How Can Song-based Tasks Gain Wider Acceptance
Among Language Teachers?

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Abstract

A number of language teachers have long recognized the value of employing songs in the classroom. In spite of the widespread use of music in the classroom, however, songs are often used just as a break from study. This paper is an attempt to analyze the reasons behind the current situation surrounding the use of songs in the classroom. The results indicate two factors which seem to hinder the educational use of songs: doubts over practicability and the excessive dependence on songs (i.e., use of songs as the only content matter of instruction), often seen in many studies and textbooks. In order to help rectify the situation, a song-based textbook was developed with its focus on relating song-based tasks to reading tasks, which in turn were aimed at enhancing students’ intercultural understanding. Its theoretical basis is discussed here, and implications for other song-based materials are presented in the conclusion.

1. Introduction

The value of using songs in the EFL classroom has long been recognized by many language teachers as a means of stimulating students’ interest and motivation. Recent years have seen increased interest in developing effective ways to use songs. A number of song-based textbooks, as well as resource books, such as Cranmer & Laroy (1992), Griffee (1992) and Murphey (1992) have been published. Nevertheless, it is still a fact that songs are widely used simply as a break from study (Laskowski, 1995). Besides, in spite of this widespread use of songs in the classroom, there are still a number of teachers who hesitate to employ songs, fearing that they might be ‘wasting time’ on a strictly ‘enjoyable’ activity that provides no ‘real’ content or learning (Kanel & Grant, 1993).

Thus, the educational value of using songs is still not fully recognized by language teachers. However, if properly used, songs can be a very effective teaching material. As Medina (1993) emphasizes, songs should no longer be regarded merely as recreational devices with no instructional value.

This paper discusses the use of songs in the teaching of English, assesses the merits and demerits of this approach, and analyzes the reasons behind the present situation. In an attempt to rectify the situation, a song-based textbook “English with Hit Songs” was
developed. Its theoretical basis is discussed in this paper. It should be noted that music and songs are not being proposed here as ‘the new methodology’ in language classes, but rather as a tool which language teachers can use to animate and facilitate language learning and acquisition.

2. Use of Songs—Merits and Demerits

2-1. Song-based Activities

As mentioned above, songs have been widely used in language classes. Asakawa et al. (1997) identifies eight classroom activities in which songs are employed:

1. Warm-up or break: Creation of a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere
2. Introduction and/or reinforcement of vocabulary and grammar
3. Writing
4. Listening comprehension (cloze exercise)
5. Oral reading (includes singing in class)
6. Translation
7. Literature (Poetic reading of the lyrics)
8. Reading comprehension of the lyrics

Some teachers may use only one of these song-based activities, but others may use some or all of them in class. For example, Hino (1988) presents, as a sample lesson plan, eight teaching procedures in the classroom, which include cloze exercise, vocabulary, grammar, and discussion of the lyrics. Despite such studies, this writer’s survey of his students revealed that in English classes, in most cases, they simply listened to songs without any activities. This annual survey has been conducted for the past ten years. The results have been consistent, and they seem to support the notion that songs are still often used just for a break or fun.

2-2. Rationale for using songs in the classroom: Advantages

The use of music and songs offers several advantages in language learning. First, a number of studies show that songs are highly motivating. Laskowski (1995: 54) reports that students were pleased to study the words and meanings of songs that they have enjoyed in the past but not fully understood. Considering the importance of motivation in language learning, this can be said to be a major advantage.

Secondly, music appears to break down many of the affective barriers that inhibit learning (Lozanov, 1979; Meyer, 1956). Murphey (1990) says that students’ natural enjoyment of music reduces many of their negative feelings and affective barriers toward studying English, while stimulating active listening. As mentioned above, this particular aspect is often taken advantage of in the classroom to create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere.

In addition, songs are highly memorable. Murphey (1990) describes what he calls the “song-stuck-in-my-head” (SSIMH) phenomenon (i.e., a song or melody we just cannot get
out of our heads). SSIMH is similar to the “Din in the head” identified by Barber (1980, cited in Krashen, 1983), which refers to involuntary mental repetition or review that often occurred after extended periods of foreign language input. Murphey (1990) suggests that, like the Din, the SSIMH phenomenon may be another innate developmental strategy of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

Besides, songs are short, self-contained ‘texts’ that are easy to handle in a lesson, and there is an inexhaustible supply. Compared with other authentic materials, such as movies, most of which are usually between 90 minutes and two-hours long, songs are easier to exploit in EFL classrooms.

