

Lyrics from Popular Songs and Rhyme to Enhance the ESL Learner's Proficiency in English Language

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Abstract--- The recent winning of the Nobel Prize for literature by Bob Dylan, a songwriter and lyricist inspired the writing of this article. It has always been a dormant idea in my mind to use lyrics to get children interested in learning the English Language. The acknowledgement of lyrics as a form of literature reinforced my conviction of the power of the written and spoken Word and its effect on its listeners. Being an experienced teacher of English language I have always adopted an eclectic approach to the teaching of Language; deciding on the most suitable technique and applying the most appropriate methodology to achieve learner's specific objectives, learning style and context. English language learning is a process that fits the method to the learner not the learner to the method. We should as teachers of language opt for new trends that are more eclectic and humanistic in nature, which deals with emotions in the mind of the learner. We can use technology and the audio linguicism to capture the attention of the learner. The teaching of English and the imbibing of a language should be inherently and predominantly communicative. The most innate fact underlying the mastery of a language is to make learning it an enjoyable experience.

Language cannot be taught but should be imbibed. We the teachers of English should be the facilitators helping children imbibe the English Language. The doorway to a new enriching experience, the window to the world through which the learner can explore and express his or her innate dreams and desires. The importance of the spoken word is something that I have always reiterated in all my classes of training and language learning. We must focus on the need to teach it in a more creative manner through lyrics of popular rhymes and songs that not only touch the mind but also every aspect of the life of prospective learners. It is an enjoyable and fun-filled method of imbibing the nuances of a Language. Without a doubt, it transforms the uninterested student to an eager participant in the activity of learning and imbibing and enriching himself and herself. I am a believer in the Power of the Word and its capacity to transform something mundane to lofty heights. That has been my mission statement from the beginning of my English teaching career that has spanned around twenty-five years of my life.

Keywords--- Lyrics, Songs, Rhymes, Written and Spoken Words, Language Acquisition, Eclectic Approach, Audio Linguicism, Humanistic Approaches, Communicative Language Teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN INDIA

The need of the hour is a paradigm shift in the way the English Language is taught to the ESL learner. To think out of the box and to tide over the resistance in the English

classroom to the imbibing of English we need to storm the bastion of traditional methodologies and seek fresh pastures. Age-old lessons in grammar and prose make the English Classroom as dull as ditch water. We should be very eclectic in our approach in teaching a language and helping the learner to enhance his skills. The communication and response are major factors in this arena. It should also involve modern technology as a tool to increase the student's capabilities in speaking and reading and listening and writing. The teaching of English language needs to be invigorated in ways which will catch the attention of the young learners of this generation. This article seeks to enumerate the way in which lyrics from songs and rhymes can be used to teach the English language.

Lyrics of popular rhymes and songs have a rich blend of context, rhythm and diction. The lines of enigmatic English rhymes can be the launching pads from which a student can acquire a basis of language skills that can increase his proficiency in the language. Lyrics of songwriters who have hit the popular charts list can make the teaching of English both enjoyable and interesting. The resonance of the words and the order in which it is uttered is the key to imbibing the nuances of a language. Songs and rhymes are emotionally appealing and words once sung can be remembered for a very long period than those read from a textbook. They can also be used to demonstrate prosody and informal register while teaching grammar through song. Songs and rhymes go an extra mile of breaking down cultural barriers unconsciously. It can be a precious tool in the hands of the English teacher.

RHYMES AND SONGS IS A MAGIC DOORWAY TO VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Vocabulary is commonly defined as "all the words known and used by a particular person". Knowing a word, however, is not as simple as simply being able to recognize or use it. There are several aspects of word knowledge which are used to measure the accurate usage of words contexts. For example, the rhyme,

"Rock a Bye Baby on the tree top
Rock a bye baby,
On the tree top,
When the wind blows,
The cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks,
The cradle will fall,

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And down will come, baby,
Cradle and all."

How phrases and words are retained in the memory of the learner to be used later.

