

## **Listening Activities Using Popular Music**

Maggie Lieb

Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan

### *Abstract*

*Throughout history, the link between music and language has been well established. Awareness of this link is growing, and many now acknowledge the connection between the key components of verbal interaction and the classical elements of music. Yet, music remains drastically underutilized as a pedagogical tool in language classrooms, arguably to the detriment of student success. Coupled with this is the high anxiety and lack of relevancy associated with EFL listening tasks among many East Asian EFL learners. Utilizing popular music in EFL listening tasks offers the potential to reduce anxiety, increase relevancy, and offer success opportunities by capitalizing on the interconnectivity between music and language. This paper offers a rationale for the use of music to enhance L2 listening and language learning in general, and describes a variety of popular music listening tasks that can greatly enhance English Language Teaching in any context.*

### **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged, in the field of general education, that successful teaching and learning is rooted in students' needs and interests. Furthermore, since education is concerned with contributing to the enhancement of the individual as a whole, it follows that pedagogical approaches should address not only cognitive needs, but also affective and emotional needs. Achieving these goals requires openness to a wide range of pedagogical approaches, both traditional and non-traditional. In the field of English Language Teaching, one "non-traditional" approach that holds enormous potential to enhance holistic language learning is the use of music. Yet, there are many, particularly in the Japanese EFL context, who resist the implementation of such non-traditional approaches. Compounding the problem is the perception among many Japanese that "if anything comes easily . . . it does not confer virtue" and "the ability to commit intense effort to a task and . . . devotion to hard work is the mark of virtue" (White, 1987, p.13). As a result of this "no pain, no gain" mentality, music, despite its potential as a valuable tool in the language teacher's arsenal, is drastically underutilized in Japanese language classrooms (Lieb, 2008). This, in turn, leads to the loss of valuable teaching opportunities, and may be detrimental to students' overall achievement. Therefore, this paper will offer a rationale for the use of music as a pedagogical tool in the language-learning classroom, based on the unmistakable interconnectivity between music and language. The author has chosen to focus in

particular on the use of popular music to enhance language listening development, and will suggest practical activities to accomplish this goal.

### **Music and language**

Music, as we know it, can be traced back to the musics of Ancient Greece, although the Greek notion of music was much more inclusive than the present-day concept. Believed to be “an intimate union of melody, verse, and dance” (Dickinson, 1909, in Stansell, 2005), music was believed to come from the muses, who used it to inspire spoken language such as epic, lyric, sacred, and love poetry, as well as comedy and tragedy (Bullfinch, 1913, p.22). Although modern ideas of music tend to be less inclusive, there remains an acknowledgment of the interconnectivity of music and language. Del Campo (1997, in Mora, 2000), for example, points out that the three key components of verbal interaction, (words, body language, and intonation) correspond directly with the three classical elements of music (verse, dance, and melody, respectively). This suggests that linguistic prosody is key in the communication of meaning. Studies of early childhood language acquisition further highlight the interconnectivity between music and language. Mora’s (2000) research suggests that rhythm and musical contours of language are mastered long before speech, and that this lays the foundation for the acquisition of linguistic components such as phonemes. Loewy (1995), in a similar line of enquiry refers to “Musical Stages of Speech” as evidenced by the work of Van Riper (1984), who observed the development of language from crying in babies, to babbling, to eventually using words. Even the field of brain research offers evidence of a musical-linguistic connection. Building upon Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory (1983), Zatorre, Evans, Meyer, & Gjedde (1992) suggested that the dual processes of phonological processing and pitch discrimination, vital to linguistic competency, are governed jointly by the musical and linguistic intelligences.

### **Music and listening**

Based on the nature of the musical-linguistic connection, it could be argued that it is in the teaching of listening and speaking that music holds the greatest potential as a pedagogical tool in the EFL classroom. Mora (2000) posits that central to both listening and speaking is efficient auditory discrimination, which facilitates processing of prosodic elements of language such as intonation, pitch, rhythm, dynamics and timber. This is of particular concern in contexts where the prosodic features of the L1 differ significantly from English (as is the case with Japanese). Since many English popular songs consist of 4-beat time signatures which correlate with the linguistic foundation of binary alternation, this offers Japanese students unique opportunities to subconsciously process the system of stressed and unstressed syllables in English (Palmer &

Kelly, 1992). Also, because of the pervasive nature of popular music, students are highly likely to receive continued intonation practice outside of class. Further involuntary rehearsal may take place because of the power of music to activate “A melodic ‘Din’ in the LAD (Language Acquisition Device) . . . or involuntary rehearsal of a foreign language in one’s mind” (Murphey, 1990). Murphey contends that when students experience the “Song Stuck In My Head Phenomenon” (SSIMHP), recall of linguistic prosody as well as vocabulary and grammar is greatly enhanced, due to enhanced “Comprehensible Input” (Krashen, 2003).

