

Professional Practice

HOW TO USE SONGS IN THE EFL/ESL CLASS

Universidad de Nariño, Pasto, Colombia

Jesús Alirio Bastidas A., Ph.D

INTRODUCTION

Teaching a language is not only explaining and practicing its components: sounds, grammatical structures and vocabulary. Teaching a second or foreign language (L2) means to guide the students to use the language for oral or written communication. In other words it means to train the students to listen and read with comprehension and to express their ideas, opinions, feelings, emotions, etc. both orally and in written form. In addition, teaching an L2 is not only a matter of cognitive development; it is also a process of affective enhancement.

In order to fulfill cognitive, psychomotor, and affective objectives in teaching an L2, teachers should constantly be searching for ways to provide variety in their classes. Variety will also help to prevent monotony. One of the ways to do this is by means of music. Obviously, this idea is not new, since music has been used through the history of foreign language methodology. What I think could be new for many teachers is the way some writers and the author have used songs in the EFL class.

IMPORTANCE OF SONGS

It is well known that “music is one of the basic expressions of the human spirit” (Suarez, 1975) consequently songs can be used to fulfill affective objectives.

According to some researchers, music can influence the rhythm of breathing and so relax the body. We all know that learning a language is not an easy task and because of this the students become anxious and they are afraid of expressing themselves, especially by means of the oral channel. Songs can help the students lower their stress and anxiety.

Music stimulates and produces various sensations, feelings and emotions in human beings. Hence the rhythm, the melody and the words of a song are good conditions for creative work for both the teacher and the students. For example, the students can imagine and express their feelings, emotions and images based on the melody of the song or they can write a poem or a piece of prose after listening to the music and the words of the songs.

Songs are the authentic voice of people who love and hate, rejoice and sorrow, work and play, protest and respect, dream and live in a real world. In other words, songs represent national characteristics, customs, beliefs, feelings, tastes, etc. Through songs we can guide our stu-

This author can be reached at: jabas-ct@col2.telecom.com.co

dents to identify the cultural features stated above. That is, teachers can help students to understand, enjoy and share the world of English speakers. After all the hard work of a long hour, a week, or a month, it is necessary to change the teaching style and look for a variety of activities in order to motivate the students. Singing is one of these activities that provides relaxation, amusement, and interest.

Songs are natural individual and choral language activities in real life. Therefore, teachers can use English songs first to involve the whole class and promote maximum participation and then to stimulate and develop the individual capacity of those students who like to sing.

In authentic situations, people listen to songs, like them because of the melody and/or the words, understand the songs, memorize and sing them. In the EFL class, teachers can develop the student's memory by means of the melody, the rhythm and the words of the song.

Motivation is an important condition for learning. But we can not continue believing that motivation only takes place at the beginning of a class or a course. Motivation is essential throughout the whole class and the complete EFL course. Songs motivate students to continue studying the English language.

PURPOSES

Two main purposes can be stated for the use of songs in the EFL class as follows:

1. To provide an atmosphere of relaxation, peacefulness and enjoyment.
2. To practice the components and skills of the second or foreign language.

OBJECTIVES

Songs can be used to fulfill the following specific objectives:

1. To motivate the students to learn the new language.
2. To lower the students' anxiety and stress produced when one studies another language.
3. To improve listening comprehension by doing a variety of listening tasks.
4. To practice oral skills by means of questions and answers, mini-dialogues, role-plays, discussions, etc.
5. To improve reading comprehension by using various reading strategies.
6. To practice writing skills by doing different kinds of written exercises both at the sentence and paragraph levels.
7. To practice the four skills in an integrated way.

8. To improve the students' pronunciation and intonation.
9. To increase the students' knowledge of vocabulary.
10. To practice or review a number of grammatical structures according to the song.
11. To introduce, present, practice, produce or review certain language functions.
12. To identify some cultural facts of English speakers.

