

# Using Pop Music in a University Foreign Language Classroom. Whatever Next?

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Pop music is simply a combination of mindless repetitive lyrics, focusing predominantly on love, coupled to a primitive rhythm aimed at pandering to the least discriminating listener. What purpose could such music possibly serve in an institute of higher education except possibly as material for a teacher who has abdicated responsibility for teaching and is merely trying to entertain and / or fill the class time with the least demanding activities? In what follows, I will attempt to answer this criticism and in so doing sketch some educational justification for the use of pop music in a university foreign language classroom.

To begin with, perhaps it is permissible to relate a personal anecdote which goes some way to explaining why I use pop music in my own teaching and indeed why I am writing this essay. At school I studied both French and German. Our teacher of French was older than our teacher of German and decided to have us read well-established classics by Corneille and Moliere from the choice of set books. Our teacher of German, on the other hand, elected to introduce us to two very interesting post-World War II writers, Friedrich Durrenmatt and Max Frisch, both of whom shed light on the way that the Third Reich still affected the German national psyche. The same teacher, once or twice, played us songs by Marlene Dietrich, which I greatly enjoyed. (My parents had a total of less than half a dozen single or long playing records of popular music, but strangely enough, amongst them was a single record of Dietrich, belonging to my

mother, perhaps a reminder of their time in Germany, during my father's national service.) I felt that, unlike our teacher of French, our teacher of German was attempting to share with us something that he personally valued from a living culture. Of course, just as some of my Shudo students discover the joy of Western pop music by themselves, while still at high school, I was also able to find out about Edith Piaf and both French and German cinema without guidance from my language teachers.

My first rather obvious point, then, is that lyrics of some pop songs are very rich cultural artifacts, which can be used to teach not only language but also the customs, culture and values of a society. Of course the same is true of other texts, especially novels, plays, poetry and essays. In comparison to these, lyrics of pop songs are typically a lot simpler and more repetitive. Needless to say, though, the popular appeal of pop songs lies in the combination of lyrics with music and so one is missing the point if one rejects pop music solely because the lyrics are of inferior literary merit to novels, plays, poetry or essays. Furthermore the relative simplicity and repetitiveness of lyrics is not necessarily a disadvantage if one is teaching beginner or intermediate level students or students from a society which has very different customs and values to the society / societies in which the target language is spoken. Even if the vocabulary and / or grammar of the lyrics of a given song are too simple for a particular group, they can still be used as a starting point for a discussion, imaginative exercise or some other activity. It goes without saying that there are highly literary lyrics, containing language, allusions etc., which would be far from easy even for the most advanced learners.

Another reason that I have for using pop songs in my English language classes has to do with who my students are. None of the young people who I teach majors in English language and literature. By the time these

18 or 19 year olds come to my class, they have already been studying English for at least six years. They have all endured many months of cramming in order to pass the university entrance examinations. I assume, therefore, rightly or wrongly, that a certain number of these teenagers, have lost interest in studying English. One reason, therefore, to introduce pop songs or something else from the more accessible popular culture of the English-speaking world, which has appeal for young people, is to re-motivate such students. Finally, for any student the language classroom can be a stressful environment, but perhaps particularly for the kind of students who I teach, who have just gone through puberty, who are thrown together with a large number of strangers in a first year university course, who might not have been taught by a non-Japanese before, who have typically had very little practice at speaking and listening in their English classes thus far and who may have attended a single-sex high school and are now in a co-educational setting, the communication-centred classroom favoured by myself and other foreigners can be a far-from-easy environment. Music, then, has the potential to create a relaxed atmosphere.