### **Perceptions of listening: Anxiety and relevance**

To fully appreciate the potential of music to enhance L2 listening, it is necessary to briefly examine the issue of listening anxiety. According to the Yerkes-Dodson Law (in Job & Dispano, 1991), high anxiety is detrimental to performance on difficult tasks. Since L2 listening is widely perceived as a difficult task by many Asian learners, and therefore provokes a high degree of anxiety, it follows that there is a great need for low-anxiety listening tasks that increase student confidence and prospects for success. The field of music therapy has long utilized music as a way to reduce anxiety, as have many in the business and commercial worlds. This author maintains that the power of music to “assuage and soothe” (Bancroft, 1985, p.4), should also be harnessed for use in the EFL classroom, to “create a relaxed, stress-free learning atmosphere” (Richards, 1993, p.109). Shimo (1992) also highlights the need to consider learners’ feelings and attitudes to increase positive associations and reduce anxiety. However, often the root cause of L2 listening anxiety is related to Japanese students’ desire to understand 100% of the message. This can also be addressed by designing musical listening tasks that invite students to engage in “essence” opposed to “precise” listening (Lieb, 2008, Murphey, 1992).

The other main obstacle to successful and rewarding L2 listening tasks among Japanese students in particular, is the perceived lack of relevancy of such tasks. Although they often have extensive experience in reading and writing as they progress through the school system, many Japanese students lack experience listening to native speakers. Because of this, there is often a lack of authentic L2 listening tasks, and those that are available are often irrelevant to students’ lives. Lamie (1998) claims that many students feel distant from listening materials currently available. However, since Japan is currently the largest importer of English language music in the world (Cullen, 2000), and since the vast majority of university students are interested in music, popular music offers a tantalizing opportunity to increase the relevancy of music to students’ lives. Popular music has the potential to become instantly meaningful for students as many of the lyrics contained therein consist of vague referents and lack of specificity that allow

students to attach their own meanings as they listen (Murphey, 1992), and relate to each song in a unique and individual way. Relevancy is further heightened by the fact that students are highly likely to seek out popular songs on their own (as mentioned earlier), and this encourages “out of class” associations crucial to language learning (Stansell, 2005).

In sum, popular music can be utilized to address the issues of anxiety and relevancy in L2 listening tasks, and help learners instead to “develop positive attitudes towards . . . listening skills” (Shimo, 2002, p.4).

### **Listening activities using popular music**

The following is a list of listening activities using popular music that have been designed and implemented by this author. All of these activities can be utilized with a variety of songs and in a variety of contexts.

#### ***(1) Sequencing lyric strips***

*Song:* Another Day in Paradise

*Artist:* Phil Collins

*Preparation:* Make enough copies of the song lyrics for each pair of students in the class (Appendix 1). Cut them up into pairs of lyrics and mix them up. Then paperclip them together for the students.

*Activity:* Pass out the sets of mixed-up lyric strips to the students. Play the song and allow them to arrange the strips in order.

*Wrap-up:* Review answers without music first, and follow-up by allowing students to sing the song with the CD. This provides multiple exposures to key words and expressions while, at the same time, enhancing pronunciation and rhythm.

*Notes:* The difficulty level of this activity can be adapted to any situation. For more advanced students, lyrics can be divided into lines or phrases, while for beginner students, strips can contain two, three, or more lines. Although this activity can be done individually, it works well when students complete it in pairs. As a collaborative activity, it reduces listening anxiety, and allows students to focus on “essence” rather than “precise” listening. Finally, the fact that some

lyrics repeat with minor alterations provides an extra challenge for all students – beginner and advanced.

