

Conversation Lesson – Music

Topic: Music

Aims:

- To develop fluency through a range of speaking activities
- To introduce related vocabulary

Level: Intermediate Level (can be adapted for higher or lower levels)

Introduction

Before I introduce this lesson, I wonder if you have explored the benefits of background music in class, certainly during writing activities. I guess its success depends on a number of things, including student expectations. I find it a nice way to enhance or change classroom dynamics, and for students used to a more traditional and formal education, it can be a very refreshing change. Nothing too distracting, nothing too cheesy, just a few tunes playing in the background can soften the edges a little.

During this lesson I use background music where facilities allow (most of my classroom friendly music is on my flash card). I should also point out that if you follow the plan as laid out below, you will need some samples of music, not necessarily in English, believe it or not, but a variety of different genres. All will become clear later on.

Procedure

Stage 1 Vocabulary and Lead In

- If your students come to class plugged in, with earphones in and listening to the latest (or not) tunes you'll have an easy start to this lesson. I honestly don't remember teaching a class when at least one student didn't display some evidence of a music player of some kind as they came in. And it sets the scene nicely for Stage One.
- I ask them what they are/were listening to, and more often than not they're happy to talk about it. (One student told me once they were listening to BBC Learning English podcasts. I was pleased, but it threw me a little.) Anyway, if rags can turn to riches a short answer about Robbie Williams can turn into a nice class discussion, as I develop each response and move on to other students in the class in turn. Perhaps it would develop along these lines:

Teacher: "Hi, Aizhan, what were you listening to?"

Aizhan: "Eminem."

Teacher: "Hmmm, maybe not my favourite, but he's good. Zhanbolat, are you a fan of Eminem?"

Zhanbolat: "Of course, we all are."

Teacher: "Is that true, Nargiza?"

Nargiza: "No, I prefer classic music." (And yes, I correct her vocabulary.)

- I'm sure this lead-in needs no further elaboration on my part, but note that it is not as unplanned as it seems, certainly if I know the class well. I pay attention to ask students who are likely to do more than just agree, in most cases. Nargiza's retort here opens another door and we are able to move, for five to ten minutes, across a range of mini-themes related to the overall topic.
- Then I write some words from the conversation on the board, very definitely including *classical*, and ask students to provide more. I usually write them myself. Maximising student involvement is essential to good TEFL teaching (if not all teaching) but not every activity has to be student centred, and as the intention here is just to get words on the board, there's no extra gain in turning it into a board race or Chinese whispers race.
- The available range is vast, our selection may typically include:

<i>classical</i>	<i>conductor</i>	<i>orchestra</i>
<i>concert</i>	<i>danceable</i>	<i>pianist</i>
<i>rhythm</i>	<i>woodwind</i>	<i>flute</i>
<i>melody</i>	<i>jazz</i>	<i>brass</i>
<i>download</i>	<i>lyrics</i>	<i>rock</i>

Note: try to avoid including many words from a single lexical group, for example styles or instruments.

- When we've got 25 words or so, and I am satisfied none of them are significant blockingwords, we move on to Stage 2.

Stage 2 Guided Vocabulary Discussion

- In pairs, the students talk together about the words but within a framework that I give them. I ask them to consider each word in turn, and to describe, where relevant:

The meaning
Its use or purpose
Their experience of it
Their opinions of it

- They are encouraged not just to alternate monologues but to interact, offering support and suggestions, too.
- As they speak I monitor and interject where necessary. At this early stage of the lesson students may not have found their rhythm and my help to individuals can add momentum to the lesson. As Stage 3 is a mingling activity, it therefore pays to have the class speaking with confidence early on.

Stage 3 Find Somebody Who...

