

Popular Songs in the English Classroom in Czech Lower-Secondary and Secondary Education

Abstract:

We believe that popular songs in ELT have great potential. While they are accessible and easy to work with (Murphey 1992), they may help to develop all aspects of communicative competence (linguistic, socio-linguistic and pragmatic according to CEFR, 2001) and, at the same time, involve all learning domains, i.e. cognitive, affective and psychomotor (Anderson; Krathwohl 2001; Bloom; Krathwohl 1964; Dave 1967). To find out whether the potential of popular songs might be fully exploited in ELT, we carried out a research the aim of which was to survey the situation in Czech lower-secondary and secondary English classrooms. The findings will be presented in our paper.

Music¹ and songs have been used in ESL/EFL classes by a number of teachers and are included in many textbooks of English. The potential of songs lies for example in their accessibility, authenticity and 'catchiness'. They can be used with all age groups and all levels of English. Through using songs, the teacher can address all aspects of communicative competence and target all learning domains.

The first reason for using music in ELT is the fact that it is fairly versatile. Songs can be utilized in different parts of a lesson. The teacher can open the class with a song, use it as a warm-up or cooling-down activity, use it as a filler in transition parts of a lesson, or he/she can close the lesson with it. Moreover, the main focus of a lesson can be built upon a song. A song can be a source of various linguistic features, it may introduce a topic discussed in the lesson, or serve as a summary of the topic.

Furthermore, music is very easily accessible (Murphey 1992). Music can be heard all around us every day, even if we do not actively search for it. People hear it while shopping in the supermarket, when watching TV, driving a car, waiting in a dentist's office etc. Students actually listen to music on their own, even if it is not part of the syllabus. Provided that the song used in a class is chosen according to the learners' interests or musical taste, it can have great appeal to them.

Another reason why music makes a good study material is the fact that it is usually easy to remember. If chosen correctly, the learners will keep replaying the song in

¹ To narrow down what exactly is meant by music in our research, we should state that it does not deal with instrumental and background music, or suggestopedia and superlearning. We only focus on popular songs that have lyrics, i.e. the songs that can be read or sung.

their head on their way from school, find it on Youtube and maybe even sing it at home. What is more, the lyrics can be easily and effortlessly memorized and reproduced. These features offer a great advantage of songs over traditional texts in coursebooks, because we cannot expect students to remember whole passages, let alone entire articles by heart.

In addition, the language in songs is authentic. It is not something that teachers write especially for their learners (i.e. popular songs are not usually written for learning purposes). Songwriters usually use the kind of language that is spoken every day so the lyrics of a song are usually a natural text containing idioms, colloquial expressions, informal structures and a range of pronunciation features.

By using different kinds of song-based activities and tasks, all three aspects of Communicative Language Competence (CEFR 2001) can be developed, i. e. the ability to use the linguistic system of English (linguistic competence), the ability to use an appropriate variety of the language according to the context and situation (socio-linguistic competence) and the ability to recognize the functions of the language and apply the principles according to which information is organized and sequenced (pragmatic competence).

Along with the aspects of Communicative Language Competence, all three learning domains as defined by Anderson and Krathwohl in 2001 (the cognitive domain), Krathwohl and Bloom in 1964 (the affective domain) and Dave and Armstrong in 1970 (the psychomotor domain) can be employed. If the learners repeat, memorize and recall the lyrics, try to understand and grasp the meaning, analyze or translate the lyrics or if they try to create new lyrics, the cognitive domain is targeted. Since music is connected with emotions and feelings, it is related to the affective domain. Lastly, when dealing with pronunciation and body movement, the psychomotor domain is engaged.