## ***(2) Musical Bingo***

*Song:* Hey Jude

*Artist:* The Beatles

*Preparation:* Choose a selection of expressions from the song lyrics (10 – 12 for example). Make a bingo chart with 16 blank squares with the selected lyrics listed on the same sheet (Appendix 2).

*Activity:* Pass out the bingo chart with the expressions to the students. Tell them to write the expressions into the chart in random order. Tell them that they can write the same expression more than once. Then tell them you will play the CD and as they hear each expression, they should cross it off on their bingo sheet.

*Wrap-up:* Ask students how many of them scored at least one “bingo” (one row in any direction). Then ask how many scored at least two, three, etc. Keep going until there is a winner. Then replay the song and have them sing along with the full lyrics.

*Notes:* There is great flexibility in this activity as teachers can vary the number and type of expressions, focus on individual words or full sentences, or alter the number of squares on the bingo sheet. This activity also encourages students to focus on “essence” listening and should also be effective in reducing listening anxiety.

## ***(3) Gap Fill / Matching***

*Song:* Friday I’m in Love

*Artist:* The Cure

*Preparation:* Type the song lyrics and delete the days of the week from the first and second verses (Appendix 3). Mix the daily activities in each of the choruses so that students must listen and match the day with the activity.

*Activity:* Pass out the sheet with the gaps and matching activity to the students. Tell them they must fill in the blanks with the days of the week for the verses and match the days with the activities in the choruses. Play the CD, and allow them to complete the activity.

*Wrap-up:* Allow them to compare answers in pairs and then review answers with the class. Play the song again and have them sing along for added listening and pronunciation practice.

*Notes:* As this is a gap-fill activity, it could be construed as a type of “precise listening”. Limiting this type of activity to a certain category of words (in this case days of the week) and having students compare answers in pairs are effective ways to reduce anxiety. This particular song was also selected because it contains a lot of repetition that increases students’ listening opportunities.

#### ***(4) True/False and Comprehension Questions***

*Song:* Cats in the Cradle

*Artist:* Harry Chapin

*Preparation:* Prepare a series of true/false comprehension questions based on the lyrics of the song. Also prepare a list of comprehension questions. (Sample questions are included in Appendix 4).

*Activity:* Play the entire song for students, allowing them to listen for the "gist". Then pass out the true/false statements and have them listen again while answering the questions. Depending on the ability level of the class, review the answers at this point, or after they complete the next set of questions - comprehension questions which require them to write the answers.

*Wrap-up:* This song offers enormous potential for follow-up activities. After reviewing all answers, students could have group discussions based on the theme (a father who regrets not having taken the time to slow down and appreciate the significant events in his son’s life). This could also be used as a springboard for a writing assignment, and/or grammatical practice giving advice, "He should have . . . ,” etc.

*Notes:* Again, this activity could be adapted to the needs of any class. True/false questions tend to encourage more “essence listening” while the comprehension questions require more “precise

listening” for students needing a challenge. In any case, these activities are best suited to songs that tell a story, the lyrics of which could be used like any regular reading text.

### ***(5) Correcting Mistakes***

*Song:* It’s My Life

*Artist:* Bon Jovi

*Preparation:* Go through the lyrics of this song, replacing words with other words, in other words, making mistakes. Gap fills can also be included in some sections, with the missing words provided for reference (Sample activities are included in Appendix 5).

*Activity:* Pass out the lyrics to the students. Either individually or in pairs, have them listen to the song, correct the mistakes, and fill in the gaps.

*Wrap-Up:* After reviewing all answers with the class, have them listen to the song again, sing along, and notice the “corrected” mistakes.

Notes: This activity is particularly useful in cultivating auditory discrimination, especially if the “mistakes” sound similar to the original words. It is also advantageous to choose a popular song that students are familiar with, and have some idea of how the lyrics should sound. This gives them a better chance of successfully spotting mistakes. Of course, the difficulty level of this activity can be adjusted to any level of class.

