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## **Connecting Linkin Park and Good Charlotte to ESL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This paper documents students' response to popular songs in the language classroom and asserts that songs can be a form of useful resource in the language classroom for purposes of language development and to connect learners to issues that are of interest to young adults. This paper reports the findings of a study which used two popular songs in a language classroom to develop reading, writing and speaking skills. The researchers use songs to connect their learners to both the issues in the texts and language elements. The study indicates that students were able to express their viewpoints in relation to the issues in the songs and that the songs, which were familiar to the learners, encouraged them to participate in the classroom activities.

### **Introduction**

As a form of popular culture, songs have been incorporated extensively in English language learning because of their ability to facilitate the

learning of language and to connect with learners. Songs can be used for various purposes in an ELT classroom, such as activities for bridging canonical texts and writing activities (see Evans, 2004) and speaking activities (see Naginder Kaur, 2001). Despite their usefulness in facilitating the learning of English language, songs seem to be less frequently used at the secondary school and tertiary levels in Malaysia, a country where English is considered as the second language in the field of education.

Among the reasons for not using songs in the classroom, as observed by Naginder Kaur (2001), include time constraint, examination oriented course design and pressures on completion of syllabuses. Too (2004) adds that the decision of using songs becomes more complicated when it involves popular songs because some teachers are afraid of the repercussion from parents who view popular songs as negative influence on their children. However, such generalization over popular songs seems arbitrary without taking into consideration the cognitive and pedagogical impact that songs might have on learners' learning.

Although many English language teacher resource book writers, such as Murphey (1992); Scrivener (2005), write about using songs, only a few researches look at the learning process during the lessons. Other researches either look at the framework of lesson design (see Griffee, 2003) or the motivational factors in incorporating songs in the English language as a second and foreign language curriculum (see Cheung, 2001). In view of the scarce of literature on this issue, the writers explore the learning process where songs are used in an ESL classroom. This paper aims to document students' response to popular songs in the language classroom and asserts that songs are important resources that should be utilized in the language classroom.

### **The use of popular songs in Malaysian ESL classroom**

In his studies, Too (2003 & 2004) claims that most urban young adult students in Malaysia respond positively towards popular songs as young adult students were more active in participating classroom discussion when these songs were used in the classroom. Meanwhile, students

were able to express themselves, either in oral or written form, towards the issues discussed. He also reports that students had less difficulty in comparing, contrasting and reorganising information as the issues portrayed in the popular songs were those of their concerns.

The reason that Malaysian ESL learners are able to perform language skills, such as comparing, contrasting and reorganising information, is in tandem with Mahiri's (2000) explanation on the connection between young adults and songs. She opined that urban young adults are receptive towards popular songs because they consider songs as "a form of popular culture for pleasure, identification, self-empowerment" (382), which is rarely found in a classroom. If this connection is established, learners will be able to engage in learning in which it is impossible to be repeated if conventional teaching methods and learning methods are used. In view of that, many researchers have included songs in developing literacy among urban teenagers because there is a strong connection between popular culture and adolescents' literacy development (Morrell, 2002).

### **Some concerns in using popular songs in ESL classrooms**

The acquisition of the English language for ESL learners outside the classroom is frequently associated with listening to English language (Domoney & Harris, 1993). However, Duff (2002) indicates that sociolinguistic and cultural references might pose problems for ESL learners in the classroom. The unfamiliarity of the two references causes reticent and passive participation in the classroom discussion among ESL learners. To overcome the passive participation of ESL learners during discussion, Duff suggests that teachers and students, who are familiar with the topics, to reveal the background information of the topics to ESL learners. Meanwhile, she also points out that it is important for teachers to discuss how popular culture influences learners in different contexts with learners and to decipher the semiotic reference in the topics discussed.

Duff's ideas on helping ESL learners in classroom involvement are in line with Delpit's (1983) claims on preparing underprivileged

and minority learners in an education setting. Delpit asserts that pre-assumptions about learners' capabilities and motivations are permeated in classrooms. Most curricula and texts are put designed at the expense of these learners. In the context of ESL learners, teachers need to understand students' background because their first language is not the language of instruction and English language is not their first language. In view of that, teachers should be sensitive towards the diversity that exists in a classroom, and they need to take learners' background into consideration when designing lessons that involve texts which imbue with various cultural and semiotic references. By taking such humanistic approach only will learners benefit from the lessons and meet the preset objectives.

