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Bringing Songs to the Second-Language Classroom

Thierry P. Karsenti

The article highlights ways of channelling students' passion for English music, through motivating second-language activities.

Second-language educators know how to recognize motivated students when they see them. Such students are eager to learn, unafraid of making mistakes, persistent, excited, creative, energetic, and quick to begin the tasks assigned. They are fast learners, undaunted by new challenges, who perform well both independently and in groups. Indeed, these students appear to be natural leaders and set a high standard for class participation. Their work is always punctual, well-prepared, and of high quality.

Language teachers are also well aware of the motivational problems encountered in the classroom. Each year, they are faced with students who are often absent and display apathy-like levels of effort when present. Nowadays, it seems more and more difficult to find ways of motivating students to learn a second language. Brown (1994: 20) highlights motivation as one of the most important principles of language teaching; in fact, he states that

If all learners were intrinsically motivated to perform all classroom tasks, we might not even need teachers!

Mollica (1994: 15) also argues that:

Motivation is one of the prime tasks of teaching. Motivation should be constant and should not stop at any given point. Motivation is important at the beginning of the lesson as a means of introducing the material, stimulating interest, arousing curiosity and developing the specific aim; but it is equally important for teachers to provide motivational activities which will arouse and retain the interest of students.

Therefore, as second-language educators, it sounds only logical to look for language activities that are

intrinsically motivating for students.

Educators around the world know how popular the lyrics and music of English songs are with most students; The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Pink Floyd, Bon Jovi, and Elton John are famous worldwide. There is no need to force second language learners to listen to English music in the cafeteria, in the hallways, or after school. They do it with great pleasure, and they do not hesitate to use even their hard-earned spending money to buy their favourite albums.

What Does Some of the Literature Say?

In her article, "A spoonful of Singing," Berghouse (1970) argues that songs are a very powerful means for teaching a second language at the elementary school level. In particular, she promotes the use of songs to help students recognize important language elements such as numbers, letters of the alphabet, days of the week, seasons, parts of the body, and animals. Berghouse suggests that, initially, the teacher should sing each line and have the children repeat it. As the song becomes well-known and the children become used to the format, actions can be added.

Bechtold (1983) believes that music can be very useful in the second-language classroom, particularly in the teaching of vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structures. She maintains that songs are most effective to reinforce aspects of the language learned.

According to Murphey (1992), it is important to use pop songs in the second-language classroom. The author randomly selected a Top 100 music chart and carefully analyzed the first fifty of these English songs. The results of his study show, among

other things, that pop songs tend to be short, repetitive, catchy, and sung more slowly than normal discourse. Murphey states that this makes pop songs a very motivating and effective teaching tool.

There is no need to force second-language learners to listen to English music in the cafeteria, in the hallways, or after school. They do it with great pleasure, and they do not hesitate to use even their hard-earned spending money to buy their favourite albums.

Dale Griffiee's book, *Songs in Action* (1992), provides an introduction to using songs in the language classroom. It presents a wide variety of activities for teaching new vocabulary, for developing listening or writing skills, or simply for adding a motivating element to the classroom. His book is definitely a must-read for any teacher thinking of using songs in the second language classroom.

Integrating Songs in the Second-Language Classroom

The following are some activities which are useful if teachers are planning to introduce songs in the second-language classroom.

Activity 1:

Find Someone Who...

Usually, during a song activity, students do little talking; indeed, they are often quite passive. As speaking is a very important skill (Wingate, 1993), it is essential to engage students in active, meaningful pre-listening oral tasks. Teachers need to get their students involved; they need to get them to talk. However, this is one of the most challenging tasks confronting any second-language educator. Developing speaking skills is essential, not only because the literature says so, but also because it is the single way to better prepare students for the real out-of-class talking world. In the *Find Someone Who...* activity, students have to find people in the classroom

who fit the criteria outlined in the handout. They must circulate in the class and ask their peers questions such as

"Do you love rap music?",

"Do you listen to heavy metal music while doing your homework?"

This task is a good warm up for a song activity. Learners will not communicate solely with the teacher, as in more traditional classes, but also with all the other students in the classroom. The following handout can be modified to suit various needs and time constraints.

"Find someone who..."

1. loves rap music.
2. detests country music.
3. likes going to concerts.
4. knows how to play a musical instrument.
5. has seen a famous musician in a live concert.
6. dislikes jazz music.
7. admires Elvis Presley.
8. enjoys listening to classical music.
9. prefers dance to punk music.
10. listens to heavy metal while doing homework.