2-3 Demerits

As for possible disadvantages of using songs in the language classroom, Murphey (1992) lists twenty concerns expressed by language teachers who participated in a workshop on using songs in the classroom. The list includes such concerns as:

• Pop songs have poor vocabulary — too much slang and bad grammar.
• Many songs are not intelligible.
• Teachers do not like to sing or are not musical.
• Students will not sing.

These concerns may sound quite familiar to language teachers, but they seem to be somewhat exaggerated. For example, regarding the quality of the language used in pop songs, Murphey (1990) analyzed the top fifty songs from September 1987 and found that, rather than containing archaic or unusual vocabulary and grammar, these songs made repetitive use of simple vocabulary, especially pronouns. It is true that some songs contain non-standard structures and vocabulary, but if care is taken to select songs that are relevant to learners’ needs, such problems can be resolved without much difficulty.

As for the passive attitude toward singing in class, it should be noted that “singing” is not always necessary in the use of songs. Considering the fact that there are various approaches, other than singing in class, this concern does not seem valid. Such criticism itself reflects the fact that the use of songs has been associated too much with actual “singing” in class.

More importantly, Murphey (1992) points out the following three as frequently stated problems:

1. Administrators/teachers/ students do not take music and song seriously.
2. Teachers do not know how to exploit the material usefully. The goal is not clear.
3. It takes away from the normal syllabus. Time is lost.

These concerns seem to reinforce the above-mentioned problem that the educational value of songs is still not fully recognized. Kanel (1996:114) also points out similar concerns as to why teachers hesitate to teach with songs. Therefore, what is needed most is to respond to these concerns. Obviously, that is to demonstrate:

1. the pedagogical effectiveness of songs as opposed to conventional materials,
2. how songs can be exploited usefully, and
3. how song-based activities can be incorporated into the normal syllabus.

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Regarding the pedagogical effectiveness, several studies have shown that song-based materials are as effective as conventional materials (Kanel, 1997; Kanel & Grant, 1993; Grant, Clark & Kock, 1996). The remaining two points will be addressed in the sections which follow.

3. Cause Analysis

In order to demonstrate the usefulness of song-based activities, a number of articles have described specific techniques, methods, or lesson plans (e.g., see Abrate, 1983; Griffie, 1986; Urbancic & Vixmuller, 1981). Prior research raises two main concerns: doubts regarding practicability, and excessive dependence on songs.

(1) Doubts regarding practicability

Previous research focuses on describing how some specific songs can be used effectively in the classroom, failing to pay close attention to the practicability, i.e., how those song-based activities can be used in class easily and regularly by teachers with no special knowledge of music and songs. For example, Elson & Fox (1983) provides a lesson plan for teaching the conditional tense with "El Condor Pasa" by Simon & Garfunkel. These studies provide teachers with useful teaching ideas, but, since they deal with only some specific points, not all the main grammatical points dealt with in conventional textbooks, they are difficult to put into regular use for the entire school year, leading to no use or occasional use at best. As Kanel (1996) says, it is true that songs contain virtually all the grammatical categories that appear in other non-musical textbooks, but they have yet to be presented in a ready-to-use form.

Laskowski (1995) also describes various song-based activities (e.g. “Help” by the Beatles for teaching the language function of giving advice). While admitting the usefulness of those activities, the writer found it very difficult to implement song-based activities regularly in class. The reason was basically the same. Selecting enough songs to cover other major language functions required fairly special knowledge of music and songs. The writer’s frank opinion was why there were no suitable textbooks readily available. Considering the abundance of non-musical textbooks which contain all the grammatical points or language functions, this may be one of the main causes which hinder the use of song-based activities.

(2) Excessive dependence on songs

A number of research studies have focused on the use of songs as the sole content matter of instruction. This approach might rather loosely be termed as the “All-in-song” approach. Probably due to the emphasis put on the benefits of song use in class, some studies seem to insist that all the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—can be taught with music alone (Kanel, 1996; Murphey, 1990). Lesson plans suggested in those studies employ songs as the sole subject matter for instruction. Most frequently, lessons are planned around the vocabulary, concepts, and sentence structures involved in
the lyrics of particular songs, with the whole class time devoted to those song-based tasks. Although Hino (1988) advocates such an approach as being a more holistic utilization of songs, it is doubtful if this can be adopted by many teachers, who are often restricted by time or curricular considerations. In fact, "Pops English" or "English through songs" classes are still quite rare, and many teachers must follow somewhat more conventional syllabuses.