### **Designing activities for *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On***

Taking Duff and Delpit's concerns into account, the objectives for conducting the activities should be given priority. In a second language classroom, meeting the objectives is the focus of all language activities (Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1998). The definition of a language-based activity, as suggested by Skehan (1998), should meet five of the following requirements:

1. meaning is primary;
2. there is some communication problem to solve;
3. there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
4. task completion has some priority;
5. the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome (95).

The definition emphasises the importance of 'real-world' language and daily activities which language learners participate. The language task is oriented towards the actual communication problems and how to solve these communication debacles. The design of the task enables language learners to use their existing language knowledge and the required language form to complete the task.

Songs are authentic texts which are suitable to be used in the classroom (Dale, 1992). However, authentic materials can be a

problem for weaker learners because they will not be able to respond meaningfully due to the unknown lexis, syntax and content (Guariento & Morley, 2001). To prevent such a problem from arising, song choice and pedagogy are two important factors. In the song activities, which are discussed in this article, two chosen songs, *Somewhere I Belong* by Linkin Park and *Hold On* by Good Charlotte, had the highest air-played at the time when the lesson was conducted. During the delivery of the lesson, learners were constantly assisted by guiding questions or activities for speaking, reading and writing to alleviate apprehensions towards the songs and tasks.

In the lesson, three activities, namely speaking, reading and writing, are designed to elicit students' responses by developing activities which are related to their experiences. The speaking activity focuses on fluency rather than accuracy as the objective for this activity is to encourage students to use the English Language in the classroom. Before students interact among themselves in groups, students are introduced to expressions on giving opinions, such as 'I agree with... because...', 'I disagree with...because...' and 'I like the idea of...' Students are also required to observe certain rules in turn-taking and responsibilities when engaging in conversations, so that there will not be any communication breakdown (Sayer, 2005).

For the reading activity, students are required to attempt two questions which gauge their understanding of the songs. The reader response approach is employed to engage learners actively in the process of creating meaning. Fish (1980) suggests that texts in themselves do not have any meaning. Therefore, the interpretation of the texts depends on reader's knowledge of textual conventions, psychological, cultural, social and experiential experiences (Beach, 1993). Instead of being recipients of information, learners will become active meaning makers (Probst, 1994).

The speaking and reading activities in the lesson serve as stimuli for the writing activity. By having students explore the meaning of texts through discussion and reading, students will have ideas to reflect on what they have learned from the songs and to connect the songs to their lives during the writing activity. The scaffolding process provided during speaking and reading will lower students' anxiety in their

writing. In addition to the scaffolding, the design of the activity, which guides students through their writing, also allows students to express themselves in a more confident manner.

These song activities were conducted in an English Language Proficiency course with a group of twenty-three, mixed ability, Year 1, Chinese Language and Literature major students in private college, Malaysia. The ages of the students were between nineteen and twenty-one years. The lessons were conducted over two two-hour lessons. During the initial stage of the lesson, students were asked to listen to the songs and complete the lyrics. While the songs were played students were reminded to think what the songs were about. After the listening stage, students were placed into groups of three and they attempted the speaking and reading activities. The questions for the two activities were as follows:

Who could be the people the songwriters wrote these songs for?  
Why do you say so?  
What are the issues in these two songs?  
Support your answers by giving examples from the lyrics.

After the group discussion, a whole class discussion followed to elicit students' opinions on the two songs and to discuss relevant issues that students identified in the songs. Before the lesson ended, students were asked to write short responses to the songs. Although there were three guided questions for students to choose from, they had the freedom to decide if they wanted to answer all three questions. The three questions for the writing activity are as follows:

What did the two songs remind you of when you first heard them?  
Do you think these two songs give positive or negative values?  
Do the themes in these two songs relate to your life in any way?

### **Students' responses**

For the purpose of this article, only students' response to three open-ended questions which probe into students' feelings and attitudes to the

two songs. The reading and speaking activities in this study serve as a catalyst to elicit written response from students, so that students are prepared to write their responses.

Students' responses will be presented in two sections, views on the songs (Question 2) and life and song connection (Question 1 and 3). The reason for collapsing the three questions into two sections is because all twenty-three students combined Question 1 and 3 when responding to the questions, and they answered Question 2 separately.