Activity 2:

Fill-in-the-Blanks

The primary purpose of this activity is to develop listening skills and to extend the vocabulary knowledge of the students. It can be used with any song, to introduce or review vocabulary. However, this activity is most appropriate when both the teacher and the students need a break from a long week of hard work. It can also serve to reward students for exemplary work habits or good exam results.

In this task, students are required to listen to the song and fill in the blanks with the missing words. The song could be played more than once to give students enough time to gather all the answers. It is also a good idea to go beyond the fill-in-the-blanks phase and have the students answer questions pertaining to the song. Sample questions are provided in the following example based on the song "Daniel" (music by Elton John, lyrics by Bernie Taupin).

Daniel

Daniel is _____ tonight on a _____

I can see the red _____ heading for Spain

Oh and I can see Daniel _____

God it looks like Daniel, must be the _____ in my eyes

They say Spain is 0000 though I've never been

Well Daniel says it's the best _____ that he's ever seen

Oh and he should know, he's been there enough

Lord I miss Daniel, oh I miss _____ so much

Daniel my _____ you are older than me

Do you still feel the pain of the scars that won't _____

Your eyes have _____ but you see _____ than I

Daniel you're a star in the face of the sky

Daniel is _____ tonight on a _____

I can see the red _____ heading for Spain

Oh and I can see Daniel _____

God it looks like Daniel, must be the _____ in my eyes

Oh God it looks like Daniel, must be the clouds in my eyes

(Music by Elton John; Lyrics by Bernie Taupin. Available on the album *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player.*)

Understanding Songs

Listen to the song "Daniel" and answer the following questions

1. In your opinion, what is the song about? (death, love, travelling, friendship)
2. What kind of feelings does the writer express? (fear, sadness, happiness, hatred)
3. Explain why the writer feels "clouds" in his eyes.
4. Is the writer optimistic or pessimist? Justify your answer.

It should be noted that this activity is more stimulating when interesting information about the song and the singer or band is revealed prior to the listening stage. This introduction makes the listening task easier because it contextualizes the song and makes it more accessible to the students. As well, it activates the

language they already know. The activity is therefore also more effective because the learners are better prepared. In the following example, the success of a famous one-armed drummer can even lead to a discussion on how anything is possible.

*Top Rock Drummer
Rick Allen (Def Leppard)
Has Just One Arm*

There are not many drummers with one arm. Well, here comes Rick. He lost his left arm in a car accident in 1984 but he barely skipped a beat. Within weeks, he was back at his drums. With a hyper-modern drum kit, he is still able to hit the drums. Today he is one of the rock world's hottest drummers. The kit Rick uses has manual foot pedals, so his left foot can do the job his left arm used to do. Rick was only 16 years old when he joined Leppard, and made his first appearance on "On through the Night." Rick is married to Stacey and currently lives in California. He doesn't inspire pity but envy, and is completely alone in his field - standing head and shoulders above most drummers.

(Adapted from: *The Def Leppard Cyber Centre*, WWW)

Biographical Notes

Full name: Richard John Cyril Allen

Birth day: November 1, 1963

School: Dronfield Henry Fanshaw

Favourite artists: Aerosmith, GnR, Thin Lizzy, Marc Bolan, INXS,...

Favourite film: Raiders of the Lost Ark

Favourite car: Jeep

Favourite food: Indian, vegetarian

Love Bites

If you've got love in your sights
Watch out, love bites

When you make love, do you look in
the mirror?

Who do you think of, does he look
like me?

Do you tell lies and say that it's for-
ever?

Do you think twice, or just touch and
see?

Oooh babe

When you're alone, do you let go?

Are you wild and willing or is it just
for show?

Oooh come on

I don't wanna touch you too much
baby

Cause making love to you might
drive me crazy

I know you think that love is the way
you make it

So I don't wanna be there when you
decide to break it

Love bites, love bleeds

It's bringing me to my knees

Love lives, love dies

It's no surprise

Love begs, love pleads

It's what I need

When I'm with you, are you some-
where else?

Am I getting' through or do you
please yourself?

When you wake up, will you walk
out?