- The famous TEFL cliché, *Find Somebody Who...* is not a popular classroom activity for no reason, it is a very dynamic interaction, a viable alternative to more direct forms of repetition such as drilling, while still maintaining an element of control over the language used.
- Appendix 1 has a handout which should be given to all students. They are required to find a person who will say yes to any, or several, of the presenting questions. Make sure first they understand the way to approach the questions, many students just read the header in each box and this is wrong. There may be more than one correct question but only correct questions should be allowed. And as they will be mingling often out of your earshot, it pays to get them all on task correctly before you start.
- For the purposes of complete instructions, the first two questions here would be:
Do you listen to rock music?
Did you use to play a musical instrument but then gave up? (There are some alternatives to this)
- Encourage them also to ask follow-up questions. It gives the activity more substance and keeps it moving longer. From a teaching point of view you don't want activities to run out of steam too quickly. It's not fair on the students, for many reasons, but also it makes more work for you. I for one am very prepared to work hard for my students. They deserve that and moreover in many cases pay a lot of money for it, but sensible exploitation of the activities makes things more useful for everybody.
- When this does eventually run dry, maybe as a rule after about 15 minutes (in a class of 12- 16 students), I ask students to return to their seats and we round off by expanding a little on some of the answers given. I may ask the class if anything surprised them, if anything interested them especially, or, more importantly, if anybody would like to sing now.
- They never do.

Stage 4 Can you play?

- I take into class a set of pictures of musical instruments. It pays to avoid only using mainstream instruments, perhaps a few of the students' traditional instruments would be appreciated, and there will be a high chance some of them can play them. Starting by addressing the whole class, I show them one of the 'easier' instruments (for example the guitar) and elicit basic information about each instrument, and note the prompt on the board.
- It could be, *how to play, what sound it makes, do you like this sound, what type of music it is used to play, who is famous for playing it, is it easy to play, can you play it?*
- This then becomes a ready discussion which I invite students to have for

about five minutes across five pictures spending about one minute on each picture. Rather than print lots of copies of each I rotate the pictures. It doesn't really matter if pairs deal with every prompt in full, even if they only address one or two each time they have developed conversations on the relevant topic.

- To bring this back into the group situation, which I find a very good way to enhance rapport across the class I invite a few individuals to remark on their partner's answers. I would sometimes ask them if they learned anything new, if anything surprised them or if they have anything in common. This has the dual effect of revisiting the conversation and bringing it to a close. It also leads nicely into Stage 5.

Stage 5 What do you think of this music?

- Taking care not to move too far away from Stage 4, I play students an excerpt of instrumental music, for perhaps a minute or so. Although I ask them to identify any of the instruments they have just focused on, I don't ask that they pay too much attention to this now, we have done instruments. Perhaps Stage 4 has more potential, but there are other things to do and few lessons last long enough to go down every avenue.
- The focus needs to shift to give students chance to talk about music preferences. I ask them what they thought of this piece of music and prefer to hear honest answers. If they loathe my favourite music, so be it, I only ask they express this respectfully and in constructive English.
- But before we discuss it in any more detail, I give them a handout which will allow them to rate the song according to different elements. See Appendix 2, and feel free to alter the criteria and number of songs
- When they have rated the first excerpt (5 is the strongest), I ask a few of them what they gave it and use this as a way to check understanding of the task, and the language. When it is obviously clear to everybody, I play another five varied one minute excerpts and ask them to rate these as they listen. It is the teacher's choice what they play but I recommend a blend of:
 - Something you like
 - Something you don't like
 - Something traditional to the country you are teaching in
 - Something very famous that most people like (maybe Shakira)
 - Something strange (I use The Incredible Stringband, very strange)
 - Something to act as a lead-in to Stage 7 (if you omit Stage 6)
- When the music stops, I ask students to discuss their choices in pairs. I find that this activity takes care of itself, it can last ten minutes or if not I ask SS to repeat with another partner.
- It's a good way of finding out what music SS like, in spite of advice about limiting the amount you as a teacher talk in class, if this comes at the expense of showing an interest in your students as people and not just as

producers of improving English I think this is a shame. I like spontaneously chatting to the class sometimes, this is a good time to do it not least because it doesn't undermine the activity, rather enhances its authenticity. Students almost always have plenty to say about music and can achieve this, listen to what they have to say and they will appreciate you all the more for it. And who knows, maybe it will give you a wealth of information useful for future lessons.