The word 'rock' in the juxtaposition of its usage in this rhyme has a specific significance, of a rock as a noun and rock as a verb. We find this word 'rock' as used as a verb in the above rhyme used extravagantly in all popular modern day compliments as well. How many times we ourselves have used it to signify; well done; and exclamatory remark, 'you rock', meaning in modern lingua; you have done well. Then the popular usage of the words, rock away your fears' rock away the blues. Rock a bye baby, the rocking motion is a soothing way in which the young learner can be taught a rhyme. Can this sensational vocabulary, the dream of every language learner be achieved overnight? The procurement of a treasure trove of words is a gradual process of empowering oneself with a quiver load of expressive words needed to hit the bull's eye. It is like holding a quiver full of arrows to hit the target and win the game. The process of acquisition has many stages or levels in the psyche of the ESL learner. We find as teachers of English language we come across many different styles of learning. But what we fail to realize is the fact that styles of learning may differ but it is the teacher who acts as a facilitator and helps the learner to imbibe different methodologies of acquiring new words. The acquisition of words is like arrows in a soldier's hand and works towards the target /goal of vocabulary acquisition.

Methods may vary but exposure to good language in different scenarios is a major but common task that any facilitator of language should foremost inculcate in her students. They should be exposed to different lexical items using a variety of methods which should incorporate visual, verbal, tactile, textual, kinesthetic and sonic memory aids should be made available to learners as viable means of improving their ability to learn and recall words. The learners should be presented with several strategies from which they can choose the method most suitable to their learning styles. Song and rhymes can be one of them. They can be grouped under mnemonic strategies introduced in the English classroom for optimal absorption of vocabulary.

SONGS USED AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL TO ENHANCE VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

To be able to use language effectively and accurately we must be in possession of a luminous scintillating vocabulary. Listening to songs and rhymes can open a portal of possibilities for the ESL learner. Songs can become a means to an end. It can help the ESL learner achieve this goal of acquiring an effervescent vocabulary and for instance, a very simple song from the world-famous children's classic, The Wizard of Oz.

"Ding dong the witch is dead
The witch old witch
The wicked witch
Ding dong
The wicked witch is dead
She's gone where the goblins go
Below, below your homes
Just open and sing"

Most young learners enjoy singing songs and repeating rhymes that leave a lasting impression in their minds. They learn words and phrases unconsciously. It can also help learners to improve their listening skills and pronunciation. This need not be a tenacious task every English language teacher must grudgingly fulfil. It can make the learning of language both vivacious and invigorating for the learner and equally enjoyable for the teacher in English Language classroom. To possess an impeccable vocabulary is the dream of a student trying to communicate fluently and express his ideas effectively in English.

Techniques presented in this article is neither new or novel or different from the time-tested methods of ESL teachers but the novelty lies in the presentation of the method that aims for developing optimal learning skills of students. First and foremost, I would like to confer with fellow academics that we as English language teachers should tell our students that they cannot learn English like Math or Physics or Chemistry but they should be ready to imbibe English like a sponge that absorbs everything that comes its way.

THE IMBIBING OF LANGUAGE

In the eclectic approaches to teaching and learning of English, songs aid in the absorption of language unconsciously and in the most enjoyable way through rhyme and music and rhythm and cadence. The Sponge Method helps to imbibe the nuances of a language in a pleasurable manner. It is a very efficient pedagogical tool that can be used in the English classroom. This is a method in which Music is used as a tool for language acquisition.

Let's take for example the rhyme- 'Sing a song of sixpence' a common modern version is,

"Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye,
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing;
Wasn't it a dainty dish;
To place before the king.
The king was in his counting house,
Counting out his money.
The queen was in the parlour,
Eating bread and honey.
The maid was in the courtyard,
hanging out the clothes
When down came to a blackbird,
And pecked Off her nose."

This rhyme is a classic example of how the rhythm and intonation can improve learners listening skills, pronunciation, sentence structure and sentence pattern. It could be taught to different age groups, giving colour to different aspects of its origin and the use of this rhyme in popular culture. Deriving pleasure from the imbibing of a language is an important part of learning a language.