Turning now to the question of the ways to use pop songs in the EFL classroom, by far the most common activity, and one which I regularly use, is the cloze exercise. The lyrics of a song are either typed up and distributed as a handout or written on the blackboard. From the lyrics one deletes certain words, for example (a) those which are neither too easy nor too difficult for students to hear and which one wishes to emphasize and ensure that students learn / have learnt because they are useful vocabulary or, for instance (b) all of the words belonging to the same category e.g. adverbs or prepositions. In place of these missing words one leaves a space and numbers these spaces. I make it a rule not to delete (1) too

many words as this can reduce students' enjoyment and may make some tire of the exercise (2) words which are too close together as there will be insufficient time to both fill in a word as well as listen for and fill in the next one. Alternatively one can delete words and in their place put other words which may or may not be similar-sounding to the original words. Students then have to identify which words have been inserted and write in the actual words contained in the lyrics. If one has time, before playing the song, one can get the students to read the lyrics and (a) in the case of the regular cloze exercise, suggest possible words which could be used to fill the spaces or (b) in the case of the alternative exercise, from the context, identify which words have been inserted and then suggest possible replacements. After students have had a chance to listen to the song and write in the words, I ask them for their answers. At the same time, if I have not written explanatory footnotes, I do my best to confirm that they have understood difficult parts of the lyrics by asking questions and explaining. When students are unable to hear a particular word, if it is made up of six letters, I write six spaces on the blackboard. I then ask students if they can hear the first or last letters or sounds and then which vowels and consonants they think are found within the word. If necessary, I provide hints when students are unable to identify a particular sound. Lyrics of pop songs typically contain contractions so often found in the spoken language. Whilst my students are familiar with such shortened forms as "we've", "she'd" and "I'll", I find that many of them do not know what "'cos", "gonna", "'n'", "wanna" and "ain't" refer to. Apart from this, general problems of pronunciation may be addressed as in any other English class. For instance, one song which I use contains the word 'desert' so when I use this song I make sure that the students understand the differences in pronunciation and meaning between 'desert' and 'dessert'.

Depending on the size of the class, the ability and motivation of the students as well as the time available, after going through the answers and confirming that the meaning is clear, I might first of all get the students to suggest a suitable title for the song and then ask some general questions. For instance one could ask about the instruments being played, the genre of music, the decade which the music belongs to, the mood that the music creates and the way that students would react if they heard this music on their radio. One could then move on to questions about the issues raised in the lyrics. I'm currently using songs which raise the following issues: environmental pollution, explaining divorce to a child, death, war, poverty, discrimination, loneliness as well as love, of course. Sometimes I might talk about the song which I play, giving the students information about the singer / s, songwriter / s, the time when it was a hit or a personal anecdote. In all of my classes I give my students a mini test every week. Depending on whether or not I think that the vocabulary or expressions contained in the lyrics are important to learn, I may tell students that a certain item (s) will appear in the following week's mini test. Finally, it goes without saying that there are any number of different activities which may be used in conjunction with pop songs in the foreign language classroom. The books by Griffie and Murphey mentioned in the bibliography contain a wealth of practical ideas, albeit I feel that some would not be effective in general education classes of English in Japanese universities and some are rather time-consuming. My own preference is to use songs on a regular basis, but not spend more than about 15 minutes of any class on a song as I have my own self-imposed syllabus, which I wish to cover each semester.

How does one go about choosing songs to use in the language classroom? There are songs specifically written for EFL / ESL education which

don't contain any slang, obscure words or bad grammar and which may even give a good demonstration of the use of a particular grammatical construction. On the other hand, if one uses pop songs one may come across lyrics containing slang, archaic or obscure words / expressions and ungrammatical English. Significantly, though, it is genuine pop songs with their sometimes less-than-ideal uses of English (in terms of EFL / ESL education) which can have the power to captivate and move native and non-native speaker alike, whereas, given a choice, very few people would listen to EFL / ESL songs for pleasure. As mentioned above, one can explain about ungrammatical English and obscure words in footnotes on a handout of the lyrics or have students offer their comments on the grammar and guess the meaning of words from the context. If there is too much ungrammatical English, slang or discriminatory, insulting, hate-filled words (lyrics to gangsta rap are typically sexist, if not misogynous, and glorify violence) one may decide not to use a particular song, even if it has / had a strong popular appeal. Criteria for selecting a song are, I think, a matter of common sense. First of all, that students should be able to hear the lyrics is a *sine qua non*. In general, this may mean that ballads will be preferable to up-tempo songs. Secondly, the lyrics should be interesting. For example lyrics which tell a story or comment on social problems have the potential to be interesting. If one uses a song which tells a story, after giving students a chance to listen, read and understand, one has the option to get them to summarize the story without referring to the lyrics. Thirdly, a personal criterion of mine, given the incredibly wide variety of pop songs available here in Japan, is that I make it a rule only to use songs which have both lyrics and music of superior quality. Fourthly, I might choose to play a particular song if I have been able to get hold of some interesting film footage containing the song e.g. from a movie, musical, pop video or