A glance at currently published song-based textbooks (less than 20 so far) illustrates this "all-in-song" approach. Songs are used as the sole subject matter for instruction in most of the existing textbooks, and, for example, only two textbooks contain non-musical listening practice. Considering the monologue style of songs, however, many teachers might want to supplement listening practices with dialogues and other materials. Furthermore, reading passages in these textbooks are mostly on the singer's life, or the background of the song, which gives teachers an impression that the texts deal only with show-biz topics.

In short, in spite of the various useful activities explored and demonstrated, little has been presented in the form of a complete syllabus; they are scattered like dots, so to speak, but have not been put together and lined up in a syllabus yet. Moreover, the "all-in-song" approach, often found in those studies and textbooks, do not seem to respond to the needs of many teachers. Of course there may be other reasons, but these seem to be the major factors which lead to the current situation surrounding the use of songs in class. This raises the question of how to remedy the situation, and how to ensure that the goal of incorporating music and songs into a more conventional syllabus can be effectively and systematically achieved.

4. The Development of a Song-based Textbook

Based on the discussion above, one potential solution to the current situation is to create a song-based textbook which could be incorporated into conventional syllabuses, one in which the textbook should clearly define the purpose of using songs. Presenting song-based activities as a complete textbook, not just as a sample lesson plan, should help music and songs become more accessible to teachers with no special musical knowledge. The textbook "English with Hit Songs" was developed with this objective. It is an intermediate level textbook designed for use in General English classes at the college level in Japan.

In order to survey the teachers' objectives and needs, syllabuses for General English classes at ten colleges and universities were examined. This survey revealed four key areas of focus: enhancement of four skills, improvement of communicative competence, intercultural understanding, and internationalization. These areas are basically in line with The Courses of Study (Monbusho, 1998), which states that the main purpose of foreign language study is to cultivate students' communicative competence and intercultural understanding. With these key words in mind, the means of incorporating song-based tasks into a syllabus was closely examined.

Focusing on the fact that most songs contain reduced and assimilated phonological
sequences, and formulaic contractions such as: gonna, wouldja, and lemme, songs are utilized in this textbook as authentic material to master sound changes that often occur in real-life daily conversations. As Kanel & Grant (1993) suggest, this linguistic authenticity of songs is one of the most overlooked qualities. Each unit deals with a particular sound change in spoken English. The song-cloze exercise, followed by a systematic explanation (listening point), examples and exercises, is designed to teach students to recognize sound changes of normal conversations. One major feature of this textbook is that the purpose of the song-based task is clearly defined. Although song-cloze exercises are provided in most song-based textbooks, they are provided simply as a listening discrimination practice, with no additional explanations or exercises. The only exceptions are Kumai & Timson (1998, 1999).

This song-based task is provided at the beginning of each unit, taking advantage of the fact that songs bring an atmosphere of fun or liveliness into the classroom. It is also intended that, while doing song activities, the students' interests are aroused and, in turn, their motivation increases and attitudes toward subsequent materials improve.

Since the above song-cloze exercise is basically intended for listening discrimination, another listening exercise is provided for the purpose of increasing students' listening comprehension. Its style is identical to TOEIC Part III (Short conversation), and no direct relevance to songs is given to this exercise. Rather, care is taken to include various communication settings, such as hospital, school, and office talk, which cannot be dealt with in songs due to their monologue style.

Another feature of this textbook is the reading task designed to enhance students' intercultural understanding. Unlike other textbooks, reading passages in this textbook do not deal with the singer's life or the background of the song, avoiding the somewhat limiting focus on only show-biz topics. Rather, care is taken so that they have some relevance to the singer or the lyrics of the song and, at the same time, offer various cross-cultural perspectives. For example, Unit 5 deals with the elision in consecutive consonants through "Livin' La Vida Loca" by Ricky Martin, one of the most notable Hispanic icons in the United States. In the reading activity, a 400-word essay is provided on the remarkable advancement of Hispanics in the United States. This reading exercise is intended to encourage students to learn and think about various minority groups in the present United States, promoting interest which can be expanded by additional writing or speaking practice as suggested in the teaching manual.

