and ask the class to guess the type of song (e.g. love, country, rock, etc.) or which vocabulary items might be in the song.
2. Show the class the pictures after they have listened to the song instead of before and then discuss them.
3. As a way of preparing students to deal with the theme of the song, select a picture with a theme that is related to the song and ask students for their personal reaction. For a song about city life, show a picture of a city and ask a question about a city they would like to visit, or a city they remember as a child, or the city they think is the best to live in today.

The Cloze Passage

A cloze passage is any passage with every *n*th word blanked out. It is probably the most familiar and popular song teaching technique currently used in language classrooms. In fact, in many cases it is the only technique teachers use and is, for that reason, over used. However, as long as it is used with discretion, it can be effective.

Before you begin teaching the song, prepare a handout with the text (and blanks) or write it on the board. For

example if you decided to blank out every fifth word of the song "My Country 'Tis Of Thee", it would look like this.

My country 'tis of _____
Sweet land of liberty,
_____ thee I sing.

An alternative to blanking out every *n*th word is to blank out selected words which correspond to a particular teaching point (e.g. blank out the verbs). This focuses the cloze in the direction you want. If you don't have a specific teaching point, but are using the cloze as a general listening exercise, cloze out the stressed and easy to hear words rather than contractions, prepositions or other hard to catch words. The important thing in using a cloze passage is to be aware of what you are clozing out and why.

This technique works well with low to intermediate students and is best suited for short and slow songs. I have seen teachers use, or rather misuse, this technique with long and fast songs, but long songs especially those with repeating verses have too many blank spaces, and fast songs move so quickly that students don't have enough time to write the missing words.

In class, have the students listen to the song first. Then hand out the cloze lyrics. Ask students to listen until they are able to fill in all the blanks or give up. Finally, go over what they have written and verify the correct words.

Variations

1. Have students work in pairs.
2. Give students additional help such as the first letter of every clozed word. For example, "Country R___, take me home."

3. Anticipation. Ask students to write in what they think might go in the blanks before they listen. Stress that they should guess even if they are not sure.
4. Avoid clozing two or three words in a row as students usually cannot catch them and you will have to stop the tape and/or replay the tape several times. Cloze only one word per line.
5. If you want to re-use the same cloze handout sheets for more than one class, number the blanks and have students write the words on a separate piece of paper.

Song Cards

Song cards are blank cards on which the teacher writes the words to the song. Each card has either a single word or phrase written on it. Together all the cards form the complete set of lyrics. While listening, the students arrange the cards in order. This activity works with short, slow songs but not fast songs because students don't have enough time to move the cards. It is suitable for very low to low intermediate students and works only with short and slow songs. Below are some sample cards.

I left

in San Francisco

my heart

High

Before you begin, get some cards about the size of business cards or cut a larger card into smaller pieces. Paper works as well, but card stock lasts longer and is easier to handle. Write all the words to the song on the cards. For a very short song put only one word on each card.

Play the song through once to give students a preview. Tell the students to listen only and not to take notes because you are going to give them the words. Put the cards face up on a table or flat surface. One set of cards can be used by several students. Play the song and ask the students to arrange the cards in the correct order. This may take several listenings.

If you use *Song Cards* for review in a later lesson, the challenge and interest will remain high. *Songs Cards* are successful because they use several sense modalities: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Even poorer students who only listen and watch while other students put the cards in order are participating through their visual and auditory senses.

Extensions and Variations

1. *Song Cards* are a good way to introduce singing. After several sessions of working with *Song Cards*, the tune as

well as the words become very familiar to students.

2. Select the concrete nouns and for each one draw a picture on the card instead of the word. Mix them up and insert them in the deck.
3. Paste the cards on a large piece of paper and hang them on the wall.
4. Ask students to arrange the song cards before they listen. They then listen to the song to confirm that they got the order correct.

Song Word Puzzles

This technique works with all songs and is appropriate for very low to high intermediate students. It is primarily a vocabulary enrichment technique and is based on the assumption that puzzles fascinate students, hold their attention and give them a reason for working with language.

Before you begin, select a word that has some connection with the theme of the song but is not necessarily in the lyrics. This is the secret word. Make as many lines as the secret word has letters. In the example which follows, the secret word is *California*, which has ten letters. Therefore, this puzzle will have ten lines. Next select ten words from the song. Each word you select must contain at least one letter from the secret word. Line up the words so that the secret word can be seen vertically after the puzzle is complete. Hand out the puzzle. Ask students to write in the answers and discover the secret word. Conversely, writing in the secret word makes the puzzle easier. You can also make the word puzzle easier or more difficult by changing the definitions.

1. _ _ _ _ _
2. _ _ _
3. _ _ _ _ _
4. _ _ _ _ _
5. _ _ _
6. _ _ _ _ _
7. _ _ _ _ _
8. _ _ _ _ _
9. _ _ _ _ _
10. _ _ _

Clues (and Answers)

1. city on the west coast (San Francisco)
2. large body of water (bay)
3. to be by yourself (alone)
4. moving air (wind)
5. can't see well in it (fog)
6. where people live (home)
7. where all roads lead to (Rome)
8. when people don't think of me (forgotten)
9. a city with the nickname of "city of light" (Paris)
10. not happy (sad)

What is the secret word? (California)

Acknowledgements

Pictures, Extension Three is based on an idea from Alan Maley described in his excellent article "Poetry and song as effective language-learning activities" in *Interactive Language Teaching*, Ed. Wilga Rivers, Cambridge University Press 1987. *The Cloze Passage*, Suggestion One is from Julian Bamford; Suggestion Two is from Miho Steinberg; Suggestion Three is from Steve Brown and Marc Helgesen; and Suggestion Five is from Steve Lander. *Song Word Puzzles* is from ESL songwriter Ken Wilson.

**A Selection of
Short and Slow Songs**

Julie Andrews. "Edelweiss." *The Sound of Music*. RCA. RCP-1558

The Beach Boys. "White Christmas." *The Beach Boys' Christmas Album*. Capital Records. 4MX-2-164

Tony Bennett. "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." *Tony Bennett San Francisco*. DTO. 10040A

Billie Holiday. "Solitude." *The Billie Holiday Story*. MCA. C2-4006

Kiri Te Kanawa. "Blue Skies." *Kiri Blue Skies*. London. 414 666-4

Bette Midler. "The Rose." *The Rose*. Atlantic. CS 16010

Willie Nelson. "Georgia On My Mind." *Stardust*. Columbia. FCT 35305

Linda Ronstadt. "My Funny Valentine." *For Sentimental Reasons*. Elektra/Asylum. 9-60474-4-E.

James Taylor. "Isn't It Nice To Be Home Again." *Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon*. Warner Bros. M5 2561

About the Author

Dale T. Griffie teaches at the University of Pittsburgh ELI, Tokyo. He is author of Conversation Directions, a task-oriented, intermediate conversation textbook, Addison-Wesley (in press). The song techniques in this article will appear in Songs In Action, Prentice-Hall (in press).