
Songs as Motivators for Learning English

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Introduction

The value of songs as a device of teaching tool has been widely acknowledged by many language teachers and researchers (Celce-Murcia & Hilles 1988, Griffee 1992, Murphey 1992). Students also love singing and listening to songs in the classroom. Previously songs were utilized mainly for developing listening ability or just for having fun time in the middle of class. However, besides for listening, songs can be resources for improving all other skills of English as well. Today many college students tend to lose interest in learning English after spending so much time mastering its grammar and structure. This paper argues why songs are effective for motivating college students, especially students of low proficiency and also introduces lesson plans for songs I have put into practice in my classes at Kanagawa University.

Songs as motivators for low proficiency students

One thing I realized about the freshmen at several colleges is that many

students are reluctant to learn English or lose interest in English, however they think they need to improve their English before they graduate college. There might be various reasons why this has happened. One reason is they regard English as a difficult task or as a subject far from their own world because of the aftereffect of hard working for entrance examination to college. They feel as if they were obliged to become good at English as a competent businessman in the future, however they cannot realize English is something to have fun with. On the other hand, music is one of the biggest reason many young students get interested in and attracted to. Therefore if songs are adopted as teaching material in the class, the students' response can be very positive.

Through a song, even a boring grammar point can be something students can enjoy. For example, most of college students must have learned one important grammatical rule of a causative verb 'make'; it does not need to be followed by 'to' when it is used in an active voice, but it should be followed when used in a passive voice. When they were introduced this rule in the textbook, they must have felt it was a complicating, difficult rule to be memorized. Moreover they may consider such a grammar rule far from being a real use of language. However if a teacher shows a phrase of 'you were made to go out and get her' which is taken from the lyrics of *Hey Jude*, a famous hit song by Beatles, the students would take this rule very familiar to them and easily master it much faster than learning from only the grammar textbook. Thus, songs are authentic materials which can connect inside classroom and outside. Once the students feel the material close to themselves, they are easily motivated to learn a target point.

Until now the standard songs such as Beatles and Carpenters have been most popular for materials used in English teaching classrooms. It is clear

their songs are rich resources, but some of students have been already exposed to their songs in other occasions or they regard those songs old fashioned. Therefore their songs might not be attractive enough for keeping students' attention. On the other hand, the latest songs are powerful enough to stimulate the students' motivation for learning English. When I adopted songs of Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, Mariah Carey who are popular these days, my students participated the activities with great enthusiasm. The choice of songs for activities is also the key to give them good motivation. Teachers should be sensitive to the students' interests and the latest trend in music.

Every April I ask the students to fill out questionnaires in order to investigate the students' background, attitude and desire for learning English. Among the items there is a question the students are asked who their favorite foreign singer or musician is. Based on the information from this question's answers, I plan for the schedule of my class's song activities and I try to adopt songs of my student's favorite singers as much as possible. This helps involve not only the student him/herself but also his/her classmates, considering the song more familiar.

I also tell my students they can request any song whenever they like. Once one student who looked unwilling to study English in regular classes came to me and presented his favorite singer's CDs. Then I arranged to use his requested song in my class activities and one of the activities was 'Fill in the blanks with the lyrics' while listening to the song. Evidently the student completely memorized all the words of the lyrics and he was able to give the correct answer while some of his classmate gave a wrong answer. Consequently this activity was efficient for giving him self esteem. Once self esteem is gained, the students, especially low level students, can be

motivated to learn English. In general the students with low proficiency of English are tense without self confidence and songs can provide nonthreatening atmosphere in the classroom. Songs can make the students commit to class activities easily. In that sense, songs not only makes learners to have self esteem in English but also enhances learner commitment.

Songs as resources for strengthening all the skills

Songs are abundant resources for the English classroom. The rationale of using songs is not limited to the area of listening. Songs can be utilized for strengthening all the four skills of English.

1. Listening Skill

Songs can enormously contribute to the reinforcement of listening ability. For this area there are various activities such as 'Fill in the blanks', 'Identify the wrong word(phrase)', 'Dictation' and so on. Besides, students can sharpen listening ability through learning the pronunciation, with the help of the explanation about sound changes occurred in the song.

2. Reading Skill

Students can develop their reading ability through comprehending the literal meaning of the song. In addition to this activity, a short story or passage can be attached about the singer's biography or the background of how the song was produced.

3. Speaking Skill

Usually a song has a message and the composer's belief or emotion are encoded in the music. Meaning of the lyrics in a song is just one of the many ways that a song can lead to a fruitful discussion. Other aspects such as the emotion expressed, the hidden message or the culture reflected are possible topics for discussion. In that sense, a song offers students rich materials for discussion. Although the students tend to be passive by only listening to songs, they can be active by participating in the discussion, contributing their own opinion.

