
Hey Baby! Teaching Pop Songs That Tell Stories in the ESL Classroom

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Teachers using pop songs in an ESL or EFL classroom face certain questions. Some of these questions are, do all song techniques work with all songs? What is the best type of song to use? Should I use only short and slow songs? How can I use those hard-to-understand rock songs? What should I do if I read an article on song techniques and I hate the song used to illustrate the techniques? This article, first in a series of four, considers these problems and provides some answers.

Using Pop Songs: Some Problems

As a way of answering some of the above questions, let's look at some of the problems facing teachers who use songs, especially popular songs, in their classroom.

Wandering into a well-stocked CD, tape, and record store can be a bit overwhelming, especially if you haven't been in one for a number of years. If you know what you are looking for, you might be able to find it with luck or help from the clerk. But if you are searching for new songs to try out in an ESL or EFL class, you may come away with nothing except a headache.

Feelings and attitudes toward songs are another problem. None of us feels neutral about popular songs. In a music store we might spot an album that was popular when we were in high school or another

album that came out when we were in college, and they make us feel as if we are meeting an old friend. There are also albums with strange and unfamiliar names and pictures of singers in strange clothes. Whatever they are, they're not our kind of music.

These two factors, the large number and variety of recorded songs that are available on the market today and our feelings toward them, are of concern to teachers working with songs. How can teachers work with specific techniques without appearing to recommend the songs they have selected to illustrate those techniques? From the point of view of the teacher evaluating a technique, the song being used to illustrate the technique may be unknown or uncongenial. Therefore, the technique might be disregarded because the teacher might think, "I don't like that kind of music, and I would never teach it" or "I don't see how that technique could apply to the kind of songs I like." Is it possible to match song techniques with songs that teachers already know and have in their own collections, but that other teachers may not know or even personally like? The answer is yes and the purpose of the remainder of this article is to show how.

What Makes a Song Suitable for Teaching?

Let us briefly consider what makes a song suitable for classroom teaching.

Some presenters have suggested that songs suitable for classroom use must be slow and clear so students can catch the words. Others have suggested we should only use top-40 songs to insure relevance. Each of these suggestions contains a valid insight, but my own experience has led me in other directions.

First, we must consider our classes. How many students are there? What is their age? What is their language level? And what are their musical tastes?

We must also consider how the song fits our lesson plan. Are we free to try any activity or are we restricted by a syllabus? Is the song viewed as a supplement to the textbook lesson which can thereby be justified in terms of vocabulary, structure or discussion topic? Or is the song being used after or between regular lessons?

Teachers must also consider themselves. How do you feel about the song? Do you like it? What does the song sound like in the classroom? Is it likely to distract or disturb other teachers and their classes?

And finally, do you have a copy of the song on tape or CD? The best song in the world won't do you any good if you can't find a copy of it.

In summary, my answer to the question of what makes a song suitable for teaching is...

1. the teacher likes it;
2. the students like it;
3. it fits the lesson; and
4. the teacher has a copy of the song.

How Many Types of Songs are There?

If we were able to reduce all the thousands of popular songs into a few easily identifiable types, we could describe song techniques that are compatible with each type. In that way, teachers would be able to classify any popular song and apply song techniques that fit.

There are many ways to classify songs, for example, according to type (e.g. pop, country, soul, rock), according to popularity (e.g. top 10, top 40, top 100); and according to time (e.g. current hits, oldies but goodies, songs of the '60's, etc.) However, when it comes to classifying songs for teaching, none of these schemes is useful.

In terms of song techniques, I have found it helpful to ask these questions: (1) is the song fast or slow? (2) Is the song long or short? (By short I mean shorter than three minutes to three and a half minutes.) And finally, (3) does the song tell a story? Using these criteria I have found it helpful to divide pop songs into four types: (1) songs that tell stories, (2) short and slow songs, (3) short and fast songs, and (4) long songs (longer than four minutes), the majority of which are usually fast.

This is the first article in a series of four on using pop songs in the ESL classroom and will concern itself with type one songs—those that tell stories. The remaining articles, which will appear in future issues of this journal, will deal with the other three types—short and slow songs, short and fast songs, and long songs.

Songs that Tell Stories

Songs that tell stories are songs that have a story line with a beginning, a middle and an end. They are almost always long and fast and for that reason often not easy to sing. See references for some examples of songs that tell stories.

A Possible Lesson Plan

How many song techniques are advisable for one song? There is no certain number, but the answer is probably more than one and less than five. At times I have used as many as four techniques to teach one song: one technique to introduce the song, another to provide students with lyrics, a third technique to work with grammar, and a final technique for class discussion. The following four techniques follow that pattern. *Tell Them A Story* provides the story line of the song, *Song Strips* provides the actual song lyrics, *Paraphrasing* gives students practice consolidating and reviewing lyrics and meaning, and *Point of View* is a discussion technique. These are, of course, not the only techniques that can be used with songs that tell stories.

Tell Them A Story

This technique uses the skills of listening, discussion and writing. It works only with songs that tell stories and is good for low to intermediate students. It is a listening technique that provides students with a paraphrased version of the song before listening.

Before you begin, write out the words to the song. Then write a paraphrased version for your class. Read the paraphrased version of the song to your students. This

example comes from the song, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

Rudolph was a reindeer who lived in the north land where there is a lot of snow and ice. He was normal or usual looking except for his nose. It was big and red. He was the only reindeer with a red nose. In fact, his nose would shine and glow in the dark. At night he could always see because of his nose. But the other reindeer didn't like Rudolph because his nose made him look different. They laughed at him. Also they wouldn't let him play games with them.

