Rock and Roll English Teaching: Content-Based Cultural Workshops

“As a rock star, I have two instincts, I want to have fun, and I want to change the world. I have a chance to do both.”

—Bono, main vocalist of the rock band U2

Suppose you are a passionate language teacher brimming with confidence. You are proud of your English pedagogy know-how, enthusiasm for culture and languages, and awareness of your students’ challenges and goals; however, as the years pass, the daily routine of teaching the same material day in and day out starts to diminish the passion that was once so prominent years earlier. So what do you do? You do what so many of us have done when times get dull: you recharge the batteries and break the routine of daily instruction. A fun and interactive experience that combines an English instructor’s love of cultural awareness with a student’s curiosity about cultural diversity is the perfect way to fracture that circle of potential apathy.

In this article, I will share with you a content-based English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) workshop that strengthens language acquisition, increases intrinsic motivation, and bridges cultural divides. I will use a rock and roll workshop to introduce an organizational approach with a primary emphasis on cultural awareness content and a secondary emphasis on language development. It is important to point out that even though rock and roll history is a main focus of this article, any cultural content of the teacher’s choosing may be substituted.

**Rationale for content-based workshops**

The beauty of being a language instructor is that we are so much more than just dictionaries or grammarians; we are the bridges of cultural divides, we are the delegates of social communication, and above all, we are agents of social responsibility and change. Not only do language instructors guide learners down the right path to achieve their acquisition
goals, but they also expose the speed bumps of cultural miscommunication. Teaching about culture does not necessarily entail behavioral change among students, but it does help students recognize the cultural influences affecting their own and others’ behaviors (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993). In order for second language learners to acquire communicative competence, educators must rise above the few schemas and scripts we use repeatedly in classes and introduce others that contain notably different cultural content (Davies and Fraenkel 2003). It must be noted here that we are only guides who encourage critical thinking and cultural awareness in our students and not authorities of what is right and wrong with the world. The idea is to recognize the differences in cultural ideals and stimulate intellectual curiosity about the target culture in order to build respect and understanding.

In content-based ESL/EFL instruction, the instructor’s primary objective is the information the learners will attain, while the language takes on a secondary function. The term content has a wide array of connotations in language teaching, but it most commonly refers to the subject material of the lesson that we communicate through language rather than putting emphasis on the language used to express it (Harmer 2007). As Richards and Rodgers (2001) state, “people learn a second language most successfully when the information they are acquiring is perceived as interesting, useful, and leading to a desired goal” (209). Content-based workshops are a sure way to achieve positive results because they encourage fulfilling, productive, and rewarding language learning experiences in a context where students find the material meaningful to their lives.

Regrettably, many ESL/EFL courses focus on the structure of language while neglecting the importance of using the language to acquire information. One solution is to supplement language courses with content-based workshops and allow students to learn by doing, an aspect that tends to be lost, or not even enforced during the regular class period. The rock and roll workshop presented in this article will provide more concise details to follow when you are doing one on your own.

**Rock history and social change in the United States**

This rock and roll cultural workshop is a fun, four-hour interactive English seminar that sparks student interest about the intriguing social change that occurred during several periods of U.S. history. It begins with the birth of rock music and then moves into the popular explosion that led to distinct genres and social movements. Although no music theory is introduced, the workshop does focus on rock music’s influences on U.S. society, the variety of music styles, and influential artists of the times. Students will see cultural changes associated with the rock phenomenon and recognize the ensuing societal struggles that this type of musical expression exemplifies.

Three steps to create and deliver this content-based workshop are outlined below.

**Step 1: From novice to rock star—gathering knowledge on an unknown topic**

The first step to a successful content-based workshop is to choose a topic of interest and then become familiar with that topic. Learning about any new topic can be challenging, so I suggest choosing topics that interest you. If the topic interests you deeply, you will find that the preparation phase of your workshop will reward you with enjoyment. In addition, if you convey a strong passion for the topic, you can almost be assured that the same passion will transfer to your audience. Although I chose rock and roll for my workshop, I do not consider myself an expert on the subject. But my fervor for the music was a strong motivational inspiration that I was able to share. As it turned out, this workshop was not difficult to arrange. And even if you do not have a lot of extra time to prepare workshops, students will surely appreciate the effort needed to create them as long as they are fun, interactive, and informative.

