Songs

Songs are not only fun, they have a serious purpose for language learning, says Akis Davanellos.

The majority of English language teachers all over the world use or have used songs for teaching purposes – and with good reason(s):

♪ Songs are highly memorable

We have all experienced the 'song stuck in my head' phenomenon. It seems that songs lodge in both our short- and long-term memory (Murphey 1990) so they are a relatively easy way to remember quite long chunks of language.

♪ Songs are highly motivating

Both young people and adults tend to enjoy being taught through songs.

♪ Songs are personal

Since most songs refer to generic themes (often 'love'), rather than specific people, places or times, listeners tend to identity with the lyrics.

♪ Music and songs are part of everyday life

In the car, at home, at sporting events, at times of celebration, in theatres, at the cinema, and even out in the streets, we constantly hear – and sing – songs. It therefore seems natural to make them an integral part of the language learning process.

♪ Songs are the natural opportunity for meaningful repetition

Which other texts will you find students spontaneously 'practising', both with others or alone?

♪ Songs provide examples of everyday language

The language of most songs is simple, often in a conversational style. More complex songs, such as *History will teach us nothing* by Sting, could be analysed as any other literary sample. As Tim Murphey (1992) pointed out: *'… anything you can do with a text you can do with a song'.*

♪ Songs are easy to find

Everybody has access to records, CDs, cassettes, videos, minidiscs, and song books. If your own collection isn't enough, the students themselves will no doubt have an inexhaustible supply.

♪ Songs bring variety to the lesson

Using songs is one way of 'escaping' from the coursebook and adding new learning experiences. Any commercially-published material is designed specifically for its target market, so you are bound to find songs to suit your students.

♪ Songs aid relaxation and group dynamics

According to Murphey (1992) songs encourage *'harmony within oneself and within a group'.* He goes on to say that songs sustain patriotism, cultures, religions and revolutions. And, I would add, classroom dynamics.

♪ Songs are fun

In my own experience, the most successful lessons are the ones where we all feel we've had a good time. Enjoyable learning has to be more effective than teacher-centred procedures.

> *' … anything you can do with a text you can do with a song'*

♪ Songs can deal with 'taboo' topics

Songs are an effective tool for promoting topics which, for reasons of political correctness, are not often exploited in published language learning materials. Topics, such as 'divorce', 'fighting the establishment', and others, are can often be approached obliquely through songs.

Drawbacks

Of course, there are two sides to every coin, and although I feel that the drawbacks are outweighed by the benefits, there are always teachers who voice objections.

♪ Songs aren't serious

Some administrators and teachers, and even some students, seem to think that using songs in classroom is a waste of time since they move away from the syllabus and the established coursebook. It is worth pointing out to them the 'serious' advantages mentioned above.

▶ ▶ ▶

Songs

►►► ♪ **Songs contain poor quality language**

It is true that many songs include slang, bad grammar, and unnatural word stress. As with any other materials, it is important to select carefully.

♪ **I can't sing**

Using songs in the classroom does not require a teacher to be a music specialist or pop singer. While an interest in songs and music and a willingness to sing along with the cassette is desirable, the students are often happy to do the singing (and to realise that they too do not have to be perfect singers). There are many ways of presenting songs which do not require the teacher to sing and which leave the teacher 'free' to focus on the students.

There are many ways of presenting songs which do not require the teacher to sing

♪ **It's too noisy**

Singing shouldn't be any more noisy than a normal level of talk – and a certain level of noise has to be acceptable in a language class.

♪ **I haven't got the right equipment and it's all too much hassle**

You do need equipment, but you may well find that students are only too happy to bring in their own portable machines, if the school cannot provide anything suitable.

♪ **I can't write my own materials**

Many teachers do not feel confident enough to exploit songs in a way which integrates them into the syllabus. I hope the rest of this article gives them some ideas – and confidence.

Just one word of warning.

Don't overdo it! Once you've experienced all the benefits and joys of using songs in class, it's too easy to use them again – and again. Remember to vary your language-learning activities so that students retain their enthusiasm.

Songs as texts

Earlier, I referred to Tim Murphey's contention that songs may be exploited as effectively as any other text. They can be a source of language for presenting and practising grammar and syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, and the skills of listening, reading, speaking, writing and translation. Most of the ideas presented about songs in the rest of this article can therefore refer equally well to any reading and listening text.

Songs (and texts) are traditionally exploited in three stages, with pre-study activities, while-studying activities, and post-study activities. Although real life is not quite so clearly delineated, the classification is a useful one.

Pre-stage activities

The purpose of this stage is to prepare the students linguistically, educationally, thematically and psychologically for the text. Students might be introduced to the topic and key vocabulary, or any linguistic feature(s) which might help them exploit the text effectively at a later stage.

A vital element of the 'pre-stage' is establishing a reason for students to want to read or listen to the song/text. Typically, this might involve setting pre-questions which students answer while encountering the text for the first time.

While-stage activities

During this stage, which might be seen as the main focus of the lesson, students perform tasks and activities which directly exploit the song. The tasks might be graded to get more difficult as they get into the song. For example, while listening to a song, such as *An Englishman in New York* by Sting, a gist-listening task might be to ask the students to identify the topic of the song. Still in the same stage, a later task might deal with specific information and require intensive listening or reading by asking students to mark statements 'true' or 'false'.