It can 't be love if you throw it about
I don't wanna touch you too much
baby

Because making love to you might
drive me crazy

Love bites, love bleeds

It's bringing me to my knees

Love lives, love dies

It's no surprise

Love begs, love pleads

It's what I need

I don't wanna touch you too much
baby

Because making love to you might
drive me crazy

I know you think that love is the way
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So I don't wanna be there when you
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It's bringing me to my knees

Love lives, love dies

It's no surprise

Love begs, love pleads

It's what I need

If you've got love in your sights

Watch out, love bites

(Released in 1987 by Bludgeon Rif-
fola.)

Activity:

Read the facts on Rick Allen, listen to the song and answer the following questions.

1. When did the accident involving Rick Allen occur?
2. How does Rick Allen play the drums now?

3. What does the writer mean by 'love bites'?

4. Is the writer optimistic about love? Use lyrics from the song to justify your answer.

Music can be very useful in the second-language classroom, particularly in the teaching of vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structures.

Activity 4:

Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions play an important role in any language. In fact, the use of idioms is so wide-spread that an understanding of these expressions is essential to successful communication, whether in listening, speaking, reading, or writing (Dixson, 1994). Songs are an excellent medium for presenting idiomatic expressions in the second language classroom. For instance, Marvin Gaye's song "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" is not only a great interest sparker, it is also an original way of introducing students to idiomatic expressions.

Activity 5:

Bilingual Songs:

Linguistic and Cultural Bridges

Bonjour mon ami!

How are you my friend?

Ça va très bien thank you! Bonjour my friend!

How are you mon ami? Dites-moi d'où venez-vous?

(Angèle Arsenault, 1979).

According to Stern, it is essential to introduce the learner to the second culture, that is the socio-cultural context of the language studied.

It is nowadays a commonplace in language pedagogy to stress the importance of culture teaching and to say that language and culture are intertwined, that it is not possible to teach a language without culture, and that culture is the necessary context for language use (Stern, 1992: 205).

Songs are cultural elements of society; every song is a culture capsule (Seelye, 1993). As such, music and lyrics can be used as a means of addressing culture in the second language classroom. Seen in this light, bilingual songs can serve to bridge

linguistic and cultural gaps between the learners' first and second languages. Angèle Arsenault's song (cited above) exemplifies the concept of a bilingual song, as it was written to solidify the bridges between two linguistic cultures in a bilingual Canada. Several more popular songs, though not as balanced in their inclusion of two languages, can also be counted as bilingual:

"Tears Are Not Enough," from Northern Lights (the Canadian version of the world-famous "We Are the World"):

[...] C'est l'amour qui nous rassemble
d'ici à l'autre bout du monde
Let's show them Canada still cares
[...]

"Michelle," from The Beatles:

[...] Michelle, ma belle
Are two words that go together well,
My Michelle
Michelle, ma belle,
Sont des mots qui vont très bien ensemble,
très bien ensemble
I love you [...]

Songs are an excellent medium for presenting idiomatic expressions in the second language classroom.

Besides songs in which the lyrics are bilingual, many popular songs exist in more than one language, from the famous "Are you sleeping?" ("Frère Jacques") to Paul Anka's internationally known "My Way" ("Comme d'habitude"). Other pop music which has been performed in more than one language includes:

- "The Sound of Silence," Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel ("Chanson d'innocence," Gérard Lenorman)
 - "Helen," Roch Voisine ("Hélène," Roch Voisine)
 - "Until Death Do us Part," Roch Voisine ("Je l'aime à mourir," Francis Cabrel)
 - "The World is Stone," Cindy Lauper ("Le monde est stone," Starmania)
 - "Hymn to Love," Corey Hart ("Hymne à l'amour," Édith Piaf)
- A number of singers also perform in more than one language.

- Peter Gabriel sings in both German and English;
- Gloria Estefan and Jon Secada sing in English and Spanish;
- Jacques Brel (1929-1978) sang in Dutch and French;
- Eros Ramazzotti sings in Italian and Spanish;
- Julio Iglesias sings in Spanish and French;
- Annie Lennox, Céline Dion and Roch Voisine sing in English and French;
- the bands Roxette and Abba perform in English and Swedish.

Student in Teacher's Role

When students come to class, they already identify with a type of music; they have a favourite singer or band, and they relate to certain songs. It is therefore quite useful to promote student interest by allowing the learners to speak of what they know and like, by allowing them to become teachers. In this activity, each student chooses a song, presents the lyrics to the class, gives information about the artist or group, and explains why this particular song is of interest. Also, in this student presentation, types of music can be defined, and their historical and geographic origins outlined.

