

# Exploiting songs to promote learning

[Linguistics](#), [Language Acquisition](#)



On May 28th, 2011, some twelve teachers of English and more than forty students gathered in GOETHE HAUS MEKNES — Centre of languages — for the fourth conference held in the school year 2010/2011. The conference was organised by Mr Hicham Sadiki, a teacher of English at the above mentioned centre. It revolved around the theme: “ Innovative Techniques to Teach English as a Foreign Language". It was a gathering of teachers and students who took full advantage of this opportunity to discuss different techniques that EFL teachers can adapt to take their classroom performance to the highest level. In his presentation, Mr Hicham Sadiki talked about how teachers can exploit songs to promote their students’ learning. The following is the complete text. Exploiting Songs to Promote Learning. By: Hicham Sadiki

Introduction Poetry and music are elements of each human society. They show many aspects of its culture, they contain authentic language, and they are easily obtainable. In addition, they can provide valuable speaking, listening and language practice in and out of the classroom. Music and poetry have immanent powers, for example they give people energy and help them change their mood. They occur in all phases of one’s life from birth to death. So they play an important role in the process of learning and using language. In this presentation, I am going to talk about the importance of using songs in teaching English as a foreign language, types of songs that can be used in the EFL classrooms and, beside these theoretical points, I am going to give practical teaching tips for how to use songs in EFL classrooms.

1- Why do teachers and researchers find using songs in EFL classrooms valuable? There are many reasons for using songs and rhymes in teaching English as a foreign language. Naturally, students really enjoy learning and

singing songs and have fun doing rhythmic activities while reciting rhymes. But there are deeper affective, cognitive and linguistic reasons.

- 1- Songs can help in weakening the student's affective filter. Teachers have long recognized the need for students to have a positive attitude in regard to learning. Krashen (1982) explains that for optimal learning to occur the affective filter must be weak. A weak affective filter means that a positive attitude towards learning is present. If the affective filter is strong the learner will not seek language input, and in turn, not be open for language acquisition. The practical application of the Affective Filter Hypothesis is that teachers must provide a positive atmosphere conducive to language learning. Songs are one method for achieving a weak affective filter and promoting language learning. Saricoban and Metin (2000) have found that with the affective filter weak, songs can develop the four skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
- 2- The holistic approach: Songs and rhymes stimulate the hemispherical interaction. Busy with songs and rhymes the left hemisphere (vocabulary, structure of the language) and the right hemisphere (rhythm, feelings, mimic, gesture, senso-motoric etc) work together and make learning more effective. So, it is small wonder how quick students are at learning songs and rhymes.
- 3- Songs also present opportunities for developing automaticity which is the main cognitive reason for using songs in the classroom. Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, p. 473) define automaticity as " a component of language fluency which involves both knowing what to say and producing language rapidly without pauses." Using songs can help automatize the language development process. Traditionally, it was believed that automatization would occur through

repetitive exercises in a non-communicative environment. However, the major shift towards the communicative teaching methodology requires that automatization occur in a different manner. Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, p. 476) state that we must " place students in an environment in which it is appropriate to use target utterances in a genuinely communicative fashion." The nature of songs is fairly repetitive and consistent. For example, a song such as " Sailing" by Rod Stewart provides ample opportunities for students to focus on the present progressive tense.

1. 4- Songs and poems are important elements of each culture. Learning this authentic material, students get to know parts of a foreign culture. It satisfies their natural curiosity about everything new. Being familiar with songs and rhymes in a foreign language, students feel closer to the foreign culture and its language. If students hear the same melodies or similar rhymes they are astonished at the parallels between their own culture and the foreign one. 1. 5- Besides automatization, there is also a linguistic reason for using songs in the classroom. Some songs are excellent examples of colloquial English, that is, the language of informal conversation. A song such as " My Best Was Never Good Enough" by Bruce Springsteen is a prime example of a song that demonstrates colloquial language use. This song is full of phrases like " Every cloud has a silver lining." and " Every dog has his day. " Of course, the majority of language most ESL students will encounter is in fact informal. Using songs can prepare students for the genuine language they will be faced with. 1. 6- Poems, rhymes, chants and songs could be used to give a feeling for the rhythm of the spoken language. Many well-known rhymes make use of the iambic pentameter, the natural rhymes

of the English language. Practicing intonation through reciting rhymes and poems is mostly funny and very effective. To vary the sometimes boring pronunciation teaching it is a proven remedy using rhymes and rhythmic chants, e. g. with minimal pairs.

