

Teaching Grammar Through Songs: A Step-by-Step Practical Approach

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The application of songs in the EFL Classroom has been widely advocated by teachers and researchers worldwide (Adnyani & Dewi, 2020; Murphey, 1992). Given their advantages and repetitive nature, songs are well-suited to a range of English language teaching (ELT) objectives, including grammar instruction. This article aims to provide a step-by-step practical guide for teachers intending to compile song-based grammar lessons.

Theoretical Background

The Rationale Behind Using Songs to Practise Grammar

The question arises: What makes songs an appropriate tool for teaching grammar? Researchers have highlighted the theoretical potentials of integrating songs into grammar instruction (Eken, 1996; Jadhav, 2015). Many students hold negative feelings or preconceived attitudes towards grammar learning (Díaz, 2003); as a result, acquiring grammatical structures can be a challenging or even monotonous process for learners. Díaz (2003) referred to this phenomenon as “just go over grammar”. Nevertheless, songs could create a nonthreatening, relaxed atmosphere in which students engage with grammatical structures in an enjoyable way (Jadhav, 2015). Another important advantage of songs lies in their appealing features, including rhymes, rhythm, repetition, and melody (Kumar et al., 2022), which can facilitate memorisation and enhance language retention. Furthermore, learning is often more effective when it is embedded in meaningful contexts. Songs frequently tell stories, enabling students to associate grammatical structures with specific themes and situations. Taken together, songs

could function as authentic, real-life resources (Belaid & Murray, 2015), providing meaningful context for grammar instruction (Kumar et al., 2022).

Context

The following practical ideas were introduced at the 35th TESOL-Hungary International Conference (Bloom) as part of the workshop entitled Let Grammar Bloom With Songs. The workshop focused on the use of songs as a tool for enhancing grammar teaching. During the session, the participants had the opportunity to engage with a sample worksheet specifically designed for the conference workshop (the complete worksheet is in the Appendix) and practise a concrete grammar point: the “wish” structure for present and future. The activity sequence was intended to demonstrate how a 45-minute grammar lesson in which songs serve as both the thematic framework and the source of grammatical input can be implemented through the use of worksheets. Firstly, the participants of the session worked through the activities with the author facilitating, which was followed by the presentation of additional activity ideas. Finally, the participants were asked to brainstorm how the activities could be integrated into a lesson.

Step-by-Step Procedure

The following section outlines a step-by-step practical procedure for integrating songs into grammar teaching using well-established methodological listening activity stages: pre-, while-, and postlistening activities. Each step begins with the introduction of the activity implemented during the workshop, followed by suggestions for alternative or supplementary tasks that teachers may adapt to their own instructional contexts and to the specific characteristics of the selected song.

Step 1: Prelistening Activities

Prelistening activities serve as an initial stage, preparing students for the listening passage, arousing their curiosity, and clarifying the purpose of the listening task (Movva et al., 2022). As part of the workshop, a mingling activity was introduced based on the film *Aladdin* (Figure 1), in which the main character is granted three wishes by the Genie. To add a grammatical focus, the author emphasised that only the correct wishes would come true. Teachers were asked to think of their biggest wish at the time and then move around the room to ask two colleagues about theirs. Finally, the participants reported back using the target structure, for example: “He wishes he had a Ferrari”.

Figure 1

Prelistening Activity Covered in the Workshop



This activity anticipates the upcoming topic and grammar focus of the lesson by linking a familiar cultural reference to the concept of wishes. Nevertheless, there are numerous other ideas educators can employ in order to warm students up for the forthcoming

song, spark interest in the lesson, and introduce grammar-related tasks in a light, accessible way. Some suggestions are as follows:

- 🎵 The topic to be raised: Building on the lesson and song topic can help learners associate structures with a specific theme. For instance, based on the topic, students can be encouraged to predict the upcoming themes, subtopics, or the singer's intentions, thereby practising, for example, modal verbs for speculation and prediction.
- 🎵 Background information about the singer/band: Tasks based on biographical information about the singer or band can be used to foster cultural awareness while practising past tenses, including past simple and past perfect. Additionally, presenting a picture of the singer or band and asking learners to describe it could provide an opportunity to practise the present continuous tense.

Genre: Introducing the musical genre (especially when it is unfamiliar to learners) can serve as meaningful context for practice. Learners may compare the genre with others using comparative adjectives or explore its historical background to reinforce past-tense structures.

