

# Using Songs in English Language Teaching

Susana Teopilus

*Abstract. In ELT classes, for young learners or adult learners, songs can be used to set a context of a lesson (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, listening, writing, and speaking) as they can be incorporated to all language skills and components. Attempting to encourage English teachers to occasionally use songs in their classes, this paper starts by showing the reasons why it is beneficial to use songs in ELT classrooms, continued by the guideline to select suitable songs for ELT and some activities of using songs in ELT classroom. Two models of using songs in ELT are also presented: one model for young learners' class and one for adults' class.*

*Key words: songs, english language teaching*

Almost all people, young and old, like music. This makes singing songs a universal activity in the world. The presence of folk songs in every culture in this world serves as a proof to it. In reality, songs can entertain people, change the atmosphere of a place, change a person's mood, revive people's spirit, and pass messages to society.

In education, songs have also been universally integrated in various subjects or courses. Certain songs are even believed to be able to give stimulation to the brain in processing information; this facilitates the processed information to move into the long-term memory. Dr. Lozanov, the advocate of Suggestopedia/Desuggestopedia, uses music to accelerate learning with his three distinct ways: (a) introductory music, (b) an "active concert", and (c) a "passive concert".

Teaching using songs can create relaxing atmosphere, lower anxiety and eliminate inhibition. These conditions are very conducive to the learning and teaching processes in the classrooms as learners are not on the defensive and they are ready for lessons. This paper, therefore, is attempting to encourage English teachers to willingly use songs once in while in their classes. It starts by showing the reasons why it is beneficial to use songs in ELT classrooms, which is then continued by the discussion of the guideline to select suitable songs for ELT and some activities of using songs in ELT classroom. Two models of using songs in ELT are presented afterwards; one model is for young learners' class and the other is for adults' class. This then brings the conclusion of this paper.

## Reasons for Using Songs in English Language Teaching

Using songs in ELT is not a new idea. It gives a pleasant change to students, especially when they are tired after doing a test or after having a

hard lesson. Besides that, in general, using songs in the classroom can also create a certain atmosphere, block out external noise, improve classroom dynamic, and provide background music while students are working silently.

In ELT classes, in addition to these advantages, songs can be used to set a context of a lesson (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, listening, writing, and speaking) as they can be incorporated to all language skills and components; and for listening classes, songs can be used to develop listening sub-skills. For young learners' classes, Paul (2003) states that songs add a whole dimension to children's classes, and make it easier for the children to remember words and patterns and natural chunks of language. In addition, Medina (1993) states that not only can children benefit from additional exposure to the second language, songs can provide the classroom teacher with an alternative means of promoting second language acquisition apart from nonmusical means such as oral stories. Finally, Ernest Silveria (retrieved on 17 March 2009) states that singing can build students' confidence by allowing them to enjoy a degree of fluency in English before they have achieved it in speaking. To sum up, songs are used in the English classes because of the following reasons:

- Songs are memorable  
They stick in the head with their rhythm and repetitive patterns; students remember the lyrics and melody for a long time.
- Songs are enjoyable  
They provide fun and make students relax between more exercises
- Songs accommodate pupils with different learning styles and intelligence
- Songs can be integrated into all language skills and components (listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling)
- Songs can be used in any stage of a lesson plan (pre, while, and post stages) and they can be used as a review, a reinforcement, or a transitional stage (for preschool and kindergarten) from one activity to another activity.
- Singing songs can build learners' confidence  
Students lose their inhibition and anxiety, and they are willingly participate in the singing activities together with their peers.

### **Selecting Suitable Songs for ELT**

Various kinds of songs can be brought in the ELT classes; pop songs and folk songs are two examples. It is true that many songs include slang, bad grammar, and sometimes unnatural word stress; it is then the job of the teacher to select good ones for his English classes. In her article, Keegan (retrieved on 17 March 2009) provides the following checklist for choosing songs to be used in English classes:

- Clear recording?

