SONGS’ LYRICS AND CATCHY TUNES - EFFECTIVE TOOLS OF BUILDING VOCABULARY AND LEARNING GRAMMAR

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Abstract

Vocabulary building remains one of the most topical problems of language learning for teachers of schools and universities. The difficulty is closely connected with the motivation context as well as with the Internet revolution of the recent times and easy access to a wide array of information. Modern teenagers are often seen with earphones and headphones, listening to their favourite tunes while commuting somewhere. On the one hand, for them this is the way to escape from reality and to relax. On the other hand, this is the moment when their minds are open to perceiving even more information.

The article is devoted to language learning optimization. The author gives explanations to why repetition and rhyming are still the most widely used means of remembering data; pays attention to the emotional component of the learning process; analyses methods of memory retention used in primary school with small children and with adult new entrants.

The author considers popular music tunes as one of the powerful tools of boosting motivation for language learning, simplifying the process of vocabulary introduction and set expressions learning, optimization of grammar structures presentation and explanation. Examples of tunes that can be useful for the process of language learning are provided.

The article proves benefits of this approach for teaching the modern generation of teenagers as listening to various kinds of music is one of the most widely spread leisure time activities among young people. The youth is used to plenty of music in their lives and is supposed to be receptive to this way of receiving data. Such information transfer could teach the modern generation more metadisciplinary approach to science and reality as songs’ lyrics often contain details from various fields of reality and require the ability of reading between the lines.

At the end of the article the author suggests several ways of implementing grammar, vocabulary and culture teaching via songs and catchy tunes.

Keywords: method, tool, motivation, optimization, memory, information, vocabulary, grammar, song, tune.

1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been envious of people with exceptional memories? Such people who can remember every single detail of a historic event or a novel they have just read? The people who memorize loads of information with seemingly little effort while you are trying to remember the names of students who’ve just introduced themselves? Whatever your answer is, there is hope for all of us.

It is a proven fact that music has the potential to improve listening as well as understanding ability. Music is an extremely unique way to develop the capability of memorizing. Students can easily recollect songs rather than learn their syllabus. The reason behind learning a song quickly is that our mind enjoys the tune. Whatever our mind enjoys, it preserves it. Furthermore, we do not need to be born with photographic memory. We can train our brain just like we work out for stronger muscles. Choose a melody you really like or a song you enjoy listening to and make it your memory ’weapon’.

Although it is very difficult to learn languages via songs, there are still a few examples of highly motivated students who managed with the task. More often music serves as a powerful tool of regaining motivation to studies when learners try to find a compromise between duty and pleasure.

It is natural that due to a combination of a catchy melody, rhythm and repetition songs can help to remember complicated grammar constructions and difficult set expressions that could seem monstrous and impossible to manage with if introduced in the classroom in a traditional way. There are some peculiar features in the way our brain works. It tends to memorize everything that it doesn't have to retain and skip everything that seems tedious and dull. Taking this into consideration will allow
optimizing the learning process and making memorizing more effective as it will be based on natural instincts.

2 METHODOLOGY

Contemporary memory studies are based on methodological contribution made by psychology. They are mainly based on experimental methods and the laboratory study of memory. Sociologists, historians and media researchers use textual methods for the ‘thick description’ of remembering and memorial practices. The study of memory often relies on interview data as well.

Brian Becker, associate professor of neuropsychology at Lesley University, defines memory as "the process in which the mind interprets, stores, and retrieves information". [1]

As far as the issue of the article is concerned, in order to get better understanding of songs' impact on the process of foreign language learning there should be given a notice on how the brain works and what mechanisms the process of memorizing includes. For this we need to turn to neuroscience. According to it there are three main stages involved in the process of memorizing: encoding, storage and recall. If we combine the process of getting information with paying attention to background sounds, accompanying images, tactile feelings or emotions it means we involve the mechanism of sensory input that is called semantic encoding.[2 ] In this case there is more chance for the brain to store the information in long-term memory.

If you need to retrieve a memory, the brain should revisit the nerve pathway created when the memory was formed. If you recall immediately and continue revising repeatedly, it will surely strengthen the neuron connections. The idea was experimentally proved by Hermann Ebbinghaus in 1885. In his research he concluded that there was an exponential loss of memory unless the information is reinforced. The scientist called the consistent pattern “the forgetting curve”. [3]

Scientists have been showing interest to the process of memorizing for over 2000 years already. As things stand, there are dozens of various memorizing mechanisms. Among them are: the rhyming peg system, acronyms or expression mnemonics, rhyming and music mnemonics, physical exercise, better and regular sleep, the memory palace technique, chunking, memory images animation, the use of spaced repetition, sharing the information you are learning, offloading the stuff you do not need to memorize.