Of course, you will need to take time to sufficiently prepare. And while teaching the history of rock and roll may seem like a daunting task, it does not take a degree or any deep expertise to gather the knowledge you need to have successful rock music tasks and activities. The basics of rock history, such as cultural movements and key musical contributors, can be learned in a short period
of time. With each passing day, we have more access to world knowledge with a simple click of a mouse. An Internet search with the key words “rock and roll cultural movements and contributors,” or “history of rock and roll and pioneering musicians” will link to many helpful websites. Also, the Internet has an abundance of material you need in order to familiarize yourself with rock’s genres and artists (see the Appendix for some useful videos and websites about the history of rock and roll). I was not an authority on the subject, but it did not take me much time to learn enough to share and create activities based on what I learned. I spent a few hours a day for a week researching the subject and then another few weeks organizing the information and tasks. This workshop did not complement any particular level or course, but during this preparation time an instructor can adapt activities for different language levels and incorporate specific class objectives and target structures into the workshop tasks.

Rock and roll is the topic of this workshop, but it should be noted that other cultural topics may be substituted and organized to suit your interests or pedagogical needs. The suggestions and activities presented here are unique to rock music, but that does not mean they cannot be adapted to fit your topical needs. Just as a teacher adapts instructional texts for a class, the same can be done for these workshops. Here are a few other possible content-based cultural topics to consider:

- African American Musical Influences: Blues, Jazz, Rhythm and Blues
- American Communities: Truth and Lies of Stereotypes
- A Generational Day to Remember: Historical Events that Changed Lives
- Pop Culture: Pop Cultural Icons and Their Impact on the World

**Step 2: Behind the scenes—planning and organizing**

After you have familiarized yourself with the basics of your topic, it is time to start planning and creating tasks. It is in this stage that your pedagogical expertise comes into play. When creating a content-based cultural workshop, I like to organize it as if I were writing a story with a beginning, middle, and end (Curtain and Dahlberg 2009). Therefore, the rock and roll workshop was divided in three parts:

1. The beginning: Roots and influences
2. The middle: Decades of change
3. The end: Rock and social distortion in the United States

In the third part, I mention the social aspect incorporated into the workshop, but I must emphasize that cultural themes are mentioned throughout the workshop.

**Setting and participants**

This content-based workshop can be given to a class of ten participants or to a very large audience consisting of the entire English Department of a university, for example, or as an extracurricular English learning cultural activity to the ESL/EFL community. It is important to have at least enough participants to form several groups of three or more and ample space for these groups to interact. Workshops are often most successful with a large audience, but there needs to be ample space for groups to form semicircles.

**Accommodating language levels**

Because content is the primary objective of this workshop, learners must have a foundation of the language in order to better enhance the learning experience. Therefore, I recommend a level of English between intermediate and advanced. Due to the fact that the workshop is open to a large audience, you will have to assume the participants are at different stages of their language abilities. And if there is a mix of levels, when you create tasks for these types of workshops, consider how to challenge high-level learners while not overwhelming low-level learners. For example, the use of group tasks is an ideal way to maximize participation for all levels.

Content-based workshops organized as an extracurricular activity for all levels at your school incorporate the same communicative teaching procedures used in your classroom, but with the difference that there is not any lead-up to the lesson. Also, the workshops give learners a chance to practice what they have learned from their regular course work, while sharing knowledge and experience with students outside their level or class. Harmer (2007) suggests that the one main advantage to a large class is that comedy is funnier, per-
Performance is more dramatic, and a good class is warmer and more vivacious. So do not worry about the large audience of these workshops because bigger is better, and the learners will surprise you with their enthusiasm.

**Linking workshops with language objectives**

It is also advantageous to complement individual courses with small, single-level types of workshops. For instance, the teacher can incorporate more specific course language goals; the teacher is more familiar with the students’ language strengths, weaknesses, interests, goals, and expectations; and the workshops can span several class periods. In addition, teachers of the same level or course can work collaboratively. Teaming up with other teachers will lower the amount of time each needs to spend organizing the workshop while encouraging collaborative language teaching in the process. Nevertheless, I should reiterate that both types of workshops—with a larger, mixed audience or with a smaller, focused audience—incorporate the same communicative teaching principles.

**Materials**

It is up to the presenter to decide how many materials are needed, but the beauty of this rock and roll workshop is that it does not require any special materials for the participants. However, for the teacher, this workshop integrates a multiplicity of technological devices, so it is important to have access to them. I would recommend the use of a computer, projector, and quality speakers for the use of PowerPoint, videos, and music. The materials used for this workshop are listed below.

