MUSIC AND SONG: A LEARNING TOOL

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RESUMO

Este artigo enfatiza a importância do uso de músicas como instrumento de aprendizagem de língua estrangeira (inglês). Por meio de levantamento bibliográfico, sugerimos algumas atividades que podem ser utilizadas e adaptadas à prática docente, considerando o estímulo, a abundância de informações e de reações, bem como de sentimentos, que as canções trazem tanto para o aluno quanto para o professor.

Palavras-chave: música; instrumento de aprendizagem; prática docente.

ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the importance of the use of music and song as a learning tool for English as a foreign language. Based on theoretical research, we suggest some activities that can be used or adapted to educational proposals, considering the stimulus, abundance of information, reactions and feelings that songs bring to the students and also to the teacher.

Key words: music; learning tool; educational proposals.
INTRODUCTION

Songs have been part of the human experience for as long as we can remember. Nowadays music is everywhere: “in operating theatres (for heart transplants and childbirth), restaurants and cafés, shopping malls (Muzak), at sports events, in our cars, and literally everywhere for those tuned in to a Discman or an MP3”, (MURPHEY, 1992), and to imagine the world outside the classroom without music is nearly impossible. More to the point, most students love doing activities related to music in their free time, so why not make continuous and efficient use of music and song inside the classroom as well?

Researches have proved that highly motivated language learning starts with the students and what they are interested in. In fact, we, as teachers, are responsible for motivating and stimulating our students to learn, and music is a tool that can be used to trigger neural activity in the brain. Actually, music is so powerful in the language classroom that it enhances a wide range of social and academic skills, activating memory, facilitating language development, and above all, fostering positive attitudes towards learning.

In the next few pages of this paper, I will try to emphasize the importance and effectiveness of music and song as a learning tool, as well as show how stimulating it is both for teachers and students to tune in to the abundance of information, reactions and feelings songs can bring into the classroom.

THE IMPORTANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MUSIC AND SONG IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

“Music has the unique quality of integrating the emotional, cognitive, and psychomotor elements that activate and synchronize brain activity.” (MORA, apud BREWER and CAMPBELL, 1991, IATEFL Issues, Oct-Nov, 1998). In terms of learners’ feelings, the affective factors, in other words, “the emotional and attitudinal aspects of our being,
play a prominent role in language learning.” (ARNOLD, IATEFL Issues, Oct-Nov, 1998). As previously mentioned, teachers must provide a positive atmosphere favourable to language learning. Due to that, choosing materials and activities that are more motivating and interesting for students, promote and increase language learning. I have already experienced that music has the ability to change the classroom atmosphere. It seems to provide energy and prompt images when students complain they have nothing to write about or their ideas do not come up. When facing such situations, I frequently play background music to relax and stimulate the students. Of course, we must take into consideration the types of music that go with different types of activities. For example, I usually play Kenny G, Vivaldi, Mozart, Bach, etc. as background music while my students are doing reading comprehension exercises or written tasks.

Since I have been doing that very often, I found that the music makes it easier for them to put up with the stress of answering such types of exercises. Fortunately, I could reiterate my practice after reading and researching for the purpose of this paper, as I could find quite similar suggestions in MURPHEY, 1992.

One chief reason for using music and song in the classroom is the variety they can bring to the lesson, thus providing a break in the classroom routine and enhancing students’ engagement and interest in it. Besides variety, there is also the possibility to expose students to authentic language and material, since the majority of the English songs have not been produced for EFL learners.

In addition to authentic language exposure, songs are also important as an authentic activity, that is, by using songs in the classroom, we are getting students to do something that they would do in real life because a lot of people, especially teenagers, enjoy and spend a fair amount of their spare time listening to songs. Because of that, it is
of paramount importance to use the students’ choice of music and song as much as possible, but always taking into account the learning purposes and teaching context beforehand. However, when I start teaching a new group, I usually conduct a class survey or prepare a music questionnaire (See APPENDIX 1) in order to gather information about my students’ preferences. With this information in hand, I try to design or adapt the activities. Some of the advantages of considering the students’ choices are as follows:

♫ the topic holds great value, if selected by the students;
♫ it gives them some responsibility and involves them in the lessons more;
♫ the students actually teach the subject matter (their songs and music), while the teacher is a resource for the language;
♫ it reduces the teacher-time and work spent searching for materials. (MURPHEY, 1992).