The key moment of the memory-making process is attention. It is considered to be an important stage between sensory register and short-term memory. Drawing attention to the subject under consideration means boosting motivation of the recipient and improving efficiency. A song or a catchy tune may become an effective tool to boost the process of perceiving difficult or dull information. This could be a key element of information transfer from short-term memory to working memory. It is well known that new connections between neurons and synapses stay as long as they remain in use. A catchy tune may strengthen the connection.

3 RESULTS

Music accompanies us everywhere. No matter what generation you belong to, whether you got used to a gentle sound of the kitchen radio receiver, work out in a gym to rhythmical music from a powerful speaker or hum the tune you are listening to via your headphones or Air Pods – no one can live without music, it is a prominent part of our everyday life. It has an impact on our mood, it accompanies our daily routine and is present at special family and life occasions. It is different, has various purposes and functions, but it is there and we cannot deny it.

Learning a foreign language with the help of songs analysis helps to improve the listening skills, to learn new words and phrases, to improve pronunciation and understand more grammar. It is proved that music has an impact on the right hemisphere of the brain, and the text - on the left. That is why rhymes of a text together with a pleasant melody of a song remain in our memory.

3.1 Catchy tunes or "earworms"

People cannot help humming or singing songs they have recently heard. We usually call them “earworms”. This part of our memory work is clearly out of our control. Furthermore people appear to have different catchy tunes. A team from Goldsmiths University in London held a research and
collected a database of over 5000 earworms.[4] Usually such pieces of music are simple and repetitive.

Neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote in his book Musicophilia that earworms are “the overwhelming...helpless sensitivity of our brain to music” and that “similarity of music engraves deep grooves in our mind.” [5]

Earworms often seem to have something interesting or unusual about them. It could be the circumstances when the recipient comes across the tune, the situation around the moment of hearing the song. For example, when a person is relaxed and is experiencing positive emotions, his mind is perceptive and open to gaining new information. As David Lowenthal has observed, ‘the locus of memory lies more readily in place than in time’. [6]

No doubt earworms are a phenomenon of long-term memory. They remain deep in the labyrinth of our memory often against our will and out of our control. A song has a potential to become a catchy tune if it has lyrics which is easy to understand and if it evokes strong visual memories in participants. We may call it relevancy of the information involved. It also needs special mood and emotional background to make the tune more catchy and appealing.

Paul Barsom, professor of music theory and composition at Penn State listed several factors that might cause a song to be catchy. “A certain familiarity – similarity to music one already knows – can play a role. Unfamiliar music doesn’t connect well. Cultural connection between music and listener can make a tune more memorable.”[7]

3.2 Jazz chants

There is an opinion that we usually remember songs due to a particular rhythm they possess. The first teacher who noticed it in late 1960 was Caroline Graham. The ESL teacher at the American Language Institute of New York University and a ragtime jazz entertainer at a piano bar realized that there was an obvious connection between the rhythm of spoken American English and the one-two-three-four beat of American jazz. She noticed rhythmic language in all sorts of usual life contexts: ordering food in a restaurant, arranging a date over the phone, saying goodbye on the street, making apologies in a crowded bar. She introduced special rhymed poems into the teaching process. They are called jazz chants and are all built on rhythmic constructions. [8] Throughout the ’80s and ’90s Graham’s jazz chants spread all over the world with the ESL teaching methods. They are used by teachers to present and memorize even difficult grammar structures. Simple vocabulary that they contain helps students to concentrate on grammar constructions and intonation patterns.

3.3 Songs' teaching recommendations

Some songs can shoot teachers in the foot and mislead the students as they include slang expressions and phrases with “wrong” grammar. For example the song Ain’t Nobody’s Business by Ardis that should have been formulated as “mind you own business” or “It is none of your business”. There is a famous song by Pink Floyd, The Wall with a famous refrain “We don’t need no education”, though, according to grammar rules of English, the phrase should sound as “We don’t need (any) education”. In these cases the teacher is better to avoid giving the songs at the lessons for beginners, elementary level students and some of the pre-intermediate groups. Nevertheless, it will be useful to introduce the peculiarities of such constructions for advanced students as an example of slang and youth language culture.

As a teacher I also pay attention to pronunciation. From this perspective compositions performed by Sting and Ed Sheeran are highly recommended. Teachers are to pay attention to the fact that there are songs with ‘wrong’ pronunciation of some words due to the attempt to catch the rhyme. (Eagles, Hôtel California). Real professionals will stick to correct pronunciation songs (Whitney Houston, Heartbreak Hôtel).