SELECTING SONGS

All songs are not suitable for teaching purposes. Teachers are reminded that even in the native language it is difficult to understand and sing a song. Before you present a song in the EFL class, it is important to have in mind the following criteria for selecting songs:

- * Always select a song according to your purposes and teaching objectives. For example, if you are interested in grammar or vocabulary, choose those songs that exemplify a grammatical structure or certain selected vocabulary.
 - * As much as possible, look for songs that are popular for the students, so that they will enjoy them.
 - * Select those songs which are neither too fast nor too difficult to sing. Otherwise, the students will get frustrated and will begin to hate the English class.
 - * If you are interested in practicing pronunciation, select those songs whose words are fairly well articulated.
 - * For listening and reading comprehension purposes, choose those songs that concentrate on meaning. For example: story or narrative songs, action songs, show songs, film songs, and overall idea songs (Dubin, 1974).
 - * In some songs, such as pop songs, it is quite common to find odd grammatical constructions, then you should analyze the kind of language used in the lyrics (Smith, 1976).
 - * Be careful with the quality of the recording and the clarity of the singer's voice whenever you decide to use a song in the EFL class.
 - * Identify the cultural aspects included in the song, so that you can present them to your students.
 - * Ask your students to suggest some titles of songs that they like or borrow some songs from them in order to analyze them before you decide to use them.
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- * If you are going to work with children, choose those songs that are short, well articulated and have a lot of repetition.

TIME FOR A SONG

Songs have to be used in a moderate way in the EFL class. They are only to provide variety to the English class. When you plan your course, you will identify those lessons that can be supplemented with a song according to their objectives and contents.

In addition, teachers should have a set of available songs to be used when necessary.

Any time is good for singing. However, there are certain time spaces of a lesson when you can use a song. For example, you can begin your lesson with a short song in order to review the previous teaching point. You can present the new theme by means of the words of a song that exemplify it or have a connection with it. Your class can be ended with a song to review what you have just taught.

If you realize that your students are tired at any moment of the class, then it is time for a song. When your English class is the last one of the day, you might consider preparing a lesson plan based on a popular but easy song.

Finally, teachers can use songs when 'everybody feels like singing.' If this happens, teachers should not hesitate to change their lesson plans and develop the class through a song. It is understood that teachers should have some songs and their words at their disposal in order to be able to change their lesson plan.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

I certainly believe that every human activity will be successful if it is carefully planned, spontaneously realized and systematically evaluated. If you want to use songs successfully, have in mind the following suggestions:

- § Prepare your singing English class in advance. Do not regard a song as an 'easy option'. Teachers, especially beginners, should not improvise with a song. A song needs to be taught carefully and systematically.
- § Prepare and use visual aids to double the value of songs. Pictures help understanding and can make the singing session even more fun.
- § Design some exercises and activities to fulfill your teaching objectives, type them on worksheets and make photocopies of them.
- § Ask the students to listen to the song carefully, two or three times first, then ask them to learn the tune and finally to learn the words.

- § Encourage your students to respond by tapping, clapping or by responding in any way they might enjoy the song.
- § Participate in the singing session and encourage all the students to do so as well, In this way, the students will have a sense of community and you will be considered a member of the group.
- § Never force a student to sing immediately if s/he does not want to. Give her/him some time to relax, tune in and join the group.
- § Ask your students to sing and do the actions. For example: cutting, drawing, making things with paper, etc., according to the words of the song. Both singing and doing something help to create an agreeable atmosphere in the classroom.
- § Due to the fact that songs are suitable for practicing pronunciation, be alert to correct any mispronounced word.
- § Keep the song brief, never tedious. Do not work on the song so long that you kill the students' interest in it.
- § Leave enough time for singing the song, since the aim of using a song in the EFL class is to sing it and not to spend most of the time on the language itself.
- § Guide the students to understand the song before they pronounce, memorize and sing it.

PREPARING WORKSHEETS WITH SONGS

As it was previously said, teaching songs needs careful planning in order to be successful. After you select the song, you might decide to design a number of exercises on worksheets in order to fulfill your objectives and to adapt the songs according to your students' proficiency level and age.