### *Views on the songs*

Out of the twenty-three students, fifteen students considered both *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On* as having a positive view. Six students answered that *Somewhere I Belong* was negative and *Hold On* was positive. Two students did not write about the values in the two songs. Fifteen students agreed that *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On* were songs with positive value because the two songs encouraged listeners to be proactive in their lives and not to give up. The fifteen students also agreed that that the two songs were written for young adults. One of the students wrote:

I think these two songs are positive because [they] let me think about something which [I have never] thought about before. The first song [Somewhere I Belong tells me [that human beings should search for] real things, such as 'somewhere I belong' not the materialistic life and [carnal enjoyment]. The message that I get from the second song [Hold On] is to [cherish life and should not give up easily] when [I] do things.

Similar to the first student's experience, another student wrote that he had heard Linkin Park's *Somewhere I Belong* before the lesson, but he did not know that the song was actually positive because he had not read the lyrics. Both the first and second students' responses show that the two songs stimulate teenagers to think about their lives. Their life experience is drawn into the reading of the lyrics and listening to the songs. The close interaction between life and songs is evident in students' responses. Both of them are among the fifteen students who thought about their lives after listening to the songs.

Out of the twenty-three students, six of the students chose *Somewhere I Belong* as a negative song while *Hold On*, a positive song. *Hold On* was considered positive because the song was straight forward in using words such as ‘hold on’ in the lyrics. The main reason that *Somewhere I Belong* was chosen as negative was because students did not see any positive words in the lyrics. Students claimed *Somewhere I Belong* was negative because ‘the song makes people sad’, ‘the character in the song didn’t know how to pull himself/herself together’, ‘it’s about someone who wants to vent his/her frustration’, ‘it describes a character who wants to escape from reality’, ‘it’s about someone who is confused and has nothingness inside of him/her’ and ‘it’s about someone who can’t justify how everyone look at him/her’.

#### *Song’s connection to life*

Twenty out of twenty-three students wrote that the issues in *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On* were related to their lives, two disagreed and another student did not respond. The two students who did not find any connection between their lives and the songs did not explain why they did not or could not establish the connection.

Out of the twenty students, who claimed the songs were related to their lives, several students claimed that the two songs reminded them of bad experiences with family members and peers. For instance one student wrote:

I [felt] hopeless in my life before and I was going to kill myself. I [felt] despair [interacting] with my family. I [felt] so sad and always [cried] at night. My family [cared only] about their businesses and work. I [sometimes] hoped somebody who cared for me would appear in front of me. However, strangely, although I had the similar feeling as the persona, I didnt feel anything when I heard these two songs.

Other students mentioned their unpleasant experiences in life, but they said that they managed to overcome the hostility by adopting a positive attitude towards life.



Among the issues that appeared in students' responses, when they connected their lives to the songs, was the helplessness they felt during their teenage years. One student gave a clear picture of being caught between childhood and adulthood. He wrote:

We always feel lonely, feel we have [the] ability to do things. We cannot control the world economy [and] stop the war because we are [still] young. Because of our [age] we sometimes feel helpless. I just don't know who I am or what I am. I keep asking myself and I can't find the answer anyway.

The inability to be involved in decision-making often makes young adults feel helpless. Young adults' doubts about themselves are so strong that sometimes they do not even know who they are. The two songs deal with uncertainty both in the present and future and the songs stimulate young adults to constantly search for their identities.

Besides concerns about their identities, two students also shared their concerns for their friends and family members whom they believed had bad experiences in their lives. One student worried that her younger brother would go through rough time in school and at home. She was afraid that her younger brother might give up hope on everything. Another student wrote about a story about her friend who suffered from depression and had previously attempted suicide. She hoped that her friend could come out of her depression and the song, *Hold On*, might be of help to her friend.

The issues discussed in the songs also prompted one student to question the effectiveness of the song, *Hold On*, in stopping people from committing suicide. In one of the students' responses, a student commented that

the song might be useful for certain people. If a person attempts suicide because of breaking up or other stupid reasons, *Hold On*, might work. I sometimes think it's funny that most people only concern how the act of suicide affects the family and friends, but no one [has] ever [thought] that family or friends are actually responsible [for] it [too].

She questioned the act of committing suicide and how songs could help listeners deal with the issue. This shows that she was able to connect the song not only to her own life, but to social issues too.

Although some students disliked the loud music of the songs and the way the singers presented the song, some students tried to explain why the songs were the way they were. One student pointed out the “yelling and shouting” of the singer was a way to present the themes of the songs: frustration and anger. Another student wrote that she was sceptical at the beginning when she heard the two songs, but after understanding the lyrics she found the songs rather calming. A third student concurred with both the first and second students’ views because she indicated that the songs were the representation of how she felt when she experienced a similar situation.