For students with problems connected with irregular verbs forms we can recommend the video where the teacher of English rhymes the three forms of the verbs into a creative rap song that sounds like a message to the students sitting in his class. [9] When he has chosen this way of presenting grammar he, firstly, created a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the class. Secondly, the teacher caught the mainstream of rap songs popularity and managed to motivate the class even if it had been passive and sleepy before. And finally, he succeeded in making their memory and brain work. The catchy rhythm and at least some of the verb forms are to remain in the students’ memory after the lesson.
Every teacher collects their set of songs for their professional portfolio. Here are some of the examples of my collection:

- Fool's Garden, Yellow Lemon Tree - Present Simple;
- Rod Stewart, Sailing - Present Continuous;
- The Beatles, Yellow Submarine - Past Simple;
- Whitney Houston, Always Love You - Future Simple, giving a promise: “I will always love you”;
- Gloria Gaynor, I Will Survive – Future Simple;
- The Beatles, When I’m 64 - Future Time Clauses;
- The Beatles, Let it be – ‘let somebody do something’ construction;
- Brandy, Have You Ever – Present Perfect questions;
- U2, I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking for - Present Perfect;
- Rod Stewart, Have You Ever Seen the Rain - Present Perfect;
- Ronan Keating, If Tomorrow Never Comes – First Conditional;
- Cyndi Lauper, Time after Time - First Conditional;
- The Beatles, When I’m Sixty Four – First Conditional (especially when + to be construction);
- Beyonce, If I Were a Boy – Second Conditional;
- Red Hot Chili Peppers, If – Second Conditional;
- Bare naked Ladies, If I had a Million Dollars - Second Conditional;
- Enrique Iglesias, Hero – Second Conditional interrogative sentences;
- Nelson, How Can I Miss You - Second and Third Conditional;
- Lisa Stansfield, Change - Third Conditional;
- Hoobastank, The Reason – ‘used to’ and ‘I wish’ constructions;
- Eric Hassle, Hurtful - ‘used go’s construction;
- Roxette, It Must Have Been Love – modal verb ‘must’ + perfect infinitive;
- Queen, We Are the Champions – Present Perfect, Present Continuous confirmative sentences;
- Beautiful South, A Little Time - Question Tag;
- Sting, Shape of My Heart - can help students master all the cards suits;
- Shania Twain, Ka-Ching! – “Money” vocabulary: greedy, to earn, to spend foolishly, to be broke, to get a loan, to afford;
- Mariah Carry, All I Want for Christmas – “Christmas” vocabulary: presents, Christmas tree, to hang stockings upon the fireplace, Santa Claus, snow, mistletoe, a list (of presents), reindeer, make a wish come true.

The songs are mostly ‘slow jam’ so that all the words are clearly articulated and it was easier for students to repeat them. Some songs of the list are used for teaching grammar, the others can be useful when you introduce vocabulary. They may contain a rich semantic family of words on an issue to discuss. If all the components are present, you may refer to the piece again and again during the semester and get much higher results at the final test. Regular repetition, revision together with positive emotional background and a catchy tune will improve brain and memory activity.

If there are students in your class that lack motivation, try to find out what music they listen to, print the lyrics and devote a part of the lesson to the new vocabulary of the tunes. Using this simple personalized approach teacher can evoke interest to the subject in a seemingly hopeless situation.

The brain produces a strong response to things it considers out of the ordinary. If you have to remember something, create an elaborate image or a story around it. Find a tune that will correspond to the individual or group experience, work at its lyrics and give some comprehension tasks. This might seem counterproductive, but it can help synapses of the brain connect better.
You may also use one of the internet tools to teach and entertain your class - lyricstraining.com – a resource, with songs, videos and karaoke option. It is accessible for both Apple and Android, has an updated database of songs' videos and lyrics. The is an option to choose the language you are going to study, the accent (either British or American English), the level of difficulty (from beginner to advanced) and the mode (multiple choice or Karaoke). You get the score by filling the gaps with the missing words and if you do well the song does not stop. If your speed is low, the video pauses. The student may replay the line or skip it, but it will influence their score and rating that is visible to other players in a special top list accessible in the end. This is an example of how gamification is used to motivate the youth and grown-ups compete with each other, with the players from other countries, to set their own and international records.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Music has now become a part of our life as it serves different purposes for each one of us. In its turn songs is a great teaching tool. It is highly recommended to use them at lessons. However, there should be a supervisor who will choose an appropriate song, introduce it at the right moment of studying and can boost the results of learning the language.

Teachers should remember that memory begins with individuals. Furthermore, memories are made and require the negotiation of shared histories through acts of remembrance. Our task as of teachers and educators is to blend these two principals and to use them as the basis to the strategy of songs and tunes’ teaching. Although memory remains susceptible to all sorts of problems, the elasticity of brain is unique. Memory is as capable of improving as decaying.

REFERENCES