- Suitable level of difficulty?
  - Suitable subject matter?
  - Useful language content?
  - What are you going to do with it, before, during and after?
  - Will it produce a response?
- Similarly, Paul (2003) mentions the following simple questions that can help a teacher assess and adapt a song for an English class:
- What core targets can be learned and practiced?
  - What useful chunks of language can be learned and practiced?
  - Is anything too difficult and needs to be changed?
  - What actions can be done with the song?

### **Activities of Using Songs In ELT Classroom**

Using songs in the classroom does not imply that the teacher should have the ability to sing well, even though having this ability would be an advantage for the teacher. Several things need to be prepared first before teaching using songs, for examples:

- a. Tape recorder with the cassette, or CD/MP3 player with the CD or MP3  
A CD/MP3 player is more practical than a tape recorder as it is not necessary to press the rewind button for a song to be replayed. What we do is only program the number of the song to be replayed.
- b. Worksheet  
It is a sheet for students to work on the assignments or exercises along with the song.
- c. Song lyric  
The song lyric can be given at the end of the lesson for students to check their answers.

In ELT classroom, a teacher can use songs in various ways, for examples:

- a. Singing (learners sing songs that have catchy melodies and useful language content)
- b. Actions (this is usually appropriate for young learners)
- c. Doing a worksheet which has been prepared for the song played
- d. Background (background songs can add a whole new dimension to the atmosphere of the class and the learning that is going on)
- e. Between lessons (songs can be played anywhere and anytime)

In preparing a worksheet to go with a certain song, a teacher can select some of the following exercises/assignments which are suitable for his students:

- a. Circle the words which are mentioned in the song
- b. Tick the box before word in the minimal pairs which are uttered in the song
- c. Listen to the song and fill in the blanks (cloze procedure)
- d. Listen to the song and fill in the blanks using the words in the list
- e. Listen to the song and answer the questions

- f. Listen to the song and find the words in the song which are the synonyms or antonyms of the words given
- g. Listen to the song and arrange the jumbled words
- h. Listen to the song and arrange the jumbled sentences
- i. Listen to the song and cross out the words which are not found in the song
- j. Listen to the song and write the sentences in the song that match the translation given

Once a worksheet has been prepared, what a teacher should do next is integrating it in the lesson he is going to teach. For this purpose, the three stages of a classroom instruction are helpful for him to stick to when using songs in his class: (a) pre-instructional stage, (b) while-instructional stage, and (c) post-instructional stage. The following shows how the class activities can be arranged in these three stages.

### ***Pre-instructional Stage***

The purpose of this stage is to prepare the students linguistically, educationally, thematically and psychologically. In this stage, a teacher can do various activities as follows:

- Introduce the topic/theme of the song
  1. Show a picture related to the topic of the song
    - Ask students some questions about the picture
    - Encourage them to make predictions of the song they are going to listen to (Is it a happy/sad/humorous song? Is the singer a boy/girl/woman/man?)
  2. Predict the content of the song by reading the title
  3. Predict the content of the song by ordering of the pictures given
  4. Brainstorm ideas about the topic
  5. Describe/discuss photographs/pictures related to the song
- Pre teach the necessary vocabulary or linguistic feature(s) which might help them exploit the text effectively at a later stage
  1. Brainstorm key words which might be associated with the topic of the song
  2. Predict possible vocabulary items which may appear in the text

### ***While-instructional Stage***

In this stage, students perform tasks and activities in the worksheet that exploit the song. The tasks may be graded from simple to more difficult ones as they get into the song, for example:

- Check pupils' predictions about the song made in the pre-instructional stage
- Ask them to find the gist of the song (listening for gist), e.g. identify the topic of the song

- Ask them to find specific information contained in the song (listening for specific information) or find answers to the questions asked about the song (listening for detail)

Some of the relevant activities are as follows:

