

Jazzing It Up: Tasks for Developing Listening Strategies Through Music

Kathleen Yamane

Nara University

Introduction

Music is often called the universal language. As many educators know, it can also be a useful tool for foreign language learning. Among the goals cited by Japan-based instructors for including music in their lesson plans are enhancing motivation (Barber & Underwood, 2005); exposing the students to the target culture (Yamane, 2001; Lopez, 2001); reinforcing particular linguistic forms (Yamane, 2004); creating atmosphere (Ryan, 1999); and serving as a tool for community outreach (Bergeron, 2019). These articles all support the idea that the appropriate use of music in the classroom can be both fun and educational.

The author has for many years incorporated music-based tasks into her Oral Communication lessons for undergraduate students. Teenagers spend a lot of time listening to music and in-class musical activities not only provide a pleasant break from the textbook, but in many cases encourage students to adopt a more active approach when listening to English music outside of class. But what about older students?

When I moved to Nara University eight years ago, my greatest challenge was the English III class assigned to me twice annually through the Distance Education Program. Like many private Japanese universities, the school was looking for creative ways to maintain a healthy intake in the wake of an ever-shrinking pool of traditional younger students. Currently in its fourteenth year, the program leads to a four-year B.A. degree combining History and Cultural Properties with an optional museum curator's license. The course attracts highly motivated students from all parts of Japan, ranging in age range from the twenties up to the 80s, with particular appeal to retirees.

Students in this program focus on Japanese history, archeology, and cultural preservation. The program is experiential in focus, with visits to museums, shrines, local World Heritage Sites, and other historical destinations an integral part of the curriculum. Most credits are earned through actual correspondence classes in which students are sent materials and assignments to be completed and assessed by the professor in charge. Several times a year, however, students are required to be on campus for "schooling" — three-day intensive courses that are normally run over long weekends and during the summer and spring breaks.

For the B.A. degree, students are required to take a total of 124 credits, of which a minimum of 60 credits must be in their major

field. The menu includes courses such as “Silk Road Studies”, “Buddhist Archeology”, and “Edo Culture”. A further 30 credits must be taken from the offerings in Liberal Arts. Taught primarily by the faculty of our College of Liberal Arts, this includes a wide range of classes in international relations, philosophy, sciences, sports, and foreign languages. In that latter category, three English courses and two Chinese courses are offered. Students must take (and pass) a minimum of two in order to get their degree. The language courses are for many of these Japanese history and culture buffs the most intimidating part of the program. Many of the older students have been away from English for decades. Some even claim to have never had any English at all along the way. English may not be their thing, but they *need* to get those language credits in order to get that hard-earned degree. Add to this the fact that the classes are run three consecutive days from 10 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., and you can begin to appreciate why many students fret over the language requirement.

I have described in several presentations and short articles for the Lifelong Language Learning SIG my communicative approach for the course that gradually took shape through trial and error. (Yamane, 2015a, 2015b, 2016.) This paper describes two tasks created with the aim of helping the students develop strategies for music listening that could be applied outside of class. Like the younger students, many mature learners also enjoy listening to music and as it turns out, are often familiar with many western

singers and groups. Since way back in the days of vinyl, records of American and English music came packaged with lyric sheets and translations, powerful learning aids for those eager to work on their English. One recent course participant bragged about having memorized Andy Williams' *Moon River*. Others confessed to having spent hours singing along with the Brothers Four, The Beatles, and John Denver. But that was then. The majority of English III students who do occasionally listen to English music in their older age tend to view it strictly as a relaxing activity and approach it in a passive manner. However, activating the English they learned many years back can be a nice challenge. With a bit of supervised training, they can begin to listen more actively, an important takeaway from their intensive three-day English course.

Learners need to understand that in addition to using our ears, there is another part of the body which should also be called to action when we approach listening tasks: our brains. Before turning on the music, there are three specific areas that I work on with my students: consideration of semantic clues, grammatical clues, and rhymes. Focusing the students' awareness on these potentially helpful hints enables them to build a set of strategies that they can apply to music listening anywhere, thus maximizing their exposure to the target language. The two activities described below have been successfully used with several groups of 15 to 20 mature learners, with an average age over 60.

Music-based Listening Tasks

Activity One: *Let's Get Married* (See Appendix 1)

This lesson focuses on activating semantic resources by having students think about the theme of the song and predict vocabulary before listening. A Christmas song, for example, is apt to include words like *Santa*, *snow*, *present*, *mistletoe*, and *bells*. Students are placed in pairs or small groups and asked to predict vocabulary that they might find in the song “My Broken Heart.” (The example I used with my younger students, “Let’s Party Tonight,” yielded few responses.) Once they’ve got the idea and have enjoyed sharing their predictions, the instructor writes the song title “Let’s Get Married” on the blackboard and distributes one copy of the song sheet, face down, to each pair. The students are given five minutes to elicit as many words and phrases as they can think of that might be found in a song with this title. The instructor goes around the room asking each pair in turn to share their examples, thus collectively creating a corpus of thematically related vocabulary that they might hear in the song. The list often includes such vocabulary items as *ring*, *love*, *church*, *wedding dress*, *I love you*, and *kiss*. Taking some time to reflect on the theme and possible contents of the song prior to listening has been found to result in significantly more active and focused listening.

