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Universidad de Antioquia

Colombia

Lopera, Sergio

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# Useful Ideas when Taking Songs to a Class\*

Sergio Lopera\*\*

This article gives some basic ideas when teaching English with songs and also some reasons why EFL teachers take songs to class. It addresses two important issues when teaching with songs: selection of songs and preparation of tasks, examples for each kind of task are given. This paper recommends a routine of designing tasks that follow the format of pre-listening activities, while-listening activities and post-listening activities.

Key words: designing tasks, music, teaching English

Este artículo brinda algunas ideas importantes para la enseñanza de inglés con música. Da algunas razones sobre porque los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) llevan canciones a sus quehaceres docentes. Señala dos consideraciones importantes para tener en cuenta cuando se enseña con canciones: la selección de las canciones y la preparación de las actividades. Además, recomienda una rutina de diseño de actividades que sigue el formato de pre, mientras y post actividades de escucha.

Palabras claves: diseño de tareas, música, enseñanza de inglés.

Cet article offre quelques idées importantes pour un enseignement de l'anglais en musique, et les raisons qui poussent les professeurs d'anglais langue étrangère à développer leurs savoirs-faire professionnels au niveau du chant. Sont mis en relief également deux éléments à prendre en compte dans l'enseignement en chanson: la sélection des chansons et la préparation des activités. Enfin, voici la recommandation d'un modèle de planification suivant le cadre de pré-activités, déroulement des activités et post-activités.

Mots clés : planification d'activités, musique, enseignement de l'anglais.

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At the beginning of my teaching career, and convinced of the power of songs for enhancing listening comprehension, I took a song by Cat Stevens called “Father and Son” to a class and I gave it a cloze exercise like the one below:

### FATHER AND SON

By Cat Stevens

It is not \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ a change just \_\_\_\_\_ take it easy, you’re still \_\_\_\_\_ that’s your \_\_\_\_\_ there’s so \_\_\_\_\_ you \_\_\_\_\_ to know...

As in my case, you may have tried these kind of completion exercises in your own classes yourself. However, after experiencing songs in the classroom for some years, reflecting on how they can be of more systematic use, and completing an action research project as a requirement for graduate program in Teaching Languages as a Second language, I realized that the use I was giving to songs back then was far from systematic, and academic and research oriented. More specifically, my research on “Enhancing Listening Comprehension through Videos of Song in English: A task-based Proposal” made me feel more reflective in my teaching context, and I finally concluded that I lacked creativity, instructions, systematization and criteria selection when teaching with songs. In this paper I argue for a more systematic and sound theoretical framework when taking songs to an English as a Foreign Language class which focuses on fostering listening and speaking abilities. In doing so, I am presenting reasons, suggestions, samples, and theoretical support.

There are different reasons why teachers should take songs to a teaching context. First, music has to do with social contexts. Second, it may change students’ moods. Third, it provides stimulation and entertainment as well as challenge and pleasure. Fourth, music may be associated with happiness because it brings people’s remembrances and dreams. Finally, most teachers agree that music is a powerful tool to learn English.

When working with music in a more systematic form, the results are really surprising because music means motivation, learning, authentic material among





others. Below you will find other deeper reasons why teachers take songs to their teaching context:

Motivation: “A song is an experience; it only exists through time in the air as sound vibrations and in the minds of singers and their audiences. Moreover, it is experienced vicariously by many: a song is more than a text and a melody which can be recorded or printed, examined and criticized. It is the result of a communal state of mind and it depends on the conjunction of an inspired singer, a receptive audience, and various circumstances creating a favorable mood” (Zimmermann, 1966:12 cited by Murphey, 1990). Students and teachers feel better with music because it is an experience. Working with music means to have fun, to be interested as well as challenged, to explore and manipulate; thus, songs may have cognitive purposes. Songs provide a rich amount of expressions and vocabulary that students get used to when listening to them. Careful selection of songs and activities give students a motivated attitude toward autonomy (Lopera and Ramírez, 1998)

