



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

Using Music to Make Student Learning Outcomes Fun

by [Heather McNaught](#) and [Ece Ulus](#)

Using songs to make learning material enjoyable and easy to remember is a well-known teaching strategy (Arnold & Herrick, 2017; Stavrou et al., 2022; Weale, 2022). Many English teachers have used popular songs from groups like the Beatles to facilitate language learning just as many children have used the classic song “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” to learn body parts or “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” to learn farm animals and their respective sounds. Using music to learn language is suitable for learners of every age and level of language proficiency. For English as additional language instructors, those who have been teaching long enough should remember bringing a portable sound system to class to play cassettes, and later CDs to play songs in class. Now, thanks to the internet, literally millions of songs are conveniently available on online platforms, such as YouTube and Spotify. Using songs as a teaching tool has never been more feasible.

Background

We are currently both instructors at a university-based intensive English program. In her role as activities coordinator, Ece started Language Music Club as an extracurricular activity. The name of the activity was important because she wanted to emphasize from the start that *language* and *music* were going to receive equal attention during the activity.

Heather asked to join soon after its inception in 2017, and since that time, they cohosted the meetings several times per semester. Once the pandemic hit and classes switched to remote instruction, they continued to host Language Music Club virtually, and it provided a much needed sense of connection for the participants.

Student Learning Outcomes

Regardless of the student learning outcomes (SLOs) and language goals that you have in your school or program, speaking goals can most likely be divided into three distinct areas of focus: pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Of course, some songs can be used to practice more than one SLO.

1. Pronunciation

Probably the first and most obvious way to implement songs is for pronunciation practice. There are three areas of pronunciation to consider.

- *Segmental pronunciation* features refer to the individual sounds (consonant and vowel sounds or phonemes), in particular the sounds that are challenging for your students. For example, the North American English [r] sound can be problematic for learners across a variety of home languages. Here are a few great songs to use for practicing segmental pronunciation:
 - “I Am Woman” (Helen Reddy, 1971): This song contains many words with a final [or] sound. It is also well suited for International Women’s Day, which is held on 8 March.
 - “Cheerleader” (OMI, 2014): This more recent song contains words with a number of final [r] sounds for practice.
 - “Green Grass Grows All Around” (Barney, 1993): This song is suitable for all ages to practice consonant clusters, and there are folk music versions and children’s versions of this song.
 - “The Way You Do the Things You Do” (the Temptations, 1964): This song offers a great way to practice rhyming words.
- *Suprasegmental pronunciation* deals with the aspect of pronunciation above the individual sound level, such as stress, rhythm, pitch, and intonation. Here are a few songs that are great for practicing suprasegmental pronunciation:
 - “Thunder” (Imagine Dragons, 2017): This song works well for teaching rising and falling intonation.
 - “Most Girls” (Hailee Steinfeld, 2021): This is another song that can be used to practice the “rising, rising, falling” intonation of a series of words separated by commas.
 - “We Can Work It Out” (The Beatles, 1965): The contrastive stress of “MY way” vs. “YOUR way” is good practice for this specific type of intonation.
 - “Sugar” (Maroon 5, 2014): There are excellent examples of thought groups and sentence rhythm in this song.
 - “Down by the Bay” (Traditional children’s song, 1914): This is a song that has fun rhythm and sentence stress practice.
- *Fluency* also lends itself to song because it is very difficult to sing words discretely. The music inherently links each word to the next following the rhythm of the song.
 - “Look What You Made Me Do” (Taylor Swift, 2017): This song works well for learners to practice fluency because it has phrases that are repeated multiple times in quick succession.

- “Counting Stars” (One Republic, 2013): This song is also has the repetition of the same line with the same rhythm, which makes it good for fluency practice. It also has other beneficial aspects, such as a grammar focus using present perfect progressive and future progressive, which allows students to practice fluency with more complex grammar structures.

