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LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH SONGS

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Introduction

I am sure there are many students who feel that learning English is a tough and boring subject. More importantly, when classroom activities require you to either write essays or read and answer comprehension questions. Some may view such activities as a turn-off for learning English. Remember, there are many fun ways such as playing games, singing songs and watching videos that can help you improve your language skills. If you are a person who likes music, then songs may help you enhance your English language proficiency.

Research on multiple intelligences put forward by Professor Howard Gardner highlight that no two students learn exactly the same way and each learner has his or her own preference of learning. This theory states that we learn through a number of intelligences such as linguistic, musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, inter-personal, intrapersonal intelligences and most recently naturalist intelligence. A student may use one or a combination of intelligences when studying or solving a learning task.

Students who have a preference for musical intelligence often show sensitivity to rhyme. These students can usually make a distinction between verbal and non-verbal sounds such as music. Students with a high preference for musical intelligence love studying with music in their background and they learn successfully when their teachers include songs and use musical instruments such as the radio, CD-ROM and multimedia gadgets in their classrooms. In fact, research in neurolinguistics has also shown that music and language processing occur in the same section of the brain and there are parallels in how music and language structure are processed.

We all know that music and songs are part and parcel of the human experience. Whether you are a karaoke lover or enjoy singing secretly in your bedroom and shower, studies from all around the globe have documented that music and songs can enhance language learning. Hence, this month I would like to share with you the many benefits of learning language through songs.

1. Positive Learning Environment

Songs help create a stress-free

learning environment bringing positive and creative energy to the learning situation. This reduces students' anxiety and tension when learning a second or foreign language like English. Research in brain wave theory also points out that music and songs helps students to focus better and increase their attention span thus improving student memory and retention. When listening to songs, the fun element comes in and students begin to learn the language unconsciously while listening, tapping and singing along to the beat of a song.

2. Improve Pronunciation

When you listen to a song you will realise that a singer's pronunciation is usually very clear. Therefore, you can use some songs as good pronunciation models. In language learning, reception (listening & reading) comes before production (speaking & writing). So when you listen to a song, you may need to listen to it a few times before you can accurately sing the lyrics. So during this process of repeated listening you will begin to notice the pronunciation of some

words and slowly tunes your ears to the sounds of the words and language. To pronounce words clearly in English, you need to exercise the correct vocal chords and muscles to make each sound. So while singing, you will unconsciously make each sound a lot clearer and louder. As you listen and sing along you will imitate the native singers. In the long run you will not only improve your pronunciation but also be able to speak the language better using correct pronunciation, intonation and fluency.

3. Expand Vocabulary

When you sing you remember the lyrics and you may across some new words. So you will learn the new word in context. Nowadays, songs also come as videos with lyrics and this can further enhance language learning in terms of vocabulary. When listening to songs or watching video songs with lyrics do pay attention to new words and see how the word is used in context. If you do not know the meaning of the word, use a dictionary to help you out. Once you have learnt a word and seen it in context, you will

remember it better especially if you continue to listen and sing the song throughout your life. This is a sure fun way to boost your vocabulary because when you sing the songs repeatedly the new words and phrases are learnt unconsciously. Since lyrics of songs are not easily forgotten, constant repetition will lead to better vocabulary recall.

4. Enhance Overall Language Learning

Besides improving pronunciation and developing your vocabulary skills, singing also enhances your overall language learning. Through songs you learn language in the natural way it is used and spoken. You will also learn about idioms, expressions and phrasal words.

From example, Taylor Swift's song, *Shake it Off*, the idiomatic expression "I'm lightning on my feet" means she is very fast and quick on her feet.

Lyrics such as "Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play..." (because = "cause" and "gonna" = going to) and "I wanna dance in the dark" (wanna = want to) from Rihanna's song "Dancing in the Dark" show that



songs often use a conversational tone including day to day phrases used by the native speakers of the language. By listening to songs and watching video songs with lyrics you also get exposed to the natural way the language is used and spoken by native speakers.

Furthermore, you also get exposed to grammar and sentence structures used in the language. See the following sentence structures used in Rihanna's song, *Dancing in the dark*.

*"I wanna dance in the dark and never stop (wanna = want to)
We're gonna light up the night like shooting stars (We're = we are, gonna= going to)*

By singing along to such lyrics you unconsciously practice your grammar and sentence structure. I have noticed that my students often bring to the classroom, language structures that they get from songs. So you can actually write out the lyrics in full and map out the sentence structure and improve your English language speaking and writing skills.

5. Enhance Retention

I am sure you realise that when you like a particular song it keeps "playing" at the back of your mind. Songs with catchy tunes and lyrics often 'stick' in our mind and this actually helps us exercise our mind and ultimately helps us in improving our memory and retention. Lyrics are often repetitive and together with the melody and rhythm, lyrics are easily remembered and retained. Soon you will develop automaticity and you will be able to produce language rapidly without hesitation or long pauses. Remembering lyrics of songs will help in cognitive training and if you can memories lyrics of songs you will have sufficient practice in remembering and facts for an exam.

6. Develop Cultural Awareness

Music and song are often a reflection of a culture and its people. Today, English songs are available all over the world and by listening to English songs you will get the chance to become more culturally literate. For example, a song like *I just called to say I love you*, by Steve Wonder highlights the festivities celebrated in America throughout a year. From the lyrics you will learn that the New Year's Day is celebrated in January, Valentine's Day in February, first of spring in March, April has light showers, weddings are held in June, the height of summer occurs in July, autumn breeze and falling leaves are experienced in September, Halloween in October and Christmas in December. If there is something you are not familiar with you may conduct more research on it.

7. Develop Critical and Creative Thinking

A song is usually centered on a particular issue or topic of concern. So songs are often open to discussion and have several interpretations. The issue of concern in a song can be used as a conversation starter between you and your peers as well as family members. Discussions surrounding the topic can stimulate reflection and critical thinking. For example, Taylor Swift's debut song *Tim McGraw* is a reflection of her first summer love and her breakup with her boyfriend who was moving away to college. Another song, *People are Crazy* by Billy Currington, centres around a millionaire who leaves all his money to a person he meets at a bar and discusses about life. Such topics can stimulate discussions of attitudes and feelings and leave questions in your mind, whilst encouraging you to develop your creativity and critical thinking skills.

To conclude, I would like to stress that music is a natural way into learning a language. Today, English music and songs are all around us because music has become an integral part of our life and learning experiences. So listen to a song today and explore the magic within a song to enhance your language skills.

Concluding Thoughts

So how can you improve your English by listening to songs? Try the following steps and I am sure you will succeed in developing your language skills.

- First you have to choose a song that you like. This makes learning fun, less intimidating and you will be more committed and engaged in the learning process.
- Listen to the song, on a CD, YouTube or watch a video clip of the songs with lyrics provided. Print out the lyrics of the song. You may go to available websites to get the lyrics.
- Then sing along a few times and enjoy the song – paying attention to the pronunciation, intonation and articulation.
- While listening and singing, try to guess the meaning of difficult words. If you cannot guess, use a dictionary and try to learn the meaning of 2-3 new words in a song.
- Listen, sing and enjoy the song. When you are free make a conscious effort to look into the grammar and sentence structures.
- Share the song with your friends. Try to understand the topic or message the song is trying to put across/convey. Discuss the issue presented in the song.

Tips - If you are rather weak in English begin with slow songs so that you can follow the singer.