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ENHANCING ESL LEARNING THROUGH MUSIC: BOOSTING ENGAGEMENT AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cognitive, linguistic, and emotional benefits of integrating music into language learning and deals with the ways songs can be used in ESL classrooms to motivate students to learn English and enhance their involvement. Integrating songs in teaching/learning process can result in killing two birds with one stone as songs enhance learners' skills in listening (by exposing learners to natural rhythm, intonation, and diverse accents), speaking (by introducing colloquial language, idioms, and phrasal verbs, which students may not encounter in traditional textbooks), reading (by improving comprehension and facilitating the identification of words and phrases in real-life contexts) and writing (by encouraging creative expression, with opportunities for writing). Songs can be used in various ways based on teachers' goals and objectives taking students' needs into consideration. Through this creative approach students acquire new vocabulary, grammar structures, master pronunciation, stress patterns, intonation. They can be used as language tasks, focusing on a particular material and can be adapted and tailored to specific teaching objectives, to suit the specific purpose a teacher might wish to teach. Songs provide a relaxing break for both students and teachers, turning routine classroom activities into enjoyable, fun experiences. Emotional engagement through music enhances motivation, reduces learning anxiety, and strengthens the emotional connection to language, making the learning experience more memorable.

KEYWORDS

Listening, Motivation, Activities, Teaching Tool, Specific Purpose

CITATION

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Introduction

Creating positive atmosphere and rising motivation is one of the key-points the teacher should consider. Encouragement is an inevitable part of teaching/learning process that results in boosting engagement. Teachers should always focus on ways to instill a "can-do attitude" in their students. One of the creative ways to raise motivation is integrating songs into classrooms. Students have different strengths: some excel at listening, while others easily express their thoughts on paper, some love reading and can uncover deeper meanings, and others are skilled communicators. Integrating songs in teaching process can result in killing two birds with one stone as songs enhance learners' skills in **listening** (by exposing learners to natural rhythm, intonation, and diverse accents), **speaking** (by introducing colloquial language, idioms, and phrasal verbs, which students may not encounter in traditional textbooks), **reading** (by improving comprehension and facilitating the identification of words and phrases in real-life contexts) and **writing** (by encouraging creative expression, with opportunities for writing). Songs can be used in various ways based on teachers' goals and objectives taking students' needs into consideration. They can be used as language tasks, focusing on a particular material and can be adapted and tailored to specific teaching objectives, to suit the specific purpose a teacher might wish to teach. Through this creative approach students acquire new vocabulary, grammar structures, master pronunciation, stress patterns, intonation. Songs provide a relaxing break for both students and teachers, turning routine classroom activities into enjoyable, fun experiences. Emotional engagement through music enhances motivation, reduces learning anxiety, and strengthens the emotional connection to language, making the learning experience more memorable.

The Benefits of Using Music in ESL Teaching

Songs are an amazing resource for teaching English, and there are many reasons why they should be used in the classroom.

"Language teaching can be defined as the activities which are intended to bring about language learning." (Stern, 1983, p.21). Songs can be used in a number of ways according to our aims and needs. Let's consider some ideas that explain why incorporating songs into our lessons are so beneficial:

1. Enhance Listening Skills

- **Rhythm and Intonation:** Songs expose students to natural rhythm, stress patterns, and intonation in English, which can be difficult to grasp through traditional grammar exercises alone. Listening to songs helps students better understand how English sounds in real life.
- **Variety of Accents and Dialects:** Different songs feature a variety of accents and regional dialects, giving students exposure to different ways English is spoken around the world. This helps develop a more rounded understanding of the language.
- **Improved Comprehension:** By actively listening to songs, students practice identifying words and phrases in a natural setting, which improves their ability to understand spoken English in daily conversations.

2. Increase Vocabulary and Idiomatic Expressions

- **Natural Language Use:** Songs often contain colloquial expressions, slang, idioms, and phrasal verbs that students might not encounter in textbooks. This helps them learn English as it's used by native speakers in everyday situations.
- **Contextual Learning:** The lyrics provide context, which helps students deduce the meanings of new words or phrases, making it easier to remember them. Understanding words through context is often more effective than memorizing isolated vocabulary lists.
- **Repetition:** Songs often repeat key phrases, helping students internalize new vocabulary. Repetition is essential for memory retention, and songs naturally provide this through their chorus and verses.

3. Improve Pronunciation

- **Pronunciation Practice:** Songs help students practice their pronunciation in an enjoyable way. Singing along allows them to mimic native speakers' pronunciation, rhythm, and stress patterns.
- **Natural Intonation and Stress:** In songs, the words are usually sung with varied intonation, helping students understand the stress and rhythm of English speech in a natural, musical context.
- **Challenging Sounds:** Some songs may feature sounds or words that are difficult for non-native speakers. By singing along, students can practice these challenging sounds without the pressure of having a direct conversation.