## Discussion

Although the three questions serve merely as stimuli for students’ written response, the questions used were intended to solicit various levels of students’ responses. The first question, *What did the two songs remind you of when you first heard them?*, aims at examining the student’s initial response towards the songs. The second question, *Do you think these two songs give positive or negative values?*, probes into student’s view on the song, and the third question, *Do the themes in these two songs relate to your life in any way?*, looks into students’ perceptions to the songs in the relation to their lives.

The positive response from students towards the two songs presents a case for the use of popular songs in the classroom. Teachers who are against the use of songs by Linkin Park and Good Charlotte should first attempt to understand what the songs are about. Both *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On* are songs that speak to our teenage students. Similar to many popular culture texts, the two songs deal with teenage issues: searching for identity, loneliness, helplessness and hope. The positive values of the songs are further supported by students’ responses in which almost all the students who participated in the study stated that they learned about hope and optimism from the

songs. Although the songs are of fast beat and the singing is different, popular songs are effective materials which can engage our students in meaning learning experience.

Familiarity with texts plays an important role in reading. In this study, although it is found that not all students were familiar with the songs, *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On*, when the lesson began, due to the young adult concerns in the songs, all of the students were able to understand the themes of songs. Subsequently, students were able to establish the connection between their lives to the songs. The ability of students to connect song lyrics to their lives indicates interactive and reflective learning have taken place because these skills require students to examine the texts carefully before they can connect the songs to events which happen in their lives.

Unlike conventional song activities, which focus on listening skills and grammar activities, the activities designed for *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On* emphasise the reading and writing process. This is because not all songs are suitable for listening activity (Laroy, 1993). Sometimes the indistinct enunciation of singers and the unconventional grammar form make the task even difficult to be adapted as listening activities.

Although the pertaining issues discussed in the songs help students to understand the lyrics, the scaffolding activities in the activities also play an important role in assisting students to complete the tasks. In the speaking activities, students were given a list of useful phrases in discussion and briefed about the etiquettes during discussion. For reading activities, besides literal questions which students could identify answers directly from the texts, open-ended questions that engage students' personal responses were used. During the writing activity, the three questions were phrased to include responses required for speaking and reading activities, so that students were able to provide responses based on their discussions and understanding of the lyrics. The connection between speaking, reading and writing is useful to get students to understand and complete the task.

Students' responses in the activity indicate the importance of relevance between teaching materials and students. As indicated by

Furlong and Maynard (1995), learning will take place effectively when students can identify themselves and are interested in the subjects of discussion and teaching materials. In addition, students' views on the songs and their ability to connect the songs to their lives reflect Domoney and Harris's (1993) belief in using songs in the language classroom, in which students will use 'their knowledge, their music, and their language' (235). In this activity, students not only passed their judgement on the songs, but also issues in their lives. They also reflected and evaluated their experiences during their engagement in their learning by constructing meaning of their lives through their knowledge in life and language.

## **Conclusion**

Popular songs are good learning materials to design language tasks because they are a form of entertainment, which is a close reflection of young adults' lives. The lyrics of these songs deal with 'real-world' experiences. Using these songs in the classroom will ensure that teachers provide "real-world texts" which students face in the real life (Nunan, 1989). Meanwhile, students are interested in lessons in which their concerns and interests are taken into account (Vethamani, 2003). Therefore, selecting popular songs which are of student's interest, instead of songs which are of teachers' favourite or which are considered appropriate by adults, will be a productive pedagogical practice (Too, 2003).

Aside from song choice, learner's background and instructional method are other two significant factors to be considered. Teachers are advised to know learners' language proficiency level and knowledge on the chosen songs as they will determine how linguistically challenge the songs should be and what instructional method to be adopted. Scaffolding is a suitable instructional method for activities using popular songs as they prepare students by guiding them towards achieving the learning outcomes. The activities will be even more conducive for ESL students if the questions are carefully phrased and connected among all activities.

Young adult learners like listening to popular songs and not all popular songs can be considered bad influence upon them. Many songs, like *Somewhere I Belong* and *Hold On*, exemplify the concerns of teenagers because the lyrics delve on issues related to teenagers' lives. Although some popular songs may not be suitable for listening activities, the songs can still be used to develop reading and writing skills that include the same pedagogical implications in classroom. In view of the connection between songs and ESL students, teachers should capitalize on students' interests and make learning experience more meaningful for their learners.

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