

By Colin Dalton and Owain Lewes

Utilizing Karaoke in the ESL Classroom: The Beatles



Abstract

Reading and singing song lyrics utilizing karaoke-style performances provides ESL teachers with an effective English language acquisition teaching tool. Singing the lyrics of popular songs provides ESL students with multiple exposures to essential foundational oral and written English vocabulary and grammatical structures. This practice develops students' familiarity with the pronunciation and spelling of high frequency sight words, thereby developing reading skills and oral language proficiency (Pinkerton, Van Horn, Hewitt, & Dalton, 2015). Equally important, singing English song lyrics provides students

with a new genre of English language material for lifelong learning and enjoyment. This article highlights karaoke-based lessons utilizing The Beatles songs—which contain clear, simple, and familiar lyrics—as beginning-level English language acquisition lessons. The article concludes with recommendations of additional Beatles song lyrics for use as supplemental texts in ESL classrooms. A lesson plan outline provides Texas-based teachers with relevant state curriculum (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), including incorporating elements of the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS).

Keywords: English as a Second Language, music, karaoke, The Beatles

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Karaoke is a quintessential part of many Korean English as a Second Language (ESL) students' culture and a typical night at home might include a visit to a noraebang (singing room). Therefore, utilizing this familiar format to encourage an authentic interaction with the English language can provide ESL teachers with a unique, fun method of providing English language learners with crucial English language foundations and literacy skills. Furthermore, the easily accessible lyrics and undeniable brilliance of Beatles songs, such as "Let It Be" and "Yesterday," provide ESL teachers with introductory songs to inspire further exploration of The Beatles catalog of music. This article seeks to provide advice

to teachers of beginning-level English Language Learners on how to implement a music-based lesson, informed by research in the field of language acquisition.

Music's Role in First Language Acquisition

Research on children's acquisition of their first language (L1) indicates that music plays a pivotal role in the foundational development of vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation. "Motherese," the language mothers use to speak to their babies with its unique timing, rhythmical patterns, and repetition, resembles singing (Longhi, 2009). Even in the womb, a human fetus responds to music by moving towards the sound and displays significant heart rate changes (Granier-Deferre, Bassereau, Ribeiro, Jacquet, & DeCasper, 2011). Neonatal studies reveal that auditory memories acquired in the womb can last up to six weeks after birth (Granier-Deferre et al., 2011). Furthermore, second language acquisition research conducted by Schon, Boyer, Moreno, Besson, Peretz, and Kolinsky (2008) suggests "that learning a new language, especially in the first learning phase wherein one needs to segment new words, may largely benefit of the motivational and structuring properties of music in song" (p. 976).

Music is pervasive in the lives of young children learning their respective native languages. Parents sing lullabies to soothe their children and lull them to sleep. In English speaking countries, educational television programs for children—including *Sesame Street* in the United States, *Thomas and Friends* in Great Britain and *Play School* in Australia—feature music, singing, and nursery rhymes. In addition, the content of popular children's video series, for example, *The Wiggles*, *Elmo*, and *Barney and Friends*, centers on music and singing.

Singing also features prominently in first language literacy development in formal school settings. Children learning English as their first language commonly sing songs and nursery rhymes in preschool, Kindergarten, and early grades in elementary school. When children sing along to music, they practice the rhythm, intonation, and stresses of their native language. Krashen (1987) contends that effective second language instruction mimics the techniques and methods of first language acquisition. Therefore, structured musical interactions with English language songs should also feature prominently in ESL classrooms.

Lowering the Affective Filter

Korean community college students studying to be flight attendants often enter my beginning level ESL class at the beginning of semester with the notion that it is bad to make mistakes, a mentality derived from exposure to less empathetic teachers and an obsession on their parents' and teachers' part with university entrance examinations, which place great emphasis on the study of grammar. More often than not, I have to acculturate my students to the student-centered format of a language classroom in our first few lessons in order for

After a few individual performances or a choral singing session involving the entire class, my students seem energized, less reserved, and more self-confident. Therefore, the simple act of singing a few songs at the beginning of my classes lowers the affective filter reducing the stress of interacting in a foreign language which allows my students to acquire language in an anxiety free environment (Krashen, 1987).

my beginning-level students to feel comfortable interacting in English. Fortunately, karaoke contributes to the lowering of my students' anxiety because it represents a different approach to my students' previous experiences in their academic lives. According to Krashen (1987), students with low levels of anxiety are much more effective language learners. Because of the fun nature of the activity, my students realize that making mistakes, such as singing off key and skipping or mispronouncing a word or two, is not such a bad thing. After a few individual performances or a choral singing session involving the entire class, my students seem energized, less reserved, and more self-confident. Therefore, the simple act of singing a few songs at the beginning of my classes lowers the affective filter, thus reducing the stress of interacting in a foreign language (Krashen, 1987). In his seminal work on language acquisition, Krashen (1987) contends that language learners with motivation, self-confidence, and low anxiety possess the necessary affective traits for language acquisition. I find the activity practically effective as a warmup session for students who have just entered the class from another class or lunch. Also, karaoke makes a perfect stress-reducing transitional break when moving from one activity to another.