4. Writing Skill

Students can write a short essay about the topic discussed. While they exchange their opinion with their peers, they can make their idea clear and prepare for their writing. Another suggestion for writing is students write a letter to the person in the song related to the topic of the discussion. They can show their sympathy or give advice through a letter. Letters might be easier for low proficiency students than an essay. Writing can add an element of creativity to song activities.

Procedure for the activities

I will demonstrate how each unit can be conducted and what the objective of each procedure is.

A. Listening with Imagination

In this first section, students listen to a song for the first time in the class and try to feel the song without knowing the meaning in detail. The list

of various adjectives or nouns of feeling is given and the students choose appropriate ones for the song. This section is a process of warm-up before going into the lyrics in detail and to get the students to use their imagination for understanding the song.

B. Listening for Details

This section requires learners to listen to the song and fill in the blanks while the song is being played. Students are first handed out the lyrics with the words missing. They are asked to go through the lyrics and try to guess the words in the blanks. Then students can listen to the song twice.

C. Grammar Points

In this section students review some grammar points in the song they learned before. Even simple lyrics can be a good material for reviewing basic English grammar and structures students learned before such as 'Verb Tense', 'Articles' or 'Prepositions'. Lyrics of a song can attract the attention of the students who cannot be motivated by an example sentence of a grammar textbook. Songs are effective tools to bring grammar alive and press on students its relevance to their own world.

D. Reading

This section provides the passage for improving students' reading skill. Since this passage is generally about the profile of the singer or the background of the song, it also provides information which helps students understand the overall meaning of the song better. Several questions are followed to check if students comprehend correctly what they read.

E. Discussion

In this section the students work in a pair or a small group to discuss on the topic related to the theme of the song. Since songs contain emotion, imaginative situations and narrative possibilities, they provide rich materials to be discussed. The previous activities of A, B, C and D are rather passive and this activity gives the students the chance to work creatively.

F. Writing

This section is for another creative activity following the discussion section. Writing is one of the areas traditional ways of using songs do not cover. By integrating some task of writing, song lessons can become overall activities. While they are discussing on the topic in E section, they can develop their own opinion and get ready to write. If they do not have enough time in the class, the teacher can let them do it as homework.

Sample Lessons

The following lesson plans which I devised for my classes in the spring semester are aimed at developing students' all the four skills as well as attracting their attention by using songs in fashion.

<Unit 1>

Tears in Heaven by Eric Clapton

A. Listening with Imagination

Listen to the song and choose words that describe the feelings of the person in the song.

happy, sad, disappointed, desperate, confident,
suffered, lonely, regret, cheerful, angry

B. Listening for Details

First go through this lyrics and try to guess the words in the blanks. Then listen to the song twice and fill in the blanks.

Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven
Would you be the () if I saw you in heaven
I must be () and carry on
'Cause I know I don't () here in heaven

Would you hold my () if I saw you in heaven
Would you () me stand If I saw you in heaven
I'll () my way some other ()
'Cause I know I just can't () here in heaven

Time can () you down
Time can bend your ()
Time can break your ()
Have you beggin' please, beggin' please

Beyond the () there's peace I'm ()
And I know there'll be no () tears in heaven

C. *Grammar Points*

Subjunctive Past

Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?

Rule

When you imagine a situation contrary to fact, use the subjunctive mood. Past tense is used for a present condition and it is called Subjunctive Past. Past perfect tense is used for something that happened or didn't happen in the past.

Examples

1. I wish my room were larger.
2. If I were you, I wouldn't buy that car.
3. If I knew her number, I would call her.

Exercises

Read the situation and write a sentence with if.

1. People don't understand him because he doesn't speak very clearly.
If he _____, people _____.
2. I'm not going to buy that book because it's too expensive.
If that book _____, I _____.

D. *About the Singer*

Read the following passage and answer the questions.

Eric Clapton's Profile

Eric Clapton is probably the most famous guitarist in the world. Born in England in 1945, Clapton started playing the guitar when he was sixteen. By the time he was 20, he was recognized as England's finest blues guitarist. In 1966, Clapton, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker formed the trio Cream, one of the first and most influential hard-rock bands. After Cream broke up in 1969, Clapton recorded his masterpiece, Layla. Clapton had problems with drug addiction and alcoholism in the mid-70s. He also suffered many set backs in his personal life. On March 20, 1991, his four-year-old son fell out a 54 story window and died. After the death of his only son Clapton wrote the song "Tears in Heaven" to help restore his spirit and heal his heart and it became a massive hit single. Since recovering in 1985 from drugs and alcohol, he has been free from his addictions for over 10 years. Eric Clapton's ability to survive and continue to create some of the best music is truly inspiring.

Questions

1. For whom did Clapton write "Tears in Heaven" ?
2. Where was Clapton born?
3. What are the two problems Clapton had?

E. Topics of Discussion

1. Do you believe in a life after death?
2. What do you think Heaven is like?

Do people have the same name and look the same as we are now in this world?