Activity 6: Song Module

This module can be carried out with second-language students at any level. While the steps are presented in a chronological order, they can be regrouped or adapted to suit time constraints, needs and interests. Most of the steps of this activity will be illustrated with the song lyrics presented below, but it should be noted that the Song Module can be used with any song.

I
There is unrest in the forest
There is trouble with the trees
For the maples want more sunlight
And the oaks ignore their pleas...

II
The trouble with the maples
And they're quite convinced they're right
They say the oaks are just too lofty
And they grab up all the light
But the oaks can't help their feelings

If they like the way they're made
And they wonder why the maples
Can't be happy in their shade
III
There is trouble in the forest
And the creatures all have fled
As the maples scream "Oppression!"
And the oaks just shake their heads
IV
So the maples formed a union
And demanded equal rights
"The oaks are just too greedy,
We will make them give us light!"
Now there's no more oak oppression
For they passed a noble law
And the trees are all kept equal
By hatchet,
Axe,
And saw.

1. Select a song.

Find the lyrics of a song and write them out without revealing the title or the name of the author. Read the lyrics to the class.

2. Place students in groups of three or four.

Each group receives a copy of the lyrics. One at a time, two students in each group must read the lyrics to the rest of their group. The students are asked to circle the line that they find most interesting, funny, or strange. Then, students must explain to the other members of their group why they chose that particular line. For example, a student may choose the line "As the maples scream "Oppression!" because of its rebellious connotation.

Following this, all students are asked to read out loud the line they selected and explain their choice to the class. When this is done, each group is asked to give the lyrics a title:

Group	Title
Group A	Oppression
Group B	The Forest
Group C	The Maples and the Oaks
Group D	Unrest in the Forest
Group E	Rebellion

The members of each group must, once again, be ready to explain their choice. Each group's title is written on the blackboard and the students vote on the title they like best (a group cannot vote for its own

title). All titles but the winning one are then erased from the blackboard.

3. Have the students predict

Each group is asked to discuss the lyrics of the song to predict its style. To do so, the students must make a list of the instruments they think will play an important role in the song. They must also discuss the tempo of the song, that is, if it is a slow song or a fast one. As well, the group may want to think about whether the singer is male or female. Each group must be prepared to explain its predictions regarding the style of the song. Perhaps some words are clues as to the style of the song, and the students may want to list these. All groups present their predictions to the rest of the class. In the given example, a group may think that this is a slow song because it is happening in the forest. Others may think it is a fast song because it can easily be interpreted as a poem about worker's rights and the nature of class conflict in society. Also, a group may suggest that the acoustic guitar and the saxophone are the dominant instruments because the song expresses feelings.

4. Have the students listen to the song.

All students listen to the song. Then the class is asked to make comparisons between what the various groups predicted and the actual song. As well, the class is asked if the title chosen earlier is still appropriate. Finally, the actual title is revealed, as well as the artist or group and the year in which the song was written. It may also be interesting for teachers to present further information about the singer or the band such as artistic profile and personal background. The song presented earlier is called "The Trees," and is performed by the Canadian group *Rush*. The music was composed by Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson, and the lyrics were written by Neil Peart. They are the three members of *Rush*. "The Trees" first appeared on the album *Hemispheres*, in 1978. *Rush* has been putting out masterful driving rock since 1974. The intellectual lyrics of drummer Neil Peart make the band's music an excellent way to reach the inner workings of young people, even those who are not familiar with the band's work. More

information on *Rush* can be obtained at www.fred.net/nhhs/html/rushidea or at <http://syrinx.umd.edu/rush>

Songs can serve to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps between the learners' first and second languages.

5. Explain the Elements of a Song

Several elements are essential to the analysis of a song. Though these elements may have been brought up explicitly or implicitly in the earlier class discussions, they should be presented more formally at this stage.

Contextual Elements

First, the contextual elements situate the listener as to the general framework of the song.

Setting:

Time

when the events of the song occur.

Place

where the events of the song occur.

Voice Active

the author/singer/character is involved in the action.

Passive

the author/singer/character is not involved in the action.

Characters:

The people, animals or objects that play a role in the song.

Intent:

The reason or purpose the author had for writing the song.

Musical Elements:

The students should also be brought to reflect upon certain musical elements which have a direct effect on the message of the song.

Instruments:

The choice of instruments used in a song definitely alters the mood of the song.

