

## USING MUSIC LYRICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN EVALUATION OF SONGBOOK FOR ENGLISH

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*Having used songs for language teaching in the classroom over the entire decade, I decided, this year, to compile, re-edit, and issue a Songbook for English for students' use outside of the classroom. In this presentation, I will provide an assessment of this language learning activity, based on student evaluations and on my own findings. From both a pedagogical and a professional perspective, this project has much to contribute to our understanding of the benefits of individual learning activities and how these can, in turn, affect the classroom environment and, consequently, the act of learning itself.*

In this final decade of the century, it is safe to affirm that the teaching community, in general, has come to accept the use of fun and games in the classroom as more than just "fun and games". Still, although these activities are unanimously embraced and encouraged at the K-12 level, I have found their inclusion as a teaching technique to be largely rejected at the university level in Portugal. I would like to share with you my experience with using song "in a package" as a learning tool with students in a course of content-based English, as part of the *bacharel* degree for Administrative Secretaries at the Polytechnic Institute in Guarda.

Briefly, the Songbook for English is a compilation of songs of my selection and preparation, based on cultural, functional, syntactic, lexical, and phonological interests for learning English. In many cases, the songs and the corresponding activities serve to supplement an area that has been previously developed, but at other times, they introduce new notions. What is new and unusual, to the best of my knowledge, is that the Songbook was prepared for use out of the classroom.

I would like to raise several issues before beginning the evaluation of the project. First, the inclusion of such a tool is largely predicated on my vision of content-based English as not worlds apart from a General English language course. In my ESP classes, in the Secretarial degree at hand, in

the degree for technical salespersons and in the Topographical Engineering degree, what primarily differs is the *application and use* of language in specific content areas and their consequent lexical and semantic notions, which provides a focus for material selection. This focus can be applied on an as-needed basis, meaning that it need not always be present. Applying this to song, we see that the reggae tune, "You Can Get It If You Really Want" by Jimmy Cliff, can be used for its motivational effect or for setting goals in a general learning environment, while Peter, Paul and Mary's "Leavin' on a Jet Plane" could be linked to a functional unit on travel.

Second, listening is an essential skill area which deserves to be taught and needs to be learned. Listening, the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli and a complex, problem-solving skill is the basic mechanism through which rules of the language are internalized, and "the medium through which much significant cultural information is conveyed" (Scarcella and Oxford: 139). Many current researchers have encouraged us to refrain from thinking of listening as only an enabling skill.

Third, listening to songs is an undeniable component of listening as a language skill. Focusing attention in listening is essential. Listening to music can make an important contribution since music helps to enhance the attention span (Scarcella and Oxford: 147). Music can also contribute to a higher rate of intake, not to be confused with input. Due to the difference between available stimuli and what the learners actually take into their consciousness, music can contribute to the creation of intake. This may include the images, rhyming, color patterns, and physical motion often induced through music. And while memorization is an important strategy in language learning, perhaps both the usable composite images created through songs and the stretches of language that can be learned by heart should also contribute to meaningful intake.

When listening to spontaneous speech, learners further encounter natural speech phenomena like reformulation, redundancy, hesitation, and topic changing (Harmer: 212). While it is true that not all of these phenomena may be found in song, some of them can be found, notably the first two clarifying techniques, although in songs, we tend not to think of these as more than simple repetition. As teachers of listening, it is our job to help students work through natural speech phenomena to find the main meaning; in songs, the main meaning is more readily available, so students may not

need as much assistance in listening to this medium. But the disembodied quality of a singer's voice, like listening in on a telephone conversation, is devoid of kinesics, the body language we very often rely upon in not just L2 but L1 as well! The lack of evident kinesics would seem to require stronger discrete listening skills where songs are concerned. Listening to music provides an opportunity to listen for understanding rather than for speaking (Scarcella and Oxford: 139).

Fourth, songs can be an important conveyor of culture in language. Scarcella and Oxford (1992: 189-190) have called music "an international language all of its own... (which) can lead students into a better understanding of English. (It is) culture... used as content, not just as an explainer of content or as a playful diversion for 'real' language work" while Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty (1985: 127) state that "one activity that bears fruit... is acquaintance with popular literature... (which) brings the student a little closer to the culture". Listening to music is certainly more than simply hearing music; it is an L2 area in which teachers can provide much needed assistance.

Fifth, singing is an ideal way to connect all the language skill areas. Listening to songs is seldom a static, receptive skill because even when learners do not choose to sing along, the tune will stick with them or feet will tap to the rhythm. In other cases, listening to songs does enable, as when learners incorporate phrases, expressions, or vocabulary learned through lyrics into their speaking, writing or reading skills. Reading skills are tapped through preview and discussion questions and transcribed lyrics, while writing proficiency can be extended through brainstorming and editorial suggestions. Spelling is developed through close examination of the lyrics while speaking (and pronunciation) proficiency is developed through pre- and post-discussions as well as singing along, because "the rhythms learned along with... songs are usually valid examples of the suprasegmental elements in the language" (Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty: 127). And because song helps to lower the affective filter in listening, other related language areas may become intake more easily.