Specific teaching points: teachers use songs to introduce or reinforce a grammatical structure, to provide the class with a relaxed atmosphere, to discuss about the topic of the song or to give practice with some sounds that appear in the song, and to give ideas for a composition. As a result, teachers may use songs to enhance any of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening). “Songs are taught for a variety of purposes: for the sake of the vocabulary or structures they contain; to get students to produce oral English by singing them; as an aspect of English-language culture; for fun”. (Ur, 1986: 66). According to Murphey (1992) the most common reasons that EFL teachers have to take songs to their classes are:

- To talk about the music, singer, video clips, lyrics.
- To make internal association with people, places and times in our lives.
- To translate songs.
- To encourage intensive and extensive listening.
- To stimulate discussion of attitudes and feelings.
- To encourage creativity and use of imagination.





Interactive and cooperative learning: When tasks or activities are well designed and are intended to be worked in groups, students share information and become a team. Also, interaction is given because students have to give their points of view. They may agree or disagree, they may give and take, and they may try to communicate. Thus, objectives are reached. “As students work together in pairs or groups, they share information and come to each other’s aid. They are a team whose players must work together in order to achieve goals successfully” (Brown, 1994: 81). When I was piloting the tasks in my research I confirmed that students shared learning, that they verified among them some of the exercises used in the songs, and that most of them worked as a team.

Authentic material: Songs are intended for native speakers without taking into account teaching issues. Songs are natural products that are used in real contexts. It is the teacher the one who prepares the path in order to make students manipulate, interact, and reflect on the song. Peacock (1997) defines authentic material as “materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community” (cited in [www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues](http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues))

Music is everywhere: Throughout the world, English is probably encountered more often today in music than on the printed page (Crystal, 1997). English students may hear little spoken English outside their English classes, but all of them are exposed to American and English songs on radio, TV, and in movies, so music is everywhere. In his research about the use of song and music in teaching English to speakers of other languages, Murphey (1990) determined that the English language music was readily available in most EFL environments and extensively listened by the youth. Usually what was available was appropriate linguistic and affective input, and many teachers were already exploiting this resource in many different ways.

## SELECTING SONGS

When taking songs to a class you have to take into account:

- Selection: What is the purpose to take that song? To reinforce a grammar point? To discuss an issue?





- **Students' likes:** It is important to ask students about their favorite songs and singers. With that information you have a picture about the possible selection of songs. If you want, you can make a list of different songs for students to select. By doing so, you involve students in their own learning and motivation. However, students may select rap or heavy metal which is either not very clear or too fast, or contains too much slang. Frodden (1991:4 citing Dommel and Sacker, 1986) addresses this problem of perception of the singer's voice. Songs are classified in four main groups. "There are songs which appeal students a lot through their rhythm and music, yet they are quite difficult to understand. The reason for this may be that the instruments cover the singer's voice, the words are spoken too quickly, the language variety is unfamiliar, there is too much slang or the students just do not know enough English yet."

**Message of the song:** If possible try to select not only a song that deals with love but also a song that deals with social, ecological and human issues.

- **Music videos:** Music can be encountered principally in two formats: audio and video. The amount of music through audio is significantly greater than the amount received by video. However, the amount of video has increased in recent years (Murphey, 1990). Comparing audio and video, it is easy to state the advantages that video has over audio. Video, in addition to having the listening part that the audio provides, gives input concerning the setting, and all the stimulating features that moving pictures entail. Willis (1983: 29) also favors video: "Non-native speakers of any language are likely to rely more heavily on visual clues to support their comprehension than are native speakers, yet few language course-books deal more than fleetingly with the interpretation of visual elements." Some other authors also express the importance of the video as a more realistic medium within the classroom and even question the use of audio in the classes. Ur (1986) states that if the speaker is usually present in real life listening situations, toward which we wish to train our students in the classroom, then perhaps we should think again about how much we ought to use audio recordings as the basis of our exercises. Brown and Yule (1995) think that with the explosion of video technology we must hope that fewer and fewer students, in the early stages of listening comprehension courses, will encounter the foreign language without the support of the visual environment.





Teachers can use musical videos because they are a valuable source of contextual information. They can activate background knowledge if they include situations which students are familiar with. In the selection of the songs and videos teachers should pay special attention to the songs' themes, their messages, and the images that accompany them, and try to look for familiar situations that make students express their own feelings and/or state an opinion concerning the situation.