Below you will find some techniques to design and practice using worksheets.

Technique 1: Cloze Song

- a. Select the song you want to teach.
 - b. Eliminate certain words according to your objective and the clarity of the singer's voice.
 - c. Make copies of the cloze song.
 - d. Ask the students to listen to the song two or three times. Then ask them to fill in the blanks.
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Example of a Cloze Song

I'm Stan MacCann.
 I'm a _____ .
 Good morning, _____.
 Good _____.

_____ Stan MacCann.
 I'm _____ businessman.
 _____afternoon, Stan.
 Good _____.
 _____ Stan MacCann
 _____a _____
 _____evening, Stan.

Technique 2: Songs with drawings

- Select the song you want to practice.
- Choose the vocabulary to be taught.
- Type the song but leave spaces for the vocabulary chosen.
- Make a drawing in each blank according to the word deleted.
- Make copies of the worksheets.
- Ask the students to listen to the song and identify the words corresponding to the drawings.

Example of a Song with Drawings

IF I ONLY COULD, I SURELY WOULD

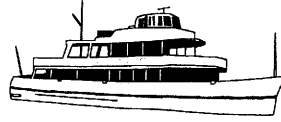


(Music of 'El Condor Pasa')

I'd rather be a _____ than a _____



Yes, I would, if I could, I surely would.
I'd rather be a _____ than a _____



Yes, I would, if I only could, I surely would.
One day I'd rather _____ away



Like a _____ that's here and gone.



A _____ gets tired of 'to and fro'.



He gives the world its saddest _____ , its saddest song.



I'd rather be a _____ than a _____

Yes, I would, if I only could, I surely would.



I'd rather feel the _____ beneath my _____

(Worksheet copied from Jiménez, Rafael.
Colegio San José. 1989. Barranquilla)

Technique 3: Scrambled Song

- a. Select a song.
- b. On the left side of a worksheet copy each stanza but put the verses at random.
- c. On the right side draw the corresponding lines for each verse.
- d. Make copies of the worksheets for each student.
- e. In class play the song and ask the students to listen to it twice or three times in order to rearrange the verses and write them on the lines.

HOW'S YOUR FAMILY

There're very well
How's your mother?
Very well.
She's well.
How is your family?
Very well.
Oh, yes, they're very well.
They're well.
How's your brother?
He's very well.
How are your parents?
He's well
They're well.
How is your father?
How are your children?

HOW'S YOUR FAMILY

Technique 4: Inaccurate Words in the Song

- a. Select the song to be taught.
- b. Type the words of the song but change some lexical items in each verse instead of the correct ones.
- c. Make copies of the worksheets.
- d. In class ask your students to listen to the song in order to identify the inaccurate words.
- e. Ask your students to cross out the words and write the appropriate ones according to the song.

Example of Inaccurate Words in the Song

ARE YOU READY?

Were you ready? Were you ready?
 It's one o'clock.
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 It's two o'clock.
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 It's dime to go.
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 Not, no , not!
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 It's three o'clock.
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 It's four o'clock.
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 It's time to go.
 Were you ready? Were you ready?
 No, not, no!

TEACHING PROCEDURES

Procedures and techniques depend on an approach to language, to language learning, and to language teaching, and to their corresponding curriculum design. Consequently, every teacher has her/his own way to teach a class, according to the approach and the design that s/he believes and puts into practice every day. However, it is important to be open to the teaching experience of other people in order to enrich our own teaching style. Below, teachers will find various procedures used by some writers in their classes. They are cited in each procedure.

Procedure 1. (Smith, L. 1976)

- a. Ask the students to listen to the song twice while looking at the words on the board or on a duplicated copy of the words.
- b. Let the students ask any questions about the song.
- c. Ask the students some general questions about the contents of the song.
- d. Have the students answer specific questions about the song.
- e. Have the class sing the song together.
- f. Ask some open-ended questions to provide topics for discussion. Each student should express her/his own opinion and be given the opportunity to explain and defend it.