1. Order the jumbled sentences
2. Do a cloze procedure with the song (reconstruct the text by choosing the word from the list)
3. Identify the meaning of words/expressions as used in the text
4. Infer the attitude of the singer
5. Put lines/groups of lines in order as they hear them
6. Put pictures/photographs in the correct order
7. Practice listening for detail (gap-fill, true/false, short answers, spot-the-error i.e. listen and circle the wrong word, circle the words they hear from a given list of words)
8. Do a dictation exercise: write out every word from a section e.g. from the verse
9. Do games
  - # word grab: key words spread out in the middle of a group, students grab them as they listen to the song to see who can grab the most
  - # word bingo: learners mark off words as they hear them

### ***Post-instructional Stage***

This involves the follow-up activities which practice the productive skills of speaking and writing in various ways. In this stage, the lyric of the song can be used as a stimulus for further activities which enhance other language skills.

Some of the activities that can be conducted in this stage are as follows:

- ***Speaking***
  1. Role-play the dialogue between the characters in the song
  2. Role-play (parts of) the situation as described in the text
  3. Discuss the message of the song
  4. Use the text as a springboard to initiate discussions to develop students' ideas about the topic
  5. Re-tell the story in the song
  6. Discuss students' personal reaction to the text
  7. Describe the characters in the song
  8. Discuss what has happened before and what will happen next
- ***Writing***
  1. Write a dialogue between the characters
  2. Re-write the text from another character in the song
  3. Write a letter to the singer
  4. Write a summary of the story told in the song using their own words
  5. Write an ending of the story told in the song
  6. Design posters relating to the topic

7. Write a review of the song for a music magazine
  8. Do a dictation exercise
  9. Write the lyrics of the song
- **Reading**
    1. Read an article about the singer/song/composer
    2. Lead-in to a reading related more generally to the topic of the song
  - **Pronunciation**
    1. Focus on connected speech, rhyming words, homophones
    2. Sing the song and record it; then play it again and improve on pronunciation
  - **Language**
    1. Focus on other vocabulary/structures within the text
    2. focus on new vocabulary/structures inspired by the text
    3. Focus on discourse markers within the text
    4. Do some language exercises

### **Models of Using Songs in ELT**

This section will be devoted to elaborating two models of teaching English using songs, which can hopefully give ideas of how to integrate songs into the teaching of English. The first model is for young learners and the second one is for adult learners.

#### **(1) A model lesson using songs in the English class for young learners**

Skill	: Listening, Speaking, Writing, Reading
Topic	: Days of the Week
Level	: Primary school students grade 2
Time allocation	: 2 x 35 minutes
Objective(s)	: To enable the learners to memorize days of the week. To enable the learners to pronounce the days of the week correctly
Materials	: A big calendar

#### ***Pre-instructional Stage:***

At the beginning of the class, the teacher has a big, colorful calendar on her classroom wall. Then, she

- Points out the days in English: "Today is Monday", etc.
- Pre-teaches or review the necessary vocabulary (for example: numbers)
- Gets the big calendar and uses it to elicit/teach the days of the week

#### ***While-instructional Stage:***

After the pupils are able to pronounce the days of the week appropriately, the teacher

- Sings the song (first singing the song alone, giving a model, then singing it again with her pupils)  
     '*Days of the Week Song*' (to the tune of 'Clementine')  
     There're seven days 2X  
     There're seven days in one week  
     Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday  
     Thursday, Friday, Saturday  
     (taken from *The EFL Playhouse*)
- Asks the pupils to perform tasks and activities that exploit the song:
  - Assigning each pupil to write a day on a piece of paper
  - Having each pupil hold his/her piece of paper with the name of a day on it
  - Getting them to line up: Sunday through to Saturday
  - Having all pupils stand in a circle in the center of the room.
  - Singing the song again (several times) and having the pupil(s) with the relevant sheet move toward the centre each time the day is mentioned

***Post-instructional Stage:***

As follow-up activities, the teacher can assign the pupils to

- Read a story related to the topic of the song
- Listen to a story about someone's habitual activities (using days of the week)
- Write their own daily activities after school

**(2) A model lesson using songs in the English class for adult learners**

Skill : Listening and Speaking  
 Topic : Comparing Simple Past Tense and Past Continuous Tense  
 Time allocation : 45 minutes  
 Level : Grade XI (senior high school)  
 Objective : To enable students to use the Simple Past Tense and Past Continuous Tense in telling a past event (recount).

