

Using Songs in the Second Language Classroom :

Creative Feast ? Or Snack Bar Learning ?

Bruce McCormack

Introduction

All second language teachers have at some pome point or other participated in or at least overheard a discussion about the merits and demerits of using songs in the classroom. Some people are all for it ; others think it's a complete waste of time. I suspect that the majority feel there's a place for a good song and some related activities from time to time, but that it's easy to have too much of a good thing.

Whether or not this is actually the majority view, it is the one I subscribe to. But I'd also add that it's easy to sell a good thing short, which is what too frequently happens when songs are used in the EFL class. Too often, they are not well exploited. Endless possibilities for imaginative exercises are left unexplored. The use of songs boils down to a cloze exercise of some kind and that's about it. And this is possibly part of the reason why using songs for second language learning seems to have so many detractors.

The Case for Occasionally Using Songs

The sad thing is that the creative use of songs in the EFL classroom can be a terrifically enriching experience for students, and a great

source of motivation for both student and teacher alike. Here are five reasons why :

- 1) They contain cultural content which students are often drawn to immediately because of their interest in foreign cultures.
- 2) Music allows students to engage their feelings, something which is often sorely lacking in traditional classroom materials.
- 3) High-profile singers and musicians lend immediate credibility to the exercise.
- 4) Vocabulary comes packaged in a meaningful context which may stir the imagination and give rise to followup activities.
- 5) At their very best, good songs assist in developing an emotional bonding between students (and teacher) which can improve class atmosphere by leaps and bounds.

One obvious reason why songs are seldom used to their full advantage in the classroom is that it takes a lot of time and effort on the part of a busy teacher to design interesting exercises based on a song.

One suggestion I have is that if you're going to put in the required time to do a decent job with a song, choose one that you, personally, really love. You'll create far more interesting materials for your students, and they'll feel that your heart is in it.

Secondly, don't just design an exercise or two and then move on to another song. Pick one song to start with and just keep on making up new exercises for that one song. You may amaze yourself with the variety of tasks and activities you can come up with. This will not only

permit maximum exploitation of the song ; it will also give you a base of exercises which you can then apply to any future songs you choose to work on. Clozes are fine, but there's so much more that can be done. Here's an example of some of the exercises I devised for one of my favorite Tom Wait's songs, "Never Saw the Morning." Because I love the song, I had great fun making these up. And the payoff is that I can't tell you how many students have shared their appreciation for the work we've done in class on this song. I sincerely hope all of this encourages you to consider picking one of your favorite songs and seeing what you can come up with.

Activity 1 : Pre-listening—Can you think of something you never really appreciated until you lost it ? (Or something you appreciated much more after you'd been without it for awhile ?) Here are some examples from my life :

- (1) my 'legs' after I spent a month on crutches
- (2) my mother's cooking after I had left home

Activity 2 : Make a few brief notes about your experience. What happened to you ? What did you lose or have to do without for awhile ? How did the experience change you ?

Activity 3 : When you're ready, turn your notes over and talk about your experience with your partner(s).

Activity 4 : Now check that you know the meaning of these words by trying to use them in the sentences that follow.

melody bind cursed heartstrings insane

- 1) He was so angry at her that he _____ at her.
- 2) They love each other so much that it really tears at at their _____ to be apart.
- 3) I really love a good song, especially when it has a beautiful _____.
- 4) He was working 80 hours a week ; he had so much on his mind that he felt like he was going _____.
- 5) She wanted to keep going to school, but she didn't have enough money. But if she took a part-time job to get enough money to keep going to school, she wouldn't have time to study! She was really in a _____.

Activity 5 : Listen to Tom Wait's song. As you listen, try to hear these five words. Write each word as you hear it. Feel free to write any other words you hear as well.

Activity 6 : The five words above (and others) are missing from the lyrics which follow. Write any of the missing words you hear in the right-hand margin as you listen. Once you're sure about a word, fill in the missing blank.

I never saw the _____
till I stayed up _____,
I never saw the _____
till you turned out the _____,
I never saw my _____
until I stayed away _____,
I never heard the _____
until I needed the song.

I never saw the white line
till I was a'leaving you behind,
I never knew I _____
until I was caught up in a _____,
I never spoke *I love you*
till I _____ you in vain,
I never felt my _____
until I nearly went _____,

I never saw the _____ coast
until I moved to the _____,
Never saw the _____
until it shone off of your breast,
Never saw your _____
until someone tried to steal it
tried to steal it away,
I never saw your _____

until they rolled down your face.

I never saw the _____
till I stayed up _____,

I never saw the _____
till you turned out your lovelight baby,

I never saw my _____
till I stayed away _____,

Never heard the _____
until I needed the song.

Activity 7 : Here are the missing words (not in order) :

Cross them out once you know where they fit in the song.

west

needed

hometown

sunshine

moonlight

melody

morning

insane

too

bind

light

east

long

tears

night

heart

heartstrings

you

all

Activity 8 : (A) Work on your own.

Find a couple of lines (two or three) in the song that you really like and underline them. Did they remind you of experiences in your own life? Why do you like these lines? Make a few notes if that is helpful.

Activity 8 : (B) Work in small groups of three or four people. Look at the lines other people underlined. Were they the same lines as yours?

Now take turns talking about what these lines mean to you, or what you think Tom Waits means by them.

Activity 9 : Write a short story describing your experience of appreciating something more now than you did before.

Activity 10 : Sing along!

Conclusion

Songs can provide great cohesion in a classroom. They can stimulate students' imaginations in surprising ways. They can lend closure to a unit on a given theme. [For example, I often use Paul Winter's "Song for the Earth" to conclude work on environmental issues.] And given that poetic expression often employs repetition of structures (as is the case with this song by Tom Waits), these can also serve to illustrate meaningful use of language forms.

Provided it's not done to excess, the appropriate and thoughtful use of songs is a surefire way to liven up any classroom you might find yourself in. A splendid time is guaranteed for all.