Then one December night something unusual happened. It was very foggy and Santa Claus could not see. When Santa and his regular reindeer flew into the sky, they became lost because they couldn't see any lights, roads or landmarks. So Santa went to Rudolph and asked him to help him. Santa asked Rudolph to be the lead reindeer. In other words, Rudolph would be in front and the light from his nose would give enough light for Santa and the other reindeer to see. In that way, they would be able to fly to give presents to girls and boys around the world.

After Santa and the reindeer returned to Rudolph's home town, Rudolph was a hero. All the other reindeer were proud of him and said that everybody in the world would always remember him.

As an optional step hand out the story for silent reading and class discussion. Then listen to the song and hand out the song lyrics if desired.

Strip Songs

This technique uses the skills of listening and discussion. It works with all songs and is good with low to intermediate students. Before you begin, cut the song lyrics into strips. Hand out the strips to students in pairs or groups and ask them to arrange them BEFORE they listen. For higher classes, ask students to discuss why they arranged the strips as they did. What clues helped them? Rhyme? Story development? Transition words? Finally, listen and rearrange strips as necessary.

Extensions

1. Give one strip to each student. Ask the student to memorize the strip and throw it away. Then ask the students to arrange themselves in what they believe to be the correct order. When they have arranged themselves, recite the song to the class.
2. Paste the strips on a sheet of colored paper and put it on the bulletin board.

Paraphrasing

This technique uses the skills of writing and discussion. It works with all songs and is good for high beginner and intermediate students. Before you begin, write out the lyrics. Also, write a paraphrased version of the song. Your paraphrased version may be a line for line paraphrase or a short paragraph. Hand out the lyrics and your paraphrase. Ask students to select the paraphrase they think is best. Discuss why.

Paraphrasing is a necessary discussion and clarification tool, but it's not easy. It's rather difficult to paraphrase a thought

or an idea without changing its meaning, and many otherwise competent English speakers—including a few teachers—have trouble doing it. Nevertheless, paraphrasing is a necessary language skill and has many uses. For example one use is to check and verify understanding in conversation and discussion.

Paraphrasing has at least three characteristics which students should be aware of. First, it must be in the student's own words. Students cannot use the same words from the original. The phrase "somewhere over the rainbow" can't be paraphrased as "above the rainbow" but might be paraphrased as "somewhere far away" or "in the land of dreams." A paraphrase is not an opinion or an interpretation. It must reflect the original meaning. It tends, however, to use simpler words than the original. Finally, a paraphrase is usually introduced by a phrase such as the following:

in other words ...

are you saying (that) ...

do you mean ...

so what you're saying is ...

Extensions

1. Write a paraphrase of some of the lines of the song and mix these with the remaining original lines. Students arrange them in correct order.
2. Write out a line-by-line paraphrase, reproduce it and cut it into strips. Students arrange the paraphrased strips in correct order either by listening to the song or by comparing the paraphrased strips with the original lyrics.
3. Rewrite street language or dialects into standard language. Ask students to identify and match.

4. Students work in groups. One group writes a paraphrased version of the odd lines while another group writes a paraphrased version of the even lines. They then exchange, correct and re-write.
5. Assign all the lines from a song, one line to each student, pair, or group. Ask each working group to write a paraphrase of their line. After each group has finished writing their paraphrased line, have the lines read in correct order. If you want, paste the line on colored paper and post it next to the original lyrics.

Point of View

This technique uses the skills of discussion and writing. It works with songs that tell stories or songs that present more than one point of view and is good for intermediate students and above.

Many songs are about people who act in various ways. Their actions and motivations can be used for paraphrasing, storytelling, writing and discussion exercises. Before you begin, no special preparation is necessary. Introduce or review the song. Then draw a grid on the board (see example below) with one space

for every character or group you want to discuss. The last character is yourself.

Working individually or in groups, ask students to write what they think is each character's point of view relative to the questions in the grid. Ask the students to consider what each character thinks and why they act as they do. Include the student as the last category and ask for personal opinions with such questions as "How do you see the problem?" or "Which character's problem do you think is similar to a problem you have?" Here are some additional discussion questions: "What is probably going to happen to each character in the future? In real life, do you know of anyone in this situation? What did they do? Can you think of a different solution?"

These four song techniques are not, of course, the only techniques that can be used, but they should work with any song that tells a story. Subsequent articles in this four part series will discuss short and slow songs, short and fast songs, and long songs.

Acknowledgements

I first saw the technique *Tell Them A Story* in a class taught by Shawn Keys. *Strip Songs*, Extension One is from

	Character 1	Character 2	Yourself
Question 1: What is the problem for this character?			
Question 2: How does the character deal with the problem?			

Kathi Bailey. *Paraphrasing* Extension One is from P. Dissosway, Extension Three from Marc Helgesen, and Extension Four is based on ideas from Alan Maley and Sandra Moulding.

**A Selection of Songs
that Tell Stories**

American Traditional. "Frankie and Johnny." *Songs Alive*. BBC English

Ruben Blades. "The Hit." *Nothing But the Truth*. Elektra 9-60754-4

Johnny Cash. "A Boy Named Sue." *This is Johnny Cash*. CBK 3014

Harry Chapin. "Cat's In the Cradle." *Even If You Can't Carry A Tune*. New York: Regents Publishing Inc.

Harry Chapin. "Taxi." *Harry Chapin Greatest Stories Live*. Elektra C2-6003

Barry Manilow. "Copacabana." *Barry Manilow Greatest Hits*. Max 1561

Shangri-Las. "Leader of the Pack." *Original Rock & Roll*. GT 5-6251

Bruce Springsteen. "Darlington County." *Born in the USA*. QCT 38653

Kenny Rogers. "The Gambler." *Kenny Rogers Greatest Hits*. 4LV-51152

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