Procedure 2. (Salas, E. 1979)

- a. Ask your students to listen to the song twice.
- b. Ask some yes/no questions to check comprehension.

- c. Present and explain new words or expressions using pictures or contextual clues.
- d. Ask the students to listen to the song again.
- e. Test general comprehension through questions.
- f. Ask students to repeat the words of the song in order to memorize them.
- g. Hand out copies of the song and ask them to listen to it while reading on their copies.
- h. Ask them to sing in chorus.
- i. Ask some personal questions based on the words of the song.

Procedure 3 (Monreal, 1982)

- a. Give your students the words of the song but without some familiar and well pronounced words.
- b. Ask the students to listen to the song and fill in the blanks.
- c. Write the missing words on the board for checking the students' answer.
- d. Give them the story but this time in other words. To check comprehension ask them to select certain answers from a multiple-choice format.

Procedure 4 (Everett, W. 1987)

- a. Ask your students to listen to the song concentrating on the lyrics.
- b. Ask them to give you the words, phrases and sentences they understood.
- c. Hand out the lyrics and ask them to translate the song to check their full comprehension.
- d. Select a grammatical point and give them an additional exercise, i. e., write a paragraph describing what happens before a concert and invite the people to attend the concert. You can also ask your students to imagine two people talking in a cafeteria and finally making an invitation to a concert given by the author of the song.
- e. Ask your students to read the paragraph or role-play the dialogue and answer some comprehension questions based on the paragraph or the dialogue.
- f. Then ask your students to answer comprehension questions based on the lyrics of the song.
- g. Now you can ask them to imagine that they are in a concert hall. Play the role of an announcer and talk about the author of the song, present her/him to the public and allow her/him to sing the song (play the song). Ask the students to listen carefully.
- h. Ask them to sing the song.

Procedure 5 (Berghouse, R. 1975)

The author presents the following suggestions based on a song for children.

- a. Sing the first words of the song pointing to your eyes (if the song refers to them)
- b. If your children don't understand it, translate it.
- c. Ask your children to sing after you as many times you think are necessary.
- d. Ask the students of the first row to take the teacher's part and ask the students of the second row to sing the repetitions. Then reverse the order.
- e. If possible, change the words of the song to correspond to the name or description of a child in the class.
- f. When the children have learned the song completely, they can sing it as a round, first in two parts, then in three, and finally in four parts.

The song used by the author is the following one:

Black-eyed Susan

Black-eye Susan,
Black-eye Susan,
How are you?
How are you?
Very well,
Thank you, very well,
Thank you
How are you?
How are you?

Procedure 6 (Kingsbury & O' Shea, 1977)

- a. Play the whole song once to allow the students to familiarize themselves with the melody and the rhythm. Do not worry if the students clap their hands, hum, tap their feet, etc., together with the singer.
- b. Ask the students to listen to the song very carefully once again in order to answer two general questions written on the board.
- c. Play the song the third time, after this, ask your students to give you the answers to the two questions.
- d. Play the chorus or the first stanza and ask the students to hum loudly or to sing with you.
- e. Write the chorus or the first stanza on the board. Then explain any new or difficult word. Ask your students to sing afterwards.
- f. Continue with the first or the second stanza in the same way.
- g. As soon as the students learn each stanza, ask them some comprehension questions or any other similar exercise.
- h. After the students have learned the song completely, ask them some personal questions in order to practice the new vocabulary and structures, and to talk about their experience. Encourage them to express their own ideas or opinions about the topic being discussed.
- i. Give instructions to do the additional written exercises. Use examples if necessary.
- j. When the students have mastered the song, give them either an oral summary of the song or dictate it so that they can copy it in their notebooks.

Procedure 7 (Abbs & York, 1977)

The authors present their procedure according to the following stages:

First Stage: Theme

The teacher presents the theme or a brief summary of the song.

Second Stage: Language

- a. The teacher presents the main topic to be learned from the song according to her/his objective. The topic can relate to a communicative function, a grammatical structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.