Without much ado, the student can understand the historical and cultural context as well. This is just an example of how a simple rhyme can be transformed into a tool for language learning.

Pronunciation, accent formation and listening skills improve at the tertiary level itself when young learners listen to rhymes and popular songs. For instance, when I make the students listen to one of my favourite songs from the blockbuster classic musical compiled by the genius Andre Lloyd Webber in the Sound of Music;

"Doe, a deer, a female deer
Doe, a deer, a female deer
Ray, a drop of golden sun
Me, a name I call myself
Far, a long way to run
Sew, a needle pulling thread
La, a note to follow Sew
Tea, I drink with jam and bread
That will bring us back to
Doe, ray, me. Far, sew, la, tea, doe"

The young listeners enjoy the song and sing it after me with great jocularly. This is indeed a fun way to teach vocabulary to the ESL learner, it is filled with homonyms and homophones like doe, deer etc. With this tool or strategy or you might like to call it method, the facilitator can explore innumerable possibilities to teach her students the beauty and nuances of English vocabulary without any dearth of ideas or constraints. The students learn unconsciously the words, meanings, pronunciation, sounds and the contexts in which each rhyme or song was sung. The rhyme tends to work on the imaginative capacity of the student and unconsciously conjures words and images in the young learner's mind. They can be encouraged to illustrate the text with pictures which they could draw from their own conceptualization' of the language.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT INFUSED INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING

We can play the songs and rhymes like Humpty Dumpty, Old King Cole, Old Macdonald had a farm and a whole gamut of language possibilities open before them. We can also improvise and make new rhymes; we can make our own songs and rhymes to suit specific regions and geographical terrains. We can be the ESL learners hail from to suit the learning needs of different age groups of students. For example, the rains, the heat of the summer all are superb opportunities for the ESL teacher to explore this method. They can even divulge a bit into different aspects of a young learner's life and activities so that they may be interested in absorbing unconsciously the poetic sensibility of the English Language.

THE WORDS OF LYRICS CAN WEAVE A WEB OF PLEASANT NOSTALGIA

To enable this to happen in a classroom we must try to relate or unearth a whole plethora of associations that a word that we hear can trigger. The word 'pleasant' for instance can lead the students to think of the pleasant experiences that they had as children in their schools and

other childhood experiences they enjoyed with parents and siblings. For instance, the lyrics of the song

POP GOES THE WEASEL

There are many different versions of the lyrics to the song. In, England most shares the basic verse.

"Half a pound of tuppenny rice.
Half a pound of treacle.
That's the way the money goes.
Pop goes the weasel."

The weasel is a cloth making a machine which makes a popping sound.

"My mother taught me how to sew.
And how to thread the needle
Every time my finger slips
Pop! Goes the weasel.
Another folk origin is the top of the hunter's trap
I went a hunting in the woods,
It wasn't very legal,
The dog and I were caught with the goods.
Pop! goes the weasel."

American version

"All around the cobbler's house.
The monkey chased the people.
And after them in double haste.
Pop! Goes the weasel."

In 1901, in New York the opening lines were

"All around the chicken coop,
The possum chased the weasel.
The most common recent version
All around the mulberry bush,
The monkey chased the weasel,
The monkey stopped to pull up his sock
Pop! goes the weasel."

We can associate this rhyme with a contextual meaning in our own cultural context. This is a great anticipatory activity to introduce students to content clues. Identify 4-5 vocabulary words from the song that students have just heard. They will need to understand, to comprehend the meaning. To activate prior knowledge, students will brainstorm what they already know about the vocabulary terms they have heard in the song. They might be listeners of the FM Radio and they might have heard the radio jockey use the words, the radio jockey pop, rock as pop music and rock music. Popping balloons or the popping sound of a punctures cycle tyre or popping eyes out when you are surprised. Words can be learnt and remembered when we hear them in a song.

We can go that extra mile and make up lyrics in the same meter, like this one for instance.