During this stage, students are frequently required to perform parallel tasks, ie read the text while making notes about X, or listen to the song and underline X in the text.

After the detailed exploitation of the song, students might then be asked to reflect on its language and content.

Post-stage activities

This third stage typically involves follow-up activities which practise the productive skills of speaking and writing in various ways.

In the previous stages, the students might have been speaking or writing in order to complete a task, eg in the pre-stage students might discuss their personal experience of the theme. However, the purpose and focus of the pre-stage is not the development of these skills, but the means for increasing motivation and introducing the topic.

In the post stage, it is the song or text which provides the stimulus for further activities which enhance other language skills. A classic example is the follow-up work to *She's leaving home* by the Beatles, where students either roleplay the dialogue between the girl and her parents, or write the letter the girl left for her parents.

During this stage, the tasks and activities will almost certainly involve the integration of previously-taught language with new language and ideas recently introduced through the song.

And, of course, once students have done all this work, their reward might be to sing the song together.

(!) The quiz on the next page gives a list of 40 activities which might profitably be used to exploit songs (and other texts) in the language classroom at each of the three stages. I hope it will provide a useful springboard to some enjoyable song-filled lessons. *ETp* ►►►

Key to quiz These are only suggestions. The important thing is to build up a variety of interesting activities relevant to your students. *Numbers in bold italics appear in more than one category.*

Before 1, **3**, **9**, **15**, **16**, **19**, 23, 24, 25, **29**, **38**, **39**

During **3**, 4, 5, **6**, **7**, 8, **11**, 12, **14**, 17, **18**, 20, 27, 28, 31, 32, **35**, 37, **39**, **40**

After 2, **3**, **6**, **7**, **9**, 10, **11**, 13, **14**, **15**, **16**, **18**, **19**, 21, 22, 26, **29**, 30, 33, 34, **35**, 36, **38**, **39**, **40**

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♪ ♪ ♪ Activities for exploiting songs and texts ♪ ♪ ♪

Decide whether these activities are most appropriate as pre-listening activities (mark them B for 'before'),
activities while listening (D for 'during') or post-listening follow-up activities (A for 'after').
Some may be suitable for more than one stage.

1 ☐ Students predict the content of the text by reading its title.

2 ☐ Students write a dialogue between the characters.

3 ☐ Cut up and mix the lines (sentences) of the text. Students order the jumbled sentences.

4 ☐ Students read or listen to the text to confirm what was predicted during the 'pre' stage.

5 ☐ Students read a gapped text and fill in the blanks.

6 ☐ Students read the text and delete words to create a gap-fill task for others.

7 ☐ Students write a letter to or from one of the characters in the text.

8 ☐ Students read or listen to the text to extract the information to write a summary.

9 ☐ Jumble the words/letters of the title of the text for the students to reconstruct.

10 ☐ Students write their own lyrics to the tune of the song.

11 ☐ Students read or listen to the text and identify stress, rhythm and intonation patterns.

12 ☐ Students read or listen to the text and put photographs/cartoon pictures in the correct order.

13 ☐ Students interview one of the characters.

14 ☐ Students invent a title for each paragraph/verse and an overall title for the text/song.

15 ☐ Students brainstorm ideas about the topic.

16 ☐ Use the text as a springboard to initiate discussions to develop students' ideas about the topic.

17 ☐ Students answer multiple choice/comprehension questions, etc.

18 ☐ Students create their own multiple choice/comprehension questions for others.

19 ☐ Students describe/discuss photographs/pictures related to the topic.

20 ☐ Students identify the meaning of words/expressions as used in the text.

21 ☐ Students roleplay (parts of) the situation as described in the text.

22 ☐ Students write a reply to the author/singer.

23 ☐ Pre-teach the necessary vocabulary to help students understand the text.

24 ☐ Students predict possible vocabulary items which may appear in the text.

25 ☐ Students brainstorm the vocabulary which might be associated with the topic.

26 ☐ Students re-write the text from another character's point of view.

27 ☐ Students listen to the song and take dictation.

28 ☐ Students identify deliberate mistakes (of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, etc).

29 ☐ Students design posters relating to the topic or promoting the song which are then displayed.

30 ☐ Students perform the song.

31 ☐ Omit words and replace them with a relevant drawing. Students identify the missing words before reading or listening to the text.

32 ☐ Omit words to produce a gapped text. Students reconstruct the text by choosing the correct word from the list. (At higher levels, give more words than students need.)

33 ☐ Students write a summary of the text.

34 ☐ Students invent essay titles relating to the topic of the text (and write one of the essays).

35 ☐ Students create or complete charts or diagrams about the text.

36 ☐ Students select or write songs to produce a class song book.

37 ☐ After the song/text is finished, students predict what happens next.

38 ☐ Students write and give a speech on the topic.

39 ☐ Design activities on the text which are similar to examination questions.

40 ☐ Students sing the song and record it. Play it again and improve on pronunciation.