The research

We presume that popular songs are used in English classes but it is not clear how and why teachers choose to use them. Therefore, we conducted research to survey the situation in Czech lower-secondary and secondary schools by using a questionnaire for teachers. In concordance with our research question "*What are the beliefs of English teachers about using songs in their classes in Czech lower-secondary and secondary schools?*", we formulated 4 questionnaire items. We asked a closed-ended question about whether they use songs in their classes and if so, how often (question A); and open-ended questions to find out:

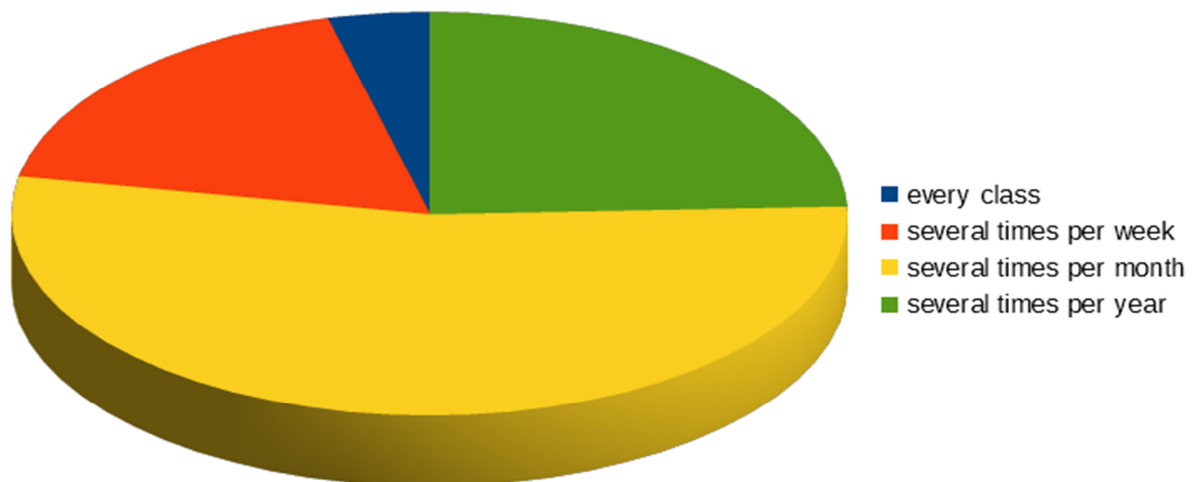
- what their opinion on using songs in ELT is (question B)
- what purpose songs can serve when learning English (question C)

- whether they take their learners' music taste into consideration when choosing the songs for the classroom (question D)

The findings of the research are based on the answers of 127 teachers who claimed they used songs in their lessons. Altogether there were 133 respondents, out of whom six stated that they never used songs. The majority of those questioned were lower-secondary teachers (116).

The frequency of song usage in English classes varies with different teachers. While 54 per cent of the respondents use songs several times per month and 24 per cent several times per year, 18 per cent several times per week and only four per cent of the teachers addressed use songs in each of their classes (see Figure 1).