- A pen/pencil and a pad of paper for participants: Students will have to take notes and do some writing during the workshop.
- Handouts: A few tasks require short reading passages, quotes, or timelines of events on strips of paper. (See the Appendix for websites that provide the information to create these handouts.)
- A computer (for PowerPoint, videos, and music): The use of a computer helps the teacher organize and guide the participants through the material as well as incorporate videos and music with ease.
- A projector and PowerPoint to project images and video from the computer: Using a projector eliminates the need for too many handouts. In the case of an interactive workshop, a PowerPoint presentation becomes more than just a visual; it becomes a learning text with the new information and tasks. Also, time is saved when the directions for an activity can be projected.
- A list of songs and artists: Only a small collection of songs is needed (e.g., see Figure 1 for a list of protest songs and musicians).
- YouTube videos (an Internet connection is not necessary if the videos are downloaded beforehand): Videos give learners examples of authentic language use that has not been edited for second language learners. If used for educational purposes and not for profit, these videos are perfectly fine to use in an educational setting. Typing in key words of your topic into the YouTube search will give you a nice variety of videos. (See the Appendix for examples of videos.)
- Clear-sounding computer speakers with sufficient volume control: Background sound needs to be isolated so that all participants hear the music clearly.
- Portable music player: This allows the teacher to use the computer for visuals and videos, while using the player for the music. However, the computer can manage all the media files without the use of this device.

“Get Up, Stand Up” – Bob Marley & the Wailers
“Allentown” – Billy Joel
“We’re Not Gonna Take It” – Twisted Sister
“ Minority” – Green Day
“Killing in the Name” – Rage Against the Machine
“World Wide Suicide” – Pearl Jam
“Gimme Shelter” – The Rolling Stones
“War” – Edwin Starr
“What’s Going On” – Marvin Gaye

Figure 1. Rock and roll protest songs
Engaging students

This workshop makes it easy to introduce a little fun competition to encourage more passion towards the subject. The theme is structured around a “Battle of the Bands,” which is a competition held among up-and-coming rock bands in the United States and other countries to win prizes, notoriety, and possibly record contracts. At the start of the workshop, I form groups among the participants. I like the participants to get acquainted at this point so that a sense of community is formed among the group members. According to Kagan (1994), group-prepared participation is a great way to lower language anxieties and promote academic achievement while simultaneously developing social and oral communication skills. These groups are transformed into rock bands and are asked to choose a name and a logo for their band. I provide examples from famous rock bands that they might recognize. I like to also encourage the groups to assign roles for each member—for example, the songwriter (a recorder), the lead singer (spokesperson), and a band manager (group leader). The recorder writes down the group’s answers during tasks, the spokesperson presents the answers, and the manager watches the time and makes sure everyone gets involved and speaks English. If members of the group have a lower level of English, being a recorder or spokesperson is a great option for them.

I organize several challenges and tasks that do not require in-depth previous knowledge on the subject, but because rock music is an international phenomenon, participants’ background knowledge will come in handy. The tasks for this workshop demand that group members discuss opinions, feelings, and ideas utilizing a free, unstructured format to practice the language. It is advisable for the instructor to visit each group and encourage all the members to speak.

Step 3: Performing—tasks and activities

To begin the task, the instructor provides a two- or three-minute mini-lecture of the new information. The story method mentioned earlier can be used for each task or activity as well; for example, the beginning part presents the new material to the audience, the middle has the learners practicing and negotiating with the material in groups, and the end includes the instructor processing the answers with everyone. None of these following tasks requires previous knowledge or extensive pre-teaching of the material. (Note: If a task below has the word challenge next to it, that means groups are awarded points for right answers.)

The Beginning: Roots and influences

I begin the workshop with the early years that influenced what we know of as rock today. The early years spanned the time from the turn of the 20th century until the 1940s.

1. Introduction to the workshop—roots and influences

• Present: For this task, the teacher elicits the names of early forms of music that led to rock music’s birth. This is a way to get the participants thinking about the era and topic before we start. I write down their responses on the board, erase the ones that are wrong, and add a few that are not mentioned. The earliest forms of rock include African rhythm and drum, gospel, jazz, ragtime, folk, country, blues, and European ballads.

• Practice: I play snippets of each type of music. While participants listen, they match the music with its form and then discuss their answers, noting the ones they liked or disliked and whether or not these forms of music are heard in their countries.

• Process: Members of the whole class discuss their thoughts and feelings about what they heard. At this point, the teacher can add bits of history to each form of music mentioned above. (See the Appendix for websites on rock and roll history.)

2. Early influential artists and songs (challenge)

• Present: This challenge begins after each group is instructed to create a definition of rock music. We then discuss each group’s definition. The teacher adds what is left out.