Step 2: While-Listening Activities

While-listening activities aim at keeping students engaged during the playback of the audio recording (Movva et al., 2022). This stage marks the introduction of the song, and it is of utmost importance to select a song that contains the target grammatical structures as frequently as possible. It is suggested that the song be played at least twice to ensure that structural patterns become familiar and memorable, allowing them to “stick” in students' ears while listening to the recording. For the purpose of the workshop, a song by Twenty One Pilots was chosen as it includes numerous examples of “wish” structures. Teachers were provided with a Misheard Lyrics type of exercise, in which they were encouraged to listen to the song while following its lyrics and correct errors based on what they heard. These errors involved phonological misinterpretations; however, they could also include

grammatical/morphological inaccuracies, or teachers can even erase or add words to the lyrics. Furthermore, it is worth considering other types of activities to further reinforce the grammatical relevance of the lyrics:

- 🎵 **Gap-filling exercises:** These are probably the most popular and widely used activities when songs are used in ELT. Beyond adopting the traditional approach of having students fill in the gaps while listening, teachers can implement grammar-focused variations as well. For example, students can be asked to predict the missing verbs and their forms or structures before listening based on contextual clues. Alternatively, the missing verbs can be provided in brackets with students required to transform them into the correct grammatical form prior to listening. Then, while listening, students can check and correct their guesses. Discussing the correct answers helps raise grammatical awareness and promotes conscious reflection on form and meaning.
- 🎵 **Note-taking exercises:** Taking notes while listening with guiding tasks or instructions can strengthen students' ability to listen for the general idea (gist) of the song. When activities are designed with a focus on grammar, teachers can also use listening to reinforce grammatical structures. For example, students may be asked to list wishes expressed by the singer in the song (e.g., in the Twenty One Pilots song, the singer wishes he had a better voice). There is a myriad of possible variations that can be adapted to practise other structures such as "like/love doing", reported speech, past tenses, and so forth.
- 🎵 **Music video:** It is easy to overlook a crucial component that accompanies most songs, namely the music video. However, the video can serve as an excellent resource for practising grammar: Ideally, it can be used with beginner learners to make them describe what is happening at the moment (using the present continuous tense) or to

narrate events that have already occurred by practising past tenses such as the past simple, the past continuous, or the past perfect.

Step 3: Postlistening Activities

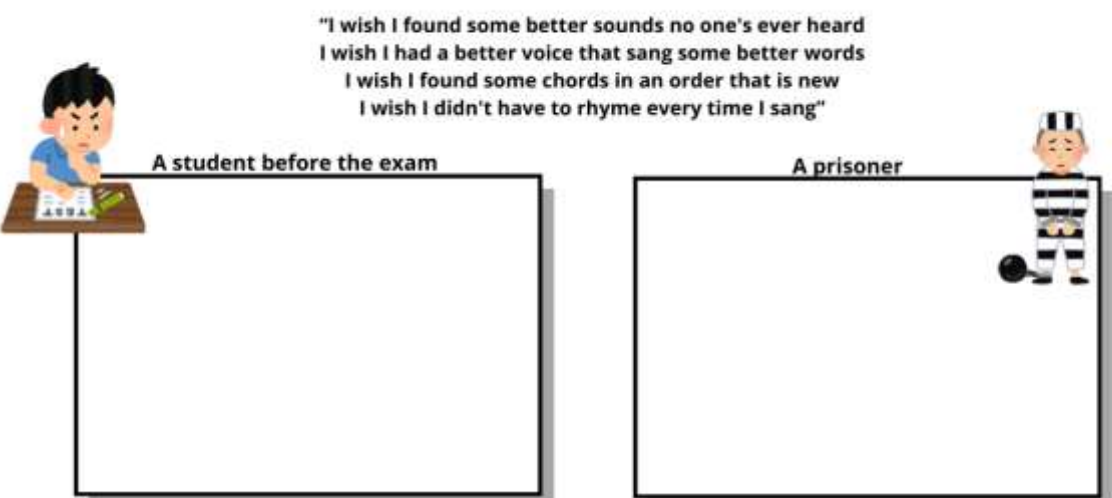
Postlistening activities can help students go beyond the listening material by further exploring its topic and language (Movva et al., 2022). During the workshop, the singer's wishes expressed in a corresponding verse were highlighted, and the participants were asked to rewrite the wishes as if they were in the role of either a student before an exam or a prisoner (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Postlistening Activity Covered in the Workshop

The singer expresses his wishes in the song. Rewrite the lyrics in a way that they reflect wishes from others.