- b. Then s/he explains some new words or expressions.
- c. Third Stage: Teaching the song.

1. The students listen to the song and then repeat each verse after the teacher. This repetition can be done with the whole group, small group, and individually.
2. The teacher plays the song once again and encourages the students to sing while they look at the words of the song.

Note: The teacher will decide on the number of stanzas to be presented and practiced in each class according to the type of song, purpose, time available, etc.

Fourth Stage: Follow-up Activities

Various activities can be done after the song has been learned. Here are some of them.

- a. Language Structure. The teacher can take advantage of some grammatical structures, lexical items of phonological features, different from the main topic of the lesson, which appear in the song. Select these points and explain them.
- b. Comprehension Questions. In order to review or to evaluate what the students have learned from the song, the teacher can ask some comprehension questions. They can be based on the facts of the song, on inference or on personal experience.
- c. Dramatization of Dialogues. Some songs can be reproduced in the form of dialogues. In this case, the teacher can ask the students to reconstruct the words of the song in dialogue form and represent it in front of the class. According to the students' level, the teacher can ask them to use the same words of the song, to use different words or to add more words and ideas. Encourage them to be imaginative, creative and very active in this type of activity.
- d. Discussion. Based on the theme of the song, the teacher can motivate the students to make a discussion in small groups or with the whole class. The teacher has to guide the students to analyze the song, to discover or infer ideas, which are in the deep structure of the words of the song and to express their opinions.

Procedure 8 (Suarez, A. 1977)

- a. Select the song according to the students' level of English and the grammatical structure you want to practice.
- b. Give a brief introduction about the song including its origin, its message, its author, etc. Do not give the title of the song yet. This introduction can be done in the native language.
- c. Play the song and ask your students to listen to it. Do not allow your students to see the words of the song yet. After this, ask them for the title of the song.
- d. Play the song again and ask your students to listen to it and follow the written words. This will help them to understand the song, get the correct pronunciation and follow the melody.
- e. Ask your students to repeat each verse after you. Be careful with the original modulation and the pauses of the song. Do this exercise at least twice.
- f. Replay the song and have the students sing along with their mouths closed in order to get the correct pronunciation and the melody.
- g. Now allow your students to sing loudly as many times as they want to.
- h. Play the song and let them sing the beginning of the song. Suddenly, stop the cassette recorder and encourage them to keep singing.

The author of this essay has used songs following these procedures:

Procedure 9

- a. Play the song once. Ask your students to listen carefully.
- b. Ask your students to give you words, phrases or sentences they understood after the first listening.
- c. Play the song two or three times more so that the students get more words and sentences. Write them on the board.
- d. Ask them for general ideas about the song. Based on these ideas ask them to give the title of the song. Write the titles given on the board.
- e. Play the song once again.
- f. Hand in the words of the song and ask your students to read them silently.
- g. Ask your students to give you general ideas of the song. Check them with those ideas written on the board. Compare the title of the song with those ones given by the students.
- h. Explain the most important new words and expressions.
- i. Play the song and ask your students to follow it silently, paying attention to the pronunciation.
- j. Ask your students to repeat each verse after you.
- k. Play the song and ask your students to sing along.
- l. Sing the song together with your students but this time without the recording.

Procedure 10

- a. Select a short song, which refers to a series of actions or activities.
- b. Draw randomly the representation of these activities on a dittoed sheet.
- c. Ask your students to look at the drawing and identify each one. Ask them to write the name of the activity in a space below the picture.
- d. Play the song so that the students get familiar with it.
- e. Ask them to listen to it again to verify the activities in the picture.
- f. Tell them to number the pictures according to the sequence given in the song.
- g. Play the song again to check the students' answers.
- h. Hand out the words of the song and ask them to listen to it.
- i. Get them to rehearse the song in order to memorize the words.
- j. Have your students sing it as many times as they like.