• Practice: Groups watch a video on early musicians who contributed to what we know of rock music today.
During this challenge, each team listens and lists six influential songs and artists mentioned during the ten-minute video. As a bonus question, participants are asked to note the name of the musician and the date he or she made the earliest recording of the words “rock and roll,” which is mentioned at the end of the video. The groups share answers and discuss thoughts and feelings about what they saw and heard.

- **Process:** The instructor leads a whole-class discussion on the video, and points are awarded for right answers. A great question to ask is whether or not participants were aware of how old rock music is.

3. **The blues (challenge)**
   - **Present:** This challenge introduces rock’s strongest influence: the blues. I introduce this challenge with a short blues song. The lyrics are provided while participants listen. We discuss what the blues are and the themes of many songs. (See Nos. 8 and 9 in the Appendix for websites on the blues.)
   - **Practice:** The groups proceed to create and perform a blues song on their own. Before the participants create their song, it is helpful for the instructor to provide an example. Figure 2 is an example of a blues song that I created. Students can create a simple blues song by following the pattern to the left of the song. There are only three differently constructed sentences: lines one, two, and three. Line one is repeated three times, line three is repeated two times, and line two is only used once.

   This particular song has a rhyme to it, but in a blues song, it is not necessary to rhyme the lyrics. However, it is necessary to encourage the students to write about something that gives them the blues—that is, makes them feel sad. This task may seem difficult, but if an example is provided, students should have fun creating one of their own. Once they finish, they need to choose a brave soul to sing or recite it to the class. I give the alternative to recite because singing can be embarrassing for some students.
   - **Process:** The class votes on the best song to determine the winner of the challenge, who is awarded points. The runners-up are also given points for trying.

4. **The birth of rock and roll**
   - **Present:** Students are introduced to the founders of rock music, such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash, with snippets of their songs. Participants make their best guesses in matching the artists with the songs.
   - **Practice:** Each group is given a short reading passage on life during the 1950s. After a few minutes,
the instructor collects the readings. Each group works together to reconstruct what they have read. (See No. 5 in the Appendix for information on life in the 1950s.)

- **Process:** Each group reads its reconstructed version to the whole audience. The whole class briefly discusses early forms of this music and the youth movements involved.

### The Middle: Decades of change

The middle of the workshop deals with the changes to rock music spanning from the 1960s to the present. The goal is for students to recognize the changes in music styles and cultural youth movements in the United States. As in the previous tasks, this part incorporates explanations, videos, and music listening challenges. A discussion of pop cultural changes among youth groups concludes these challenges.

The history of rock and roll is a vast subject that contains a large number of musicians, so in order to narrow down the list, I chose those artists that I considered to be at the forefront of each decade or genre of music.

1. **Rock genres**

   - **Present:** The instructor introduces the topic by eliciting generational differences between the participants and their parents, and then explains the definition of a certain music genre and how it is reflected in society. There are many genres and subgenres of rock music, including punk rock, glam rock, heavy metal, grunge, surf rock, reggae, psychedelic rock, rockabilly, blues rock, and folk rock.
   
   - **Practice:** Each team reads and discusses several sentences describing a specific decade, including the genres of music popular during that time.
   
   - **Process:** After five minutes, each group reads its sentences to the class without mentioning the decade. After they read, the teacher plays a snippet of a few songs from that decade. The instructor then elicits guesses as to what decade it might be.

2. **The decades and their pioneering artists (challenge)**

   - **Present:** The instructor starts this challenge by naming various decades and eliciting the most popular musicians for each one. It is fine if nobody can answer; the idea is just to get people thinking about the topic. (Figure 3 lists a sampling of rock and roll artists by decade.)
   
   - **Practice:** This challenge incorporates YouTube video music montages of influential musicians from the 1950s to the 2000s. (See Nos. 12 and 13 in the Appendix.) A list of musicians from one of the videos is presented to the audience. Before the video, each group matches the musicians with a decade. During the video, each group checks its guesses. After the video, group members discuss which decade of music they enjoyed the most, and why. This is not a challenge but a fun way to keep participants interested in the topic.
   
   - **Process:** After the video, the groups share with the whole class whether or not their guesses were correct and which decade was their favorite. Further points about each musician can be elaborated during a mini-lecture.

3. **Music and current events**

   - **Present:** The instructor introduces the topic by naming a decade and eliciting important events that occurred during that decade in the students’ countries or around the world.
   
   - **Practice:** Each group is given slips of paper representing a certain decade. Some slips contain lines of song lyrics and others contain historical events. The groups do their best job matching the lyrics with the corresponding event.
   