2- Types of songs

1. Finger play songs: The content of these songs can be illustrated by the children's finger movement. They support the acquisition of gesture meaning and the use of nonverbal expressions. They also develop the children's senso-motoric abilities. Example: Hickory dickory dock
2. Counting songs: These songs support the learning of numbers and are often connected with using fingers. Most of them train the numbers from one to ten. Example: Ten little Indians
3. Spelling songs: They are useful to train the sounds of the English alphabet. The separate letters mostly sound different from their pronunciation in words. Therefore the pupils need help for learning the individual letter sound. Example: Farmer Brown has got a dog
4. Action songs: The biggest group of songs aims at associating words with movements of their body. They also "internalize the sounds and rhythms of English, ... develop a sense of rhythm [and] ... give the children a chance to let off steam. Example: If you're happy
5. Songs for special occasions: These songs are suitable for deepening the special vocabulary and for celebrating these occasions in the school. They emphasize the cultural aspect of songs. Example: Black and gold (for Halloween)
6. Spirituals: Spirituals are religious songs. They are connected with the Christian culture and often very traditional. Singing simple spirituals the children enjoy the sound and the special rhythm of gospels. Example: Kumbaya, my Lord
7. Drop-a-word songs: These songs train the children's concentration. They

are often combined with actions instead of the dropped words. Drop-a-word songs encourage internalization of language (Murphy 1992: 130). Example: My hat it has three corners

2. 8. Role-play songs This type of song « contextualizes vocabulary and make the transfer from singing to meaningful referents." (Murphey 1992: 129) They use the children's love for stories and role playing. Example: There was a princess long ago

2. 9. Topic songs: Many songs support the acquisition of vocabulary according to a special topic like " The days of the week", " The weather" or " The family". If they do not fit in with other categories they are called " topic songs". Example: Look outside (for the topic " The weather")

3- Ways to exploit Songs in the EFL Classroom.

Cloze or Fill-In-The-Blank Worksheets: One of the simplest ways to introduce a song is to remove all appearances of the grammar point from the lyrics. For example, if the grammar point is adjectives, and the lyrics are, " I'm so tired," the fill-in-the-blank worksheet will show, " I'm so \_\_\_\_." Give your students the worksheets and have them try to fill in the blanks while listening to the song.

Scrambled Lyrics: Another popular activity is to cut up all the lyrics. Most people separate them by line, but you could even do it by phrase, that's your choice. Divide the class into teams and give each team a set of lyrics. Play the song and have them try to put all the lines in the correct order.

Act Out The Verb: If the song you are playing uses a lot of verbs, play the song for them once without any lyrics. Every time the students recognize a verb, they have to act it out. This can be a lot of fun and gets the class relaxed.

Listening for Points: To introduce a song to the class, divide them into two teams. Explain that the song contains a certain grammar point that you have been studying. If someone hears that grammar

point, they must raise their hand. If they identify it correctly, their team gets a point. It's a good idea to pause the song at this point so that you don't miss anything. Theme-based Songs: If the song you are using is not related to a specific grammar point, but instead to a theme, that's okay! Play the song first and have students write down anything they hear that is relevant to the theme: nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Combinations of Topics: Of course, the above activities can be combined or altered to make different activities. For example, Act Out The Verb and Listening for Points could be combined to make a fun and competitive activity. I find that students often get more involved when it is a competition, even if there isn't a prize! Sing the Song!: After any activity, remember to take a few minutes and sing the song as a class! The students' enthusiasm will be influenced by yours, so be excited about it. Singing the song after these games will give your students a sense of accomplishment. They have just learned some authentic material and are proud of it! Conclusion: Songs and rhymes have an important function in teaching English as a foreign language. By virtue of their typical characteristics, they support the language acquisition for young learners. Songs and rhymes combine important didactic claims like the holistic, the monolingual and the contextual approach with fun, activity and motivation. Almost incidentally, the learners become familiar with parts of the foreign culture and see them as enrichment for their own life. The English teacher can choose from among a lot of types of songs and rhymes with special characteristics and different actions. Each teacher should collect useful songs and rhymes on which he can fall back. As EFL teachers, we know from our experience that young learners love English songs and rhymes.

Therefore, we all should see this big advantage and use songs and rhymes as a permanent part of our lessons. Hicham Sadiki English Teacher