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TEACHING TIPS FORUM

Learning English through Songs

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Out of the four skills of English, it would seem rather convincing to state that listening is the one that foreign students practise least. The why and wherefore is that most EFL instructors tend to pay more attention to linguistic competence, an approach which is reflected in the use of grammar-based materials. In addition, being trapped in the traditional approach of teaching English, instructors are more likely to concentrate on reading and writing rather than speaking and listening. Lastly, when students leave the classroom, there are few opportunities to listen to English. However, there is a cunningly lighthearted solution. Here, the use of song in teaching listening skills can be of great help.

Recently, there has been a great deal of interest in song in the EFL classroom. This comes from the fact that not only does a song induce entertainment, but it also is an unexpected source of knowledge. It would be worthwhile to divide this written piece into four areas: song as a tool to sharpen listening ability, song as a source of linguistic improvement, song as a collection of interesting embedded content, and the implication of song in foreign language classrooms.

Song as a tool to sharpen listening ability

A song can be an alternative for EFL teachers who are exhausted looking out for listening materials. It is essential to state here that a song can offer quite a variety of listening modes to the listeners. A song could be considered as another form of spoken language. It is realistic utterances in which authentic pronunciation, genuine accent and intonation can be heard. Moreover, a song also provides listeners with concrete examples of weak forms, sound reduction and linkage, either between words or between sentences. Consider the following lines from the song, "If Tomorrow Never Comes" by Westlife.

*Sometimes late at night
I lie awake and watch her sleeping
She's lost in peaceful dreams
So I turn out the lights and lay there in the
dark
...*

Here, teachers might introduce the sound reduction of prepositions such as 'at', 'and' and 'in'. Also, teachers can raise the issue of sound linkage at the underlined parts. Regarding these points, they might ask their students to practise the pronunciation

and pinpoint those reduced sounds and linkages so that their students find realistic utterances by English speakers less challenging.

EFL students need to combine all these aspects of listening in order to understand what a song says. Hence, being introduced to this type of input, it is possible for students to be aware of pronunciation which could ease them into everyday-life situations. If teachers already have their students listening to authentic conversation, then a song could be wisely used to balance the other end of the listening material scale. Listening to songs can be a very useful supplement for students who are interested in listening to authentic conversations.

Song as a source of linguistic improvement

The term 'linguistic' here includes grammar, vocabulary and expressions such as idioms or slang. At one level, in order to comprehend the message, students need to overcome grammatical difficulties and unknown vocabulary by referring to the context. At this point, a song can be useful because it offers another pattern to teach grammar, vocabulary and expression in a rather pleasant and entertaining way. The language used to compose a song is usually not beyond the student's comprehension and thus the level of grammatical difficulty is average. It is sensible to bring the grammar in a song into the forefront and systematically point it out to students who may find themselves more enthusiastic to learn in this context. This is because they learn things from the context, not from a dry and stagnant grammar book alone. The following lines are from the song, "I Never Had A Dream Come True" by 'S Club 7'.

*Everybody's got something they had to leave
behind,*

*One regret from yesterday that just seems to
grow with time.*

*There's no use looking back or wondering,
How it could be now or might have been.*

*Oh this I know, but still I can't find ways to
let you go...*

I never had a dream come true

Til the day I found you...

In this extract, the underlined items can be dealt with in terms of 'tenses' and how it influences the understanding of the song. Teachers can make this point clear to students by referring to certain rules of grammar. In addition, it is also interesting to highlight that grammar, when it occurs in the context, functions as a tool to clarify the idea of the song and, to a certain extent, helps the song become more comprehensible.

Apart from grammar, students can also learn more about vocabulary, some interesting verbs and expressions including idioms and slang. Some songs convey many of these elements, so it is an individual decision as to which points of language teachers wish to make clear to their students. Moreover, in certain songs, figurative language might be used. The vocabulary may not be too demanding to master. But in order for the listeners to understand the intended message of the song, they need to know its underlying meaning. This point can be clarified by the following extract from the song "Like A Rose" by 'A1'.

...

And now I've finally found my way

To lead me down this lonely road

All I have to do

Is follow you

To lighten off my load

*You treat me like a rose
You give me room to grow*

...