The textbook consists of twelve units. Song titles, listening points, and reading topics dealt with in each unit are shown in Table 1, and basic procedures in a lesson are shown in Table 2.
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Listening Point</th>
<th>Reading Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My Heart Will Go On</td>
<td>Linking 1</td>
<td>A Clearly Canadian Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celine Dion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Open Arms</td>
<td>Elision ①</td>
<td>Wedding Customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>(ing ⇒ in’)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Don’t Look Back In Anger</td>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>Britain’s Rock ‘n’ roll Royal Family?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oasis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A Whole New World</td>
<td>Elision ②</td>
<td>A Whole New World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peabo Bryson</td>
<td>(plosive sound)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Livin’ La Vida Loca</td>
<td>Elision ③</td>
<td>The Changing Face of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ricky Martin</td>
<td>(consecutive consonants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kiss Of Life Sade</td>
<td>Contracted form ④</td>
<td>The Face of Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(must’ve been)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I Don’t Want To Miss A</td>
<td>Formulaic contractions</td>
<td>Hollywoodland?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thing Aerosmith</td>
<td>(wanna, gonna, gotta)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Every Time I Close My Eyes</td>
<td>Elision ④</td>
<td>What’s in a Name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Babyface</td>
<td>(schwa sound)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Life Des’ree</td>
<td>Similar vowels</td>
<td>Superstitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>([a:][!]&amp;[.]&amp;[a:p] [a:p])</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Stranger</td>
<td>Weakening</td>
<td>Masks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Billy Joel</td>
<td>(function words)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>All I Want For Christmas Is</td>
<td>Contracted form ②</td>
<td>Christmas Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You Mariah Carey</td>
<td>(want &amp; won’t)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hey Now</td>
<td>Linking ②</td>
<td>Do Girls (and Women) Just Want to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cyndi Lauper</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have Fun?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP 1 Song-based task</th>
<th>STEP 2 Listening task</th>
<th>STEP 3 Reading (Writing / Speaking) task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Song-cloze exercise</td>
<td>Listening comprehension exercise (TOEIC style)</td>
<td>Reading exercise (Intercultural topics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Listening Point</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Additional listening discrimination exercise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that all the songs were selected from a popular compilation CD album, “MAX BEST2nd”. While recordings by the original artists are not usually available in textbooks, by using a commercially available CD album, this textbook made it possible to use original recordings in the classroom.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Study

The findings obtained in this study indicate that more attention should be directed to how song-based tasks can be incorporated into conventional syllabuses. In the present study, as an attempt to incorporate song-based tasks into the “General English” syllabus, a song-based textbook was developed with its focus on relating song-based tasks to reading tasks, which in turn were aimed at enhancing students’ intercultural understanding. In order to assess the effectiveness of this textbook, feedback from both students and teachers will be necessary.
Given their versatility as a resource, music and songs can offer many other possibilities for classroom use. Such approaches may include:

1. Incorporating songs in a grammatical/structural syllabus:
   presenting songs whose lyrics illustrate a grammatical point in focus
   (e.g. "It might be you" by Stephen Bishop for teaching auxiliary verbs)

2. Incorporating songs in the functional/conversational syllabus:
   presenting songs appropriate to the language function in focus, like "Help" by the Beatles for teaching the language function of giving advice (cited in Laskowski, 1995)

3. Incorporating songs in the reading/writing syllabus:
   presenting songs which deal with topics covered in reading materials, such as peace, human rights, and environmental problems.
   (e.g. "Luca" by Suzanne Vega on the topic of child abuse)

More attention should be directed to the educational value of songs, not their entertainment value alone. Further research should also be conducted in order to comprehensively dispel the notion that song use in the classroom is limited to entertainment or mood enhancement and has little practical value. For song-based tasks to gain wider acceptance, they should be proposed in a more "user-friendly" way, enabling their adoption by teachers with no special knowledge of songs. The practicability of song-based material must be carefully considered in order to ensure that its use in the language classroom is not limited to some enthusiastic music-loving teachers.

Note
1. A sample copy of this textbook is available at the following web site:
2. "MAX BEST" was released in 2000 by Sony Music Entertainment (Japan) Inc. and became a best-selling album with more than one million copies sold.

Acknowledgement

The textbook presented in the present study was co-authored by Associate Professor Simon Capper of Suzugamine Women's College, Hiroshima. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to him for his tremendous contribution to the textbook.

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