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MUSIC AND HUMOUR FOR THE ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract

Either extrinsically or only intrinsically motivated, our students' success or failure in learning English is greatly influenced by what happens in the classroom. That is why, whether we teach English for general or for specific purposes, our lessons should be not only informative, but also interesting, memorable and enjoyable. In this respect, an efficient way of avoiding de-motivating, stressful activities is to complement boring, purely informative spoken or written texts for listening and reading, with songs and with humorous excerpts. Thus, we suggest a number of listening activities focused on vocabulary or grammar structures, via a collection of songs, ranging from the evergreens to the latest hits. Also, the listening and reading activities we suggest, are based on humorous visual and written materials selected for the acquisition of idioms, phrasal verbs etc. and for the avoidance of language traps.

Key-words: music, humour, motivation, listening

How can we help students learn and have fun at the same time? My experience gained while teaching English for Specific Purposes, especially for Academic Purposes and for Science and Technology, helped me consider the following solution as a daring answer: by using what everybody likes to do (listening to music, laughing, playing etc.) in order to teach

them what they are normally reluctant to learn (grammar) or what they find difficult to deal with (idioms, phrasal verbs, set phrases, etc.)

Why music and humour

The string of research questions and answers that eventually led to the solution of using music and humour for English classes began with the basic one: “Why do we teach English first of all?” Its logical answer- “to assure our students’ success in this foreign language acquisition” should naturally be followed by the next challenge, i.e. to establish how we can assure students’ success in acquiring the language skills. No single answer is acceptable in this case any more, but it has been agreed upon [3: 3] that among the factors that contribute to this, students’ high **motivation** prevails. As we have all noticed, while some of our students pursue their goals in deep awareness and know exactly why they should learn English proficiently, most of them, however, are driven only by an “intrinsic motivation” [3: 4] and their attitude to studying English vary significantly depending on the teaching methods and materials and/or on the teacher’s professionalism and personality. The fact that nowadays mastering the English language has been proved to be crucial, not only for occupational purposes, but even for survival in the context of globalization, may still count for nothing in the eyes of a student who gets bored during the English lessons. That is why we should admit that, either extrinsically or only intrinsically motivated, our students are definitely influenced towards success or failure in learning English by **what happens in the classroom**. Continuing with this kind of deductions, we should ask ourselves what exactly in the classroom is responsible for increasing students’ **motivation**. According to some studies mentioned by Jeremy Harmer [3: 5-6], enjoyable and interesting classes are much more likely to stimulate students’ motivation than any other possible factors, such as the teacher’s abilities to explain or the methods used. Consequently, whether we teach English for general or for specific purposes (ESP), to highly motivated students or to reluctant ones, our lessons should be both informative or centered upon “the discourse of the bulge” [2] and **enjoyable and memorable**. Instead of seeing this as a challenge of the general assumptions that classes are supposed to be solemn, serious and work-based only, we could just welcome a return of the Enlightenment’s slogan that marked all forms of culture, namely to teach and to entertain at the same time.

A relaxed atmosphere in the classroom has in fact a lot of other positive effects on the students and why not, on the teachers themselves. Besides the proven beneficial effect on students’ motivation, it induces a positive attitude to learning by releasing the stress

