

View from the provinces

by John Bartrick



John is a teacher and language school owner and lives in Ioannina.

Teachers are well aware of the benefits of using songs in the classroom. Many course books employ songs as a way of consolidating target language and they can certainly be successful at providing a feel-good factor at the end of the lesson. However, songs can do a lot more than that. When chosen well they can inspire students with their subject matter and create the focus for a whole range of activities. The song can be the main focus of the lesson and not just an added extra.

As an example of this approach let's look at some activities that could be used with the song "Space Oddity" by David Bowie. "Oh no!" you cry, "that's far too old for my students." Well, yes it was first released in the 1970s but with the correct handling a song like this can still really strike a chord. For a start, space travel is still making the news and in fact the whole process of countdown, lift-off and orbiting has hardly changed since the first astronauts. What's more, the lyrics of the song are open to interpretation in such a way that space travel is only one of the possible levels of meaning.

Pre-listening

In order to create a strong opening to the lesson and "engage" the students (Harmer:2004) the perfect pre-listening task is watch a video of astronauts in action. There's plenty of material available, but for this song it's good if the ground control staff are shown as well as astronauts.

How to play the song

Don't just fall into the trap of playing the song on the CD player. Students soon become familiar with stale routines and "now listen to the song" may be the cue for some students to "switch off".

Surprise the class, make use of technology, create a happening!

Play the song using Youtube. There is an incredible variety of songs with video to create extra interest. For the internet savvy you can even upload a class version of the song!

Try a class karaoke. Sing along with the CD but have students hold a microphone for a bit of fun.

Writing

Depending on the level the teacher can choose an appropriate writing task. For lower levels, students can send a postcard from space, describing the spaceship, the view from the window and what the astronauts are doing or did yesterday. For higher levels students can write a daily "blog from space", describing their emotions, hopes and fears, as well as daily routines and schedules.

Another reason "Space Oddity" is a useful choice for the classroom is that the lyrics form a complete but brief narrative. There are three clear divisions in the song which make it possible to analyse as discourse. That is to say learners can identify features of each section that make it distinct from the others. Learners can be encouraged to give titles to each section, drawing on vocabulary particular to each part. Each section could be revealed in turn, with students predicting what will happen. Students can write their own Part 4, or sequel, to the song.

Class debate

Higher levels can debate the pros and cons of spending money on space travel. Is the expense justifiable and what other priorities does mankind have?

Act it out

Again the level of the class will determine the type of task. Fun exercises for younger students could include miming actions in zero gravity. The comic element is supplied by the student astronaut moving in slow motion while the class/ground control view Major Tom "on camera" and report his actions, "he's brushing his teeth, he's reading a book" The context is also suitable for practicing giving instructions, "Open the box, don't press the red button!"

Role-play and improvise

Fluency practice with higher levels can be encouraged with role play. Students use their imaginations to explore related situations before, during or after Major Tom's space flight. The teacher supplies cards to each group with the scenario and basic instructions.

Situation 1

You are Major Tom's wife: talk to your family about your anxieties.
You are the daughter....

Situation 2

You are Major Tina: explain to your family why you think it's important for a woman to carry out this mission.
You are the husband....

Situation 3

You are a politician: explain to the president why you think the mission must go ahead despite warnings from the engineers.

In conclusion

So there you have a few ideas on how to bring the song to the front of the lesson. Using the song as your starting point, there's no limit to where you end up, much like Major Tom really!

And remember

- Songs are a great way to engage students
- Don't use songs just for listening practice, use your imagination too
- Song lyrics are discourse, explore the possibilities
- The song is not the place to finish; it can be the starting point.

Here are the lyrics to Space oddity by David Bowie. You can find countless other song lyrics at letssingit.com or, for the more adventurous, lyrics and music at ultimate-guitar.com

Ground control to Major Tom
Ground control to Major Tom
Take your protein pills and put your helmet on

Ground control to Major Tom
(10, 9, 8, 7)
Commencing countdown, engines on
(6, 5, 4, 3)
Check ignition, and may God's love be with you
(2, 1, liftoff)

This is ground control to Major Tom,
You've really made the grade
And the papers want to know whose shirts you wear
Now it's time to leave the capsule if you dare

This is Major Tom to ground control
I'm stepping through the door
And I'm floating in the most peculiar way
And the stars look very different today

For here am I sitting in a tin can
Far above the world
Planet Earth is blue, and there's nothing I can do

Though I'm past 100,000 miles
I'm feeling very still
And I think my spaceship knows which way to go
Tell my wife I love her very much, she knows

Ground control to Major Tom,
Your circuit's dead, there's something wrong
Can you hear me Major Tom?
Can you hear me Major Tom?
Can you hear me Major Tom?
Can you...

Here am I floating round my tin can
Far above the moon
Planet Earth is blue, and there's nothing I can do...

Ground control to Major Tom,
Your circuit's dead, there's something wrong
Can you hear me Major Tom?
Can you hear me Major Tom?
Can you hear me Major Tom?
Can you...

References

Harmer J. 2004 *How to Teach English* Longman

John Bartrick can be contacted at bartrick@hol.gr