Songs In the English Classroom


Every teacher has ever faced a classroom where the students are tired after so many lessons during the day. A good way to catch the attention of the students and make them enjoy the English classroom is making the most of music. Songs are always a good point to break the normal rhythm of a lesson. They are a useful tool for teachers as they allow students to improve different skills apart from the obvious listening. The teacher can use songs in the classroom as a project so that pupils can work in groups, pairs or individually.

The idea is that the students choose a song sung in English and then make some activities to work the song in the classroom by doing an oral exposition. In a previous lesson, the teacher has handed out the students a photocopy with the different activities they can do with the song with examples so that they are well illustrated.

Here there is a list of proposed activities to work to classified in different areas. These areas embrace different aspects to work with the four skills (listening, writing, reading and speaking). There are other aspects included that are normally associated to songs like learning vocabulary, grammar and cultural aspects.

Listening exercises. While using a song in the English classroom, it brings to our mind the most traditional listening activities: Fill in the blanks. The students write the word or words that are missed in a space or blank while they listen the song.

This classical exercise could be done including different levels of complexity. In a starter level there is only the first letter of the words to fill the blank. For instance:

If I was just another d_____ record on the shelve
Will you b_____ me o_____ and play me like everybody else

In the second level, the pupils must complete the blank with the correct word among others that appear in a box at the beginning of the song. For example: Use the words in the box to complete the song:

RECORD KNOW WORLD BOTTLE LONG LUCKY REASON PRAY TRYING BOY WHAT EVERYTHING CHANGE THINKING SHALL

(...)Give me a ______ why
Give me all that you got
Maybe you’ll do fine
As _______ as you don’t lie to me
And pretend to be _______ you’re not(…)

(record the song)
Finally, the third level is just a blank without any clue for the students, so they have to pay attention and try to complete all the blanks or at least most of them.

But ______'ll tell ______ one thing

If ______ would leave ______ would be a crying shame

In every breath and every word

In Fill in the blanks exercises we can introduce other varieties like including the phonetic transcription of the word,

Boys and (1)_______/g3:ls/of every age

Wouldn't you like to see (2)______________/’sʌmʘɪɳ/strange?

Including in a verse a word scramble and unscramble it like:

Come with us and you will see This, our town of (3)_____________ Ihowlnea

Introducing an icon representing the word the students must write to complete the song:

I don't want a lot for Christmas
There's just one thing I need

I don't care about the ______

Underneath the ______________

**Comprehension exercises.** Here two types of comprehension exercises are proposed. The first type is based in listening comprehension. Exercises basically done by ordering the words in a verse(a), the lines of a chorus (b) or by choosing among different words. For instance:
(a) My starting a heart there’s fire
There’s a fire starting in my heart

(b) [Adam Levine]
( 6 ) This melody was meant for you
( 3 ) Hear my thoughts in every note
( 1 ) My heart’s a stereo
( 5 ) Turn me up when you feel low
( 7 ) Just sing along to my stereo
( 4 ) Make me your radio
( 2 ) It beats for your, so listen close
(Oh oh oh oh To my stereo)

Oh oh oh oh So sing along to my stereo

(c) If I was an old school, fifty pound boom box

Would / Could / Should you hold me on your shoulder, wherever you walk

The second kind is based in the general and detailed comprehension of the song. This type of activities goes from the traditional True or False questions to concrete questions about what is said in the song. For example in the songs “My Funny Valentine” and “Makin’ Whoopee” we could suggest the following comprehension activities:

General Comprehension. Which sentence summarise the song better?

1. You're perfect in every way, so please don't change.
2. You're not very good-looking or intelligent, so we can't be together.
3. Although you're far from perfect, especially in your appearance, I still want you.

Detailed Comprehension. What does the song says?

1. Her figure a. Doesn't have much character.
2. Her looks b. What comes out may not be very intelligent.
3. Her mouth c. It's not as good as the classical ideal.

Is is True or False?

1. He's very confident about getting married
2. They get married in summer
3. He's very incompetent at domestic work.
4. There is one year between the two parts of the song.
**Vocabulary exercises.** Songs are a good source for learning new words, collocation patterns, idiomatic expressions, slang, etc. Students can be focus in searching synonyms, antonyms, specific vocabulary.

We can present exercises focusing on the words we are interested in and give their definition and asks students to match them or the students only have the definition and the grammatical category of the word and they may look it up in the song. For example:

Match the word to their meaning:

1. Smooth ________ a) to understand you.
2. Groove ________ b) to make you happy.
3. Cool ________ c) a short form of am not, is not, are not, has not, or have not.
4. Ain’t ________ d) very attractive, fashionable, interesting.
5. To lift you up ________ e) someone who is smooth is polite, confident and relaxed.
6. To suit your mood. ________ f) the beat of a piece of popular music.