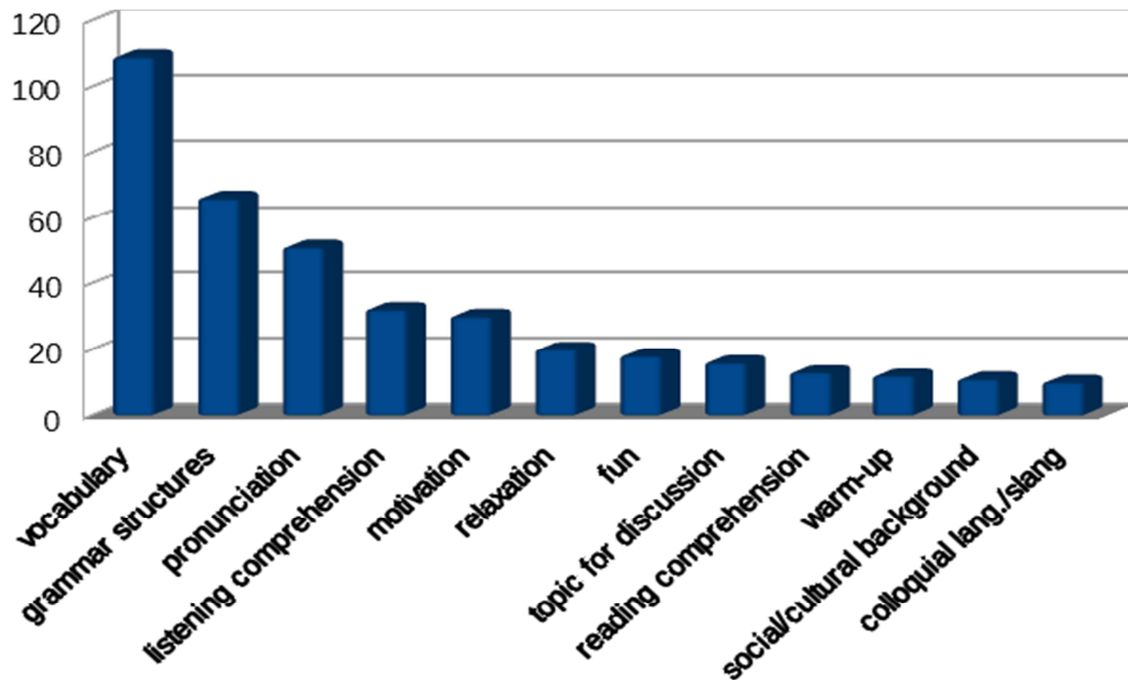
Figure 1: Frequency of song usage



The answers to questions B and C were analyzed with the intention to find out which aspects of the English language and the process of learning it can be targeted through song-based activities and tasks.

The majority of the teachers (109 out of 127) see the potential of songs in developing target language vocabulary and more than a half of the respondents (66) believe that songs can be used to explain and/or practice grammar structures. Nearly 50 per cent of the teachers involved (51) considered various features of pronunciation to be a possible aim of song-based activities and tasks. Among other aspects mentioned in the responses were the following: listening comprehension (32), motivation (30), relaxation and fun (20 + 18), topics for discussion (16), reading comprehension (13), warm up and ice-breaker (12), social and cultural background (11), colloquial language and slang (10), translation (6), authentic language (6), filler in transition times (4), introduction to different types of music (3), creative writing (3), memory training (1) and spelling (1). The most common answers are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Possible aims of song-based activities and tasks



Almost 82 per cent of the respondents said that they do take (at least partially) the learners' music tastes and interests into consideration when choosing songs and designing activities and tasks. Only 20 teachers claimed they do not use songs popular with the learners. Some of the reasons mentioned are that those often include impractical or inappropriate language, grammar mistakes, colloquialisms, or simply that the songs are not the teacher's taste.

The answers of the respondents revealed which particular aspects of Communicative Language Competence they believe can be developed and which learning domains can be involved through using various song-based activities and tasks.

Regarding linguistic competence, using song-based activities and tasks may improve lexical and semantic aspects (vocabulary, collocations, translation), orthoepic and orthographic aspects (spelling and pronunciation), grammatical aspect (various grammar structures) and phonological aspects (pronunciation). The authenticity of the language in the songs, the social and cultural background of the songs, the use of idioms and colloquial language can promote the development of socio-linguistic competence. Pragmatic competence can be fostered through activities such as reading and listening comprehension, creative writing, discussions based on the lyrics of the song and discussions based on the music video.

As for the learning domains, all three were present in the answers of the respondents: cognitive domain (vocabulary, colloquial language, grammar structures, translation, memory training, spelling, creative writing, listening and reading

comprehension); affective domain (choosing songs according to learners' taste, affecting the mood, fun, ice-breaker, motivation, positive atmosphere, social and cultural background, relaxation) and psychomotor domain (pronunciation, movement such as TPR).

To sum up, on the basis of the research findings we found out that a large number of teachers use songs in their classes. However, the potential of popular songs is not fully exploited. Although the respondents mentioned a wide range of aspects of English and the process of learning it, a vast majority see the potential of using songs in developing the vocabulary and grammar structures only.

In the research that was carried out, we surveyed teachers' beliefs. However, to examine the real situation in Czech lower-secondary and secondary schools, it will be necessary to analyze the song-based activities and tasks the teachers really used in their classes. We also plan to review song-based activities and tasks in the most commonly used coursebooks.

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