## **PREPARING TASKS OR ACTIVITIES TO WORK WITH SONGS**

Below you will find some concepts of tasks and some examples of tasks that have been highly successful in the teaching context. Although I am aware that some authors make a clear distinction between tasks and activities I am going to use these two terms interchangeably.

Tasks are exercises in which there is an objective to reach and they are exercises intended to facilitate learning. Breen defines a task as "Any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the tasks. "Task" is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning - from the simple and brief exercise type, to the more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem solving or simulation and decision making" (Nunan, 1989: 6 citing Breen, 1987). Some important aspects of language learning must be included when designing activities, namely, activation and building of background knowledge, activities to work on the comprehension of the message, or some activities dealing with reflecting and discussion. When designing tasks for the students one of the most recommended routines is to design tasks that follow the format of pre-activities, while-activities and post-activities.

Pre-listening activities: These tasks are intended to activate background knowledge. The lack of a proper activation of background knowledge accounts for the main problem in our learners since as Patricia Carrell (1984) says, much of the meaning understood from a text is not really actually in the text per se, but in the one who receives the input, in the background or schematic knowledge of this subject. The input, either written or oral, arrives to the learner and it is he who takes such external stimuli and converts it into intake (what the learner





has assimilated from the coming input). The processes of decoding input and converting it into intake are similar in reading and listening; they only differ in the channel through which the information is presented. This process implies a clear and explicit interaction between the student's background knowledge and the text.

The role of the teacher here acquires, consequently, a significant value. The teacher becomes a bridge builder between what students already know about a concept - schemata - and what they need to know in order to understand a particular text, that is, the interaction between those schemata and the input coming from the text.

Pre-listening or pre-viewing tasks are intended to prepare the learners for a listening or viewing selection activating background knowledge so they can later interact with the text. With these tasks teachers give students meaningful pieces of information as well as expressions that they will encounter in the songs. In other words, pre-listening tasks mean activities that prepare the learner to get acquainted with the song before working with it. Examples are given below:

### ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE by Phil Collins

1. Look and listen to the video. What is the general theme of the song ?
2. Associate the following two terms with your opinions. Write key concepts around each diagram.

<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>
Poor People		Rich People	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 0 auto;"></div>

3. Tick (✓) one column according to your opinion. You may wish to tick on the two columns. Relate your opinion with what you think Poor People or Rich people do or how they feel.





The first one is done as example:

	Poor People	Rich People
1. Usually think about God.	<u>✓</u>	___
2. Ask for help.	___	___
3. Have no appropriate shelter.	___	___
4. Look indifferent.	___	___
5. Walk barefooted.	___	___
6. Spend a lot of money.	___	___
7. Sometimes are desperate.	___	___
8. Usually feel sick and/or cold.	___	___

While-listening activities: Once the learners have activated and built some background knowledge, they should have immediate contact with the song by listening to it, watching it, and then have the opportunity to have some discussion about the song. The aim is to encourage learners to be flexible, active and reflective listeners; that is, to be able to perceive from overall to specific information, and vice versa, depending on the text, and to interact with the text while they are listening to it. In while-listening or viewing tasks, for example, learners have to sequence the events in the video, cross out the expressions actually mentioned in the song or match the image with the expression. Exercises such as matching, ticking, sequencing, organizing could illustrate this point:

## EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE

### by The Police

#### Activity 1

Mark TRUE or FALSE according to the musical video. (no volume)

	T	F
There are two women in the video	___	___
The singer is Michael Jackson	___	___
Sting plays the bass	___	___
There's a flute appearing in the video	___	___





The singer shows desperation	_____	_____
You can see a sample of love in the video	_____	_____
The video represents something unreal	_____	_____
The butts of the cigarettes mean anxiety	_____	_____

### Activity 2

Sequence the following events as they appear in the musical video.

\_\_\_\_ four men play the violins  
 \_\_\_\_ a lamp lights the room  
 \_\_\_\_ someone puts a cigarette out  
 \_\_\_\_ a cigarette is lighted up  
 \_\_\_\_ Sting plays the bass

### Activity 3

In the song there are words that are closely related to verbs. Match the word with its corresponding verb.