Find the words for the following meaning, and complete the song

1. v. Makes you remember
2. n. The time when you where a child
3. n. The part of your body where your eyes, nose and mouth are
4. v. Drop tears from your eyes
5. n. You see through them
6. n. When drops of water fall from the sky
7. adj. Opposite to cool
8. v. go to a place so nobody can find you
9. n. the loud noise you hear during a storm

Non-standard English. Songs are a good way to learn colloquial or no grammatical English language.

An' I ain't a-gonna be treated this way (And I am not going to be...)

**Grammar exercises.** Teachers can take a good profit from songs to show certain grammatical points. A part from focusing in the verb tense, they can deal with pronouns, indefinite words, comparative and superlative adjectives, quantifiers...Furthermore, most English songs sometimes sacrifice grammar for smooth rhyme. This
makes them very good grammar teaching tools. Teachers can ask students to find the mistakes or ask them how we would normally say it. For instance:

A1) Write the verbs in bracket in the correct tense.

*Baby I have no story to be __TOLD__(tell)*

*But I’ve __HEARD__(hear) one of you*

*And I’m gonna make your head _BURN__(burn)*

A2) Different uses of a modal verb

*May I list a few?*

*We may never never meet again*

B) Correct the mistakes in the verses of the following songs.

*Doorbell rung and in come a man*(rang/came)

*I’m a-goin’ where the water *taste like wine* *(tastes)*

C) Grammar structures

*And I told her not to grieve after me*

**Reported speech**: “Don’t grieve after me”

*Told somebody to do something* is an order in the reported speech

*If only* (to express a wish, a desire)  *You’d be hers if only she would call*

in the present: If only+verb in the Past tense

in the past: If only+verb in the Past Perfect

in the future: If only+would+bare infinitive

**Pronunciation exercises.** Songs are a good resource to help students to improve their pronunciation as they heard the words in a context and not just individually. For example, they can learn without noticing how to
pronounce words that in a normal lesson will be mispronounced for not paying attention to them. So basic exercises can be done to point different words and how are they pronounce like:

**How are the following words pronounce? /ei/ or /ea/**

care-change-day-hair-stay (My funny valentine)

**Pay attention to pronounce these words correctly /b/ or /v/**

Best-break-but-I've-very (I get along without you very well)

*But I get along without you very well*
*But I've forgotten you just like I should*

Songs are also a good tool to introduce the idea of rhythm, rhyme, connect words in the speech. For instance in the song “My Funny Valentine”, the singer connects the words while pronouncing them.

(...)The way you wear your hat
The way you sip your tea
The memory of all that
No, no they can't take that away from me(...)

Students can do basic exercises to look for words that rhyme in the song like:

hat- that tea-me

They can also notice the variety of accent of singers from Jamaica, Canada, USA, Ireland, Australia, Britain... They can notice the difference of rhythm in a Jamaican singer from a British singer. The way to pronounce word depending of the variety of English spoken. For example, the word “party” is very different in British English than in American English as Americans make the /r/ voiceless.

Furthermore, the students can do activities on something like varieties of modern English or simply by comparing two songs and asking students to figure out where the speaker is from and why.

**Writing exercises.** After listening the song, it can be a great opportunity to create writing exercises, for example, to narrate the song like a story, to write a letter, a report or even a comic using the information of the song or imagine what happens next. There is also the possibility of creating running dictation by cutting the song in pieces and then the students may run around the classroom, memorise the verses of the lyrics and then dictate them to another member of the group. Finally, there are the typical exercises like summarizing the song or writing a biography of the singer or group.

**Speaking exercises.** The presentation of the song and explaining the activities is an oral exercise. The students can start their exposition by introducing the song to their partners; they can talk about the singer or the group, their background, the style of music, the context when the song was broadcasted, the importance of the song and its influence in the world of music. Then, they will listen the song and do the different activities proposed by the students in the different points dealt in this article as if they were the teachers. After that, either the students or the teacher can propose a debate about the message of the song just by asking “What
does the song talk about?”. The teacher can go deeper by asking a certain aspect of the song like ‘Define ‘Spanish Harlem Mona Lisa’.

But above all, there could be a great debate by talking about the fan phenomenon if there is a song of a famous singer or boy band or girl band. Everybody can talk about what they know, what fans do, if they are or have been fans of somebody... So, it is also a good source to reflect on modern habits, and consumerism.

The positive aspects of doing this kind of lesson is that students are really motivated because they enjoy music and they want to show their partner their favourite music and how they feel about it. Obviously these activities are genial as students have fun while doing them.

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