

SONGS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

by Salvador Montaner

Biodata:

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays we have to consider pop songs as a highly motivating teaching resource, but ungraded language and unclear diction can often pose problems and limit our choices. Concerning publications related to songs in the EFL Classroom, we shall make a brief mention of United Magazine, published by Heinemann. This magazine offers ESO teachers and students a collection of twelve purpose-written contemporary songs plus an accompanying comic strip, with the linguistic contents appropriately graded to the students' level and needs. Nevertheless, in order to explain the different activities the teacher can use in the classroom, we shall quote fragments belonging to other songs by well-known singers or groups as good examples to work with in the classroom.

In this article we are going to explain some activities for each stage of a lesson, through which we can exploit these songs and give practice to all language skills. The activities are generic and can thus be applied to any other pop song (and any stage of the ESO cycle or Batxillerat).

WHY USE POP SONGS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Before concentrating on the various activities we shall propose below, it is important that we explain very briefly some reasons why learners should deal with songs in the classroom. The main reasons we can think of are:

- 1- Students love them; songs are very motivating.
- 2- Songs are great for aspects of pronunciation, word and sentence stress.
- 3- Research says that melody and rhythm help us process and recall structures more easily.

However, language is not graded and diction can be unclear.

ACTIVITIES

If we want our learners to improve their language skills through songs, we shall classify the various activities into three different phases:

- A) Pre-listening activities.
- B) Listening activities.
- C) Post-listening activities.

A) Pre-listening activities

These activities involve that learners have to manage with the language (students get familiarised with some concrete vocabulary and with specific language structures) and with the theme, that is, the situation of the song in the context.

Some activities we might consider are:

1- Blankety-blank.

This activity can be done in groups of 5 or 6 learners. It consists of predicting the missing word or inventing the next line.

2- Key words

If the song has a message or tells a story, the teacher might consider writing the key words on the board and asking learners guess the context. Another option is to visit www.puzzlemaker.com and put the words in a word soup.

3- Running dictation

This activity can be done in pairs or in groups, according to the number of verses the song may have. For example, let us suppose that there are only two verses in the song. The teacher gives the students two different handouts, where they have different lines from the same song. The lines are not placed in the correct order.

Student A dictates the sentences from the first verse to *Student B*. *Student B* then dictates to his partner the sentences from the second verse. Once both students have written down their lines, they have to order them before listening to the song. The aim here is that they predict what the order of the lines might be and later they check whether they have done it properly or not when they listen to the song.

The activity we propose here should be done in groups of three. We have here the song *Just my Imagination* by The Cranberries, which has got three verses. *Student A* has got the first verse, whose lines are placed in this way:

And stay in bed until Sunday
We would hit the town on Friday
There was a game we used to play
Living not for reality

We used to be so free
We were living for the love we had

Student B has got the second verse, which is quoted as follows:

I have always kept my faith in love
Let it never be said that I'd be unstable
There was a time I used to pray
It's the greatest thing from the man above
The game I used to play
I've always put my cards upon the table

Student C, finally, has got the third verse:

I like to hit the town on Friday night
And stay in bed until Sunday
Living not for reality
We will be living for the love we have
There is a game I like to play
We'll always be this free

Student A dictates his or her verses to *Student B*, then *Student B* to *Student C* and lastly this student to *Student A*. Once they have finished, they are told that the lines are not in order, so they have to predict and guess, before listening to the song, what the order of the lines might be. They will check it later listening to the song.

4- Match the rhyming words.

The teacher asks learners to match words that rhyme (usually at the end of lines). Most of the words must be present in the song, but not necessarily. This is an ideal preparation for an ordering or "inserting the missing lines" activity.

For example, let us consider the song by Green Day, which is called *Basket Case*.

Do you have the time
To listen to me whine
About nothing and everything
All at once
I am one of those
Melodramatic fools
Neurotic to the bone
No doubt about it

Sometimes I give myself the creeps
Sometimes my mind plays tricks on me
It all keeps adding up
I think I'm cracking up
Am I just paranoid?
Or I'm just stoned

I went to a shrink
To analyze my dreams
She says it's lack of sex
That's bringing me down
I went to a whore
She said my life's a bore
So quit my whining cause
It's bringing her down

Sometimes I give myself the creeps
Sometimes my mind plays tricks on me
It all keeps adding up
I think I'm cracking up
Am I just paranoid?
Uh,yuh,yuh,ya (x2)

TASK: Match rhyming words from Column A to Column B. Some words are in the song, other are not.

A	B
WHORE	TOES
CREEPS	CRACKING
THOSE	BORE
ADDING	TOOLS
DREAMS	WHINE
GIVE	TRICKS
FOOLS	CREEPS
WINE	LIVE

Once learners have matched the rhyming words, the teacher might get them to order the lines of the song or to complete the missing lines as a listening activity.

