

Teaching Tips: Using Songs in the Classroom

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We teachers have been using popular songs in class for years, but we often save songs for those few extra minutes on a slow Friday afternoon. However, songs can become an integral and exciting part of our classes. Here are a few suggestions of when and how to incorporate songs into daily class experiences.

(1) **Teaching Grammar.** Many songs can be used in class to present, practice or reinforce grammar lessons. You could use *Blowing in the Wind* written and performed by Bob Dylan ("How many seas must a white dove sail before she can sleep in the sand?") to present time clauses, or Barry Manilow's *Copacabana* or one of many country-western songs that tells a story to practice the past tense (just copy the words, leaving out the verbs; students listen and fill them in). Other songs that come to mind for grammar structures could be: Eric Clapton's recent hit *Tears from Heaven* ("Would you remember my name, if I saw you in heaven?") for *if-clauses*, the multi-celebrity rendition of *We are the World* for the present tense of BE, *I just called to say I loved you* by Stevie Wonder for *say/tell*, and the traditional songs *Frere Jacques* (*Are you sleeping?*) for present progressive and *There's a Hole in the Bottom of the Sea* for *there is*.

(2) **Teaching Pronunciation.** Many songs have the same sound segments repeated various times, either in the same or different words. Try using the Beatles' *Let it Be* for [ɛ, ɪ, iy] and *Yesterday* for [y] or, as above, a country western song for the pronunciation of the regular past tense "ed" forms.

(3) **Language Functions.** The language needed for various linguistic functions, such as inviting, excusing, etc., can be reinforced with songs such as the traditional *Happy Birthday* for how to wish someone a *feliz cumpleaños* or David Bacharach's famous *I'll Never Fall in Love Again* sung by Dionne Warwick to practice promising.

(4) **Listening Comprehension.** Many kinds of listening practices can be developed by using any clearly-sung song as a cloze dictation (you omit every fifth, sixth or seventh word or every verb, adjective, etc.) Play the tape as many

times as necessary for the students to fill in all the blanks. It's a good idea to let students try to guess what goes into each blank before they hear the song so that they learn to pay attention to the part of speech each word represents.

Besides being good for practicing vowels or consonants, songs can also help students with word stress and rhythm. Rap music is very rhythmical and can be used to help students internalize the English rhythm system.

(5) **Vocabulary Building.** Vocabulary can also be practiced even at very beginning levels with children's songs such as *Ten Little Children* (a culturally-correct version of the traditional *Ten Little Indians*: "One little, two little, three little children...") for the numbers from 1 to 10 or the *Alphabet Song*. Obviously, popular songs are good sources for the up-to-date slang expressions your students are always looking for.

(6) **Culture.** Songs can also be used as mini-history or culture lessons. The traditional spiritual *Go Tell it on the Mountain* could illustrate a lesson on Afro-American history, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* was sung during the American War of Independence and the U.S. national anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner* was written based on a battle that took place during the War of 1812. Any of the later Beatles songs, such as *Give Peace a Chance*, are representative of the spirit of the late 60's. I'm also sure most of us use Christmas songs during the Holiday Season. These songs can also be used to illustrate cultural differences since they illustrate how Christmas is traditionally celebrated in English-speaking countries.

So, as you can see, you don't have to wait until you have a slow Friday afternoon to sing in class. Sing more often; your students will appreciate it.

By the way, the songs mentioned here are either common popular songs or children's songs. I have tried to indicate the name of the composer or most popular singer whenever possible. Many of the very popular or traditional songs can be found in special collections for ELT classes. Also, some original songs have been developed for ELT; check recent texts for ideas. To find these materials, visit your local bookstore and see what is available. However, if you have never heard the songs I mention or can't find them, start listening to popular music. You can form your own collection of teachable songs in no time.