"I wish I found some better sounds no one's ever heard
I wish I had a better voice that sang some better words
I wish I found some chords in an order that is new
I wish I didn't have to rhyme every time I sang"



A student before the exam

A prisoner

This type of lyric-rewriting exercise can be useful in encouraging learners to use their creativity while applying targeted grammar structures. Another variation can serve as follow-up grammar practice to compare and analyse structures. Beyond having students rewrite the lyrics, teachers can also aim to personalise the topic and grammatical focus by relating it to students' own lives while, at the same time, exploiting the complexity of these lessons. The following section introduces some postlistening, grammar-related activities:

🎵 Grammar transformation: Consider the following verse by the Beatles – For No One:

“She wakes up, she makes up

She takes her time

And doesn’t feel she has to hurry

She no longer needs you.”

In this case, a grammar transformation activity can be carried out by asking students to focus on the verbs and change their tense from present to past. Extending this activity, teachers may ask students to transform verses or even the entire song by changing their grammar structures, that is, from active to passive; from first person to third person; from affirmative to negative and vice versa. Comparing and contrasting the original lyrics with the transformed versions can foster a deeper understanding of how grammatical choices affect meaning.

🎵 Discussion questions: In order for students to practise the grammar structures in oral communication, personalised questions can be included that exploit the song’s topic, themes, and vocabulary, eliciting responses that require the use of the target structures.

🎵 Message to the singer: To develop their writing skills, students can write letters or messages in response to the song’s dilemma, practising modal verbs (e.g., would, should) and the second conditional in particular. This activity can feel even more lifelike if students actually send their messages to the singer. Another idea would be to ask students to continue the story presented in the song, extending its narrative with the same grammar structures.

Conclusion

Utilising the three main steps of building a song-based grammar lesson discussed in this paper, teachers can design a 45-minute activity sequence that promotes the development

of complex skills, focusing not only on listening, but also on speaking and writing skills.

Although selecting the appropriate songs and designing effective song-based activities can be time-consuming, the use of this step-by-step, adaptable framework may reduce preparation time. At the same time, teachers can draw inspiration from and build upon the wide range of already existing resources.

Useful Websites

ESL Songs website

<https://www.eslsongs.com/>

Sandra Heyer's website

<https://sandraheyersongs.com/grammar-songs/>

Learn English with Beats YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/@LearnEnglishwithBeats/videos>

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Appendix

The Worksheet

35th TESOL-Hungary Conference - BLOOM

Workshop by Anita Majorszki

LET GRAMMAR BLOOM WITH SONGS

Practicing WISH structures

PRE-LISTENING ACTIVITY

Think about your biggest wish for one minute, then ask two group members about theirs.

LIST OF WISHES

MY WISH:

TWO OTHER WISHES:



OTHER IDEAS

for pre-listening activities

WHILE-LISTENING ACTIVITY

Listen to the song by Twenty One Pilots and correct its lyrics!

I wish I found some better mounds no one's ever heard
 I wish I had a better voice that rang like birds
 I wish I found some chords in an order that is new
 I wish I didn't have to climb every time I rang
 I was told when I get older, all my fears would shrink
 But now I'm on schedule, and I care what people think
 My name's Blurryface, and I care what you think
 My name's Blurryface, and I care what you think
 Wish we could earn back rhyme to the good old days
 When our mama sang us to sleep, but now we're stressed out
 (oh)
 2x
 Sometimes a certain smell will take me back to when I was
 young
 How come I'm never able to identify where it's coming from?
 I'd make a sandal out of it if I ever found it
 Try to sell it, never sell, out of it, I'd probably only sell one
 It'd be to my brother, 'cause we have the same nose
 Same clothes, homegrown, a stone's throw from a creek we
 used to ford
 But it would remind us of when nothing really mattered
 Out of student tones and tree house homes, we all would take
 the latter

CHORUS

Used to play pretend, give each other different games
 We would build a pocket ship, and then we'd fly it far away
 Used to dream of outer space, but now they're laughin' at
 our pace
 Sayin', "Wake up, you need to make money, " yeah
 2x

CHORUS

We used to play pretend, used to play pretend, money
 We used to play pretend, wake up, you need the money
 Used to play pretend, used to play pretend, money
 We used to play pretend, wake up, you need the money
 Used to play pretend, give each other different games
 We would build a pocket ship, and then we'd fly it far away
 Used to dream of outer space, but now they're laughin' at
 our pace
 Saying, "Wake up, you need to make money, " yeah

OTHER IDEAS for while-listening activities

POST-LISTENING ACTIVITY

The singer expresses his wishes in the song. Rewrite the lyrics in a way that they reflect wishes from others.

"I wish I found some better sounds no one's ever heard
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A student before the exam



A prisoner

OTHER IDEAS for post-listening activities

LET GRAMMAR BLOOM WITH SONGS!