2. Grammar

One way to make grammar more active and memorable is through music. Many songs use repetitive grammatical forms in both the chorus and in the verses. Here are some examples:

- *Present perfect tense*: Queen’s “We Are the Champions” (1977) includes a wide variety of excellent examples of the present perfect tense.
- *Present unreal conditional tense*: “If I had a Million Dollars” by the Barenaked Ladies (1988) is another fun song that students will not be able to stop singing for days. As the title suggests, it is a great song for practicing the present unreal conditional tense.
- *Yes/No questions*: “Shallow” (Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, 2018) has great examples of yes/no question formation and use. This song also contains examples of the use of the *ain’t* form of the verb *to be*.
- *Phrasal verbs*: “Try Everything” (Shakira, 2016) has an incredible number of useful phrasal verbs in it.

3. Vocabulary

Songs are full of both everyday and academic vocabulary that is made much more memorable through the melody and the lyrics. When using a song in a lesson, sometimes the vocabulary is the learning objective, and other times there are only a few words that need to be explained.

Asking students to guess the meaning of a word or phrase is also effective if there is sufficient context. Here are some good songs to use for vocabulary practice, though, of course, song choice for vocabulary depends largely on your learners’ proficiency levels and what the class is studying during a given unit.

- *Figurative language*: For higher proficiency students who are ready for practice with figurative language, Natasha Bedingfield’s 2004 song “Unwritten” contains engaging examples.
- *Slang and idioms*: The 2020 song “Dynamite” by BTS is full of useful idioms, cultural references, and fun current slang.
- *Adjectives*: “I Will Survive” (Gloria Gaynor, 1978) is a good song for practicing adjectives and synonyms as a way to increase vocabulary.

Choosing a Song

With so many songs to choose from, it can seem like a daunting and time-consuming task to find the perfect one. It is also easy to find yourself always returning to the same genre or decade that you yourself typically listen to. In considering which song to use, think of it as an opportunity for yourself to expand the types of music and artists that you listen to. Keep the following in mind when selecting a song.

1. **Student Learning Objectives:** If a song is going to be incorporated into the curriculum, it needs to support the course's goals and the lesson's SLOs. One easy trick is to help the internet narrow down your choices. If you are looking for a way to liven up the simple past tense, simply do an internet search for, "songs with past tense." Just finishing a lesson on comparative adjectives? A quick search for "songs with comparative adjectives," will yield helpful results. This will narrow down your choices from seemingly infinite to a smaller, more manageable number of results.
2. **Language:** One aspect to consider is the amount of slang or objectionable language in a song. If there is a song that you like that is full of curse words, try searching for a "clean version," which may be suitable for the classroom. Another language-related consideration is the use of "nonstandard" grammar in the lyrics. This does not necessarily immediately disqualify a song. In fact, it can be used as a way to discuss the many varieties of English that learners will encounter. For example, many songs delete *be* verbs or contain forms like *ain't* (as in the song "Shallow" mentioned in Activity 2) that teachers typically avoid when teaching grammar. Encountering these grammatical structures can open up a dialog with students about how and why speakers use these forms. The discussion topic can be related to where it is more common to hear different grammatical forms.
3. **Speed:** Obviously, if the "perfect" song is much too fast for your learners, it can be frustrating. If you encounter this problem, one thing you can try is searching for another version, perhaps recorded by another artist. You can even do an activity using the slower version, and then share the faster version and encourage students to work up to that. Most digital music platforms such as YouTube or Spotify also allow the listener to increase or decrease the playback speed.

Another related obstacle is when the singer does not enunciate clearly enough. Songs can have great examples of reduced speech, such as "wanna" and "gonna," but if every lyric sounds like a mumbled mess to your learners, it will not be an effective learning tool. Again, try to find another version of the song by a different artist who might sing a bit more clearly.