5- Use the students' knowledge.

This activity is a great opportunity to connect with a genuine teen interest area. The teacher here gets students to invent questions about a theme related to the song or the genre of music of the songs.

B) Listening activities

These activities focus obviously on training learners' listening skills. Some activities to be considered are:

6- **Discrimination.**

The teacher asks learners to choose the right word from two alternatives. There are obviously various sets of alternatives within the song. Let us see, for instance, a fragment of the song by Shania Twain,

Life **will/ was goin'** great
Love **was/is** gonna have to wait
Was in no hurry-had no worries
Stayin' single was the plan
won't need/didn't need a steady man
I had it covered-'til I discovered

That love **gets/is getting** me every time
My heart **changed/has changed** my mind
I gol' darn gone and done it

Gone and done it (gone and done it)
Guess I **fell/will fall** in love (gone and done it)
Must've been the way he **will walk/walked** (gone and done it)
Or his sweet, sweet talk (gone and done it)
I guess I gol' darn gone and done it

Love gets me every time

...

The aim here is that learners have to choose the correct word from each pair. This activity might also be called a *multiple choice activity*, in that learners have to choose the right word from two. This type of task might be considered for *lexical* purposes or *grammatical* purposes, depending on what we want our learners to focus on.

Students can also do this activity by first reading and then listening to check. This means that the *multiple choice activity* or *discrimination activity* can also be used as a pre-listening activity. The teacher decides what he/she aims to achieve depending on the usage of the activity.

NOTE: Once students have chosen the right word, another task to be considered might be that the teacher asks learners to remember some words because he/she is going to omit some of them and ask learners to say them aloud. This activity is just memoristic.

7- **Students as teachers!**

If the teacher has access to computers, then he/she will ask students to create gap-fills for each other. They could either choose which words to take out or older classes could work with specific parts of speech.

8- Order the lines.

The teacher here photocopies the lyrics in the wrong order and gets students to re-order them by numbers.

The Cranberries, *Animal Instinct*

I was utterly and totally stressed
Do you know you made me cry
As I was having my cup of tea
Suddenly I was feeling depressed
Do you know you made me die
Suddenly something has happened to me

It was a lovely thing that we
It is a lovely thing, the animal
And the thing that freaks me out
Is you'll never really see
It is a lovely thing that we have
And the thing that gets to me
The animal instinct
Is I'll always be in doubt

Is you'll never really see
They will never make me die
We will change reality
So take my hands and we will pray
They won't take you away
They will never make me cry, no
Is I'll always be in doubt
And the thing that freaks me out
And the thing that gets to me
So take my hands and come with me

The animal, the animal,
The animal instinct in me
It? The animal, the animal,
The animal instinct in me (x2)

C) *Post-listening activities*

9- Pictionary.

This activity consists of a team game. Students draw or mime lines from the song that they have been working on for their teammates to guess.

10- What comes next?

The teacher plays the song and stops the tape from time to time. The teacher then asks students what comes next.

11- Disappearing song.

The teacher writes the song lyrics on the board and gradually rubs them out. Students are challenged to remember them.

12- Write an extra verse!

See the **Song Writing Workshop section** and follow the step-by-step guide.

13- Project work.

Learners might consider choosing from among three different options:

- **POSTER** – about the group, a concert involving the group or a concrete singer, or a theme related to the song.
- **VIDEO CLIP** – for the song. Frame by frame, on A3 card, including narrative and speech bubbles.
- **INTERVIEW** or **LETTER** – write to the band or create an imaginary interview with them.

14- Interpreting and reviewing the song.

Students from 1st cycle of ESO enjoy singing!

An interesting task for learners to review the song might be the following activity:

- a) How was the singer feeling when he/she sang this song?

Tick (✓):	angry	happy	sad	romantic	relaxed
		broken-hearted		in love	

- b) How do you feel about the song? Do you like the song? Why or why not?

Is it:	catchy	boring	repetitive	fun	old-fashioned	original
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SONG WRITING WORKSHOP

1. a) Look at the four lines below. How many syllables are there in each line?

I've got my eyes You've got your smile

It's no surprise That we've got style

- b) Say each line to your partner and decide which are the stressed syllables.

c) Now put a big square above each stressed syllable and a small square above each unstressed syllable. This is called a *stress pattern*.

For example

 We are cool

2. Three of these sentences have the same stress pattern as the 4 lines above. One is different. Which?

a) my cat is dead

b) there's the postman

c) we don't wear shoes

d) I want a drink

3. Look at your *stress pattern* in 1 and 2 above. Make more sentences. You can use the suggestions below, but you must make AT LEAST ONE line of your own invention.

Verbs:

(don't) like
love want
need



dog, hands, shirt, etc.

Love hug
Kiss
friend

Boy girl
heart

My verse:

(This activity has been made from a song within *United Magazine*, Heinemann)