Another relevant reason for the use of songs in the classroom is that they are among the best ways of teaching a foreign language. Consequently, they can develop and integrate the four basic skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, in a natural and harmonic way in the language classroom.

I have been teaching a group of pre-intermediate students and we have been talking a lot about environmental issues due to the last topic provided by their coursebook. To round off the lesson in an enjoyable way, I worked with Michael Jackson’s song *Heal the World* and I could also make use of the Internet, since students had to search for information about a namesake organization, which is run by Michael Jackson. The students could benefit immensely from skills integration through this activity as they read and spoke about the organization and
Michael Jackson, they listened to the song and filled in the gaps, and as a follow-up, they had to write about the topic. (See APPENDIX 2).

In addition to the reasons already cited, songs can still be used in the classroom to:

**INTRODUCE A FUNCTIONAL OR GRAMMATICAL TOPIC**

For example, to introduce *would/might*, I have adapted an activity from the book *Music and Song*, by Tim Murphey, called *Film Music*. I was able to make use of the video as well, since I have shown a scene of the film *Moulin Rouge*, in which *Elton John’s* song (*Your Song*) is played. (See APPENDIX 3).

As I have been revising present and past tenses with my intermediate group, I have used an activity named *Changing the Texts* to practise the verb tenses. I chose a song with a very strong story (*The Boxer, by Paul Simon*) and asked students to change all the verbs from present to past. After that, I conducted a discussion towards the meaning changes, regarding the verb tenses. (See APPENDIX 4).

**P.S.** - this activity is also appropriate if you want to deal with lexical items because you can also get the students to change adjectives and verbs to give the opposite meaning.

**DEVELOP STUDENTS’ LISTENING SKILLS**

For this purpose, I have used a multiple choice activity. (See APPENDIX 5). The students had to circle the correct answer to fill in the missing gaps. For this activity, I used a song played by *U2*, called *Elevation*.

Teach vocabulary

With songs, we always have the opportunity to teach new words and expressions. To achieve this aim, I worked with *Text completion and*
construction. (See APPENDIX 6). My teaching focus was on adjectives and adverbs, so I dealt with *The Logical Song*, by *Supertramp*.

DEVELOP STUDENTS’ READING SKILLS

*Jumbled Lyrics* is the activity I have used to help students to recognise the organization of ideas in a text and to use contextual clues to order it. (See APPENDIX 7). For this purpose, I used the song *Hotel California*, by *Eagles*.

Practise pronunciation

I usually use raps provided by the coursebook, in which students practice two or more sounds. (See APPENDIX 8).

I hope some of the most important reasons for using songs in the classroom were emphasized above, however, we, as language teachers, should always keep in mind that songs not only act as a means of stimulation, motivation, and relaxation, but also as an effective way to teach and practice the English language.

CONCLUSION

Music and songs used to be part of occasional lessons for me. At the beginning of my teaching career, I used them just as an ice-breaker for the first lesson and rarely played another song again all over the term or year, because I had the false thought they took away from the normal syllabus and time was lost. As I gained experience, I started to notice how excited my students became when I brought songs to the classroom.

Nowadays, especially after reading and researching about the subject, I experienced the powerful effects music and songs can produce in my students. Moreover, it was extremely surprising to discover the amount of things we can do with songs. Besides that, I coulds also
become aware of the grounded learning theory behind the use of songs in the classroom, consequently, I know the reasons for making use of such an efficient tool.

Although some concerns regarding the use of music and songs in the classroom still remain, I am convinced that they are extremely valuable to stimulate positive associations towards the study of the language. In fact, they are available to be used for so many purposes and in so many different ways to engage and motivate students that learning takes place in a fun and pleasurable atmosphere, benefiting learners enormously from it.

On the whole, I can say that I became really amazed at my students reactions after listening to music. There is nothing more joyful than providing opportunities for our students to create their own learning process and through frequent use of songs, we are surely contributing for that.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


APPENDIX 1 (adapted from Music and Song)

MUSIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age: __________   2. Sex: M/F
3. Mother tongue: _______________________

TICK IF YOUR ANSWER IS YES:

4. _____ I play a musical instrument. Which one? _________
5. _____ I sing in a choir.
6. _____ I read music.
7. _____ I sing in the shower.
8. _____ I wake up to music.
9. _____ I go to sleep with music.
10. _____ I study with music.
11. _____ I play/played in a band.
12. _____ I take dance lessons. What kind? ____________
13. _____ I do aerobics.
14. _____ I write songs.
15. _____ I read pop music magazines. Which ones? _______

PROVIDE APPROXIMATE ANSWERS:

HOW MANY MINUTES/HOURS A DAY DO YOU ..............