Materials :

# Students' worksheet

# A song entitled '*Sad Movies*' (sung by Sue Thompson)

(Sad movies always make me cry)

He said he had to work

So I went to the show alone

They turned down the lights

And turned the projector on

And just as the news of the world started to begin

I saw my darling and my best friend walk in

Though I was sitting there, they didn't see  
 And so they sat right down in front of me  
 And when he kisses her lips, I almost died  
 And in the middle of the color cartoon  
 I started to cry  
 Ref. Oh ..... Sad movies always make me cry  
       Oh ..... Sad movies always make me cry  
 So I got up and slowly walked on home  
 And mama saw the tears and said 'what's wrong'  
 And so to keep from telling her a lie  
 I just said 'Sad movies make me cry'

### ***Pre-instructional Stage:***

Prior to introducing the song (letting the students listen to it), the teacher

- Reviews the uses and usage of the Simple Past Tense and the Past Continuous Tense.
- Introduces the title of the song and encourages the students to
  - a. Make predictions of the song they are going to listen to (Is it a happy/sad/humorous song? Is the singer a boy/girl/woman/man?)
  - b. Predict the content of the song by reading the title
  - c. Predict the content of the song by ordering of the pictures given in their worksheet (5 pictures: a happy girl, a crying girl, a boy and a girl walking hand in hand, a theatre, and a mother wondering why)

### ***While-instructional Stage***

- After the students listen to the song for the first time, the teacher can ask them to check their predictions about the song made in the pre-instructional stage.
- While listening to the song the second time, the teacher can ask them to
  - a. Find the gist of the song (listening for gist), e.g. identify the topic of the song
  - b. Find specific information contained in the song (listening for specific information) or find answers to the questions asked about the song (listening for detail)
  - c. Order the jumbled sentences by numbering them
- While the song is being played for the third time, the teacher can ask the students to sing the song together.

### ***Post-instructional Stage***

As follow-up activities (the song lyric can be given to the students):

1. The students are assigned to individually retell the story in the song using their own words
2. In groups of two, they role-play the dialogue between the mother and the daughter in the last part of the song, the dialogue between



- the girl and the boy before the incident, the dialogue between the girl and the boy after the incident
3. In small groups (groups of three or four), they
    - a) discuss students' personal reactions related to the characters in the song
    - b) discuss what will happen next (what will the girl do to the boy?, what will her mother do when she knows the truth?, how will the girl's life be next? etc.)
    - c) compare their opinions with other groups' opinions

## Conclusion

In using songs in ELT, teachers should ask themselves this question, “*What is the rationale for using the song in the class?*” This question will always remind them that the use of songs in their classes should be related to the lessons they are teaching. Wherever possible, the selected songs should be fully integrated into the core part of the course, that is the target lessons taught. The songs are used for learning and practicing the main language targets. In short, the use of a song in the language class needs a purpose if it is aimed at yielding a more beneficial result.

## References

- Ernest Silveria, Ernie. *ESL/EFL Songs Page*.  
<http://www.anglik.net/teflsongs.htm> (retrieved on 17 March 2009).
- Keegan, Ellie. *Using Songs in English Teaching*. <http://www.celta-course.com/songs.html> (retrieved on 17 March 2009). Materials from Skills Module. 2008. Australian TESOL Training Centre Sydney NSW, Australia,
- Medina, Suzanne L., PhD. 1993. *The Effect of Music on Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*. In National Network for Early Language Learning. Volume 6, Number 3, Spring 1993.
- Paul, David. 2003. *Teaching English to Children in Asia*. Hong Kong: Pearson Education Asia Limited.
- Puasa, Kuran, S.Pd. 2007. *Teaching English Through Pop Songs*. Bandung: CV. Yrama Widya. The EFL Playhouse,  
<http://www.els4kids.net/songs/mulberry.html> (retrieved on 19 March 2009).