Abstract

There are some who believe that literature is a neglected resource in the language classroom, and, of the literary genres, probably the one that is given the least attention is poetry. But songs are only poems set to music. They have universal appeal, and the rhythm, rhyme and other poetic devices help to make them memorable. Furthermore, songs can be found which appeal to all ages and levels.

This session will illustrate the potential of songs by presenting one for quite young learners and one for more mature students. Suggestions will be made for using the songs to develop skills and language awareness.

1. Introduction

Poetry is one of the three major literary genres along with drama and prose, and songs are poems set to music. In recent years, literature has tended to be neglected in the language classroom. As McKay (1986, p.191) comments, since the emphasis has been on “meeting the particular academic and occupational needs of the students, it is easy to view any attention to literature as unnecessary”. Lazar (1993), nevertheless, believes that there has been a resurgence of interest in teaching language by means of literature, which is viewed by some as an underutilized resource. There is, however, much controversy about a definition of literature.

1.1 What is literature?

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The question “What is literature?” is one which has been hotly debated over many years, and it is a question to which there is, probably, no definitive answer. There are those who would insist that literature includes only “great” works such as Shakespeare, the Bible, Wordsworth and Dickens. Others believe that works by writers such as Agatha Christie or Roald Dahl, as well as contributions of contemporary authors and media, deserve to be considered literature.

“Literature” as the term is used today derives from the Latin “literatura” meaning “writing”, and has come into English via the French “lire” meaning “to read”. We might, therefore broadly define “literature” as “that which is written or read”. In other words, if someone has written it, and someone can read it, it is, by definition, literature. There are generally considered to be three broad literary genres: prose, drama and poetry.

1.2 Genre in literature

Prose: In modern times, of the three broad genres, prose presents the largest body of work. A major reason for this may well be the fact that modern printing presses have simply made printing easy and relatively cheap, whereas in Shakespeare’s day people had to go to a theatre to be entertained. Because of its popularity, prose is probably the genre which has generated the most sub-genres. The broad division into fiction and nonfiction can be further sub divided into short stories (such as *Bliss* by Katherine Mansfield), novellas (such as *The Old man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway), novels (such as *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte), science fiction (such as *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells), biography (such as *Helen Keller’s Teacher* by Margaret Davidson), autobiography (such as *Anne Frank’s Diary* by Anne Frank), satire (such as *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift), allegory (such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan) and so on. In addition, the influence of folk and children’s literature (such as *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll) cannot be ignored.

Drama: English drama really begins with Shakespeare. Whether one actually enjoys Shakespeare or not, it is impossible to ignore the influence he has had on English literature and even on English as a language. Expressions which originated in plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and many others have become idioms – part of the very fabric of the language. Shakespeare, however, is not easy to read even for native speakers, so it may well be easier to introduce students to more modern dramatists such as George Bernard Shaw (e.g. *Pygmalion*). And, of course, we should not forget modern dramatic genres such as TV drama, documentaries and movies.

Poetry: Of the three broad genres, it is probably poetry which has the longest history. It is not always easy to define precisely what it is that makes a poem, but common features include rhyme, rhythm, stanzas and other literary devices such as alliteration, simile and metaphor. English poetry is frequently reckoned to have begun with *Beowulf* in Old English, followed by Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English. Later came Milton (for instance, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*) and the Romantics, such as Wordsworth (for instance, *The Solitary Reaper*), Shelley (for instance, *Ozymandias*), Coleridge (for instance, *Kubla Khan*), Byron (for instance, *She Walks in Beauty*) and Keats (for instance, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*). Tennyson became Poet Laureate in 1850 and wrote many poems including *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and *The Lady of Shalott*. Poems may be very short (a haiku, for instance, consists of only seventeen syllables) or much longer, such as Coleridge’s narrative ballad “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. In between there are sub-genres such as the limerick and the sonnet. The most common contemporary manifestation of poetry is as song.