16. listen to the radio? _________________
17. listen to CDs? _________________
18. watch music videos on TV? _________________
19. watch other programmes on TV? _________________
20. What percentage (approximately) of the songs that you listen to are:

Instrumentals? ______ %

In English? ______ %

In other languages? ______ %

CIRCLE THE ANSWER WHICH IS TRUE FOR YOU:

21. Do you play the same song several times?
   ( ) never  ( ) sometimes  ( ) often  ( ) very often

22. Do you choose music to suit your activity?
   ( ) never  ( ) sometimes  ( ) often  ( ) very often

23. Do you use music just for background?
   ( ) never  ( ) sometimes  ( ) often  ( ) very often

24. Do you listen to classical music?
   ( ) never  ( ) sometimes  ( ) often  ( ) very often

25. Does music ever disturb you?
   ( ) never  ( ) sometimes  ( ) often  ( ) very often
   If yes, when and why? ______________________________________

HOW OFTEN DO YOU DO THE FOLLOWING: (once a week/fortnight/month/year)

26. buy a CD? ________________

27. buy a cassette? ________________

28. go to concerts? ________________

29. List your three favourite pop groups or singers at the moment: ________________________________

30. List your three favourite songs at the moment: ________
APPENDIX 2 (adapted from BRAZ-TESOL Newsletter, December, 1998)

HEAL THE WORLD  (by Michael Jackson)

STEP 1: T. writes the name MICHAEL JACKSON on the board and asks ss about his life.

STEP 2: ss probably do not know about M. Jackson’s organization HEAL THE WORLD, so the T. tells them about it.

STEP 3: ss are taken to a computer room to search for info about this organization. T. allows 10’, so that ss can select relevant info and write them down.

STEP 4: back to the classroom, ss exchange info and talk about the importance of this organization.

STEP 5: T. tells the students there’s a song called HEAL THE WORLD and elicits from the ss words they believe will be present in the song.

STEP 6: T writes the words on the board and hands out a fill in the blanks sheet with the lyrics.

STEP 7: ss listen to the song and fill in the blanks. Ss compare their answers in pairs, then T. checks.

STEP 8: after checking the exercise, T. and ss compare the words they have previously brainstormed with the actual song.

STEP 9: ss select a meaningful sentence from the song and are encouraged to speak up and add their feelings towards the song.

STEP 10: T. writes the sentence “HEAL THE WORLD, MAKE IT A BETTER PLACE FOR YOU AND FOR ME”, on the board. T. asks ss to stand up and write their ideas on how they think we can make this world a better place. T. provides vocabulary.

STEP 11: as a follow up, ss write a composition about the topic.
SONG: HEAL THE WORLD (by Michael Jackson)

Listen to the song and fill in the blanks:

There’s a place in your __________
And I know that it is __________
And this place could be much brighter than tomorrow
And if you really try
You’ll find there’s no need to cry
In this place you’ll feel there’s no hurt or sorrow
There are ways to get there
If you care enough for the living
Make a little space
Make a better place...

Chorus
Heal the world
Make it a __________
For you and for me and the entire human race
There are people __________
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for you and for me
If you want to know why
There’s a love that cannot lie
Love is __________
It only cares of joyful giving
If we try
We shall see
In this bliss
We cannot feel _________ or dread
We stop existing and start living
Then it feels that always
Love’s enough for us growing
So make a better world
Make a better world...

Chorus
And the _________ we were conceived in
Will reveal a joyful face
And the world we once believed in
Will shine again in _________
Then why do we keep strangling life
Wound this earth
Crucify its soul
Though it’s plain to see
This world is heavenly
Be God’s glow
We could fly so high
Let our spirits never die
In my heart I feel you are all my brothers
Create a world _________
Together we cry _________ tears
See the nations turn their swords into plowshares
We could really get there
If you _________ enough for the living
Make a little space
To make a better place...

