FLARR Pages #62: Using Songs to Teach Grammar and Generate Discussion in the Classroom

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“Using songs to teach grammar and generate discussion in the classroom,”
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Throughout my nearly three decades of teaching language (Spanish and English), I have experienced that students absolutely love the use of songs in the classroom to learn vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, as well as engage in great discussions. Songs provide good models of pronunciation, authentic language, topics of interest, and impetus for discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. Songs present topics students can identify with, so they enjoy participating in the pre-song activities, listening, singing, and post-song discussion. Because of the repetition of verses and the use of rhyme, the meaning and sounds are retained longer, helping students to remember what they learn in the target language. This paper presents pre and post-song activities, as well as strategies to adapt these activities to different levels of proficiency.

First, I would like to present some of the rationale for using music to teach language:

- Music stimulates multiple intelligences: Left and right brain.
- Music reinforces correct grammar and enriches vocabulary.
- Rhyme, rhythm, and repetition facilitate memorization.
- Lyrics provide great practice of grammatical structures.
- Singers are native speakers of the target text; therefore, they are good models of pronunciation.
- Repetition of songs enhances aural comprehension.
- Music lowers inhibition providing “comprehensible input in an environment conducive to a low affective filter.” (Alice Omaggio Hadley 62). Students feel relaxed because they do not realize they are actually learning; they think they are just having fun.
- Music motivates students. It adds “some spice for the language classroom.” (The Language Educator, April 2007)
- Music is part of the students’ daily life, and it is an essential part of every culture.
- Music familiarizes students with the music and singers of the target culture.

But songs are not only great for teaching a language; they are excellent tools for generating discussion in the classroom, due to the fact that they present values, attitudes, and behaviors of the target culture, and these values and attitudes stimulate reactions in the students.
Here are some suggestions for pre-song activities:

- Provide background information about the singer, country, type of music, instruments, etc., or have the students do it.
- Brainstorm with your students about the topic of the song and words likely to come up.
- Have a pre-song discussion. If, for instance, the topic is love, the teacher can ask questions like: Are all love songs happy? Is love the same for everyone? What love songs do you know? etc.
- Choose the vocabulary you think students may not know and ask them to look the words up as homework. They can translate them, define them, or use them in sentences.
- Prepare the lyrics as a class exercise. The teacher can adapt the assignments according to the students’ level of proficiency (In lower levels, emphasize the structure you want the students to learn. Example: If you are teaching tense or aspect, you can put the verb in parenthesis for the students to conjugate. In higher levels, don’t give them any cue. Students must guess the word according to the context and grammatical function of the word.)
- Listen to the song and verify that the blanks have been filled in correctly.
- Ask students if they have any questions about vocabulary. It’s important that they understand the song before they sing it.
- Have the whole class translate the song orally into English.

Involve all the students in this activity.
- Sing the song and have fun!

Some suggestions for post-song activities:

- Class discussion: What do you think about the topic of the song? Why do you think the author wrote this song? What’s the tone of the song? Serious? Funny? Ironic? Is this song too idealistic? What words did you learn? (In lower levels, you can ask specific questions on comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. In advanced levels, you can ask students to summarize the main theme of the song, make changes to the song, or analyze the tone of the song [serious, ironic, and humorous].)

Conclusions
The use of songs in the classroom is a great tool for teaching grammar and providing topics for discussion. Lyrics enrich vocabulary and reinforce correct grammar and pronunciation, while rhyme and rhythm facilitate long-term learning. The informal and friendly environment of singing lowers the affectsive filter, so students feel relaxed and happy, and if they are happy, they learn!

Works Cited