

## OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS' ROOM

### POP SONGS IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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#### **Synopsis**

Most students enjoy listening to pop music and using songs can make a welcome change to your usual classroom activities/ This article describes various fun ways in which you can use songs to teach and practice grammar and vocabulary.

#### **Pop Music**

'Before Elvis, there was nothing.'                      John Lennon.

My love affair with popular music began with Elvis Presley. I vividly recall sitting with Robert, my elder brother, in our front room, listening to the latest rock and roll music. I must have been only five or six at the time, but I clearly remember looking through my brother's mounting collection of records imported from the USA: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and, of course, Elvis. I used to sing along with the songs, and though they were in English, I didn't really know what they were about.

'Well, since my baby left me,  
I've found a new place to dwell,  
It's down at the end of Lonely Street  
In Heartbreak Hotel.'

To a five- or six-year-old, words like 'dwell' and 'heartbreak' mean nothing.

'You can burn my house, steal my car,  
Drink my liquor from an old fruit jar,  
Do anything that you wanna do,  
But oh, honey, don't step on my blue suede shoes!'

Likewise, I'd never seen a pair of 'blue suede shoes' and didn't know what 'liquor' was. I'm still not exactly sure what a 'fruit jar' is.

#### **Singing along**

The point is that it doesn't matter. In my twenty years of teaching students English, I've seen all the latest styles come and go – punk rock, glam rock, heavy metal, grunge. One thing that is constant is that I've seen many students, even ones whom I would consider very weak students of English, singing along to pop songs they like – **with perfect intonation** and often **without understanding the words**. I've put those last two observations in bold, because when you think about it, it's quite amazing. Intonation is, after all, a very difficult thing to teach. It can really only be picked up by listening to a lot of English. Young students, though, listen to the same hit songs over and over again, just as I used to, in order to 'get it right'. This is something we can exploit in the EFL classroom. It also doesn't matter if we, as teachers, don't like the music. I don't think students expect us to like their music. Going back to my teenage days, I remember my father making many sarcastic comments about Bob Dylan's singing ability (though he did concede that 'the words are all right!'). The 'understanding' part is where teachers have a part to play.

In the rest of this short article, there are a few ideas for classroom tasks which involve listening to pop songs. For copyright reasons, I'm not able to use the lyrics of songs I would like to use. Instead, I have written a few lyrics myself, and apologise in advance if they are not up to Paul Simon's or Sting's standards!

### Gap-fill

This is the most common activity I've seen teachers use. Students are given the lyrics to a song with certain words gapped; they listen to the song and fill in the gaps. I'm not always sure about the merit of this kind of exercise. It's often used as a 'filler' activity and I don't think students get a lot out of it. The problem is finding songs that are relevant, either thematically to what you are doing in your course of studies, or linguistically. For example, if you are in the middle of a unit in your course book about 'war', it's quite easy to find very good anti-war or 'protest' songs; what is more difficult is to find a relevant song that is not linguistically far above the level of the students. The gap-fill you adopt should not be random; it should have a real objective. For example, you could gap all the verbs to practise a variety of tenses; you could gap only the prepositions; or only the words that rhyme.

Here are some lyrics to show how you could gap the verbs (in red) or the rhyming words (in blue).

When your heart **spoke** to me like an answer-phone,  
I **didn't know** just what to **say**,  
And that is the reason I **hung up** on you,

And the reason I'm **feeling** this **way**.

You told me you'd **found** somebody new,  
Someone who **would treat** you real **fine**,  
Unlike some people you could mention now,  
Like the one on the end of this **line**.

There was a time you **had** love in your **eyes**,  
Like it's **written** in every love **song**,  
It seems a shame we should **jeopardise**  
A love that **could be** so **strong**.

I'm **writing** these lines from a hotel room,  
Two thousand miles from **you**,  
Hoping you can **read** between the lines,  
But I'm **not saying** anything **new**.

Maybe I'll **see** you sometime soon,  
But I can't imagine where or **when**,  
I wish we **could go** back in time  
And **start** it all over **again**.

### Discrepancies

This is an intensive listening activity. You give your students the song, but with the **wrong words**. They have to listen and correct any errors. Using the first verse of the song above, here is an example, with the errors in bold:

When your heart **broke** to me like an answer-phone,  
I didn't know, just **went away**,  
And that is the reason I **stood** up on you,  
And the reason I'm **kneeling today**.

By the way, many English and American pop songs contain ready-made grammatical errors. I remember many years ago, teaching in Manchester, playing a song by the group Pink Floyd, with the title 'We Don't Need No Education'. My students were unaware of the double negative, of course, as it's quite acceptable in many parts of Britain. Ask your students to spot errors in songs and point them out to the class.

### Sequencing

With this activity you give the students the complete lyrics of the song, but with the lines in the wrong order. Give them some time to read the words before you play the song; you could even ask them to predict the order of the lines. The students listen and number the lines in the correct order. Again, using the first verse of the above song as an example, you might give them this:

I didn't know just what to say,  
 When your heart spoke to me like an answer-phone,  
 And the reason I'm feeling this way.  
 And that is the reason I hung up on you,

### **Follow-up**

Depending on your reasons for doing a song activity, it's important to follow it up so that students can see there's a purpose to it all. If you've focused on verbs, go through them with the class, eliciting or explaining why certain tenses were used. Explain new vocabulary and get students to use the words in their own sentences, written or oral. If you've focused on rhymes, get the class to think of more rhyming words.

### **Writing songs**

Most verses in popular songs have a very clear stress or even syllable pattern. A follow-up activity you can do is to analyse the stress or syllable pattern of a verse of the song you have listened to, and then ask the students, in pairs perhaps, to write another verse to the song. When they have written it, they can sing it to the class! I've had verses from my classes that would give many pop stars a run for their money in the songwriting stakes!

### **Conclusion**

Using songs in the classroom can be a very enjoyable experience for both teacher and students. Songs can help motivate weaker students and be extremely rewarding at higher levels. They also make a nice change from the humdrum of everyday teaching, a musical oasis in your busy timetable.

### **Footnote**

The following songs are in the **Opportunities** course (writers in brackets).

#### Elementary

She's My Baby (Harris/Mower); Time Machine (Harris/Mower); Dark-Eyed Sailor (Traditional); Get On The Net (Harris/Mower)

#### Pre-Intermediate

James Dean (The Eagles); Money, Money, Money (Abba); The Telephone Call (Kraftwerk); Sailing (G. Sutherland); Don't Say You Love Me (The Corrs); Our House (Crosby, Stills & Nash)

Intermediate

Leaving On A Jet Plane (John Denver); Candle In The Wind (Elton John/Bernie Taupin); Wonderful World (Sam Cooke); If You Could Read My Mind (Gordon Lightfoot); Waltzing Matilda (traditional)

Upper Intermediate

Dedicated Follower of Fashion (Ray Davies); In The Year 2525 (Zager/Evans); Daniel (Elton John/Bernie Taupin); Father and Son (Cat Stevens)