Finally, I do defend the use of song (and poetry, games, role-play, drama, and so on) at learning levels beyond high school. Music, regardless of the listener's age, is commonly seen as a form of relaxation; due to this view, in part, listening to music can be a positive learning aid. And after all I have just stated on its behalf, why should students of higher learning be

denied such a benefit? Music, included overtly in the curriculum, offers an unexpected variety in the teaching-learning continuum. Moreover, our students, while growing, exploring and trying to understand their place in a confusing world, often identify closely with songs, being that they cover the realm of human emotions and experience.

Then why move this activity out of the classroom when it is so beneficial? Traditionally, it has been shown that learners spend an extensive amount of time listening in the classroom (some cynically refer to this as "bench time"); so why not move the Songbook for English, yet another listening task, OUT of the classroom? This step would provide more time to expand on and integrate this learning tool in other effective communicative ways IN the classroom.

Furthermore, as previously pointed out, the main meaning of a well-chosen song may be less camouflaged by distracting natural speech phenomena, and thus, may be the easier of listening activities for a student to manage without direct teacher involvement.

And rather than "abandoning" the learners, the music project at-home actually allows the teacher to extend learner contact hours with the target language, much like the weekly composition or working on the Internet. Then, as learners are likely to teach and impress their friends and family by singing along with songs, their pride and interest in the language will tend to grow. And given that EFL learners may perceive or truly face limited immediate opportunities to use English, enlarging the environment of the target culture is an appreciated plus.

In light of the fact that our students listen to music for enjoyment on a regular basis, this seems a logical source to tap for learning. In using the Songbook for English, a student at home can listen to an item repeatedly without exposing any lack of success that could be potentially embarrassing. Transcribed lyrics also seem to contribute to a "democratization" of music in the sense that weaker learners gain access to understanding previously available only to the "elite" or stronger language learners.

One objective of bringing music INTO the classroom is related to reducing the affective filter. Taking it OUT of the classroom, but labeling it "required work" changes the perspective on both the part of the learners and that of the teacher. As teachers, we must ask ourselves, "Do we lose the positive effect of lowering the affective filter by thus removing the cause from the classroom?" In my experience, the response is an emphatic "no".

My students expressed their appreciation for this significantly different material for learning in various overt manners:

- commenting on enjoying the activity;
- being willing to evaluate their experience, the songs and activities;
- telling of how they taught their friends and family members;
- dropping lines from the songs into conversation and writing;
- coming to class humming the tunes and positively motivated.

Although many other factors contribute to a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom, I do not doubt that the Songbook has been one. Compiling the previously separate songs creates a “project” which students then look forward to completing, a “page turner”. An unusual homework assignment, it entails numerous useful life skills such as organizing and planning ahead to meet a deadline, possibly cooperating with a workgroup, and a myriad of other necessary skills.

However, I must point out that the extent to which students benefit from this at-home exercise can only be measured indirectly. The reaction and feeling cannot be gauged on the spot because the moment of contact is removed from the sphere of classroom influence. Conversations, follow-up texts, tests, and activities can be employed in the search for immediate results, but the flavor is different. Teachers using this project forego to possibility of convincing students that it is worthwhile and must leave it “up to the students” to judge, enjoy, and find their own ways.

Overall, using the Songbook, and other such editions, encourages interaction with the material, not rote copying or transfer of words or sentences. Because it functions in ways that go beyond filling in the blanks, it exercises many thinking modalities and solicits socio-cultural growth and expansion on the part of the learner. By securing several different approaches to using songs, the compendium of sixteen melodies translates into a rich source of language knowledge, with learning occurring through discovery, in a place where the learner is in absolute control.

Using songs as a teaching tool requires extensive preparation, especially when moved out of the classroom. Song selection, which is just the beginning, can be based on lexical, syntactic, functional and/or cultural topics. I further recommend that issues such as vocal range, instrumentation, and musical arrangement be attended to. The song must be

transcribed or, with any luck, the jacket cover will include lyrics. Just as a warm-up is common in the classroom, songs need a good lead-in or pre-activity, which can include brainstorming relevant concepts, listing or mapping vocabulary (many of these techniques were discussed in a workshop at the 4<sup>th</sup> ENELESP, where Prof. Walter Best and I showed how students really seem to want to engage in these activities which then create positive learning habits), and stimulating background knowledge, including the historical background (of the song, artist, or the cultural topic), a recapitulation of an area of linguistic competence, or the relevance of the song in the context of the class or world concerns. Let me point out that it is no less important for the teacher to create expectations and enthusiasm for the task where listening to songs is concerned.

The challenge in creating listening activities is, perhaps, to design tasks of listening for perception as well as comprehension of meaning (Oxford: 71). Listening for perception, for example, can be achieved through taking notes and dictation, while comprehension is exercised in summarizing and highlighting parts of the song. Listening activities can further include objectives of confirming expectations, finding specific information, carrying out a communicative task, and reaching a general understanding (Harmer: 212). Techniques I have learned and employed in Songbook include:

- completion exercises
- cultural/social background
- similes and metaphors
- other grammatical features
- vocabulary
- phonological features.