### **Things to consider when choosing songs**

Selection of songs for EFL listening activities is very much a subjective process that depends almost entirely on the preferences of the teacher. That said, there are some factors that should be considered when choosing songs for classroom use. Paramount for listening activities, of course, is the clarity of the lyrics. Lyrics that are obscured by strong instrumentals and/or percussion are not effective for listening activities, and run the risk of frustrating students, thereby “losing the affective advantage” (Lieb, 2008). Even with lyrics that are clear, the difficulty level should be considered, as some songs contain highly idiomatic, or heavily inflected terminology that may be daunting for students. Students’ interests should also be considered, as most students have their own favourite English language musical artists. Also important is the suitability of the lyrics, especially in terms of messages students may consciously or subconsciously receive

regarding the target culture. While song selection is a highly subjective process, it would be advisable to avoid lyrics that are violent, profane, or subversive in nature. Song length should also be considered as most songs will need to be replayed numerous times. Songs that are 4 minutes or longer may make this a cumbersome process. Also, in the interests of sharpening students' auditory range, a variety of genres, styles, and tempos should be utilized. Teachers could also select songs based on the target language structure, as there are many songs that are ideal for certain grammatical structures and/or vocabulary lists. Included in Appendix 6 is a list of useful website that should be helpful to teachers in locating song lyrics and activities.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the value of music as a pedagogical tool, not only in the enhancement of L2 listening, but in English Language Teaching in general. Popular music in particular offers promising opportunities to address the issues of L2 listening anxiety and relevancy of listening activities. Indeed, the use of music in the language classroom can help to facilitate effortless processing of prosodic features of language, thereby capitalizing on the well-documented interconnectivity between music and language. If more ELT teachers in Japan appreciate the benefits of this “non-traditional approach,” the result can be a more holistic language learning experience that transcends the mundane and moves teachers and students in the process, in the same way that the Ancient Greeks were moved and inspired by the musics of the muses.

### **Biographical Statement**

**Maggie Lieb** teaches at Meiji University, Tokyo. She holds a B. Ed. Degree from St. Patrick's College, Dublin (National University of Ireland) and an M.A. in Reading/Language Arts from California State University, Chico. She has been teaching for 18 years in Ireland, the U.S.A., and Japan. Her research interests include musico-linguistic pedagogy, multiple intelligences, the affective domain, and intercultural communication.

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## Appendix 1. Lyric strips for Another Day in Paradise by Phil Collins

Probably been moved on from every place

Cos she didn't fit in there

---

Oh lord, is there nothing more anybody can do

Oh, lord, there must be something you can say

---

He walks on, doesn't look back

He pretends he can't hear her

---

Oh, think twice, its another day for

You and me in paradise

---

She calls out to the man on the street

"Sir, can you help me?"

---

She calls out to the man on the street

He can see she's been crying

---

Starts to whistle as he crosses the street

Seems embarrassed to be there

---

It's cold and I've nowhere to sleep

Is there somewhere you can tell me?

---

You can tell by the lines on her face

You can see that she's been there

---

Oh think twice, it's just another day for you,

You and me in paradise

---

She's got blisters on the soles of her feet

Can't walk but she's trying

---

## Appendix 2: Musical Bingo for Hey Jude by The Beatles

Write the following words and expressions into the bingo chart below, in any order. Then cross them off as you hear them in the song.

- \* don't carry the world
- \* on your shoulder
- \* don't let me down
- \* plays it cool
- \* you have found her
- \* remember

- \* don't make it bad
- \* take a sad song
- \* anytime
- \* make it better
- \* you feel the pain
- \* don't be afraid

- \* let her under your skin
- \* you know
- \* go out and get her
- \* let her into your heart


### Appendix 3. Gap fill / Matching for Friday I'm in Love by The Cure

*(Write the days of the week)*

I don't care if \_\_\_\_\_'s blue  
\_\_\_\_\_ 's grey and \_\_\_\_\_ too  
\_\_\_\_\_ I don't care about you  
It's \_\_\_\_\_ I'm in love

*(Match the days with the phrases)*

Monday	I'm in love
Tuesday, Wednesday	you can fall apart
Thursday	break my heart
It's Friday	doesn't even start
Saturday	always comes too late
and Sunday	never hesitate
But Friday	wait

I don't care if \_\_\_\_\_'s black  
\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ heart attack  
\_\_\_\_\_ never looking back  
It's \_\_\_\_\_ I'm in love

*(Match the days with the phrases)*

Monday	watch the walls instead
Tuesday, Wednesday	I'm in love
Thursday	stay in bed
It's Friday	you can hold your head
Saturday	never hesitate
and Sunday	wait
But Friday	always comes too late

Dressed up to the eyes, it's a wonderful surprise to see your shoes and your spirits rise,  
Throwing out your frown and just smiling at the sound,  
And as sleek as a shriek spinning round and round, always take a big bite  
It's such a gorgeous sight to see you in the middle of the night  
You can never get enough, enough of this stuff. It's \_\_\_\_\_ I'm in love.

