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LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH MUSIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Making music is a remarkable human phenomenon that begins with the human voice—the same voice that also speaks languages. Music can be created and performed in ways that range from the most intimate personal settings, such as singing to ourselves or hearing melodies in our heads, to huge venues, such as large concert arenas, or now, the Internet. Music involves parts of the brain that include some of the “language centers,” such as Broca’s area, but also many additional areas, such as the limbic system, which processes emotions. Because it activates so many parts of our brains, using songs and music in ESL/EFL teaching can help to create a happy, interactive, and intellectually stimulating atmosphere for language learning (Lems, 2001).

The digital revolution has profoundly changed teaching practices around the world, and access to music is one of the benefits of that revolution. Increased access to online music resources opens up many possibilities for learners and educators to use music as a teaching tool. The extra benefit of a visual representation of music, through music videos, further enhances the effect.

The following are three simple ideas for music activities that work well in the English language learning classroom. Although there are innumerable methods and techniques, I have selected three techniques that involve use of video because of the focus of this newsletter.

1. Responding to a Musical Performance

The Internet makes it possible to see millions of musical performances, including individual musicians, bands, dancers, or large ensembles such as orchestras and choruses. The range of performances extends from “yesterday” all the way back to vintage footage that may have been filmed in black and white and digitally preserved. Nearly every musical performer from the second half of the 20th century can be found somewhere on video, and that includes not only musicians from industrialized countries, but also those who perform regional and folkloric music from every part of the world.

These video performances can be used to build background knowledge, oral skills, and vocabulary through discussion and enjoyment of the videos. For example, the class can watch videos of two different performers interpreting the same song and practice using comparison and contrast words to discuss them. Students can also enjoy and talk about performances from cultures outside of the English speaking world, such as the singing of Malian “diva” and woman’s rights advocate, Oumou Sangare. We can watch, listen to, dance to, and discuss the music she performs, share how the music makes us feel and what it reminds us of, and in so doing find a pathway into a deeper experience with another culture. Because we know that we can use content areas as a great way to learn language, music is an area rich in content that can boost language (and global understanding). Another example might be to enjoy a Balinese gamelan orchestra through viewing a gamelan performance online.

2. Karaoke

This simplest way to support oral language practice is so obvious that we sometimes forget it! Thanks to the digital revolution, we no longer need a karaoke bar or machine to belt out our favorite karaoke hits. All it takes is a networked laptop and screen, and voila! We can bring the delightful ambience of a karaoke session right into the English learning classroom. Karaoke can be used in many ways. The whole class can sing along with a song as the karaoke plays, or students can take turns performing their favorite karaoke songs for the rest of the class. If any of you have used karaoke in the classroom, you already know that it has a magical ability to draw out some of the most reticent students in the most surprising ways.

Due to the worldwide popularity of shows like American Idol, Britain's Got Talent, and other competitions in which unknown people bring audiences to tears with their vocal stylings, many students are now willing to work up a song and perform it in front of others. What's more, they will rehearse the song endlessly to get the pronunciation "just right." I witnessed the power of karaoke for language practice firsthand at conferences when teaching in Chile in 2012 and Mongolia in 2013. Both groups of English teachers thoroughly enjoyed spending their free time at the end of the conferences singing their favorite English language karaoke songs for each other for hours on end!

Some karaoke videos are easier to read than others, and some karaoke soundtracks are easier to sing to than others. Some lyrics are in fancy or small fonts that are difficult to read, and some soundtracks are set in keys that are hard for people to sing in. Therefore, make sure you locate and bookmark in advance the tracks you are confident will be "hits." Which songs to choose? Most of the time, your students will gladly let you know, and it will be obvious because those songs are being played incessantly on radio and TV. For example, Adele's smash hit "Hello" has numerous karaoke versions on YouTube, and several of them have surpassed 5 million views already. However, don't rule out the oldies, either. Many students know and love older, classic songs, whether they're by Elvis, Frank Sinatra, John Denver, or Whitney Houston, and they enjoy pouring their hearts into the performance just as much. The only proviso is that students need to be familiar with the tune beforehand because karaoke is not a place to learn a new song, but rather perform one that is already very well known.

3. Song Lyric Visualization Videos

It is easy to create videos through phone apps as well as laptops, and students can express their creativity using songs as a resource for video projects to practice English. Music videos already have storylines, which add a whole new dimension to a song, and now we can find "lyric videos," which add song lyrics to a music video in an artistic format. Two examples of lyric videos, "Waiting for Love" by Avicii and "Lost Boy" by Ruth B, have logged millions of views.

Our students can create lyric videos, too. In this project, students choose a song they like and illustrate it using photos and images, or images and video clips, using technology such as Microsoft's Photo Story or Apple's iMovie. Students will design their project based on their own available technology and their skill in using it. They may include all of the song's lyrics in their videos, or only some key words from the lyrics, along with images. Although this project is creative and interpretive, it also requires a clear understanding of the vocabulary in the song and an ability to find images to support the understanding. Teachers should give students enough time inside and outside of class to assemble and edit their projects. When the song lyric visualization projects are complete, students show their video to their classmates and discuss their directorial choices.

I have used this in my classroom, and students are delighted and astonished at some of the clever productions of their classmates. For example, one of my students chose the song "Help!" by the Beatles, and used a series of funny emojis, clip art, and Google images to show various people in circumstances that called for help. Key words, especially the word "Help," were placed in the photo story at the place they appeared in the song. By the end of the song, the whole class was laughing, and it led to a discussion of other situations that might call for a helping hand. I have found, and you will find, that such assignments are highly motivating, and you'll be amazed at the level of engagement and the clever ways your class members will interpret songs using the technology and apps now available to them.

Best of all, these video-supported musical techniques all push language output because of their creativity, their interactivity, and their charm. Go ahead and try them out!

Reference

Lems, K. (2001, December). Using music in the adult ESL classroom. ERIC Digest, National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. ED # ED459634. Retrieved from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/music.html

Kristin Lems is a full professor of ESL/bilingual education at National Louis University in Chicago. She has presented her Postconvention Institute about using music to teach ESL at the annual TESOL convention for the past 11 years. She recently appeared in a live webinar for the U.S. State Department's American English series called "Using Songs and Music to Teach English".