

How to exploit the full learning potential of songs

CEFR level: any level

Skills Focus: all skills

Resources: songs in English

Description:

Apart from being fun, English songs are a fantastic and fun way to help students of all ages learn English because they are naturally inclined to learn certain information more efficiently if delivered in rhythm. In this handout, we will go through the process of choosing and using a song in class.

An 8-step process to choosing and using a song

Step 1: Choosing an appropriate song



- 1 Choose a song that is linguistically accessible – with some support - to your students
- 2 The song should be full ('flooded' with) of the target linguistic features you want your students to learn
- 3 Select a song that contains lexis and grammar which is related to what the learning outcomes of the lesson are
- 4 Choose a song that reflects the sub-culture that the majority of your students feel they 'belong' to
- 5 The song should contain vocabulary which is worth learning, i.e. high frequency vocabulary and phrases
- 6 It is practical to choose a song that has readily available resources such as mp3s or videos
- 7 Songs that are 'catchy' and have lyrics that are repetitive and patterned help learners remember

Step 2: activating schemata

In order to activate the learners' prior knowledge and the language related to the themes and semantic areas the song taps into, learners should be engaged in a series of tasks which, whilst recycling vocabulary they have already processed in previous lessons, engage them on some kind of reflection on the song's themes.

These activities could involve:

- a slideshow with photos of the singer and key content of the song
- showcasing lines of the song which contain key expressions from the lyrics
- playing the most enticing parts of the song's official video clip on silent.
- creating a fact file with interesting facts about the singer to arouse students' curiosity

Step 3 – Pre-listening activities to facilitate bottom-up processes during the in-listening phase

At this point, we may want to focus on facilitating the students' understanding of the text through activities that involve working on the key lexis included in the song's lyrics. These activities could involve:

- split sentences activities
- gapped sentences
- odd one out
- matching exercises, etc.

Step 4 – listening for pleasure

You should let the students listen to the song for pure enjoyment the first time around; then ask them to do any in-listening tasks.

Step 5 – recognising and noticing

Get students to listen to the song again. This time ask them to note down any words they recognise and any words they don't know but they noticed (maybe because they kept re-occurring) – spelling doesn't matter at this stage.

Then get students to work in pairs to compare notes.

Ask students to feedback the to you. Put the words on the board or collaborative document if working online. Explain or check the meaning in L2 or translating them in the L1, if you prefer.

Finally, ask them what they think the song is about (this can be done in the L1 with less proficient groups).

Step 6 – Promoting selective attention and further noticing

At this stage the learners could be given a traditional gapped version of the lyrics of the song, where the words are provided down the side of the handout. We can choose to gap

the words or chunks of language that we want our learners to pay particular attention to, because of their linguistic, semantic or cultural value.

We can also focus on pronunciation by drawing students' attention to words that rhyme or alliterate with another word containing that same sound. After listening to the song a couple of times, students pair up to compare the words they have identified.

We can cater for **mixed ability classes** by create tiered handouts.

Tier 1: traditional gap fill with word bank for students to choose the missing words from.

Tier 2: multiple choice gap fill to offer support for those that need it.

Tier 3: a gapped text with no support to give extra challenge to those students who can cope with it.

Step 7 – Working on segmentation skills

Segmentation, i.e. the ability to identify words boundaries is a key micro-listening skill.

These activities could involve:

- Break the flow – give your students a version of a portion of the song's lyrics from which you have eliminated the spaces in between some of the words. Ask students to listen to the song and mark with a line the breaks between the words;
- Spot the intruder – insert some small function words, such as articles and prepositions, between the words in the lyrics and ask the students to delete the ones they don't hear while they listen to the song;
- Complete the beginning / endings – delete the beginnings and/or the endings of every single word in a verse song. The students will have to complete the 'mutilated' words.

Step 8 – Working on general print-to-sound correspondence

If this is what we want to focus on, then we could consider the following activities:

- eliminate all consonants or vowels from a few words or even lines of a song;
- eliminate specific syllables;
- jumble up the letters in specific words;
- split words in half (one or two per line max);
- write a few words on the whiteboard and ask your students to listen to the song and spot as many words in the song that rhyme with them.