I have also included the identification and use of the following:

- paraphrasing
- error identification
- synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms.

Completion activities, when guessed at prior to listening, require use of discourse competence by which the students test hypotheses in a top-down process, recognizing that the purpose of a CLOZE can vary according to structure or function desired, or be simply random.

Back in the classroom, I have used techniques including:

- lyric dictation
- writing or modifying lyrics
- journalism
- debating
- summarizing
- discussion sessions
- singalongs of same or new songs
- charades/miming of parts of songs
- story-telling
- language corpus research
- Internet research: finding more lyrics, biographies, other information.

Listening to additional songs with related structures or about related topics allows for further application of the skills practiced, while singing the songs again in class can contribute to feelings of mastery and enthusiasm for more of these activities.

Writing or modifying song lyrics (individually or in groups/as a class) is another fun way to “bring the activity home” in the classroom. Editing a song can include substituting one surface element for another to achieve greater semantic/syntactic accuracy, making the element more explicit or specific, or omitting unnecessary elements.

In addition to linking these activities to other skill areas, both in and out of the classroom, it is also important to link the songs to the students’ life experience and other areas of contact with the target language. These may include movies, books, poetry, advertisements, menus, street signs and other realia, as well as other songs. In Portugal, foreign language productions, which are not dubbed, are a particularly wealthy source for teachers.

Fifteen students responded to an evaluation of the Songbook (see Appendix) with the following results. Only one-third of the students thought it was useful to have each song recorded three times on the cassette; the other two-thirds said twice was enough. While most respondents thought each of the language skill areas was enhanced through the exercise, two disagreed with respect to grammar, with one nay-sayer for each of the following areas: spelling, reading, listening, and vocabulary. All but one of the fifteen respondents enjoyed the activity.

The variety of “least” enjoyed songs (8/15) seems to point to the



difficulty of selecting songs that will fit everyone's tastes, yet a consensus was easier to reach: 15 respondents listed a total of just five favorite songs.

Further requests were also varied, but some consensus can also be found in this category. Of the groups or singers requested by more than one student, The Beatles, Queen, Elvis, and Elton John lead the Kelly Family, Michael Boulton, BackStreet Boys and Bon Jovi, followed by Guns 'n' Roses, Scorpions, Nirvana, and Brian Adams.

In conclusion, I do lose some of those moments of joy which singing a song for the first time in the classroom can bring. But I have not forfeited the right to link the project with what goes on in the classroom, and as shown, this is certainly possible. Essentially, to ignore music as a teaching and learning tool would be a great loss for at least the following reasons:

- it speaks so strongly to the socio-cultural underpinnings of a language;
- it is a valuable technique for reducing the affective filter in language learning;
- the teacher preparation required is invigorating and creative;
- it provides another forum for the teacher to learn to be willing to "let go" and experiment with new dimensions and responsibilities;
- it gives learners an opportunity to claim the language for their own.

The Songbook for English, as an out of class project, is the perfect solution for teachers who feel that there is "no time" for music in the classroom and a creative challenge for those teachers who have already recognized the benefits of music.



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APPENDIX

(Results of) **Evaluation Songbook for English**  
volume I

Scale: 1 to 5 - 5 is excellent

TITLES	Task/Topic	Song	Activity
Mercedes Benz	varied	3,93	3,86
Our House	synonyms	3,2	3,46
Our House	vowels	N/A	2,53
You Can Get It...	goals	3,26	3,2
Dock o' the Bay	pres. cont./geography	3,26	3,53
Tears in Heaven	2nd conditional	4,46	4
If You Want to Sing Out...	1st conditional	3,26	3,06
Where Were You Last Night?	simple past	3,06	3,53
Steppin' Out	inf./pres. cont.	2,3	3,33
It's a Big, Old, Goofy World	similes	3	3,06
Helplessly Hoping	pres. part.	2,8	3,6
Fire and Rain	past/pres. perf./preps.	2,73	3,66
Leavin' on a Jet Plane	pres. cont./cond.	3,26	3,66
Bruce's Monologue	fluency	3,53	3,06
Streets of Philadelphia	varied	4,6	3,46
Love Me Tender	adv./adj.	4,06	3,46
Elvis is Dead	Elvis	3	2,86
AVERAGE		3,35	3,37

Was it useful to have the song recorded three times?	Yes	No
Do you enjoy this kind of learning activity?	Yes	No
Does this help you with your grammar?	Yes	No
Does this help you with your vocabulary?	Yes	No
Does this help you with your pronunciation?	Yes	No
Does this help you with your listening skills?	Yes	No
Does this help you with your reading skills?	Yes	No
Does this help you with your spelling?	Yes	No

What song did you like the most?

What song did you like the least?

Write the name(s) of song(s) in English that you'd like to learn or singers/bands that you like: