

“Music is the divine way to tell beautiful, poetic things to the heart.”

Pablo Casals

Songs and Their Role in the ELT with Young Learners

Songs are generally used in listening practice. Anyhow the song's potential is immense because as Max Heindel says: “Music is the soul of language.” The songs enable training all four language skills. First of all when we want to train listening and pronunciation, the songs are a real “wonderland”. Stress, rhythm, weak forms, linking, contractions, all of them can be found in the songs. They are suitable for teaching vocabulary, too. Of course, we cannot ignore grammar they offer. Grammatical forms are often used repetitively in the lyrics.

Beside the language cultural background also works. Songs discover a bit of national culture and motivate students on their path to further cultural knowledge. A song is mostly a good friend of fun and they both together contribute to a friendly, pleasant atmosphere in the classroom.

It's up to the teacher what kind of song he/she chooses and what kind of activities he/she will use.

Before we decide to bring a song into the classroom we should realize whether it is a suitable one. Are there any doubts? Then try to answer the following questions:

1 Would my students not dislike the song? (There is hardly any song which could be loved by everyone. The student might not choose to listen to a certain song outside the classroom sometimes, but it doesn't mean that he/she would not enjoy it as part of a learning activity.)

2 Is the level of difficulty appropriate for my group of students? Are the lyrics of the song clearly audible? Will my students understand the words pronounced? Is the pronunciation natural enough?

3 Does the song cover the semantic field I want to illustrate? Are there too many unknown words? Does it fit to the structure of my lesson?

4 Does the song provide a good illustration of a structure I want to present or train?

5 Is the cultural information the song provides suitable for the age of my pupils?

Having answered all these questions the teacher may incorporate the song into his/her lesson plan and start choosing suitable activities:

Pre-listening activities

Brainstorming: The title of a song might be given and students try to predict what the song is about. A short list of words or two or three lines out of the lyrics can be offered and students try to guess what the whole thing is about. They may prolong the list of words and see later how successful their choice was. Pictures dealing with the topic may help, too, and become the basis of future listening activities.

Listening activities

Ordering: With the first listening the access to the whole lyrics is not usually necessary. Students may be given just a set of words written on cards. While listening they put them in order as they appear in the text. Instead of the words pictures can be used in the same way. The whole lines can be mixed, too.

Total physical response: Words can be distributed among students so that each student has one. When listening he/she has to react somehow whenever he/she hears his/her word. He/she may stand up and sit down with the second appearance of the same word. Some silent reaction should be chosen preferably, stand up and sit down for example. When standing in a circle, students may turn round with their words; go to the centre of a circle etc.

Bingo: students choose nine words from the list offered and write them into their grids. The number of words may differ with each song. More or less words are suitable depending on time, space, topic ... the teacher has at his/her disposal. When listening they cross the word as soon as it appears in the song. The student who has all words crossed is a winner and shouts, "Bingo!"

Word ordering: students are given the lyrics with some of the lines distorted. They put the words in order.

Word deletion: Some extra words may be inserted into the lines of the lyrics. These extra words are deleted during listening.

Word correction: Instead of extra words we may use wrong forms of words, maybe wrong tense of verbs. students have to discover them.

Gap-filling: This technique is probably most frequently used in our schools. The text of the song is gapped and students have to fill in the gaps. We may ask them to fill the words in before listening and to check their choice during listening later.

Activities after listening

Comprehension questions. They could have been given before listening and answered now.

Grammar practice: Students may search for certain words or forms, underline them or write into a table. E.g. all verbs in past simple, regular/irregular.

Creative teachers may enrich the activities mentioned above and prolong the list.

Do not forget to search for other ideas in the library.