**Appendix 4: T/F and comprehension questions for Cats in the Cradle by Harry Chapin**

*While you listen to this song, decide if the following statements are true (T) or false (F). Correct the false statements the second time you listen.*

- (1) \_\_\_\_\_ He learned to walk while I was at home.
- (2) \_\_\_\_\_ My son turned twelve just the other day.
- (3) \_\_\_\_\_ My son said, "Thanks for the ball, Dad."
- (4) \_\_\_\_\_ My son wanted to borrow my cell phone.
- (5) \_\_\_\_\_ I've long since retired.
- (6) \_\_\_\_\_ My son has free time to see me.
- (7) \_\_\_\_\_ My son's kids have the flu.
- (8) \_\_\_\_\_ My son is not like me.

*Listen to this song and answer the following questions.*

(1) Did the father see his son learn to walk? Why?

---

(2) What did the father say when his son asked him, "When you coming home, Dad?"

---

(3) What present did he give his son for his birthday?

---

(4) What did he say when his son asked him to play?

---

(5) What did the father say to his son when he came home from college?

---

(6) Why didn't the son sit with his father after he came home from college?

---

(7) Why couldn't the son see his father after he moved away?

---

(8) What occurred to the father at the end of the song?

---

(9) What do you think the message of this song is?

---

## Appendix 5: Correcting mistakes for It's my life by Bon Jovi

(Adapted from [www.esl-lounge.com](http://www.esl-lounge.com))

*Use these words to fill in the blanks. You will not use all of them.*

Money    voice    prayer    train    sun    song    face

This ain't a \_\_\_\_\_ for the broken-hearted  
No silent \_\_\_\_\_ for the faith-departed  
I ain't gonna be just a \_\_\_\_\_ in the crowd  
You're gonna hear my \_\_\_\_\_ when I shout it out loud

*Now find the 8 words that are wrong and correct them using these words.*

highway                    alive (x2)                    life (x3)                    way                    never

(Chorus)

It's my wife, it's now or always,

I ain't gonna live forever, I just want to live while I'm young

It's my wife, my heart is like an open market

Like Frankie said, I did it my best

I just wanna live while I'm young, it's my wife.

*Now, use these words to fill in the blanks. You will not use all of them.*

make    stood    believe    eating    getting    backed

This is for the ones who \_\_\_\_\_ their ground  
For Tommy and Gina who never \_\_\_\_\_ down  
Tomorrow's \_\_\_\_\_ harder make no mistake  
Luck ain't even lucky, got to \_\_\_\_\_ your own breaks

(Chorus)

*Now, use these words to fill in the final verse. You will not use all of them.*

calling    telling    bet    bend    back    break    stand

Better \_\_\_\_\_ tall when they're \_\_\_\_\_ you out  
Don't \_\_\_\_\_, don't \_\_\_\_\_, baby, don't \_\_\_\_\_ down

(Chorus)

## **Appendix 6: Useful websites**

ESL Through Music: [www.caslt.org/research/music.htm](http://www.caslt.org/research/music.htm)  
(great starting point - provides links to many of the sites listed below)

ESL Through Music: [www.forefrontpublishers.com/eslmusic](http://www.forefrontpublishers.com/eslmusic)  
(useful source of articles, materials, lesson plans submitted by teachers, books and CD's)

ESL Lounge, Songs for English Teaching: [www.esllounge.com/songstop/shtml](http://www.esllounge.com/songstop/shtml)  
(Good source of free song lyrics and activities)

Teaching Language With Music: <http://gs.fanshawec.on.ca/tlwm>  
(with "ESL Song Directory" available for download. stipulates that files are available with the understanding that they will be used for educational purposes only)

Teaching With Songs: [www.isabelperez.com/songs](http://www.isabelperez.com/songs)  
(30 songs complete with activities)

Song Lyrics: [www.songlyrics.com](http://www.songlyrics.com)  
(an excellent source of song lyrics, with music available for download after a 14 day free trial)