- ***I have once or twice varied this activity by including an activity from the excellent Language Activities for Teenagers by Seth Lindstromberg, in which students role play working for a record company deciding which new band to offer a contract to, these excerpts representing the new bands available. I found this book enormously useful and recommend it very highly.***

Stage 6 (optional) Discussion Questions

- Simple and useful, I give them a list of questions in pairs or threes, and encourage them to avoid short answers. As they talk, I take an active part in the conversations, one group at a time, and let it flow until the SS seem to be running out of fluency or ideas. Here are the questions, once again, feel free to amend any or all of them. SS can choose the questions or the order, it gives them more freedom to choose things they can say more about.
- **In pairs, make discussion about your answers to these questions:**
 - Is music important: to you, to society, to the world? Why (not)?
 - How often do you listen to music?
 - Do you play music while you study, or work? If so, how do you concentrate on the other things?
 - Have you ever been to see your favourite musicians live? Were they as good as on the CD?
 - What is your favourite music?
 - Did you like it the first time you heard it?
 - Is there any music you can't stand? What is it, and why don't you like it?
 - Have your tastes in music changed a lot over the last five years? How?
 - Do you think music can heal sick people?
 - Do you think animals appreciate music? Why (not)?
 - Do you like classical music? Why (not)?
 - Can you sing? Do you want to demonstrate now?

Stage 7 Famous Musicians

- This stage depends a lot on what resources you have available. Interactive whiteboards make it easier, magnetic whiteboards likewise but otherwise creative use of blu tac might be your only option. You will need five or six photos of a range of well known musicians or groups. Knowing the class well helps make your choices, for instance I like Jethro Tull but know that outside the English speaking world perhaps only a minority of students in a handful of countries would be likely to recognise them, let alone accept them as a focal point of a class discussion.

- When you have prepared the pictures, display them on the board in such a way that students will be able to move them round.
- The first stage is to set the scene, ask them to discuss in pairs who they are and what music they are known for. This is why it's easier to choose very famous musicians, everybody will have more to say (even if it's a tad cynical at times). Then I bring the class together for a whole class activity which hardly leads to producing long spoken turns but gets everybody active and communicating, not to be underestimated.
- Ask one student to come to the board (I do this by spinning my marker quickly on the floor and choosing who the cap points to – for some reason students tend to find this amusing) and tell them to arrange the artists into order according to a criteria. They have to physically move the photos into a vertical order). The following criteria lead to some discussion, albeit not extensive.
 - Popular (by album sales)
 - Gifted
 - Overrated
 - Rich
 - Creative
- The discussion comes when I ask the class to interject, to disagree, or to tell the person at the board an alternative order. *Come on, how can Robbie Williams be more gifted than Pavarotti?* for example. I'd agree, but one time a student of mine in full knowledge of who each man was decided that he was.
- This can last for thirty minutes, I don't like to let it run for too long because in essence in a conversation class random and spontaneous comments don't lead to fluent language production, so I limit it to fifteen or twenty. However as a lead-in to Stage 8 I find this activity an essential step.

Stage 8 University Extrav

- For those of you who don't know, Extrav(aganza) is the university end of year party and most student unions, certainly mine back in the 90s, take them very seriously. Local bands are out, the overwhelming criteria is to impress, to break the bank to get the biggest names they can.
- I remember there was a little heated debate back in my so called Fresher's year about who to book, and although it seemed senseless at the time, remembering it gave me the idea for this next activity.
- I divide the class into four groups. I offer them a choice of four musicians and if it works I put them in equal groups according to their musical tastes. If not, equal groups.
- Then I take four of the photos from the board and give one to each group, along with the instructions that they are to make a case for booking this

singer or group for the university extrav. The whole class must ultimately agree and decide who to book. Tell them that money is available for any artist, even Oasis.

- This seems to take care of itself but I suggest that they focus on the benefits of booking each singer, and prepare their case to convince. *Robbie Williams knows how to throw a party* etc. They can 'deride' the other singers respectfully if it helps their cause.
- It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure that activities given to the class are useful and not just word repetition. For this reason, it is essential that speaking does not only mean saying words and to this end if you want to introduce some useful language prior to the debate I encourage you to do so. I generally don't at this point, because I am keen to benefit from the momentum of the previous stage.
- For the debate here, I put the groups in corners, not too far from each other, and find that they generally know what to do, especially if they have a passion for the artists on offer. It might not be easy to agree, but if you set this as a goal it breathes more life into the debate and keeps it going until they literally have nothing left to say, other than to make the final decision.
- Then I ask them to get on the phone, not literally, of course.
- Students prepare interviews with their favourite singers (pairs) and perform them in front of the class (questions and answers)
- Students listen to a popular song and write an extra verse for the ending. They could also rewrite some of the song itself
- Students perform music in class, if they are able, and on rare occasions could play together
- Students liken their teacher to popular musicians on grounds of talent, lack of talent and / or facial characteristics. Apparently I look like Sting