These underlined words should be figuratively interpreted. The listeners need to probe under the surface of language so that they can gain the true meaning. If students take their meaning literally, understanding the idea of the song seems to be beyond their reach. From this point, a song should not be viewed as merely an entertaining sound, but as a means to generate critical thinking.

Song as a collection of embedded ideas or intended messages

Another point worth mentioning here is, when listening to a song, students have an opportunity to listen to and deal with a limited subject matter. When they listen to a song, they have only one piece of subject matter in a clear and single topic to decode. They know what they are doing and where they are heading. All in all, a song could be a way to open their ears, establishing listening strategies that might later be developed and extended by students themselves.

A song is not only a way to convey feeling and enjoyment, but also a medium to impart a message to the listeners. Regarding this point, teachers can ask students to discuss the content of the song. Akin to reading any written passage, the readers need to discover its main idea so that they can understand the whole passage. Hence, listening to a song and discussing its main theme can be a step to effective reading. It would be advantageous to consider the song, "Reach" by 'S Club 7'.

*Reach for the stars
Climb every mountain higher
Reach for the stars
Follow your heart desire
Reach for the stars*

*And when that rainbow's shining over you
That's when your dream will all come true*

Through the illustration, students are supposed to explore the intended message of this song either individually or together. They should notice the encouraging tone of the song which tries to uplift the spirit of a person. A song can, therefore, be thought-provoking for students.

The Implication of song in Foreign Language Classrooms

How and when to use song in a classroom should be taken into account. First of all, the question of students' levels should be considered. An activity which is commonly practised is to fill in blanks with words heard from a song. When teachers have discussed the answers, they might ask their students to think and talk about what is happening in the song or what is the main point. Students have a chance to speak and express ideas. After that, instructors could ask them to write a paragraph based on a set question requiring a critical, logical or simple answer. This universal activity pattern can be used with any level of students.

Considering the level of students, a song, in fact, can be used with every type of student. If students are at an advanced level, teachers might modify the follow-up questions and activities to be more complicated such as criticising the content of the song, writing an essay, and debating the issues that they hear in the song. Beginners could be asked whether they like

the song and give some reasons to support their answers. Some songs contain difficult language such as idioms, vocabulary, expressions and complicated sentence structures which require a good command of English. Seen in this light, this type of song might be more appropriate for intermediate and advanced students than beginners. Look at this excerpt from 'Candle in the Wind' by Elton John.

*Goodbye England's rose
May you ever grow in our hearts
You were the grace that placed itself
Where lives were torn apart
You called out to our country
And you whispered to those in pain
Now you belong to heaven
And the stars spell out your name*

*And it seems to me you lived your life
Like a candle in the wind
Never fading with the sunset
When the rain set in
And your footsteps will always fall here
Along England's greenest hills
Your candle's burned out long before
Your legend ever will*

...

The song, 'Candle in the Wind' is rather difficult for beginners due to the figurative language and symbols which require a good command of English to master. Putting the level of difficulty of a song aside, it still proves to be advantageous to use song to teach English since it can develop listening skills, critical thinking and reasoning, in the case where students are asked to provide a reason why they like or dislike a particular song.

In most cases, teachers introduce songs either as warm-up or wrap-up activities. A

song can be used to lead students to a topic of discussion and the main part of a lesson and can also be employed as a refresher at the end of class after students have been loaded with a lot of grammar and reading tasks. Apart from these two functions of a song, it can also be used in class to teach one particular topic that would lead to different types of activities. The lines from 'Memory' by Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber serve well as a sample of this case.

*Midnight
Not a sound from the pavement
Has the moon lost her memory?
She is smiling alone
In the lamplight
The withered leaves collect at my feet
And the wind begins to moan*

*Memory
All alone in the moonlight
I can smile at the old days
Live was beautiful then
I remember the time I knew what happiness was,
Let the memory live again.*

...

This song could be wisely exploited as an introduction to a reading passage, say, a story of a paralysed old man who spends his last moments lying still and reminiscing about his eventful life. Teachers might ask students to criticise how the song depicts the old man's feelings and do some other thought-provoking activities. Viewed in this light, the song and the reading passage intertwine. Moreover, the reading passage is made more realistic and accessible by the use of the song.

Using songs in EFL classrooms may thus be loosely defined as yet another creative way to promote English language

learning since it creates a pleasant environment in language classrooms and makes English language learning more enjoyable for everyone.

The Author

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