1.3 Why use literature in the language classroom?
In addition to its obvious use for developing reading skills and comprehension, literature can be used to enrich vocabulary (including idiomatic expression and correct collocational usage), to provide a model of correct grammar and to develop cultural awareness. It can also be extended to develop listening and speaking skills (including pronunciation) and used as a prompt for writing. In addition, Collie and Slater (1987) argue that literature is valuable because it represents authentic input and involves students on a personal level, while according to Lazar (1993, p.15), literature “provides meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language”. Ghosn (2002, p.172), furthermore, believes that “literature can also act as a powerful change agent by developing pupils’ intercultural awareness while at the same time nurturing empathy, a tolerance for diversity, and emotional intelligence”. Moreover, Küçükoğlu (2010) suggests that literature is valuable in the language classroom because it is authentic, it encourages interaction, it educates the whole person and it is motivating.

1.4 Why use poetry in the language classroom?

Widdowson (1986) acknowledges that using poetry in the language classroom can be problematic. One reason for these difficulties can be the fact that poetry often does not conform to standards of “correct” grammar (Lazar, 1993). Collie and Slater (1987, p.226), however, argue that “poems offer a rich, varied repertoire and are a source of much enjoyment for teacher and learner alike”. This is especially true of songs, effectively poetry set to music, which form a large component of an entertainment industry which many people choose to enjoy, and which form a background to much of our daily lives.

2. How to use songs in the language classroom

So how can we make use of the intrinsic interest value of songs in the language classroom? Of course, the answers to this question will depend largely on the learners, on variables such as their musical tastes, language level and, perhaps most importantly, their age. This article will suggest ways of using two songs – one for younger learners, the other for older learners.

2.1 A song for younger learners – There’s a Hole in my Bucket

**Vocabulary.** Words which are important for understanding this song include

- Hole
- Bucket
- Fix
- Straw
- Axe
- Dull
- Sharpen
- Stone
- Carry

Teachers should check if their students already know these words, and if not, they should be taught.

**The song.** There’s a Hole in my Bucket is a well-known English children’s song. It can be obtained on CD or downloaded from the internet.

There’s a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza
There’s a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole
Then fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry, dear Henry
Then fix it.....

With what shall I fix it, dear Liza.....?

With a straw, dear Henry.....

The straw is too long, dear Liza.....

Then cut it, dear Henry.....

With what shall I cut it, dear Liza.....?

With an axe, dear Henry.....

The axe is too dull, dear Liza.....

Then sharpen it, dear Henry.....

With what shall I sharpen it, dear Liza.....?

With a stone, dear Henry.....

The stone is too dry, dear Liza.....

Then wet it, dear Henry.....

With what shall I wet it, dear Liza.....?

With water, dear Henry.....

In what shall I carry it, dear Liza.....?

In a bucket, dear Henry.....

But, there’s a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza
There’s a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, a hole!

*Possible language extension*

Verbs - What are they doing?
- They are dancing
- They are arguing
- He is eating the clothes
- She is carrying a stone
- He is licking the stone

Adjectives – How are they feeling?
Puzzled
Angry
Worried
Exhausted

Creative thinking – discussion: How are they going to resolve this problem?

Activity: Divide the class in half. One half is Henry, the other half is Liza

2.2 A song for older learners – Bridge over Troubled Water

Performing live in Dublin. Art Garfunkel is on the left

Speaking: What do you know about Simon and Garfunkel?

Vocabulary: Explain the meaning of the following words from the text

1. duo
2. vocal
3. peaked
4. decade
5. rendition
6. anniversary

Use the words in sentences of your own which clearly illustrate the meaning

Pronunciation: Listen to your teacher’s pronunciation and repeat the words above

Comprehension: Read the text below and say if the following statements are true, false or not given

1. Simon and Garfunkel first meet when they were children
2. They lived quite a long way from each other
3. They went to the same high school
4. They were always good friends
5. Half a million people came to the concert in Central Park
Reading:

Simon and Garfunkel are an American music duo consisting of singer-songwriters Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. Close friends through childhood, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel grew up in New York, just blocks away from each other. They met in elementary school in 1953, and began performing together in their junior year. They rose to fame in 1965, largely on the strength of the hit single "The Sound of Silence".

