

The top 10 reasons to use songs in the classroom

Music is a way to build strong language skills and foster learning.

Teachers all over the world use music and song in their classroom every day. Teachers turn to music for many reasons but mostly as a 'break' from regular classroom activity. Music is considered an 'extra' and not embedded formally into class curriculum. There is a mindset throughout education that music isn't really a serious approach.

English language teaching (ELT) must rid itself of this overriding and plainly wrong educational paradigm. Music is a way to build strong language skills and foster learning. It is well researched and a proven way to foster language acquisition in the ELT classroom.

The reasons for using music and song in the ELT classroom generally fall under 6 broad categories: affective, cognitive, social, cultural, linguistic and pedagogic.

Teachers need to have a strong educational belief system that has music and song as a central tenant. The starting place for that is to both face up to the myths surrounding music and education and to clearly develop a strong rationale and research based instructional approach for using music in the classroom. Here is an outline of the main reasons of why teachers should use music and song when teaching English.

1. They are research supported

Music is a proven teaching tool which fosters language retention and production in young learners. Teachers need to read many of the comprehensive studies (see references) that show undoubtedly that students of all ages learn more and learn better with music

Using music in your classroom will help your students succeed as English language students. Language itself is musical, speech has flow and form and songs strongly link and teach the underlying patterns of the language itself. If you aren't using music in your ELT classroom, you aren't following strong research driven instructional practices.

2. They are affective, it works

Songs, when used correctly, are very motivating for students. Students learn

language in a fun way and gain confidence through repetition and voicing. Further, music appeals to the affective needs of students, their inner world and feelings. Music is an input (like stories and pictures) which makes its way through the student's inner filter (see Krashen's 'affective filter hypothesis') and helps them learn by appealing to their emotive and social experiences. What pleases us, teaches us!

3. They are authentic

The value of authentic language input can't be undervalued, especially in an EFL environment. Songs are 'real' English and provide students with input that is not educational or scripted. Songs also promote highly valued 'ambiguity tolerance', allowing them to not get too upset when they don't understand every word.

4. They are student friendly

Songs are seen by students as 'cool' and 'high tech'. With the popularity of programs like 'American Idol', singing is mainstream, especially singing with a microphone. Everyone can be a star! Teens especially learn through music and 'pop' culture, teachers shouldn't ignore this and especially since English language songs are so international and widely popular, the world over.

Further, students like that their favorite songs can be used to help them learn English. Get your students to bring in their own songs to listen to and share in the classroom. This kind of informal needs analysis really works and is as simple as setting up a 'request box' where students can anonymously recommend their favorite English songs.

Songs help create a student centered classroom and gives students a feeling of empowerment and control in the classroom.

5. They are pedagogically 'deep'

Songs and music are such a versatile material. They can be used for so many purposes and in so many ways. Here are just a few of the main ways music and song can be used as

a learning material: as a listening cloze; as a vocabulary focus; as a game and play; as background music for self study/reading; as an activity (dance and total physical response); as a social and historical document; as introduction, engagement; as a writing activity (lyric rewrite); as pronunciation practice / focus (especially intonation & stress).

Songs also have several features beyond just the text/words and sound themselves that make them so pedagogically strong. Songs are usually very repetitive and they recycle vocabular and language structures. Songs are short and condensed – they usually don't take up so much time in class. Songs are thematic. You can find a song for almost any topic or grammar point. All in all, songs offer us teachers pure gold when it comes to choosing a language learning material.

6. They open the reading door

Songs are the perfect tool to help students begin to see and learn the associations between sound and script – it helps foster phonemic awareness. It is a phonics powerhouse and by using songs with lyrics, teachers are helping young learners to read and recognize the connections of sound, rhythm to text.

Karaoke in particular, has been used in classrooms to help struggling readers and is a mainstay tool of special educators to use with students who have a hard time learning to read. ELT teachers can also use karaoke to do the same and help students to become strong second language readers. Visual lyric videos and kinetic typography have become very widely available and are now at any teacher's fingertips.

7. They widen the classroom

Students will listen to and learn the songs outside the classroom. It helps students become 'self-learners'. Further, your own song lessons and files can be made available to students to play at home, on their computers. It extends your classroom into the world and makes it relevant to the larger learning world.

Further, songs are a way to bring students together and create a strong classroom learning community. Songs are very social. I remember once teaching a very difficult Grade 4 ESL class. I was their homeroom teacher and students were from every continent of the world. I started us just singing songs every day to start the morning and afternoon classes. What a difference this small change made. We held hands, we clapped together, we started looking into each others' eyes and relating to each other. Students started helping each other more in class and learning more. And just plain feeling happier (and don't think this isn't an important objective!). All through the power of music and song.

When a teacher uses up to date songs in the classroom, students feel like the classroom does not consist of 4 walls but is a part of the wider world. Using music and songs can be a way to bring a lot of fresh air into your classroom, your learning community.

8. They are intelligent

Music is one of numerous forms of 'intelligences'. It is important for educators to foster the development of all these intelligences and address the needs of the whole child. Even or especially so with EFL/ESL students. We don't just teach a subject, we teach a student.

Music helps nurture musical intelligence and helps create a fully developed, balanced person. It is especially successful in educating those children with emotional difficulties. Further, it isn't just something for young learners. At any stage of life, people need to be in touch with their musical nature. It uplifts and it fosters intelligence.

Too often music and the arts are given short attention by educators and we are realizing how wrong this approach has been. As Ken Robinson has described in his well known TED Talk, 'Do Schools Kill Creativity?', we have been wrong in considering education as something that happens only from 'the neck up'. The whole body should be taught and learn.

9. They teach culture

Without traveling and directly visiting a country, it is terribly hard to learn the cultural aspects to language and the culture of the wider English language community. Culture is something transmitted and not directly taught. All English language teachers need to teach culture, it is a cornerstone of what language is.

Songs have been described colloquially as a 'repository of culture', the place where the spirit of a people are described, preserved and shared. They all contain the core of what we were, are and believe. Songs are a way to enter into the culture of a community and they transmit the values, ideals, history and nature of the culture. Students benefit and understand the target culture through the deductive, implicit learning that occurs through song.

10. They are free

Songs are widely available free online and can be found on many video sharing sites and resource sharing communities. Most countries have some level of 'fair use' for education when it comes to using songs in our classrooms. Songs are also low tech – all you really need is a device to play them. Could be a CD player, a cell phone or your own voice, yes, this, too, is a 'device'! If you aren't using music or song as a teaching tool – you should be!

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