Incorporating Multiple Intelligences

According to Gardner's (1999) educational theory of multiple intelligences, individual students possess a unique combination of innate talents, that is, intelligences, including spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Musical intelligence encompasses aptitude in the appreciation, performance, and composition of musical arrangements. Students with musical intelligence possess an innate understanding of pitch, tone, rhythm, stress, beat, sound, and music (Gardner, 1993). Karaoke allows the students to move, dance, and sing along with the performer, thereby incorporating kinesthetic and musical intelligences into the language acquisition

process (Gardner, 1993). Therefore, utilizing karaoke in the ESL classroom allows students with musical intelligence to acquire language in a manner best suited to their individual learning style.

Performing karaoke also involves bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. Students with bodily-kinesthetic intelligence possess an inherent aptitude for bodily motions, physical action, timing, and the utilization of tools, instruments, and objects in a skillful manner (Gardner, 1999). I often notice my students tapping their feet and bobbing their heads to the beat of the music being sung by another student, indicating a physical reaction to the activity. Also, karaoke performance which involves singing, dancing, and handling a microphone provides students possessing bodily-kinesthetic intelligence with a unique opportunity to acquire language while utilizing their physical talents.

Build Sight Word Vocabulary

The Beatles (1966) song “Yellow Submarine” contains numerous words that appear on common sight word lists of the most frequently used words in the English language (Pinkerton, Van Horn, Hewitt, & Dalton, 2015), including the following: a, about, an, and, around, ask, be, been, can, come, I, in, know, like, little, let, me, our, sea, see, that, the, to, under, warm, we, with, would, and you. These words appear on lists—such as *Fry Instant Words* and *Dolch Sight Words*—of the 300 words that encompass approximately 65 percent of all written material in the English language (Fry & Kress, 2006). Recognizing these words immediately by sight, rather than through decoding, increases reading fluency. This in turn leads to reading comprehension and recall (Carnine, Silbert, Kameñui, & Tarver, 2004). Furthermore, word recognition for English language learners improves their oral proficiency due to the interrelatedness of oral and written language (Saunders, Foorman, & Carlson, 2006). Providing students with multiple exposures to common English language sight words via reading and listening to song lyrics combines visual and auditory discrimination of these commonly used words utilizing a whole language approach. My usually shy, beginning-level students gushed with enthusiasm at the conclusion of this activity dedicated to reinforcing basic sight-word vocabulary based on songs from the classic Beatles (1969) album *Abbey Road*. Students’ comments following the unit included “I really enjoyed the singing lessons” and “I liked the octopus song because it was new and fun.” (See Figure 1 for more information on skills involved in studying “Yellow Submarine.”)

Cloze Activity

To introduce a song, I play the song twice while my students read along silently with a copy of the lyrics. Lyrics to popular songs are readily available online. Then my students complete a modified cloze procedure where they fill in missing words from the lyrics using a word bank. A cloze procedure, commonly used as a reading comprehension assessment, consists of a text or a passage of suitable length and difficulty with every fifth

word deleted (Hossein, 1996). For example, for the lyrics of the song “The Octopus’s Garden” by The Beatles (1969), I delete the following words: sea, warm, dance, shout, swim, octopus’s, shade, friends, you, storm, found, under, hideaway, garden, waves, cave, coral, happy, head, me, under, seabed, sing, lies, joy, waves, safe, girl, ocean waves, boy, happy, safe, and me. I provide the students with a jumbled list of the missing words in a word bank located at the bottom of the cloze exercise. After the students complete the exercise, I review their work orally and provide definitions of the words at the point of need. This provides students with multiple exposures to the words, sounds, and letter-sound relationships. In addition, the song contains several contractions, such as, “I’d” and “he’d,” providing teachers with a perfect introduction to a lesson on contractions.

Total Physical Response

After completing the cloze exercise, we sing the song as a whole class with the song playing in the background. Often, I designate different verses of a song to certain groups of students within the class according to their gender, hometown, or seating location. While designating groups to sing certain verses, I subtly include Total Physical Response (TPR) communication to teach additional vocabulary and syntax. TPR, a commonly used ESL teaching method for beginning-level students, requires students to respond physically to the teacher’s directions in the target language. Research suggests that TPR communication mimics the communication between parents and young children who are learning their first language (Asher, 1969). When young children respond physically to their parents’ verbal instructions, they acquire language naturally (Asher, 1969). For example, when I instruct my students in the first row to stand and sing the first verse (and my students in the second row to sing the second verse, and so forth), I teach my students the words for ordinal numbers.