Chorus (3x)
There are people _________
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for you and for me
There are people _________
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for you and for me
You and for me
You and for me
You and for me...

APPENDIX 3 (adapted from Music and Song)

ACTIVITY: FILM MUSIC

You will listen to a piece of music. as you listen, think of the answers to these questions. you may write notes if you like:

1. think of three adjectives to describe the music.

2. if this music were the theme for a film, or tv series, what would the film be about? (cowboy, spy, dance, police/detective, love story, soap opera, children’s film, etc.)

3. what would the title be?

4. where would the action of the film take place, and in what country?
5. what would the main characters be like? (male/female, profession, look, etc.)
6. what would be happening in this scene?
7. why would the music start to play?
8. how would it end?

TEACHER’S NOTES:
– The song is called *Your Song*, by Elton John.
– Hand out the questions and make sure ss understood.
– Play the tape as the ss write their response.
– Ask ss to compare what they have written with a partner.
– Show the film sequence in which the song is played. (the film is *Moulin Rouge*)

**SONG : YOUR SONG by ELTON JOHN**

It’s a little bit funny this feeling inside
I’m not one of those who can easily hide
I don’t have much money boy but if I did
I’s buy a big house where we both could live
If I was a sculptor, but then again, no
Or a man who makes potions in a travelling show
I know it’s not much but it’s the best I can do
My gift is my song and this one’s for you
And you can tell evrybody this is your song
It may quite simple but now that it’s done
I hope you don’t mind
I hope you don’t mind that I put down in words
How wonderful life is while you’re in the world
I sat on the roof and kicked off the moss
Well a few of the verses well they’ve got me quite cross
But the sun’s been quite kind while I wrote this song
It’s for people like you that keep it turned on
So excuse me for getting but these things I do
You see I’ve forgotten if they’re green or they’re blue
Anyway the thing is what I really mean
Yours are the sweetest eyes I’ve ever seen

APPENDIX 4 (adapted from Music and Song)

ACTIVITY: CHANGING TEXTS

SONG: THE BOXER (by Simon and Garfunkel)

I am just a poor boy.
Though my story’s seldom told,
I have squandered my resistance
For a pocket of mumbles,
Such are promises all lis and jest
Still, a man hears what he wants to hear
And disregards the rest.
When I left my home
And my family,
I was no more than a boy
In the company of strangers
In the quiet of the railway station,
Running scared,
Laying low,
Seeking out the poorer quarters
Where the ragged people go,
Looking for the places
Only they would know.
Lie-la-lie...
Asking only workman’s wages
I come looking for a job,
But I get no offers.
Just a come-on from the whores
On Seventh Avenue
I do declare,
There were times when I was so lonesome
I took some comfort there.

Lie-la-lie...
Then I’m laying out my winter clothes
And wishing I was gone
Going home
Where the New York City winters
Aren't bleeding me,
Leading me,
Going home.
In the clearing stands a boxer,
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders
Of ev'ry glove that laid him down
Or cut him till he cried out
In his anger and his shame,
“I am leaving, I am leaving.”
But the fighter still remains.
Lie-la-lie...

TEACHER’S NOTES:
– Give -out the hand -outs. Ask ss to change all the verbs form present to past.
– Ss work in pairs.
– When they have finished, discuss the different versions. Ask: Is the meaning significantly changed? Why is one better than another?, etc.

APPENDIX 5
ACTIVITY: MULTIPLE CHOICE

SONG: ELEVATION (by U2)

Choose the best word to fill in each gap. then, listen to the song and check your answers:
high, higher 1. _________ the sun
You shut me 2. ________ a gun
I need you to elevate me here,
At the corner 3. ________ your lips
As the orbit of 4. ________ hips
Eclipse, you elevate my soul
I’ve 5. ________ all self-control
Been living like a mole
Now going down, excavation
I and I 6. ________ the sky
You make me feel like I can fly
So high, elevation
A star lit up a cigar
Strung out like a guitar
Maybe you could 7. ________ my mind
Explain all these controls
I can’t sing 8. ________ I’ve got a soul
The goal is elevation
A mole, living in a hole
Digging up 9. ________ soul
Going down, excavation
I and I 6. ________ the sky
You make me feel like I can fly
So high, elevation
Love, live me out of these blues
Won’t you tell 10. ________ something true
I believe in you
A mole, living in a hole
Digging up 9. __________ soul
Going down, excavation
I and I 6. __________ the sky
You make me feel like I can fly
So high, elevation
Elevation .............(6x)