3. If you lost your child by an accident, how would you try to overcome your sadness?

F. Let's write a letter.

Your friend recently lost their child by an accidental death and he/she is deep in grief. Let's write a letter to encourage him/her.

<Unit 2>

I Want It That Way by *Backstreet Boys*

A. Listening with Imagination

Listen to the song and choose words that describe the feelings of the person in the song.

joy, sorrow, disagreement, harmony, frustration

anger, compromise, self-assertion, passion, misunderstanding

B. Listening for Details

First go through this lyrics and try to guess the words in the blanks.
Then listen to the song twice and fill in the blanks.

You are my ()

The one ()

Believe when I say I want it that way

But we are two () apart

Can't reach to your ()
When you say that I want it that way

*Tell me why ain't nothing but a ()
Tell me why ain't nothing but a ()
Tell me why I never wanna hear you say
I want it that way

Am I your ()
Your one ()
Yes I know it's too ()
But I want it that way

*Repeat

Now I can see that we've fallen ()
From the way that it used to be, yeah
No matter the ()
I want to you ()
Deep down inside of me

C. *Grammar Points*

Hear + Object + Base Form

I never wanna hear you say.

Rule

The structure for verbs of perception such as hear, see, feel, smell and so on is as follows.

Perception Verb + Object + Base Form (not infinitive)

Examples

1. I saw Tom get into his car and drive away.
2. John felt someone touch him on the shoulder.
3. Can you smell something burn?

Exercises

Complete these sentences, with an appropriate verb in the correct form.

1. I saw the accident _____.
2. I heard someone _____ the door.
3. Listen to the birds _____.

Used to

From the way that it used to be,

Rule

Used to is used when you say that something happened regularly in the past but no longer happens.

Examples

1. I used to play tennis a lot, but now I'm too lazy.
2. We used to live in a small village, but now we live in Tokyo.

Exercises

Complete each sentence with 'used to'.

1. She _____ my best friend, but we aren't friends anymore.
2. Ann doesn't smoke anymore, but she _____ 40 cigarettes a day.
3. Susan _____ long hair, but she cut it some time ago.

D. About the Group

Read the following passage.

Backstreet Boys' Profile

Made up of Nick Carter, Howie Dorough, Brian Littrell, A.J. McLean and Kevin Richardson, the Backstreet Boys have been one of the driving forces in the pop revival of the '90's. Combining pop, dance and R&B with tight vocal harmonies, the group found their first success in Europe and Canada before they became a worldwide phenomenon. Since their debut, they have sold millions of albums and won countless awards.

The core of the Backstreet Boys is cousins Kevin and Brian, who are from Kentucky. Howie and A.J. who were natives of Orlando, Florida met each other, as well as Nick from New York, through auditions for local commercials. Later the three met Kevin, who moved to Orlando, and the four decided to form a group, naming themselves after an Orlando Fleamarket. Eventually Kevin was invited to join to make the band into a quintet.

Millennium was released in the summer of 1999, and debuted at number one with first-week sales of over a million copies. Despite the fact that no singles were officially released from the album in the U.S., "I Want It That Way," "Larger Than Life," "Show Me the Meaning of Being Lonely," and "The One" all hit the charts base on airplay alone. The group released

its Christmas Album before the end of the year, by which time Millennium was well on its way to sales of 12 million copies in the U.S. alone. Once again striking immediately after their previous album stopped producing hits, the Backstreet Boys issued Black & Blue in fall 2000.

Circle *T(true)* or *F(false)*.

1. All the members of Backstreet Boys first met at an audition. T F
2. The name of the group is associated with one place in Florida. T F
3. They made their debut in their home country. T F

E. Topics of Discussion

1. Have you ever broken up with your girlfriend/boyfriend because of the difference of the points of view? If Yes, what was the situation like?
2. If you notice your girlfriend/boyfriend is going to leave you, do you just let her/him go, or do you try to change her/his mind?

F. Let's write a letter.

Your girlfriend/boyfriend wants to leave you because she/he cannot agree with your opinion about your plan after graduation. But you don't want to break up with her/him. Let's write a letter to change her/his mind and to convince her/him you are a good match for her/him.

Conclusion

These two lessons successfully motivated the students to improve their basic skills of English in relaxed atmosphere. It goes without saying that students enjoyed the activities, showing tremendous interest. The activities described above offer a great deal of advantages in involving English learners. These activities can arouse a lot of interest especially in low proficiency students, providing them with a variety of techniques for improving their English. Thus, incorporating songs into language teaching enables passive learners to be actively involved in learning English. When students have strong motivation, they are better able to grasp what they should learn.

Dubin (1974) points out that, "Songs can be utilized as presentation contexts, as reinforcement material, as vehicles through which to teach all language skills, and as a medium through which to present some of the most important themes which pervade modern life." Indeed, using songs can involve students more integrally in the learning process and make language learning a more authentic, meaningful process.

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