

6 Teaching-With-Music Myths Busted

by [Emily Herrick](#) and [Jean L. Arnold](#)

Some teachers still hesitate to incorporate music into their classes in spite of its reputation for being an engaging and effective approach. They may be concerned that musical activities are time-consuming to prepare and to implement, "just for fun," neither research supported nor well matched with their courses, or they may worry that that using them involves having musical talent. Perhaps you have some of these concerns about using music to teach language. Here are some reasons you should reconsider.

Myth #1

There is little research supporting the use of music in language classrooms.

A strong relationship between music and language is supported by studies in first and second language acquisition, cognitive science, socio- and psycholinguistics, and anthropology, concludes Engh's 2013 extensive literature review. "From an educational standpoint, music and language not only can, but should be studied together" (p. 121), he states. Since Engh's (2013) study was completed, even more research has been conducted that indicates a musical approach in language classes may be the way to go. In 2014, Coyle and Gómez Gracia, for example, found evidence for pairing music and vocabulary in teaching young children, and a year later a European study produced results that confirm many teachers' anecdotal experience that music can lessen student anxiety (Dolean, 2015).

Myth #2

I am a serious teacher with serious students. We have curricular objectives to meet. I don't do "just for fun" activities.

Enjoyment, learning, and retention are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they enhance each other. In addition, the same curricular objectives met with traditional classroom texts can often be achieved through song. Music is not intrinsically frivolous. Objectives involving everything from *wh*- noun clauses to recognition of key vocabulary can be addressed musically. Begin any activity by ensuring that students understand the objective, and conclude by checking student mastery of the objective.

Remember that even pop songs can have serious themes, and that not all songs are pop songs. Historical topics and history can be examined through song, such as national anthems and other music deeply rooted in a country's or culture's history. Students can explore parallels between song and literature or the visual arts; there are many songs to choose from (e.g., "Vincent," about Vincent Van Gogh, or "The Raven," about Edgar Allan Poe's poem of the same name).

Myth #3

Music is great for listening and speaking, but I teach reading, writing, and grammar.

Students can do far more than gap-fill or cloze activities with music. They can apply both bottom-up and top-down reading strategies to musical lyrics. Lyrics can enhance other reading

strategies as well, from reading for gist to figuring out vocabulary in context. Texts about music can be used to increase reading fluency when used alongside songs, and music can be used to augment complex composition skills such as using figurative language and paraphrasing, which are both used in abundance in music. Usually, we sing with the same grammar as we speak and write; beginning students can work with simple present and past tense and intermediate learners can compare conditionals. The grammatical exceptions provide a fertile corpus for analysis by advanced classes.

Myth #4

I'm not a musician; I'm not musical.

Perhaps not, but you are a language teacher, and lyrics use many of the same prosodic features, grammatical structures, and vocabulary as other language “texts.” It may help if you love music and listen to it often; we always listen for lyrics that contain grammar that our students have had trouble with. If you familiarize students with a catchy song that uses the grammar correctly, the repetition of the feature in music may help them learn it without much conscious effort. However, even if you don't have a large repertoire of songs under your belt, you can still use music in the classroom.

One creative activity is the “Sound Scavenger Hunt” (Cardoso, Sundberg, & Bione, 2017, pp. 84–86). This activity gets students to find linguistic features in music that they listen to. After introducing aspects of connected speech in class, such as linking, consonant deletion, sound changes, and so on, students go on the sound scavenger hunt in their own time, finding songs that contain examples of these features. Assigning fun homework will undoubtedly result in a higher rate of returns, and students can then share their music with their peers and you.

Myth #5

I don't have enough class time.

Portions of many musical activities can be assigned as homework, as in the previous example. Songs can also be used as integrated skills activities addressing more than one objective at a time. Tegge's (2017, pp. 228–229) “Song Dictogloss” activity is a good example of this. Instead of the teacher reading a dictation, a short song (or part thereof) can be played, and students are afterward required to reproduce the verbatim lyrics. They each write as much as they can remember and then compare notes, making amendments to what they've written. This activity engages the students in focused listening, writing, speaking, attention to grammar, and any language features contained in the song, such as collocations, idioms, or metaphors. Such judicious use of music might even save time!

Music doesn't have to take center stage—it can also be used in the background to lighten the mood, block out distractions, or create a certain atmosphere. Many classrooms today are set up with Internet-connected computers, projectors, and speakers: Putting on quiet instrumental music (just search online for something like “music for concentration and focus”) can help students. A study reported by Brewer (2008) found that students working with background music wrote double the amount of what they were able to write without it.

Myth #6

I don't have time to develop activities involving music.

You don't have to develop your own activities; there are an abundance of activities out there already. Here are a few places to start:

- [*New Ways in Teaching with Music*](#), just out from TESOL Press (and edited by the authors of this article), offers 101 music-related activities that can be easily adapted to almost any classroom setting. In addition, the book's companion website comes with three pages of websites to help ESL/EFL teachers incorporate music.
- [English Teachers Everywhere](#) has free ELT audio and plenty of quirky ideas from Kevin McCaughey.
- [Breaking News English](#) has stories from the news recorded at different speeds in North American and British accents and includes a wide array of ESL activities. A topic search for "music" found, among others, an [unusual story](#) about Bulgarian radio and an accompanying music-related activity.
- [Lessonstream](#), by Jamie Keddie, contains many ESL activities. Search topics for "Music and Music Videos" to find lessons based on "Message in a Bottle," "Ode to Joy," and more.

Neuroscientist Robert Zatorre said, "There isn't a cognitive function that doesn't somehow pertain to music" (as cited in Mannes, 2009). So, isn't it time you jumped on the bandwagon? You don't have to use music the way it's been used in classrooms in the past, but for goodness' sake, use it!

References

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