"All around the field
The farmer chased the beetle
And caught it in a bottle"

The lyrics of such popular rhymes can make us songwriters as well. It can make us feel so confident to replicate what we have heard, to write a similar lyric using the same meter and rhythm.

SONGS AND RHYMES IS A WINDOW TO THE WORLD

Learning rhymes and songs open new vistas to the Language learner and to different kinds of cultures and ways of life. The words of the song I am going to Alabama with a banjo on my knee, talk of a universal emotion love but from the point of view of a young man from a different country.

"I come from Alabama
With a banjo on my knee.
I am going to Louisiana
My true love for to see
O Susanna
Won't you cry for me
I'm going to Louisiana
For my true love for to see"

A method which acts like a magic trick in the hands of the users of language and the participators wear different coloured hats and under each hat, there is a surprise in store for the wearer. Given one keyword he weaves a tapestry of images and words that make a beautiful quilt of words. The method is like a magician pulling out different coloured streamers from a hat. Words pour out in a stream from the unconscious memory stacked up in the mind of the student from when he was a child.

Given the word true and love, it conjures up images in the learner's mind of similar cultural contexts in which this song is sung – the student then conjures out of his memory words already there like longing, yearning, seeing, loving and a plethora of other possibilities with words he conjures up from his own mind. The student becomes a traveller, travelling with his banjo to learn and master his truant, enigmatic mistress English language and travels the high seas to be united with his lady love. The same we can do with the song,

"My Bonnie lies over the ocean
My bonnie lies over the ocean,
My bonnie lies over the sea
My bonnie lies over the ocean,
O bring back my bonnie to me,
O bring back,
O bring back,
O bring back my bonnie to me.
Last night as I lay on my pillow,
Last night as I lay on my bed,
Last night as I lay on my pillow,
I dreamt that my bonnie was dead,
O bring back, o bring back,
O bring back my bonnie to me.
Blow you winds over the ocean,
Blow you winds over the sea,
Blow you winds over the ocean
And bring back my bonnie to me
Bring back, o bring back
And bring back my bonnie to me.
The winds blew over the ocean
The winds blew over the sea

The winds blew over the ocean
And brought back my bonnie to me."

What better way in which to learn the present tense and past tense, so effortlessly and unconsciously. The student will never forget when he learns this enjoyable way, what a noun is or a verb is, or how it is used in time, in the present tense or even the past tense. Unlike the hundred written rules, we try cramming into his head, rules on the subject-verb agreement and tense forms. What about the parts of speech; the noun, the verb, the prepositions, all these are rolled into a neat package in this rhyme. So we look at the array of possibilities of teaching and learning English through lyrics of rhyme and song.

"English is best learnt through rhythm,
tone and beat.

The rhyme,
The grand old Duke of York
The Grand old Duke of York
He had ten thousand men
He marched them up the hill
And he marched them down again
When they were up
They were up
When they were down
They were down
When they were
Halfway up
They were neither up nor down."

When the student first hears this heady rhythmic rhyme, he is caught retrievably in its fold. And it takes him in whole like the blue whale that swallowed Jonah. He finds the rhyme simple but heady and feet tapping well. He moves and sings with the marching rhythm of soldiers marching up and down a hill with a grand duke in the front of them. The intonation, the pronunciation and the accent are picked up unconsciously with no extra effort. It is a magical way to learn a language through music and rhyme.

II. CONCLUSION

Debunking the myths of English learners and can also teach grammatical components through rhyme and song. When the learner hears songs and rhymes and gets engrossed in the rhythm, he or she becomes familiar with sounds of English and imbibe all the cultural and historical origins of a song or rhyme. One of the tricks to language learning is listening to the language and unconsciously you will absorb the language and imbibe it into your daily life. One of the easiest and enjoyable ways is through songs. Pick the music you love, find the music that uses the right kind of language and easy to understand. Choose songs where the words are pronounced well. Then look out for clarity of sound. Understand the meaning of the song you have chosen and the context in which it was sung. Then just sit back and enjoy the joy ride and learn, enhance and enrich yourself with the gift of language.



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