



How to use songs and music in the classroom

The benefits of using songs and music

There are many good reasons for using songs and music in the language classroom. Some songs provide interesting examples of grammar or vocabulary use, and practising grammar and vocabulary with songs is likely to be memorable. Songs can also be used for listening practice; every kind of task that can be done with a normal listening passage can also be done with songs. In many cases, the lyrics of a song can be good material for discussion, and you can devise tasks that focus on interpreting the meaning of the lyrics or identifying the feelings expressed in the song.

Another benefit of songs is the cultural content they contain. There are songs that deal with historical events, political issues, or social values, and they can help students understand different perspectives and attitudes in a way that can be more engaging and meaningful than a traditional text. Songs belong to a time and a place, and listening to and talking about a song in class are excellent ways of placing English language learning in a real, living context. Well-known songs allow students to understand that English is an important part of a global musical culture, and can make the challenges of learning English seem more valuable and relevant to them.

Music can be used for classroom management as a way to mark the start and end of a task, or for different phases of an activity. For example, students participate in a mingling activity and stop speaking when the music stops; or when they are working in pairs, they can change pairs every time the music stops.

Music played quietly in the background can be very effective for certain parts of the lesson and can help establish a specific mood. For example, during a role-play in which you want students to enjoy themselves as well as practise speaking, you might have lively music playing in the background. Quiet classical music playing before the lesson starts can be very effective in helping students focus and tune into the English lesson.

General tips

- Choose songs carefully. It's good to play songs that your students like, but it's unlikely that all the students will like the same songs. You can also take advantage of the opportunity to introduce students to songs they may not have come across before.
- If the activity focuses on the lyrics of a song, make sure that the recording is of good quality and the lyrics are easy to hear.
- Check that the language of the song is appropriate for the level and age group.

- If you use video from websites, check there is no inappropriate advertising with the video.
- Not every student will be comfortable singing, so don't force students to sing if they don't want to.
- In general, it's better to choose instrumental music for background music; music with lyrics can distract students from their task.

Seven activities using songs and music

1 Jumbled lyrics

Aim To practise ordering sentences in a text

- 1 Before the class, cut up the lyrics of a song so that there is one line on each strip of paper. Prepare one set of lyrics per group.
- 2 Put students into small groups and distribute the cut-up lyrics.
- 3 Give the students a time limit to put the lines in the correct order.
- 4 Play the song and ask the students to check the order of their lines and make any necessary changes.
- 5 Ask each group in turn to read out (or sing) one or more lines of the song in the correct order.

Note It's best to choose a song that students are not familiar with, so that they use clues such as rhyme and linking words to help them put the lines in the correct order.

2 Wrong words

Aims To give students intensive listening practice; to focus on the pronunciation of similar-sounding words

- 1 Before the class, type the lyrics of a song with wrong words inserted at regular intervals, e.g. every one or two lines. It's best if the wrong words sound quite similar to the right words, e.g. 'When I find myself in *chimes* of trouble' (the correct word is *times*).
- 2 Give students copies of the modified lyrics, and ask them to work in pairs to try and identify which words are wrong, and what the correct words should be.
- 3 Play the song and have the students check their work.

Note For this activity it is best to choose a song that students are not familiar with.

3 What's in a song?

Aim To research information about songs and present it to the class

- 1 Before the class, select a number of songs that have an interesting background story to them. Good examples are *Hey Jude* and *Layla*.



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- 2 In class put the students into groups of three or four and let them choose a song, or give each group a song.
- 3 This step can be carried out in class, if circumstances allow, or for homework. Tell the students that they have to find out as much as they can about their song and present their findings to the class. For example, they could work out what the lyrics mean, find out who wrote the song, explain who or what the song is about, and any other interesting background details. It is important that they have access to resources for this, such as dictionaries and the Internet (for sites like Wikipedia and songfacts.com).
- 4 Give students time to plan how to present their information. They could do this as a simple PowerPoint presentation; or as a dramatized presentation, e.g. they play different characters involved in the background story. Make sure that their presentation includes playing the song. Students could also collate all of their information into a class magazine, which is copied for each student.

Note Wiki-based websites often have conflicting information about songs (*Hey Jude* is a good example of this). If this is the case with any of the songs you have chosen, encourage the students to decide for themselves which version they consider to be true, justify their decision, and include the conflicting information in their presentation. Having a questioning attitude towards sources makes this mini-project more interesting and is good for developing critical thinking skills.