4. **Age of Learners:** Many popular songs are suitable for learners of all ages, but if there is a song that you would like to use with younger learners that has lyrics that might not be appropriate, there are child-themed versions of popular songs available on [Kidzbop](#). There are, of course, many songs, such as *The Green Grass Grows All Around* and *Down*

By the Bay, that are specifically for children and which are great for learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

How to Teach With Music

Basic steps for using music in the classroom:

1. **Introduction:** Give a brief overview of the plan for the lesson. If it's the first song-related lesson of the semester, it helps to have a short warm-up discussion about the students' favorite artists, songs, and types of music. If the lesson is part of an extracurricular activity, these questions can be included in an online registration form to be completed before the activity. Alternatively, paper information forms asking for the same information can be used at the beginning of, or after, the first lesson.
2. **Artist and Song Background:** Using projected slides, give some basic information about the artist and song, such as the time period, genre, and a few interesting facts.
3. **Introduction of Language Feature:** Introduce the language focus (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) of the lesson and present a few examples of the specific language feature.
4. **Practice of Language Feature:** Elicit additional examples of the language feature from students. If the focus is a grammatical feature, such as a specific verb tense, you can elicit explanations about form and use. If the focus is pronunciation, students can do choral repetition as well as practice with a partner or group.
5. **Listen for Specific Language Feature:** Give the activity to the students. If the task requires students to listen for missing words related to the language feature, draw their attention to the blanks and remind them about the focus. You can have them predict the missing words based on the target feature. Here are some activities to create using the songs of your choice:
 - a. *Pronunciation [specific sound or phoneme]:* Print out the lyrics to the song and have students listen to the song and underline the specific pronunciation feature that you're working on.
 - b. *Vocabulary:* Print out the lyrics to the song and ask students to try to predict what the missing words might be. Remind students to use the context and other lyrics to help them, especially for lyrics that have a predictable rhyming scheme.
 - c. *Grammar:* Delete the lyrics that contain the target grammar feature. After introducing the grammar, ask students to listen and complete the lyrics with the missing words.
6. **Review Answers and Challenges:** After listening to the entire song one time, ask students how they did (e.g., for a fill-in-the-blank activity, how many missing words they were able to complete). If the activity was challenging, play the song again. Then, have students check their answers with a partner or group before reviewing the answers as a class.

7. **Sing!:** After the answers are complete, play the song again and encourage students to sing along, paying special attention to the target language.
8. **Point Out Interesting/Useful Vocabulary:** After singing one time, stop to explain interesting and/or useful vocabulary.
9. **Answer Questions:** Ask students if they have any other questions about the target feature, and if time allows, answer questions about any other unfamiliar vocabulary.

Conclusion

Using music and songs to learn a language can make any lesson more memorable and engaging. If the curriculum does not allow time for extra activities, try alternative ways to introduce the song. In our program, we decided to create the extracurricular Language Music Club, which is open to all students at all levels. Alternatively, an activity with explanations could be posted on an LMS or emailed to students as an outside activity. Try out one of these songs and share your experience with the TESOL community.

We have enjoyed using music as a language learning tool so much that we started a podcast in early 2022. “English as a Singing Language” uses songs from different time periods and genres of music to teach pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The episodes are 7–12 minutes long and designed to engage learners’ attention and assist them in achieving language objectives.

How to Listen to “English as a Singing Language”

- [Apple Podcasts](#)
- [Spotify](#)
- [Website](#)
- [Instagram](#)

References

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Heather McNaught has been a language teacher for more than 30 years. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees in applied linguistics from Ohio University. After living and teaching overseas for many years, Heather returned to the United States in 2009. She is currently the assessment supervisor at the English Language Institute at the University of Pittsburgh. As a language teacher and a language learner, she loves using music as a tool to make learning language enjoyable.

Ece Ulus has taught at the English Language Institute at the University of Pittsburgh for more than 10 years. In addition to teaching classes in the Intensive English Program, Ece enjoys planning and chaperoning activities in which students can use their English skills outside the classroom. Ece is an alumnus of the University of Pittsburgh, where she earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees, the latter in foreign language education with a TESOL certificate.