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Using songs with teenagers

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by [Cambridge English \(/blog/authors/cambridge-english/\)](#), 24/08/2020

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Why use songs?

Songs provide good listening practice for teenage learners – but with a difference. Songs can tell stories, and convey emotions. Music can set the scene or provide a change of mood. You could use a song at the beginning or end of a class, or build a whole lesson around it, its meaning and the singer or band.

In terms of language learning, the rhyme and rhythm of songs are great for pronunciation work. Songs often use repetition of vocabulary or a grammar structure and can be used to help learners ‘notice’ language use, guess the meaning of words or phrases from the context, and lead into speaking or writing activities.

All of these are useful skills for improving students’ general level of English as well as to prepare for an exam. Students often enjoy listening to songs in English and understanding them can be motivational.

Things to think about:

- Musical taste – teenagers will have a very clear idea about the music they like and don’t like! Ask them (perhaps as a class survey) and use a range of different types of music in your classes.
- Appropriacy of lyrics, videos and ads – read and listen carefully to the lyrics and watch the video all the way through before the lesson to make sure it is appropriate. Be aware of songs and videos that are hosted on websites with ads which might not be appropriate. If necessary, just play the audio rather than the video.
- Music and emotions – when you select a song, be aware that listening to music can bring up different emotions. Also, the themes of some songs might be sensitive for some of your learners.
- Song versions – make sure the lyrics match the version of the song you are using. Covers or live performances might be slightly different.

Activities to try before, during and after listening to songs

Phonemic predictions

Select a song where the lines rhyme. Choose words from the end of some of the lines and get learners to work in pairs and brainstorm lists of words that rhyme. Then they listen and tick words from their lists that they hear.

Alternatively, they can write the words on slips of paper and pick up the ones that they hear. If learners are familiar with the phonemic script you can use this to help them to identify rhyming words.

Pronunciation is one of the criteria that learners are assessed on in the Speaking part of their Cambridge English Qualification. Songs are a fun way to highlight and practise pronunciation.

Predict the story

Choose a song that tells a story. Take screenshots from the video at different stages of the story. Give a set of screenshots to learners and ask them to work in groups to order and predict the story. They listen and check.

After listening, the students could retell or write the story, and describe similarities or differences between their ideas and the actual story.

Encouraging learners to predict before listening is useful for exam practice – the pictures, text or questions in the exam paper can give clues about what to listen for.

Order the song

Print the song lyrics and cut it up by verse or line by line. Learners work in pairs or groups to try to put the song in order, then listen and check. This involves detailed reading and listening skills.

Alternatively, you could put learners into groups and distribute different lines of a song to different learners. Learners have to listen carefully to the song, and when they hear their line, they put it on the table. In this way, the students assemble the lyrics of the whole song together.

My favourite song

Set learners the task of choosing a song that they really like and researching it to present to the rest of the class. For example, you could ask them to find out:

- who wrote it
- who sings it
- what the song is about
- why you like it
- a line from the song you like and why.

Learners take it in turns to present their song choice to the class and play the song. You could even help them to create activities for the class to do as they listen (e.g., ordering the lyrics or doing a gap-fill).

This can help to build confidence for the Speaking paper in B2 First for Schools or C1 Advanced, where the candidate has to talk on their own for a minute and give their opinion.

Role play the song

Choose a song with a story, or a song that describes a relationship. After listening to the song, learners work in pairs or small groups to create a scene from the song, or even what happened before or after the story described in the song. Students could record or perform their role play for others to watch.

Song quotes

Show some quotes from the song lyrics. Set a group discussion task, such as: Do you agree/disagree? Have you ever ...? You could do this as a way to lead in to the song, or after listening.

If you are preparing learners for B1 Preliminary for Schools or B2 First for Schools, you could use a quote from a song as the first line of a story to practise Part 2 of the Writing paper. They can then listen to the song to compare it to their story.

Independent learning

Encourage learners to listen to songs in English outside class. For learners aged 14+, the website and app LyricsTraining.com allows learners to select a song and tests their knowledge of the lyrics by asking them to type missing words as they listen.

Alternatively, students can play the song showing all the lyrics to learn them or even do karaoke. Read a [review at the Digital Teacher](https://thedigitalteacher.com/reviews/lyricstraining/) (https://thedigitalteacher.com/reviews/lyricstraining/).

Also for language work, there are lots of ready-made gap-fill activities freely available, for example at the [Busy Teacher](http://busyteacher.org/classroom_activities-listening/songs_and_lyrics/) (http://busyteacher.org/classroom_activities-listening/songs_and_lyrics/) and [iSL Collective](https://en.islcollective.com/english-esl-worksheets/search/songs) (https://en.islcollective.com/english-esl-worksheets/search/songs).

Students might also enjoy these [misheard lyrics](http://hancockmcdonald.com/materials/wrong-lyrics-1) (http://hancockmcdonald.com/materials/wrong-lyrics-1).

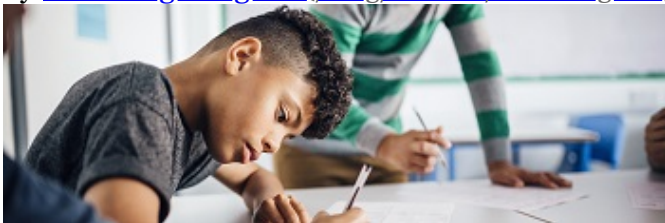
Students can research and create a singer/band profile. Older teens could also research and discuss the [meaning of different songs](https://songmeanings.com/) (https://songmeanings.com/).

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