When the students finally look at the song sheet, their attention is drawn to [a] through [d]. In these four sections, the students are asked to turn to the context for grammatical clues about the deleted

words. I generally begin with [b], as that is the most obvious. Students have no difficulty identifying that a noun (or adjective plus noun) will follow the possessive pronoun *my*. The other three examples require more thought, but if students are allowed to work together and encouraged to provide possible words before identifying grammatical labels, they are usually able to answer correctly. They are asked to jot down in the margin the grammatical category of each of the missing words. At this point, armed with a list of possible vocabulary and some grammatical information, they are ready to listen. This particular song works well as a listening comprehension task because of the clear enunciation of the singer as well as the fact that it tells a simple, appealing story. It was also noted that the singer, Mariya Takeuchi, has excellent English pronunciation! As a follow-up, we stand and sing the song together. The stronger students in the group are encouraged to identify thematically linked vocabulary in an English song of their choice (using the word sheet or Internet for the lyrics) and to share the results in the next class.

Activity Two: *Every Breath You Take* (See Appendix 2]

From “Mary Had a Little Lamb” to “One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish” and “Hop on Pop”, children raised in English-speaking countries are exposed to rhymes from the time they are at their mother’s knee. Rhymes are an integral feature of many English songs and poems. And yet, and yet... what for many native English-speaking instructors is simple child’s play, the notion of

rhymes is frustratingly obtuse to many of our students. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to explain the concept, usually resorting to IPA and getting the students even more confused, I have learned to jump right in with carefully chosen examples. *hat* is a good one to begin with, because of the large number of rhymes available and the fact that most of them share similar spellings. It should be clearly noted, however, that *hat*, *ham*, and *hand*, although similar, are not rhymes. The learners' attention must be focused on the end of the word, and they must be explicitly taught that it is the sound, rather than spelling, that is important. *so*, which rhymes with *toe*, *know*, and *though*, is a good example to illustrate that point.

The instructor then writes the following words on the blackboard: *TAKE*, *DAY*, *SEE*, and *TRACE*. Students work in pairs to elicit as many rhymes as they can for each (or one word per pair, if time is short or if the students work slowly). The lists are put up on the blackboard. The students are then given the song sheet, and are instructed that the words in blanks 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 rhyme with *TAKE*; 3, 4, and 5 with *DAY*; 6 with *me*; and 10 with *TRACE*. Next, they select words from the rhyme lists on the blackboard that make the most sense in each blank, or come up with another alternative. When the song is finally played, the students are listening to check that they have inserted the correct rhymes. As a follow-up activity the next day, students are asked to work with a partner to create an original version of the last two lines of the Valentine rhyme "Roses are red, violets are *blue*, sugar is sweet and so are *you*."

Concluding Comments

While using carefully selected songs in class serves to create an enjoyable atmosphere, the main purpose of these exercises is to empower the mature learners to listen more actively to English music outside of the three-day intensive class. At the end of the course, many students identify the music lessons as being among the most memorable and most useful activities done during the course. (There was also a request from students in a recent class to create similar lessons for watching English movies—a nice homework assignment for the teacher!) Working together in pairs or with small groups of classmates, many come to view listening to English music as a fun challenge rather than an intimidating one. Most of the students are fully engaged and will hopefully pay more attention to English tunes outside of class. With clear educational goals in mind, teaching songs can be an enjoyable way to boost the students' motivation, whatever their ages.

Appendix 1:

Let's Get Married

Mariya Takeuchi

Now let's get married, no need to wait and waste (our)
(time)

Why do we have to carry on this way?

[a] can keep us apart,

a= No one

So let's get married right away.

I'll wake you up in the morning, my [b],

b= baby

Sweeten your coffee (with) (my) (kiss).

And, in the night, I will hold you so tightly

Whispering the words you long (to) (hear).

So let's get married

Why don't you [c] and stop hesitating?

c= ask me

Just think how happy we can be, you and me,

(In) (a) (small) (house)

with a dog,

So let's get married right away.

When you are blue and so down, my baby,
I'll (give) (a) (smile) to cheer you up.
But if I get sad and lonely,
Please hug me close and (wipe) (my) (tears).

So let's get married.

I just don't know how to live without you.

Maybe it's nice to have [d] someday,

d= our kids

And this is all I can say,

Now let's get married, right away.

So let's get married right away.

So let's get married right away.

Appendix 2:

Every Breath You Take

The Police

Every breath you TAKE

Every move you (1. make)

Every bond you break

Every step you (2. take)

I'll be watching you.

Every move you make

Every vow you (8. break)

Every smile you (9. fake)

Every claim you stake

I'll be watching you.

Every single DAY	Since you've gone
Every word you (3.say)	I've been lost without a TRACE
Every game you (4. play)	I dream at night
Every night you (5. stay)	I can only see your (10. face)
I'll be watching you.	I look around
	But it's you I can't replace
	I feel so cold
Oh, can't you SEE	And I long for your embrace
You belong to (6. me)	I keep crying,
How my poor heart (7. aches)	"Baby, baby, please."
With every step you take	
	(*repeat)

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