CIRCLE THE BEST ANSWER:

1. a) then  b) than  c) them
2. a) from  b) to   c) for
3. a) on    b) off   c) of
4. a) you   b) yours  c) your
5. a) lost  b) lose   c) loose
6. a) on    b) in     c) of
7. a) educate b) to educate  c) educated
8. a) or    b) but    c) and
9. a) mine  b) I      c) my
10. a) my   b) mine   c) me

APPENDIX 6 (adapted from Music and Song)

ACTIVITY: TEXT COMPLETION AND CONSTRUCTION

SONG: THE LOGICAL SONG (by SUPERTRAMP)

Read the following song and try to fill in the gaps with your partner. Then listen to it and fill in the missing words:
When I was ______, it seemed that life was so ______,
A miracle, oh it was ______, ______.
And all the birds in the trees, well they’d be singing so _____, ______, _______ watching me.
But then they send me away to teach me how to be ______, ______, ______, ______.
And they showed me a world where I could be so ______, ______, ______, ______.
There are times when all the world’s ______,
The questions run too ______
For such a ______ man.
Won’t you please, please tell me what we’ve learned
I know it sounds absurd
But please tell me who I am.
Now watch what you say or they’ll be calling you ______, ______, ______, ______.
Won’t you sign up your name, we’d like to feel you’re ______, ______, ______, a vegetable!
At night, when all the world’s ______.
The questions run too ______
For such a ______ man.
Won’t you please, please tell me what we’ve learned
I know it sounds absurd
But please tell me who I am.
APPENDIX 7 (adapted from Music and Song)

ACTIVITY: JUMBLED LYRICS

SONG: HOTEL CALIFORNIA (by EAGLES)

Some of the sentences are not in the correct order. In pairs, try to reorder them. Then check your answers with other pairs. Listen to the song and check your answers:

On a dark desert highway
Cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of colitas
Rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance
I saw a shimmering light
My head grew heavy, and my sight grew dim
I had to stop for the night

__________ And she showed me the way
__________ I heard the mission bell
__________ This could be heaven or this could be hell
__________ I thought I heard them say
__________ There she stood in the doorway
__________ There were voices down the corridor
__________ And I was thinking to myself
__________ Then she lit up a candle

Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place, such a lovely place
Such a lovely face
Plenty of room at the Hotel California
Any time of year, any time of year
You can find it here

_______ She calls friends
_______ Some dance to forget
_______ Her mind is Tiffany twisted
_______ How they dance in the courtyard
_______ She’s got the Mercedes Benz
_______ Sweet summer heat
_______ She’s got a lot of pretty, pretty boys
_______ Some dance to remember

So I called up the Captain
Please bring me my wine, ‘n’ he said
We haven’t had that spirit here since 1969
And still those voices are calling from far away
Naked you up in the middle of the night
Just to hear them say
Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place, such a lovely place
Such a lovely face
They’re livin’ it up at the Hotel California
What a nice surprise, what a nice surprise
Bring your alibis
Of your own device
But then just can’t kill the beast
Mirrors on ceiling
They gathered from the feast
We are all just prisoners here
And pink champagne on ice, and she said
And in the master’s chambers
They stabbed it with their steely knives

Last thing I remember
I was running for the door
I had to find my passage back
To the place I was before
“Relax,” said the nightman
“We are programmed to receive
You can check out any time you like
But you can never leave”

APPENDIX 8 (adapted from Go!2 - Unit 25)

ACTIVITY: RHYTHM RAP

Listen to this rap. then repeat it:
Turn around
What’s that sound?
It’s getting louder,
Like gunpowder.
It’s all round town
And it’s coming down.
From north and south,
From mouth to mouth.
It’s all about,
Now shout it out!
So start the show.
Hello, hello!
On video and radio,
From coast to coast
The word is GO!
On video and radio,
From coast to coast
The word is GO!

Find the words with the sounds /əʊ/ and /ɔʊ/. Write them in the columns, then listen and check.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/əʊ/</th>
<th>/ɔʊ/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AROUND</td>
<td>SO</td>
</tr>
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</table>