4. Engage Emotions and Create a Positive Learning Environment

- **Motivation and Enjoyment:** Music is fun and can motivate students to participate more actively in lessons. It brings an enjoyable and relaxing element to learning, which can reduce anxiety, especially for shy or hesitant learners.
- **Emotional Connection:** Music often triggers emotional responses, which can create a deeper connection to the language. Students may be more likely to remember phrases or vocabulary if they associate it with positive emotions, making the learning experience more impactful.
- **Cultural Awareness:** Songs expose students to the culture behind the language. By learning songs from different English-speaking countries, students gain insight into cultural references, traditions, and societal norms, which enrich their understanding of the language.

5. Encourage Creative Expression

- **Writing and Composition:** After listening to a song, students can be encouraged to write their own verses, create their own lyrics, or adapt a song's theme to a new context. This can help improve writing and creativity while using new language structures.
- **Speaking and Conversation:** Discussing the meaning of a song, its themes, or its lyrics gives students the opportunity to practice speaking in a meaningful context. They can share their opinions, interpret the lyrics, and connect their personal experiences to the song's themes.

6. Reinforce Grammar in Context

- **Grammar in Real-life Contexts:** Songs often contain a mix of tenses, conditionals, modals, and other grammatical structures in a way that feels natural and engaging. This allows students to see how grammar works in real conversations or storytelling, rather than just in isolated examples.
- **Grammar through Repetition:** The repeated use of certain grammatical structures (such as present continuous, future forms, or modals) in songs allows students to hear these structures in context, which reinforces their understanding and usage.

7. Support Multiple Learning Styles

- **Visual Learners:** You can provide written lyrics, visuals, or videos that accompany the song to cater to visual learners.
- **Auditory Learners:** For auditory learners, listening to songs and singing along helps reinforce learning through sound.
- **Kinesthetic Learners:** Incorporating movement or gestures with the song (like miming the lyrics or dancing) can help kinesthetic learners engage with the material and improve retention.
- **Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Learners:** Group discussions about songs or personal reflections on their meaning can cater to students who learn best through interaction with others or self-reflection.

8. Promote Cultural Exploration and Global Awareness

- **Cross-Cultural Learning:** Songs are often steeped in cultural references, social movements, and history. Learning songs helps students understand different aspects of English-speaking cultures, whether it's the music scene, history, or social issues.
- **Broadens Perspectives:** Listening to songs from different parts of the world or different time periods can help students gain perspective on diverse viewpoints and historical contexts.

9. Provide a Fun and Low-Stress Way to Learn

- **Stress-Free Learning:** Many students find traditional grammar and vocabulary lessons stressful or monotonous. Learning through songs can provide a more relaxed and fun approach to language learning, reducing anxiety and building confidence.
- **Music as a Reward:** Songs can be used as a reward or as part of a relaxed learning environment, helping students associate learning English with positive experiences.

10. Memory Enhancement

- **Reinforced Learning:** The melody, rhythm, and repetition in songs enhance memory retention. Students are more likely to remember words and phrases if they associate them with a tune or rhythm.

- **Mnemonic Devices:** Songs can serve as mnemonic devices, helping students recall vocabulary and grammar structures by remembering the melody and lyrics.

The reasons mentioned above clarify the fact that even those aspects that students find daunting can be solved simply and easily and listening to the songs can be of great value to foreign language teaching. Murphey's words seem to make all the obstacles disappear: "What is even more amazing is that it also seems easier to sing a language than to speak it". (Murphey, 1992)

Enhancing Language Learning with Songs in the Classroom

"In our time, it is hard to escape music and songs as it occupies ever more of the world around us: in operating theatres (for heart transplants and childbirth), restaurants and cafes, shopping malls, at sports events, in our cars and literally everywhere for those tuned in to a Walkman. It would seem that the only place music and song is slow to catch on is in schools". (Murphey, 1992)

It was already stated that songs can inspire learners and fill them with the passion of getting knowledge, fostering their comprehension and awareness. Utilizing songs in the language learning environment can help mastering the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) in as much effective ways as possible.

From a variety of activities on songs I would like to present vocabulary practice activity based on that can boost engagement and enhance language learning. This paper explores the application of the Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) method in teaching vocabulary, using Taylor Swift's song "*Shake It Off*" as a context for vocabulary practice. The PPP model is an effective instructional framework that facilitates structured and gradual language acquisition. By focusing on key vocabulary related to emotions, resilience, and social dynamics, the activity enables students to engage with language in a context that is both meaningful and enjoyable.

➤ Teaching Vocabulary through Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" Using the PPP Method

Objective: Students will learn and practice key vocabulary related to emotions, resilience, and social dynamics using the PPP method, while engaging with Taylor Swift's song *Shake It Off*. By the end of the lesson, students will be able to use the vocabulary in context, demonstrating both accuracy and fluency.

➤ Presentation Stage:

1. Introducing Vocabulary

Time: 20 minutes

Objective: To introduce and explain key vocabulary words from the song *Shake It Off* that students will need to understand during the lesson.

2. Pre-Listening:

- **Warm-Up (10 minutes):**

"How Do You Deal with Haters?"

- **Instructions:**

Start by asking the class what they know about the song *Shake It Off* by Taylor Swift. Briefly discuss its theme of negativity or criticism.