associated with it, by lowering the distance between the teacher and the students, by reducing the anxiety and the psychological tension, by increasing the students' self confidence and by allowing them to express themselves more spontaneously and thus creating the premises for developing their linguistic skills and their cultural competences. Another reason for preferring music and humorous texts as materials for teaching foreign languages in general and English in particular, is that they are both captivating and easily recollected. International hits which are broadcast so frequently that almost everybody becomes able to memorize the lyrics and to hum the tune are like memory anchors for both vocabulary items and for patterns of discourse. The evergreens and the *en-vogue* refrains should be exploited as authentic samples of language that can be resorted to whenever one needs language pattern landmarks for one's own verbal productions. As for jokes and other forms of humour, their ability of being a memory support and, additionally, a good instrument for testing language competences have been insisted upon in many studies that are representative for the main approaches to humour¹. Worth quoting in this respect is also the core of Dr. Donald Stoddard's *Why Humor in American Idiom?*, the preface to Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop's textbook *Be on Target, Updated (American) English for Multiple Purposes*: "Jokes tend to stick in the mind in ways that ordinary expressions do not. Without seeming effort, one can recall hundreds of jokes, particularly under the stimulation of joke-swapping sessions. If we have learned anything from the linguists over the past years, it is the importance of patterns in language learning, but it is in the establishing of language patterns that humor is particularly helpful. One has to know a language very well to be able to joke in it." [1: 5] And, paraphrasing it, we could add that one has to know the language very well in order to understand its humour.

Research materials

The idea of using music and humour during my English classes was not taken out from any scholar's book on language teaching. But I looked for such a book after I systematically applied materials based on songs and humorous excerpts for a whole semester. Because I was so thrilled with the positive feed-back received from my students, I decided to write about it. Thus, the need to consult theoretical material to check whether this approach to language teaching is or not in alignment with the current syllabuses, recommendations and practices. As higher education teachers of English, we are allowed to compile our own materials and we can alter various textbooks to tailor their resources to our language teaching

¹ A review of the main theories of humour and of their representative analyses is the focus of the second chapter in Carmen Popescu' *Teaching and Learning English with Humour* (2005).

needs. The fact that most of the available textbooks devised for ESP provided little or no written or taped support for the activities that I decided to do with songs and humorous texts, made me wonder whether there was something wrong with them being introduced in the classroom. Fortunately, at least two notable recent research books, namely Carmen Popescu's *Teaching and Learning English with Humour* (2005) and Guy Cook's *Language Play* (2000), as well as several resource books, such as Woolard's *Lessons with Laughter* (1996), *Grammar with Laughter* (1999) and Peter Medgyes' *Laughing Matters* (2002) demonstrate the opposite theory i.e. that, in fact, these types of activities (and many others, such as games, recitations, choral repetitions) are beneficial and recommended for successful foreign language teaching.

Basically, all these researchers plead for taking advantage of students' preferences and for exploiting them for their learning acquisition profit. Analyzing the policies of selecting the teaching material that are promoted both by the structural and by the communicative approaches, Cook notices that these materials are chosen and imposed on criteria that disregard what students are actually interested in: "If personal importance, psychological saliency, and interest were taken into account in the selection of the materials, then genres such as *songs*, soap operas, advertisements, rhymes, *jokes* and prayers would figure equally with the ubiquitous discourse of business and polite conversation as a major source of teaching material" [2: 193]. In one way or another, all the researchers that I mentioned take into account the rejections that can arise from the attempt to assimilate forms of entertainment into the school curriculum. Despite the fact that the common element for all these types of materials suggested is their ability of putting one in a good mood or stirring one's interest, the disparagement and censorship can be explained by the fact that these "language play" activities apparently disturb one from "serious" tasks that learning, as a subcategory of work, traditionally imply². In fact, the element of pleasure incorporated in activities based on such materials, should be viewed as an incentive to work harder rather than a hindrance. In the conclusion section of *Teaching and Learning English with Humour*, Carmen Popescu summarizes the beneficial effects on classroom life, quoting some of the students' responses to the tasks: "If we enjoy the lesson, we can learn with pleasure and we remember things easier (the new words met in funny contexts). This atmosphere encouraged Ss' participation during the class. (S5)" [5: 154]. After proving that the changes brought by teaching with

² In this respect, Cook argues that "the most fruitful approach is not to set up a dichotomy of play and work and then force learning to belong to one side or the other [...] but rather to view play, work and learning as a triad, each having parts which overlap with one or with both of the others" (Cook 2000: 150).