Procedure 11

- a. Ask your students some personal questions based on the words of the song you are going to teach.
- b. Give them a list of key words taken from the song and ask them to say what the song

- c. Hand out the text of a cloze song (an incomplete song).
- d. Ask your students to read the song carefully trying to get certain general ideas in order to confirm their predictions.
- e. Have them read it once again and try to fill in the blanks with the missing words. Ask them to do this in pencil.
- f. Play the song for the first time and ask them to fill in the blanks.
- g. Ask them to rehearse it twice or three times more, until they get all the missing words.
- h. Guide the students to understand the unknown words and expressions by looking at the context or giving them your own examples, definitions, synonyms, etc.
- i. Play the song again and ask your students to identify certain communicative functions, feelings, etc.
- j. Now have them sing the song together with you and the singer.
- k. From time to time, lower the volume of the cassette recorder and ask them to follow the song alone.
- l. Finally tell them they are going to take part in a contest, similar to the one presented on the Colombian TV program entitled "Compre la Orquesta". Call a pair or a group of three, four or five students to the front of the class and ask them to sing together with the cassette. Suddenly, lower the volume and have them continue singing for a while. Then increase the volume and check if the singer and the students are singing at the same time. If not, they lose the contest. Call another group to participate in the contest. Congratulate the winners of the contest.

Procedure 12

- a. In a previous class make a list of songs yours students would like to practice and learn.
- b. Select one of these songs for the next class.
- c. Type the song but placing the stanzas in a different sequence from the original version. Photocopy the song.
- d. Present some pictures to exemplify new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions which are necessary for understanding the song.
- e. Hand out the words of the song and ask the students to underline the sentences which include the new vocabulary and expressions presented in the previous step. Check their comprehension.
- f. Using various techniques, present and explain one or two grammatical structures which appear the most in the song. Have the students practice each structure both orally and in written form.
- g. Ask the students to go back to the words of the song and identify the grammatical structure(s) presented before.
- h. Ask some questions to check comprehension of each stanza.
- i. Tell your students that the stanzas of the song are scrambled. Ask them to try to organize them in the correct order by numbering each stanza.
- j. Play the song to check the order of the stanzas. Ask your students to copy the song on the other side of the sheet of paper. While they copy it, play the song many times to familiarize the students with the melody.
- k. Have the whole class sing the song together with the singer first and then ask them to sing it with you.
- l. Divide the class into small groups according to the number of stanzas. Assign a stanza to

- each group and ask them to prepare to sing it in front of the class.
- m. After each group has sung a stanza, ask your students to stay in the same groups to identify the main ideas of their stanza and express their interpretation of the composer's intentions or feelings.
 - n. Have each group report their ideas to the whole class.
 - o. Finally ask them to give you opinions about the way you worked with the song in order to incorporate their suggestions for the next song.

Procedure 13

The author has used the following procedure to work with short songs.

- a. Write the songs on the board.
- b. Read it aloud while the students listen to you.
- c. Ask them some comprehension questions.
- d. Have them repeat the words of the song line by line.
- e. Erase one word from each verse and ask one student to read the song providing the words deleted.
- f. Erase another word from each line and ask another student to read the song as it was previously done.
- g. Continue erasing the words until all of them disappear. Ask some students to say the song aloud.
- h. Play the song and ask the students to listen to its melody.
- i. Ask your students to sing together with the singer.
- j. Sing the song without the cassette.

To sum up, songs are useful devices for motivating the students to learn a new language. They provide the class with a pleasant atmosphere which allows the students to lower their anxiety and to feel at ease in the EFL/ESL class. They can also serve to practice the components (i.e, sounds, vocabulary, and grammar) and the skills (i.e, listening, reading, speaking, and writing) of a language. In order to fulfill the previous purposes, I have given some suggestions for selecting songs, identifying the appropriate time for a song, teaching songs successfully, and designing worksheets with songs. Finally, I presented a series of teaching procedures used by a number of writers and myself as an EFL teacher. I hope that EFL/ESL teachers will find this article useful for their everyday classes.