concert. When I use the word 'interesting', I have in mind things like the choreography of a dance, as well as the dance itself, in a musical, or the visual effects in a pop video. I avoid songs of superior quality by artists who are extremely well-known in Japan, such as the Beatles and the Carpenters because many of the students will already be familiar with these songs or will almost certainly get to know them in the future. As mentioned earlier, I believe that one of our roles as teachers is to share with our students things which we value and which they are unlikely to have come across.

In end-of semester teaching questionnaires, students have generally evaluated the pop song cloze activity favourably. It is not clear to me exactly how to interpret the reactions of those who did not choose to completely agree with the statement on the questionnaire that the activity was interesting or useful, but I suppose a number of possibilities exist. (1) Some students may not particularly like (a) [Western] [pop] music (b) the songs which I use (c) English as a school subject (d) my teaching style or class content. (2) It may be difficult for some students to hear the lyrics. (3) As the activity does not resemble anything taught by Japanese teachers in high school English classes and as it involves the leisure activity of listening to pop music, it may not only be evaluated as less than a serious exercise but could even be thought of as a waste of time. The third criticism is also likely to apply, to some extent, to other activities, which the foreign teacher brings to the EFL classroom. At the risk of stating the obvious, I think it is unsurprising that the native speaker of English, teaching college students and the Japanese junior high and high school teacher are likely to use different activities in the English classroom. First of all, the junior high and high school teachers are severely bound by time constraints, having to cover a wide syllabus in order to prepare their students

for the rigorous college entrance examinations. For this and other reasons, the training undergone by these teachers will have emphasized areas of English language education in a different way to the training received by their native speaker counterparts. On the other hand, native speakers of English at college level do not typically have a jam-packed syllabus, unless it is of their own making or, for instance, they are preparing their students for a national or international English proficiency test. For this reason and, significantly, because they are not, typically, in a position to do what Japanese teachers of English are able to do so much better (give explanations of grammar which can be comprehended by the least motivated / proficient student) the native speakers of English, teaching at college level, are able to spend time on things like communicative tasks and activities which have the potential to (re-) ignite students' interest in English.

To summarise, then, I think that the use of pop songs in a foreign language classroom has at least the following merits: (a) songs may provide insights into the culture of the society / ies where the target language is spoken (b) they have the potential to (re-) ignite students' interest in learning the target language as pop music has a universal appeal (c) they can help to create a relaxed atmosphere (d) the teacher is able to share with the students something which he or she personally values from the popular culture of the target language. The cloze exercise and other language-learning activities used in conjunction with pop music are certainly not perfect and there may be some students who will not attempt to fill in the missing words or take part in the related activities. However, as long as a majority of students are finding these activities meaningful, then I don't think it is unreasonable to take the attitude that (1) it is difficult to please everyone all of the time and (2) one can lead a horse to water but one cannot make it drink. Finally, I should say that I realize that songs and speech are very

Christian J. A. Lister: Using Pop Music in a University Foreign Language Classroom. Whatever Next?

different kinds of verbal expression and therefore, for the purpose of listening practice itself, I do not confine myself to using pop songs. I also use recorded dialogues.

### **Bibliography**

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