humour to the structure of the discourse in the classroom are clearly positive, in the sense that they lead to the expansion of conversational patterns and, in this way actually serve the main goal of foreign language teaching, Carmen Popescu makes some final pedagogic considerations: “Needless to say, this book is a plea for using (more) humour in the language classroom. At the end of each lesson I had the feeling that something good had been going on in my class that besides the teaching that had taken place, I was happy and my students were happy too. The attendance rate was high and optional and the participants’ anonymous answers about the course were extremely encouraging. Although I was interrupted and there was laughter, I felt I was actually in control all the time and that my students had gained from the lesson” [5: 149]. I could say that I experienced the same feelings of fulfillment after each lesson centered on materials rather “unconventional”, such as pop music or jokes, and that I was not in danger of losing face because I sang or laughed together with my students. Although at the beginning of the last semester I did not intend to set up a pilot experiment with a clear aim in mind i.e. to analyze the utility of combining songs and humour employed to a greater extent as teaching materials in the English classes, my own observations and my students’ reactions, testimonies and test results actually highlight the advantages of this method, namely that these forms of entertainment stimulate learning significantly.

Practical activities

After pointing out the reasons for eliminating the worries about music and humour being distractions from serious work or inadmissible teaching material, we can actually refer to the practical activities that can be performed. We suggest that, instead of considering them as fillers-in or only worth mentioning with a couple of minutes before the bell rings, we could actually:

1. Use songs for listening but also for speaking activities and then for writing assignments;
2. Use humorous excerpts (written or visual) for reading/listening/viewing, speaking, and writing exercises, so for both the receptive and for the productive skills.

1. What can we teach with songs?

Depending on their students’ age, levels or domain of interest, there is a wide range of songs that teachers can select from: nursery rhymes, carols, hymns, folk songs, ballads, blues etc. For higher education students, like the ones for whom I used music intensively, I chose

pop music for the reasons which were mentioned in the first section of the article: they are more appealing than songs that are especially devised for a certain grammar or vocabulary item and, in addition, they could be afterwards listened to and recognized outside the classroom almost everywhere (at the radio, on TV, CDs etc) and quite frequently, therefore the “repetition” and consolidation of the suggested language patterns is assured. Nevertheless, I paid attention to the following Song Selection Criteria [7]:

- Popular songs: from the ever-greens to the latest hits;
- Songs with clear and understandable lyrics;
- Songs with appropriate themes (preferable positive, upbeat, even humorous songs).

From the greatest hits of Abba, The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Modern Talking, Roxette, Pet Shop Boys etc. to the latest singles of Miley Cyrus, everything was tempting and rich in possibilities of changing the lyrics into support for practising the listening skills while also focusing on:

- new vocabulary, idioms and expressions;
- grammar structures.

I can refer to some of the grammar issues for which I found more interesting and memorable examples in very catchy songs:

- tenses: *The Winner Takes it All* (Abba) or *Tom’s Dinner* (Suzanne Vega), for present simple and progressive, *Have You Ever Really Loved a Woman* (Bryan Adams) or *I’ve Never Been to Me* (Charlene) for present perfect, *Yellow* (Coldplay) for irregular verbs in the past, etc.;
- modals: *The Day before You Came* (Abba), *It Must Have Been Love* (Roxette);
- conditionals: *Stand by me* (John Lennon), *If I Had A Million Dollars* (Bare Naked Ladies), *If You Tolerate This, Your Children Will Be Next* (Manic Street Preachers);
- adjectives and adverbs: *Gummy Bear*, *Hand in My Pocket* (Alanis Morissette), *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (Savage Garden) etc.

We all come to know at one point what our students need to practise more, what grammar difficulties may not be overcome yet, what new words may particularly be useful for

them. A good solution for all these could be to make them the focus of various listening exercises which are to be discussed after checking the results. Once I found a convenient source for the lyrics (on the internet), I devised beforehand the following Types of Tasks:

- Fill-in;
- Arrange the lines in order;
- Write the correct form;
- Correct the mistakes;
- Multiple choice;
- True/false;
- Answer the questions.