Possible Discussion Questions:

- ✓ How do you usually react when people criticize you or try to bring you down?
- ✓ Can you share a time when you had to ignore negative comments or drama in your life?
- ✓ What do you do to stay positive when life gets tough?

3. Vocabulary Introduction

- **Target Vocabulary:**

- ✓ *Haters:* People who criticize or dislike something or someone.
- ✓ *Shake off:* To discard or ignore something unpleasant.
- ✓ *Drama:* Emotional or exaggerated situations, often involving conflict or stress.
- ✓ *Player:* An individual who is active or successful, particularly in a specific field such as sports or other activities. *Gonna:* Informal contraction of "going to," used to express a future intention or action.

- **Presentation Techniques:**

Use **visual aids** (images, slides) to represent each vocabulary item:

- ✓ For *haters*, show an image of someone criticizing.
- ✓ For *shake off*, show an image of someone brushing off dirt or shrugging.
- ✓ For *drama*, display an image of an exaggerated argument or tense situation.

Provide example sentences for each vocabulary item:

- ✓ "There will always be haters, but you have to shake them off."
- ✓ "Life has a lot of drama, but you can dance it away."

➤ **Practice Stage: Controlled Practice**

Time: 25 minutes

Objective: To provide students with controlled activities where they can practice using the new vocabulary accurately.

1. Listening Activity: Gap-Fill Exercise

• **Instructions:** Play *Shake It Off* once. Students will listen to the song and complete the gap-fill with the missing vocabulary words.

Example Gap-Fill Lyrics:

- "And the players gonna _____, play, play, play, play."
- "And the haters gonna _____, hate, hate, hate, hate."
- "I'm just gonna _____, shake, shake, shake, shake, shake."

- **Follow-up:**

Play the song again and review the answers together.

2. Vocabulary Matching Activity

- **Instructions:**

Set students in pairs. Give students handouts with the definitions. Students work in pairs to match the definitions with the correct vocabulary items, then share their answers with the class.

Example Definitions:

- ✓ "A person who dislikes or criticizes something." → *Haters*
- ✓ "To move rhythmically to music." → *Dance*
- ✓ "A situation with emotional or exaggerated conflict." → *Drama*

➤ **Production Stage: Freer Practice**

Time: 30 minutes

Objective: To allow students to use the vocabulary creatively and in more personalized ways, improving fluency.

1. Role-Play or Dialogue Creation

- **Instructions:**

In pairs, students create a short dialogue or skit using at least five of the target vocabulary items from the lesson. They should create realistic scenarios in which they can use the words.

- **Possible Scenarios:**

- ✓ Two friends discussing how they handle criticism or challenges.
- ✓ A student explaining how they cope with drama and negative situations in their life.

- **Presentation:**

After practicing, pairs present their dialogues to the class.

2. Writing Activity: "Shake It Off" Personal Reflection

Instructions: Have students reflect on a personal experience and write a short paragraph. They should incorporate the vocabulary into their reflection. After completing the writing, students can share their reflections in small groups or with the class.

- ✓ **Writing Prompt:**

"Write about a situation where you had to ignore criticism or negativity from others. How did you 'shake it off'? What did you do to stay positive or move on?"

➤ **Wrap-up and Review**

Time: 10 minutes

• **Objective:** To consolidate the vocabulary and ensure understanding through a final review of the lesson's activities.

• **Instructions:**

- ✓ Briefly review the vocabulary and key points from the lesson.
- ✓ Ask students for feedback on what they learned and what they found interesting.
- ✓ Revisit any areas of difficulty or misunderstanding before closing the lesson.

• **Materials Needed:**

- ✓ Song *Shake It Off* by Taylor Swift (audio)
- ✓ Visual aids/slides for vocabulary presentation
- ✓ Handouts for vocabulary matching and gap-fill activity
- ✓ Whiteboard/markers

Summary of the PPP Structure:

1. **Presentation:**

- Introduce vocabulary through visuals, definitions, and example sentences.

2. **Practice:**

• Engage students with gap-fill exercises and vocabulary matching activities to reinforce understanding.

3. **Production:**

• Allow students to use the vocabulary in creative ways through role-play, writing activities, and discussions.

By using the PPP method, this lesson provides a structured approach for students to learn, practice, and produce vocabulary in a fun and meaningful context. The song *Shake It Off* adds an enjoyable element that makes the lesson more engaging and relatable.

Conclusions

In conclusion, integrating songs into the ESL classroom is a powerful and enjoyable method to enhance language learning. Through music, students can improve their listening skills, expand their vocabulary, refine their pronunciation, and engage with grammar in context. Songs also provide an emotional connection to the language, making learning more memorable and enjoyable. By using structured approaches like the PPP method, teachers can harness the full potential of music to create a dynamic and motivating learning environment. The versatility of songs allows for tailored activities that cater to different learning styles, fostering creativity and cultural awareness. Ultimately, songs not only make language learning fun but also help students build a deeper, more natural understanding of English.

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