They are well known for their vocal close harmonies and were among the most popular recording artists of the 1960s. Their biggest hits – including "The Sound of Silence" (1964), "I Am a Rock" (1965), "Homeward Bound" (1965), "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" (1966), "A Hazy Shade of Winter" (1966), "Mrs. Robinson" (1968), "Bridge over Troubled Water" (1969), "The Boxer" (1969), and "Cecilia" (1969) – peaked at number one in several charts.

Their sometimes rocky relationship led to their last album, Bridge Over Troubled Water, being delayed several times due to artistic disagreements and as a result the duo broke up in 1970. It was their most successful album worldwide to date, peaking at number one in several countries, including the United States.

Simon and Garfunkel have, at times, reunited to perform and sometimes tour together. They have done so in every decade since the 1970 breakup, most famously for 1981's "The Concert in Central Park", which attracted more than 500,000 people, making it the 7th-most attended concert in the history of music. They still occasionally perform in public, including Paul Simon's rendition of "Sound of Silence" at the ceremony to mark the 10th anniversary of the Twin Towers disaster in 2011.

Grammar (morphology, parts of speech): Put the following words from the text into the correct form in the sentences:

1. He was keen to gain ________________ (known) about his subject
2. Celebrities are often concerned about their ________________ (popular)
3. Many people would like to see the ________________ (reunited) of the country
4. Many people thought the concert was their best ________________ (perform)
5. The opening ceremony was a grand ________________ (occasionally)
6. The ________________ (disaster) event cost many lives

Writing: Write about a time when either you helped someone in trouble or someone else helped you

Listening: Fill in the gaps in the following song (can be obtained as a CD or on the internet)
When you’re ______, feeling small
When tears are in your eyes, I will _____ them all

I’m on your ______ when times get rough
And _______ just can’t be found

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down

When you’re down and out, when you’re on the ______
When evening falls so hard, I will ______ you

I’ll take your part when __________ comes
And _____ is all around. Like a bridge……

Sail on silvergirl, sail on ____. Your time has come to shine
All your ______ are on their way. See how they shine

If you need a friend, I’m ______ right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will ease your ______

For further discussion:

1. What does “on your side” mean? Have you ever been grateful to have someone on your side?
2. What does “down and out” mean? Have you ever felt like this, or known anyone else like this?
3. Who do you think “silver girl” is? Do you think the sailing metaphor is effective? Why?

3. Conclusion

In this paper, ideas have been suggested for using songs to improve not only listening skills but also speaking, writing and reading as well as expanding vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, developing comprehension and increasing grammatical awareness. In other words, songs can be used to present an integrated language learning package which is also enjoyable and memorable.

The corpus of songs represents an almost unlimited resource which is available for use in the language classroom. Hopefully, the two examples above may inspire teachers to experiment with songs which may be appropriate for and interesting to their own students

References

Ghosn, I. (2002). Four good reasons to use literature in primary school ELT. *ELT Journal*, 56/2, 172-179


**Appendix: Full text of Bridge over Troubled Water**

*When you’re weary, feeling small*
*When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all*
*I’m on your side when times get rough*
*And friends just can’t be found*
*Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down*

*When you’re down and out, when you’re on the street*
*When evening falls so hard, I will comfort you*
*I’ll take your part when darkness comes*
*And pain is all around. Like a bridge…….*

*Sail on silvergirl, sail on by. Your time has come to shine*
*All your dreams are on their way. See how they shine*
*If you need a friend, I’m sailing right behind*
*Like a bridge over troubled water, I will ease your mind*