Research-Based Fluency Development Activities

Assigning groups of students to sing particular sections of a song mimics choral reading, a commonly utilized reading fluency development technique for young native English speakers. The more extroverted students and fluent readers model expressive oral reading (singing), scaffolding the experience for shy students and dysfluent readers. This activity leads nicely to other fluency development activities, including echo reading, paired reading, and reader’s theater. Echo reading involves a fluent reader, often the teacher, reading a sentence or logical chunk of text aloud and the learners repeating, echoing the pronunciation, rate, and rhythm of the fluent reader. Paired reading or partner reading involves students reading aloud to each other in pairs. Reader’s theater provides students, working in groups, the opportunity to develop a script based on a text read in class (Peregoy & Boyle, 2012). Then, the students, reading directly from the script, perform their work in front of the class. The rereading of song lyrics utilizing these techniques allows students to move from single word fixations to reading phrases of meaningful units in

Grade Level: 2	ESL: Beginning Level	Subject: English Language Arts and Reading	Prepared By: Colin Dalton and Owain Lewis
Objectives & Purpose: Developing foundational literacy skills in beginning-level English Language Learners using karaoke.		TEKS Addressed: Phonological Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary Development, and Reading Fluency	
Activities Karaoke Choral Reading Echo Reading Cloze Activity Paired Reading	Materials Lyrics to songs by The Beatles (easily accessible online). Word wall of target vocabulary. Word sort on target vocabulary.	Connection to Past or Future Learning Foundational Reading Skills: Phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency. Bridge to other music genres, including those from various cultures.	ELPS Cross-Curricular Language Acquisition Strategies Expand and internalize initial English vocabulary by learning and using high-frequency English words.
Technology Karaoke machine or microphone system connected to computer and speakers.	Learning Environment Set-Up Students seated in groups of two for paired reading.	Connection to Community Popular culture Music Karaoke Singing competitions on television	
Higher-Order Thinking Skills Students write and perform their own song.	Listening and Speaking Phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and pronunciation.	Connection to Culture Popular music genres History of rock and roll British invasion Beatlemania (films, fashion, merchandise, concerts, and iconic albums)	Sight Word Vocabulary a, about, an, and, around, ask, be, been, can, come, I, in, know, like, little, let, me, our, sea, see, that, the, to, under, warm, we, with, would, and you
Teaching Strategies State, display and review sight words. Play original version of song several times as students read along silently to the lyrics.	Reading Reading fluency (rate, accuracy, expression, and appropriate phrasing) development through choral reading, paired reading, and echo reading.	Connection to Student Interests Music Singing Karaoke Popular culture The Beatles	
Evaluation/Assessment Informal assessment of pronunciation while students sing. Informal assessment of students incorporating newly acquired vocabulary in their oral and written English. Performance on cloze assessment. Word sort performance.	Writing Writing common English sight words using Latin letters. Writing song lyrics for more advanced students.	Vocabulary Acquisition Multisensory learning (see, say, sing, and write). Highlight word patterns and their meanings. Word sorts with and without pictures.	SIOP Features Language objectives must be clearly stated, displayed, and reviewed with students. Adaptation of content to all levels of student proficiency. Integrate lesson concepts with language practice opportunities. Supplemental materials used to a high degree.

Figure 1. Developing the foundations of reading with karaoke using the Beatles “Yellow Submarine”.

a single fixation, thereby improving reading rate, expression, and ease of reading.

Other Beatles Songs for the ESL Classroom

The Beatles portfolio of music, with lyrics easily accessible online, provides ESL teachers with a unique literary genre to engage their students in activities that increase oral language skills, develop sight word vocabulary, foster reading fluency, and nurture an interest in this socially, politically, and economically significant musical phenomena. Songs from The Beatles (1964) album *A Hard Day's Night* contain uncomplicated, easily accessible lyrics, for beginning and intermediate level English Language Learners. The album's title track "A Hard Day's Night" is a perfect song for teaching similes, for example "I've been working like a dog" and "I should be sleeping like a log" (The Beatles, 1964). In addition, the song's upbeat, fun lyrics follow a simple rhyme scheme and provide a repetition of key phrases, both qualities of children's books used to develop first language literacy in young native English speakers. Later albums provide the teachers of advanced students with material to analyze literary elements, such as narrative structure, figurative language, voice, and auditory and visual imagery. For example, The Beatles (1967) album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*—regarded by Rolling Stone Magazine (2012) as "the most important rock and roll album ever made" and an "unsurpassed adventure in concept, sound, songwriting, cover art, and studio technology by the greatest rock and roll group of all time"—contains songs utilizing a litany of literary devices worthy of investigation by advanced students. In recognition of the literary strength of the album's lyric, the original album contained a booklet of lyrics, a rarity at the time. Finally, the entire Beatles story including books, documentaries, movies, interviews, newspaper/magazine articles, and websites makes for fascinating informational literary material for authentic English language acquisition.

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