- |             |               |
|-------------|---------------|
| 1. Take     | _____ Step    |
| 2. Ache     | _____ Game    |
| 3. Say      | _____ Embrace |
| 4. Play     | _____ Smile   |
| 5. Long for | _____ Move    |
| 6. Belong   | _____ Night   |
| 7. Play     | _____ Claim   |
| 8. Fake     | _____ Heart   |
| 9. Say      | _____ Breath  |
| 10. Make    | _____ Me      |
| 11. Stay    | _____ Word    |

Post-listening-activities: These tasks are intended to verify and expand the knowledge acquired in the song. These last tasks also lead the learners to discuss and analyze issues presented in the songs. For instance, learners have to discuss the theme of the song, share their own experiences related to the song, and give their point of view. In short, post-listening-activities are tasks in which learners, after interacting with the song, reflect, argue and give their points of view. Examples are given below:





## EVERY ROSE HAS ITS THORN

### By Guns and Roses

Discuss the following :

- How do you feel when you see that the relationship with your boyfriend / girlfriend / husband / wife / is going down ?
- Do you wonder what is happening ?
- Would you try to save his / her / your love ? Why ? How ?
- What do you miss the most when you break up with your sweet-heart?

## SUGGESTIONS

When working with music follow these recommendations:

- ✓ Tolerance: Train your students to tolerate the idea of incomplete understanding when listening to the song. Guide them slowly with the activities, make them feel that every single exercise is done to facilitate the comprehension of the song.
- ✓ Pilot the tasks: Outside correction is important to take into account. Ask a colleague to monitor the tasks you prepared; you may believe that they are well-designed and you may also think that instructions are clear but sometimes you become contaminated with the tasks and you do not see any error.
- ✓ Repetition: Play the song as many times as learners need to complete an activity, but be careful with the exposure and with the extension of the listening tasks. Ur mentions that a listener may become tired because of so much continuous exposure to listening material, consequently, they can lose some ability to listen carefully (Ur, 1986: 8).
- ✓ Music videos: As mentioned above, not only take audio songs but also video songs. Both the video images and the suprasegmental features present in the video help learners with the comprehension of the singer's situation. According to Ur (1986) phonological signals such as, stress, pauses and intonation can give useful cues to the listener concerning final statements, important statements and could provide information concerning the speakers' situation or mood. It is quite helpful for most listeners to observe the movements of the speakers'





lips and face, since they give an indication of the utterance of labial consonants and vowels, rounded consonants and vowels which reinforce the auditory input. It is very helpful too, to observe the extra articulatory effort of a singer on a stressed syllable which often coincides with larger facial gestures like raising and lowering the eyebrows as well as with nodding or shaking the head (Brown and Yule, 1995).

- ✓ Lyrics: Try to include the whole song (lyrics) through the tasks. Working with the complete song is better because students like working and understanding the whole song.
- ✓ Exposure: there is not any formula to tell you how often and how long a teacher should use a song; of course you have to make sure that students do not get tired or bored when using a song.
- ✓ Level of English: You can take a song to any level of English: beginners, intermediate or advanced. "It is worth noticing that it is the task and the teacher's support, and not the material used (song, reading) the one which determines the difficulty of an exercise. Most important of all to keep in mind is that the same music/song can be used at different levels of proficiency depending on the kind of task the students are assigned and the amount of support the teacher is willing to provide" (Frodden, 1991:9).
- ✓ Adaptation: Observation in class is very important. When you notice that a task does not function as it was intended, make changes. Sometimes you think that a task was designed well, but it does not work perfectly; make sure to adapt new ones.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sometimes, teachers work on a song just for the sake of it without having in mind a real and more useful purpose. My intention in this paper was to show how teachers can take songs to their teaching contexts with a more systematic, and informed approach. Most teachers have tried to include songs in the classroom because they believe them a powerful, motivating and authentic means to enhance the four skills, specially the oral ones. Indeed, I may say that songs provide the classroom with a rich and authentic way of approaching English and that we have to set clear objectives and design purposeful tasks





before taking them to class. Finally, and after exposing my current thinking about using songs in the classroom, I want to end this discussion by presenting the very same song that I used in a classroom for the first time and that I referred to at the beginning of this paper but now with more creativity, systematization and academic purposes:

## FATHER AND SON

By Cat Steven

1. Mark the possible expressions you would give your 22-year-old son as advice. (if you don't have any kids yet, imagine yourself being a father).