Here are some examples that can be adapted according to our students' level and to our lessons/ syllabuses requirements:

- a. Listen to ABBA's *The Day Before You Came* and insert the missing words. Then, translate the underlined phrases.

[I] must have left my house at eight, because I always do
My train, I'm certain, left the station just when it was(1)
I must have read the morning paper going into town
And having gotten(2) the editorial, no doubt I must have frowned
I must have made my desk around a (3) after nine
With letters to be read, and (4) of papers waiting to be signed
I must have gone to lunch at half past twelve or so
The usual place, the usual(5)
And still on top of this I'm pretty sure it must have rained
The day before you came [8]

- b. Listen to the song and write the correct forms of the words in brackets:

Maybe I (to treat).1..... you
Quite as good as I should have
Maybe I (to love).2..... you
Quite as often as I could have

Little things I (to say).3.....and done
 I just never (to take).4.....the time
 You (to be).5.....always on my mind
 You (to be).5.....always on my mind
 Maybe I didn't hold you
 All those lonely, lonely times
 And I guess I never (to tell).6.....you
 I'm so happy that you're mine
Refrain
 If I (to make)..7.....you feel second
 (good).8.....
 Girl I'm so sorry I was blind
Refrain.....
 Tell me, tell me that your sweet love (to die).9.....
 Give me, give me one more chance to keep you satisfied, satisfied. [8]

Naturally, the pre-listening or the follow-up activities should be focused on practicing the speaking skills by solving tasks centered on the theme of the respective song or on its singer. Writing assignments could have the same orientation. In this way, the place of music in the English classes is perfectly justified as a means to integrate all skills at the same time focusing on accuracy and fluency.

2. *What can we teach with humour?*

Perfect ice-breakers, jokes can also become good excuses for the reinforcement and for the evaluation stages of English lessons. I need not resume the considerations mentioned earlier on the positive effects of humour on learning, especially due to the fact that remarkable research books, such as Carmen Popescu's *Teaching and Learning English with Humour* (2005), have analyzed the matter in depth. I will only refer to the types of humorous excerpts that I found particularly useful for my ESP classes and to the types of activities that have been done. Just like the lyrics of songs, small texts consisting in jokes, puns, misprints, odd announcements, riddles, sayings, spoonerism, excerpts from short-stories, novels such as *Three Men on a Boat* by Jerome. K. Jerome have been applied as aids for learning. They have been used to increase students' awareness about language traps (homophones, homographs, polysemantic words, idioms, false friends, slang for colorful English, fixed similes, etc). In

addition, jokes, puns and spoonerism have been used for their potential to practice pronunciation. While the main skill emphasized with these texts was reading, listening (with video) was also practiced on excerpts from cartoons and sitcoms in which humour mostly derives from puns in the form of play of words. Walt Disney's *Snow White* as well as episodes from *The Big Bang Theory* was resourceful material for "silent viewing", "freeze frame", "sound only" and "listening to confirm expectations" video specific techniques. The topics and the lexis, even the academic, technical, computer jargon predominant in the respective sitcom, were particularly suitable for the EST (English for Science and Technology) and for the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) lessons. Besides the tasks that corresponded to reading and listening (answer the questions, spot the different meanings of words, correct the mistakes etc.), the humorous written or visual materials generated other types of activities, as follows:

- Performing a joke in front of the classroom;
- Jokes contests;
- Translation exercises.

Final considerations and conclusions

A wide range of vocabulary areas and grammatical problems can be explained and practised using materials based on music and humour. Merry, popular, catchy songs and a wide range of humorous materials create a relaxed atmosphere during the class, facilitating better language acquisition by arousing the students' interest, stirring their curiosity and thus motivating them to a higher degree. Still underestimated teaching resources, listening to music and reading/viewing humorous excerpts are among the activities that merge entertainment with learning in foreign language classes with better results in the long run. I do not claim that these activities should replace the ones focused on "traditional" materials for listening and reading, but rather that they should complement them to a higher extent.

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