Songs as a valuable pedagogical tool in the primary English classroom

**Abstract**

Songs play an important role in the learning of a second language. In fact, songs are satisfactory used in foreign language lessons all over the world. This article starts by giving reasons why songs are used as valuable pedagogical tools for learning a foreign language. Then, it explains how to make literary creation with the songs in the English class. Afterwards, it shows some types of songs suitable for primary English learners. Finally, it presents some activities to be applied in different aspects of the English learning.

**Keywords:** Songs, music, lyrics, activities, phonetic, vocabulary, cultural, learning

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Songs are regarded as useful pedagogical tools because, apart from being very relaxing activities for students, they contribute to encourage their interest in learning. Children enjoy singing and dancing. These activities often provide them an escape from daily routine and create a warm atmosphere in the classroom. Furthermore, while learning a song, students feel they learn the language faster, since the results of the practice are obtained at the moment.

Recent investigations reveal that music has positive effects on the brain. Indeed, if a song has a special meaning for a child, it stimulates the brains to remember things easier. It is due to the association of the data with musical notes. Don McMannis (2009) says: “Music is an effective, almost magical medium for learning and retaining information”. He adds “Words paired with music are far easier to retain. As an example, most of us still remember the words and meanings of songs we haven’t heard for years. Isn’t it interesting how you still remember your ABCs?”

**A LITERARY CREATION IN THE ENGLISH CLASS**

Aldo Tripiciano (2006), wrote in his blog (poetry.wordpress.com) that in poetic texts, the poet usually expresses an emotional state. He explained that the word poetry comes from a Greek verb that means to make, to create. We use this definition because we consider that poetry and songs have many things in common. In songs, authors also transmit their emotions by creating relevant, meaningful and interesting melodies and lyrics. That is why songs are considered literary creations because in them, music and language are the means to create poetry.

In the case of children’ songs, its poetry transmits positive emotions. Children enjoy the rhythm of the music and the similar sounds of the words. In addition, the reading comprehension of lyrics enable students to exploit this literary side of the song. As a classroom activity, students can do their literary creation by writing their own song. For this, they can use the rhythm of another song or compose both, the lyrics and the melody. Teachers can also make their literary creation by adapting of inventing songs. “With a little initiative and imagination, a children’s song can easily be adapted. By slightly altering the vocabulary, grammar, or sentence structure whilst maintaining the original rhythm, a traditional song can be adapted to suit a particular theme or part of the curriculum”. Millington (2011). One example of this kind of adaptations
could be the song “The Wheels on the Bus” which, thanks to the catchy melody and easy lyrics, requires little adaptations to make it suitable for teaching different topics.

**TYPES OF SONGS**

It is necessary the use of carefully selected songs or compose them especially for the purpose of the lesson. We must also bear in mind the students’ features such as: their age, interests, and level of English proficiency. The following are some examples of types of songs we can use at primary:

- **Songs for especial occasions.** These are songs that make reference to special events that happen in daily life. For instance: “Happy birthday” or at specific time of the year like “Merry Christmas” or “Jingle Bells”.
- **Topic songs.** These are songs that deal with a specific topic useful to work English vocabulary. For example: “Charlie and the numbers” or animals “Old McDonald”.
- **Actions songs.** These songs include movement which is related to “Total Physical Response” method (James Asher). E.g. “If you’re happy” or “The Hockey Pockey”.
- **Dialogue songs.** In this type of songs, children have to answer questions or complete a dialogue, so it requires more attention on the part of the children. E.g. “Is the wolf at home” or “Who are you?”
- **Traditional songs.** They come from the English culture that is why they will not probably known by the students. For example: “London Bridge” or “Yankee Doodle”.
- **Pop songs.** These kind of songs usually sound on the radio or are availed in commercial markets. They can be used in class to teach grammar. For example: “Yesterday” (the Beatles) which is useful to teach the simple past tense.
- **Films songs.** They are famous because children have usually seen the films. For instance: “Hakuna Matata” (The lion king) or “Let it go” (Frozen).

**ACTIVITIES FOR USING SONGS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

Some of the purposes of primary education is to provide students the practice of oral skills, the acquisition of basic notions of culture, and the development of creativity, among others. Therefore, we will present some useful activities for using songs for improving phonetic and lexical learning which are related to the oral skills, and for acquiring cultural notions. All of the following proposals shall aim to develop creativity.

**ACTIVITIES FOR PHONETIC LEARNING**

“Through songs learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation, therefore potentially helping them to improve their speaking skills”, Murphey (1992). Apart from imitating the melody and lyrics, students can also learn pronunciation (sound, stress, rhythm and intonation) with them. So, they are adequate tools for learning phonetic.

a. **Complete the text.** Teacher gives the lyrics of a song with some words removed. Those words must be chosen in order to focus on their pronunciation. Students should fill in the gaps after listening the song twice.

b. **Arranging words.** Teacher delivers a paper sheet with some words listed in a different order they will appear in the song. Before listening to the song, the teacher should review the pronunciation of words list. Students must arrange the words according to the correct order of appearance.

c. **Finding stress.** Teacher gives the lyrics of a song with some sentences underlined. Students have to listen carefully to the song and pay special attention to the words pronounced with major intensity in the underlined sentences. While listening, students to circle those words which have more stress.

**ACTIVITIES FOR LEXICAL LEARNING**

“Songs are useful tools in the learning of vocabulary, sentence structures, and sentence patterns” (Murphey, 1992). Songs provide the opportunity to learn and practice vocabulary in a real context. However, some of the vocabulary and language used in popular English songs may cause difficulties due to their use of low frequency words. So, teachers need to study carefully the lyrics before giving to the students.
a. **Questions about a song.** After watching and listening a video of a song, teachers can ask questions to check student’s comprehensive capacity. The questions can be about a general idea or specific details. The questions should be about the lyrics not about the images of the video.

b. **Correction of mistakes.** Teacher changes some words of a song or write them wrong. Students have to listen to the song, find the mistakes and correct them.

c. **Words with opposite meaning.** Teacher gives a list of words that students have to find in a song, but these words do not appear equal. Students have to find words that means the same.

**ACTIVITIES FOR CULTURAL LEARNING**

According to Jolly (1975), “using songs can also give learners the opportunity to acquire a better understanding of the culture of the target language”. Traditional English songs help learners to find out details about life-style, habits, sports, festivals and so on, of the English countries.

a. **Christmas carols.** By watching video-clips of these songs, students can get an idea about how this important day is celebrated in the English culture. They can also find out details about decoration, food, clothes, presents, and believes, etc., of the Christmas celebration.

b. **Original English songs.** There are some children’s songs that are popular only in the countries were English is the official language. Students can listen to them to discover which kind of rhythms are famous there. Teacher can also display videos of real classes to know how children enjoy singing, dancing and acting those songs.

c. **Pop music.** By listening modern pop music, students can take out some useful words and expressions that native people use to express something in a real context.

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