- |                                     |                              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| a. you have to be a good person     | b. I can still help you      |
| c. take it easy you are still young | d. I have to make a decision |
| e. I am old but I am happy          | f. you have a destiny        |
| g. settle down                      | h. it's not your fault       |

2. Circle the correct expression actually mentioned in the song.

- |                                   |                               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a. it's not time to have a change | a. just relax, take it easy   |
| b. it's not time to make a change | b. just be fast, take it easy |
| c. it's not time to face a change | c. just be fax, take it easy  |

- |                             |                               |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a. find a girl, sit it down | a. if you have, you can marry |
| b. send a girl, settle down | b. if you want, you can carry |
| c. find a girl, settle down | c. if you want, you can marry |

- |                                       |                               |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a. look at me, I'm old but I'm happy  | a. I was ice like you're not  |
| b. look for me, I'm all but I'm fatty | b. I was wants like you know  |
| c. look at me, I'm old but I'm pretty | c. I was once like you're now |

3. Put the words in the correct order. The song is going to help you.

- a. still / you're / young \_\_\_\_\_





b. your / fault / that's \_\_\_\_\_

c. you / so / to / there's / know / much / have \_\_\_\_\_

d. easy / know / not / and / I / that / it's \_\_\_\_\_

e. calm / on / to / when / something / you've / going / found / be \_\_\_\_\_

f. lot / a / think / time / your / take / \_\_\_\_\_

g. everything / of / why / you've got / think \_\_\_\_\_

h. tomorrow / here / be / still / will / you / for \_\_\_\_\_

i. your / not / may / but / dreams \_\_\_\_\_

4. Listen to the second part of the song and find synonymous expressions to the ones given below.

a. How could I be clear? \_\_\_\_\_

b. When I do the changes away another time \_\_\_\_\_

c. It's the same situation \_\_\_\_\_

d. I learnt to speak, I was asked to pay attention \_\_\_\_\_

e. There's a solution right now and I must go far away, I recognize, I must leave \_\_\_\_\_

5. Answer the following questions. The answers are in the chorus.

a. Is it time for a change? \_\_\_\_\_

b. What could I do, to sit or to stand? \_\_\_\_\_

c. How could I take it? \_\_\_\_\_

d. How old am I? \_\_\_\_\_

e. Is that my responsibility? \_\_\_\_\_

f. How much do I have to take? \_\_\_\_\_

g. What should I do to organize myself? \_\_\_\_\_

h. Who should I look at? And how do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Fill in the blanks with the words you hear.

All the \_\_\_\_\_ I've \_\_\_\_\_ keeping \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ I knew  
\_\_\_\_\_ it's \_\_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_\_ harder to \_\_\_\_\_ it \_\_\_\_\_ they \_\_\_\_\_





I'd agree \_\_\_\_\_ it's them they know \_\_\_\_\_ me \_\_\_\_\_ there's \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
\_\_\_\_\_ that \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_, I \_\_\_\_\_

7. Answer the following questions and give your point of view.

a. Why do you think he is giving such advice to his son? \_\_\_\_\_

b. How can you help your son to be independent? \_\_\_\_\_

c. Americans leave their mother-father home when they are 20 or 21 years old. Most of them go to live with roommates or alone. What do you think of this? Does this happen in your country? \_\_\_\_\_

d. How could children become good citizens or people? \_\_\_\_\_

e. How could you help your children to be good citizens or people? \_\_\_\_\_

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## THE AUTHOR

\*\* Especialista en Didáctica en Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad de Antioquia. Coordinador y profesor del programa de Capacitación Docente en Lenguas Extranjeras, Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia. Correo electrónico: [serggiolop@hotmail.com](mailto:serggiolop@hotmail.com)