Volume:

The song may have sound contrasts (softer, louder) to follow the lyrics.

Tempo:

The global speed of the song (fast or slow) and the variations in rhythm throughout the song characterize it and affect the listener's perception of the lyrics.

Literary Elements:

Finally, students' attention should be drawn to the literary elements of the song, that is those aspects of the text which, as in literature, create an ambience.

Similes:

Comparisons including "like" or "as". "It's burning like fire on the water" (*Fire on the Water*, Chris De Burgh, 1986)

Metaphor:

Comparisons which do not include "like" or "as". "You're a star in the face of the sky" ("*Daniel*," Elton John, 1978)

Hyperbole:

An exaggerated statement or comparison "She's got the world on a string" ("*The Big L.*," Roxette, 1991)

Personification:

Inanimate objects are brought to life; they are given human characteristics or qualities, making the impossible or unnatural seem conceivable and real. "As the maples scream 'Oppression' and the oaks just shake their heads" ("*The Trees*," *Rush*, 1986)

Alliteration:

Repetitive consonant sounds at the beginning of consecutive (or almost consecutive) words. "Goodness Gracious Great balls of fire" ("*Great Balls of Fire*," Jerry Lee Lewis, 1957)

6. Have the students write a critique of the song

A critique is a good way of getting students to express their opinion in the second language. The critique could be done orally or in written form, individually or in groups. The length and complexity of the critique obviously depends on the level of the students in the second language, but a few essential areas should be covered in all cases:

summary:

A general outline of the song's content.

positives:

A description of the aspects of the song that pleased the listeners

(students may refer to the contextual, musical and literary elements discussed above).

negatives:

A description of the aspects of the song that displeased the listeners, or that left them indifferent (students may refer to the contextual, musical and literary elements discussed above).

evaluation:

An evaluation of the song as a whole (there could be a picture code, like a gold CD if the song is considered excellent, a silver CD if the song is considered good, and so on).

This module could be repeated with any number of songs, and the students could keep their work in a song portfolio. Perhaps a section of this portfolio could be reserved for the definition of new words or expressions. The students may even compose new sentences using these words or expressions.

Copyright

Any teacher using songs in the second-language classroom must be aware of the Copyright Law. In Quebec, an agreement between the ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ) and la Société canadienne des auteurs compositeurs et éditeurs de musique (SOCAN), concerning the public use or performance of music, has been renewed to run from January 1, 1996 to December 31, 1999. It stipulates that any music can be used or performed by students and school personnel only, inside the school, for either educational or recreational purposes, without having to seek authorization or pay licensing fees. Article 27(3) of the Copyright Law also allows public performances of any musical work worldwide, for educational purposes, without having to seek authorization or pay licensing fees. This agreement therefore covers the use of any song in the second-language classroom.

How Can Teachers Get the Lyrics to Songs?

Second-language educators planning to use a song in the classroom must have the exact and complete lyrics. The unknown word or phrase is usually the one students will happen to ask about.

There are many ways to acquire song lyrics. The best and more obvious way is to buy the tapes or CDs that have the lyrics printed inside. However, teachers should be aware that lyrics thus acquired may contain spelling mistakes. It is therefore important to carefully verify them.

There are also many magazines and paperback books which feature song lyrics. Some are not very expensive and contain interesting facts about singers or bands. As well, the new improved web site *The Lyrics Page* (<http://archive.uwp.edu/pub/music/lyrics/>) will allow teachers to acquire the lyrics of most songs for free. This site is quite appealing because the information is presented in an accessible and teacher-friendly way. Lyrics can be found using the title of the song, the artist's name, or some words that appear in the song. This web site is definitely a must-see for language educators planning to use songs in their classroom. There are also many other resources on the internet such as the MTV music site (www.mtv.com) from which a song and its video can be downloaded.

Final Note

While music is often perceived as having a purely recreational goal, this article hopefully illustrates how songs also offer many educational advantages. Not only do they create a positive climate in the classroom which is essential to learning a second language, they also transport the students to familiar territory where they are more at ease to accumulate new knowledge in the second language. As culture capsules, songs offer insights into the second culture and contextualize

new language information. Activities based on songs are not simply light relief for tired learners and educators; rather, they are an excellent means of increasing the students' vocabulary, and of developing their listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. Whether pop or folk, heavy metal or blues, fast or slow, short or long, songs are a motivating, effective and enjoyable aid to language teaching.*

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