   - **Process:** Each group presents its answers. The instructor asks the whole class whether each group’s answers are correct. The answers are corrected, and more information is added about each event: Examples include “Say It Loud, I’m Black
The 1950s
Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Johnny Cash, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Ritchie Valens, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino

The 1960s

The 1970s

The 1980s
Ozzy Osbourne, Metallica, Guns & Roses, Bon Jovi, The Cure, The Smiths, Jane’s Addiction, Journey, U2, Def Leppard

The 1990s
Pearl Jam, Nirvana, The Offspring, Stone Temple Pilots, Sound Garden, Lenny Kravitz, Foo Fighters, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Green Day

The 2000s

Figure 3. A sampling of rock and roll artists by decade

and I’m Proud” by James Brown (the 1960s civil rights movement), “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan (1960s antiwar movement), “Intervention” by Arcade Fire (terrorism and U.S. foreign intervention). (See No. 7 in the Appendix for a website of song lyrics and Figure 1 for additional protest songs.)

The End: Rock and social distortion in the United States
The last part of the workshop includes challenges that focus the learners’ attention on the influence rock has had in U.S. society. I finish the workshop by awarding certificates that give the participants rock-star status. The winners of the competition are given a small prize.

1. Behind the musical lyrics (challenge)
   • **Present:** This challenge introduces learners to the power of lyrics in songs and demonstrates that many artists have become agents of change in opinion and thought. The instructor elicits from students songs that have influenced them in some way or another.

   • **Practice:** During this challenge, lyrics of protest songs from different time periods in rock history are given to each team so that they can follow while listening. A wide range of songs can be found on the Internet by searching for the key words “influential protest songs.” After listening to the selected songs, the groups discuss what they feel the meaning of the song is. For the challenge, the instructor presents the meanings to the audience, and participants match the song with its meaning.

   • **Process:** The groups are awarded points for correct answers. The instructor elicits the reasons for their answers.

2. A voice of a generation
   • **Present:** The instructor presents a quote from a rock musician and asks the class what the quote means. (See No. 6 in the Appendix for a website of famous quotes.)

   • **Practice:** The groups are given a few other famous quotes from rock
musicians and discuss what the speakers mean.  

- **Process:** Each group reads its quotes and explains what the quotes mean. The instructor plays a snippet of a song from each musician discussed.

**Alternative tasks that reenergize**

1. **Air band competition.** Mimicking playing a guitar while listening to a favorite rock song is a common activity that leads to enjoyable competitions. This challenge gets students out of their seats and laughing and is a good way to recharge the batteries. During this challenge, each group assigns roles to the band members: for example, the guitarist, drummer, lead singer, and bassist. Groups choose a song already heard or from a list the teacher provides. The groups then compete against one another for air band supremacy. At the end of the competition, the audience votes for the best air band. To incorporate a language component into the activity, the instructor can give each group a song. The group members read and discuss the meaning of the lyrics, and then, before performing, they tell the audience what they believe the song is about.

2. **Twist dancing competition.** This challenge, like the air band competition, is a fun way to mix things up a little bit. Laughing can help lower anxieties and spark interest back into the workshop.

**Conclusion**

Content-based workshops offer a break in everyday instructional routines. They provide learners practice in the target language, cooperative learning strategies, and in-depth insights into culture. These workshops excite while lowering language anxieties, but most importantly, learners become unaware of practicing the language and more interested in the themes presented. Language is a tool for communication, and during these workshops students are shown how this tool can be used to learn about the world or target culture.

The feedback from the participants following this workshop reinforced the success of these content-based activities; the majority of comments and whispered reactions revealed how students learned new things apart from just the language, shared experiences in a group, and of course practiced English in a new and interactive way. The quote by Bono at the beginning of this article resonates well with me as an English language teacher; that is, just replace “rock star” in the quote with “teacher,” and you will find that you, as an English teacher, are not so different from a rock star.

**References**


**Tim Robinson** was an English Language Fellow in Venezuela 2010–2011, where he worked with pre- and in-service teachers at the Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador. His core interest includes the importance of empowerment to take control of one’s own educational development.
Useful Websites on Rock and Roll History

1. http://thehistoryofrockmusic.com
4. www.history-of-rock.com
6. Quotes: www.brainyquote.com (search for “rock musician quotes”)
7. Song lyrics: www.songlyrics.com

Useful Websites on the Blues


Videos on Rock and Roll History

10. An incomplete History of Rock and Roll in a six-part series:
    www.youtube.com/watch?v=PevgPIhWk3k
11. Early Rock influences:
    www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAK19xrjYx&feature=related

Rock Montages:
Influential Songs and Artists through the Decades

12. www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVNl74cB5Sc&feature=related
13. www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrCL3cqPbPI