4 Singing the song

Singing along to a song as a group is something that students of all ages can enjoy. Generally speaking, the teacher plays the audio track and the students just sing along. However, you could also:

- ask half the students to sing only the verses and the other half to sing the chorus
- with the right kind of song, get the students to think of gestures and actions that they can do while singing
- ask the female students and the male students to sing different parts of the song
- take advantage of any musical talent among your students – guitarists could provide the accompaniment instead of the audio track, good singers could add harmonies around the main tune, beatboxers could add percussion.

5 Responding to music

Aim To present and practise vocabulary for expressing opinions about music

- 1 Before the class, prepare a number of short audio tracks, each one representing different musical genres, e.g. country music, pop, blues, bossa nova.
- 2 Teach or revise the vocabulary of musical genres. This should include all the genres represented in the audio selection and a few others to make a full lexical set.
- 3 Teach or revise a range of informal words and phrases used to talk about likes and dislikes, e.g. *I love it, I can't stand it, I quite like it, it's OK but I'm not crazy about it.*
- 4 Teach or revise a number of adjectives that can be used to describe music, e.g. *fantastic, brilliant, boring, terrible.*
- 5 Play the first of the audio tracks and use it to build a model dialogue, such as:
A What kind of music is this?
B I think it's jazz.
A I love it. What do you think of it?
B It's terrible, I can't stand it.

Write the dialogue on the board as an example. Tell students it is an example; they can change or adapt it as they wish.

- 6 Play the other tracks and get students to talk in pairs about their own ideas and opinions about the music, using the model dialogue to help them. Allow time between tracks for them to expand on the model dialogue, if they wish.

Note It's important to prepare a varied selection of music tracks so that students have the opportunity to practise a wide range of the target language.

6 Talent show

Aim To provide an opportunity for free speaking practice

- 1 Before the class, search YouTube for amateur cover versions of a popular song. Select three cover versions, preferably of a fairly similar standard.
- 2 Tell the students that they are judges at a talent show. They have to give feedback on each of the performances, and select one of the versions.
- 3 Play the first cover version. After the performance, pause to allow students to work in pairs to discuss and make notes about their opinions of the performance.
- 4 Put pairs of students together and ask them to discuss their feedback with their new partners.
- 5 Repeat steps 3 and 4 with the other two cover versions.
- 6 At the end of the activity, throw the discussion open to the whole class and ask them to decide which performance was the best. If there is no clear winner, students could vote for their favourite.



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Tip It will help to set the context and give students ideas if you first show a video clip of a judge from an actual reality TV show giving feedback about a performance. Clips of this kind also provide plenty of useful vocabulary for students when they do the activity.

7 Make a cartoon

Aims To encourage creativity; to provide an opportunity for free speaking and writing practice

- 1 Before the class, prepare eight short audio tracks of one minute each. As far as possible they should be very different from each other in style, e.g. classical, jazz, rock, folk music from different parts of the world, music from a horror film.
- 2 Put the students into pairs and give each pair a blank sheet of A3 paper. Tell the students to draw a grid of eight equal rectangles using the full sheet of paper, with one line right across the middle and three lines from top to bottom. They should then number each rectangle from one to eight, in sequence, writing the number in the bottom left-hand corner of each rectangle.
- 3 Tell the students that they will hear a piece of music lasting for one minute. They will have 10 seconds to just listen to the music and then 20 seconds to discuss what idea the music suggests in their minds and how to draw that idea. For example, if they hear some calypso music, they might decide to draw two people dancing under a palm tree on the beach. One of the pair will then have 30 seconds to draw the picture, very quickly and without worrying if it isn't perfect.

- 4 Play the first audio track and signal the end of the 10-, 20-, and 30-second periods. The first drawing goes in the first rectangle. At the end of the minute, the students stop drawing, and the sheet of paper is passed to the other student in each pair.
- 5 Repeat this process seven times, using the remaining seven audio tracks and with the students in each pair taking it in turns to draw a picture in each of the rectangles. There is no need for them to make a link between one drawing and the next.
- 6 When all eight drawings have been finished, each pair passes their sheet of paper to the pair on their right. Students now work on converting the eight pictures into a comic strip story, adding speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and captions, as appropriate.
- 7 When all the pairs have had enough time to finish their comic strips, get the students to pass all the comic strips around the class so that everyone can enjoy each other's work.

Note This activity normally produces very original and often very funny results. Although students at first tend to be worried about having to draw something in just 30 seconds, they soon realize that this challenge is what makes the activity interesting.



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