

NEW PERSPECTIVES: SONGS AS YOUNG ADULT LITERARY TEXTS¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates the use of contemporary popular songs that are of interest to learners. Primarily, it presents a study using a song for the development of comprehension skills and for examining issues in the song that are concerned with young adults. A focus on interactive and reflective learning processes enabled students to participate, exploit and experience the meaning of the texts for themselves. The use of the song also facilitated discussion and allowed students to connect personal experiences to the song, providing an avenue for presenting their thoughts in oral or written form.

Introduction

Teaching secondary students a second language is a challenging task. Although most of the instructional materials are prepared for learners, learners themselves as individuals are often not given much attention (Vethamani, 2002). Often students feel distant from the instructional materials that teachers use in the EFL or ESL classroom.

To instil students' interest in teaching materials, songs have been used in the language classroom because of their motivational effect on teenagers (Horner, 1993). However, songs used in the language classroom tend to be those written for the purpose of instruction and students usually get bored with them very quickly. In view of this, some teachers resort to the use of their own favourite popular songs in the classes, albeit with some problems. Some students view the choice of teachers' songs as being unfamiliar and uninteresting.

In this paper, I will present a case for using songs in the EFL classroom. The use of contemporary songs is advocated as they are of interest to learners and are effective learning instructional materials in the language classroom. The focus is on contemporary popular songs and not on teaching grammar items or vocabulary.

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Songs as Young Adult Literary Texts

There is no denying that students will be interested in a lesson in which their favourite popular song is used to teach the language. Besides the music, students are interested in songs which deal with issues related to their lives – the interests and concerns of young adults today. This salient feature of contemporary popular songs is in tandem with the themes expressed in young adult literature.

Young adult literature is a genre that presents the conflicts, life events and language use of young adults. More importantly, almost all the characters in the texts are young people (Bushman and Bushman 1997; Brown and Stephens 1995). In relation to young adult literature, eight common themes in young adult literature have been identified by Lukens and Cline (1995):

1. Becoming self-aware and responsible for one's own life.
2. Understanding marriage and parenthood.
3. Fostering hope despite differences.
4. Becoming aware of interdependence.
5. Dealing with a sense of isolation.
6. Judging by appearances.
7. Understanding the nature of society.
8. Acknowledging contradictions.

Learners, who are young adults, will be able to relate to these issues if these issues are present in the text used in their lessons.

Young adult literature is one of the genres that allows young adults to think and make connections to their lives. To help establish the relationship between texts and students' experience, McRae (1991, 1996) suggests that texts that are imbued with representational language be used. Representational language, as opposed to referential language, engages the mind and not merely informs the readers. The utilization of representational language learning materials allows for the affective domain to be drawn into the educational experience. Not only do these materials promote affective learning, they also encourage interaction between students and texts, among students themselves, between teachers and students, and students and society.

Songs are useful as representational materials. The lyrics are exploitable for interpretation and discussion. The best songs to use in the classroom are those which have a story and may contain a conflict, a point of view or certain social engagements or issues (McRae, 1991).

For the purpose of this paper, the song that will be discussed is *Somewhere I Belong* by Linkin Park, a contemporary popular music group. This song fulfils all the requirements of a young adult literary text. The representational language in the lyrics stimulates students to consider the ideas and connect them to their own experience. The song deals with young adult issues, especially those related to the sense of isolation and awareness of the responsibility towards one's life. Myers (1992) states that "literature gives strategies for living", and the song, *Somewhere I Belong*, can provide the needed "survival kit" for young adult listeners and learners.

Pedagogical Implications for the Use of Reader Response Theory

Fish (1980) suggests that texts in themselves do not have any meaning. According to reader response theory, the interpretation of the texts depends on several factors, such as the reader's knowledge of textual conventions, psychological, cultural, social and experiential experiences (Beach 1993). Generally, assumptions of reader response theory are based on the following:

1. Meaning is not contained in the text, but is derived from an interaction between the content and structure of the author's message and the experience and prior knowledge of the reader.
2. Readers comprehend differently because every reader is culturally and individually unique.
3. Examining readers' responses to text is more valid than establishing one correct interpretation of text meaning.

(Chase and Hynd, 1987: 531)

In reader response theory, the concerns are readers' thoughts, responses and feelings (Rosenblatt, 1991). Thus, using reader response theories, our learners can be invited to participate in the negotiation of meaning of the text. Instead of being recipients of information, they actively create meaning based on their experience and history (Probst, 1994).

The Study

An activity using a song was carried out with 84 low proficiency students from three English Language Proficiency classes. The students are all Malaysian Chinese in a tertiary institution, between the ages of 17 and 21 years. As all the students fall in the category of young adults, I chose a song that was of interest to them. The song that was used for the lesson was *Somewhere I Belong*, by an American group

called *Linkin Park*, a song that had the most airplay in Malaysian radio stations when the lesson was conducted.

In the class activities that were carried out, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing were utilised to elicit students' responses. This activity required students to read, listen to, and speak about the lyrics of the song. Finally, students were required to give a written response to the song. Students were constantly asked to relate their own ideas or experience during all the activities.

In the pre-listening stage, students were asked questions pertaining to their feelings. Before the actual listening activity, students attempted to complete the lyrics of the song by filling in the gaps, based on their reading and understanding of the lyrics (see Appendix 1, Activity A). During the while-listening stage, students needed to listen to the song while checking their answers (see Appendix 1, Activity B). Students were then asked several questions to ensure their comprehension of the lyrics. They answered the questions orally (see Appendix 1, Activity C). The questions in the comprehension activity ranged from literal to inferential questions, based on Barrett's taxonomy (Tollesfeson, 1989).

As a follow-up to the reading activity, students were given the following phrases: '*The song has reminded me about ...*' and were asked to complete the sentence and give a short written response to the song (see Appendix 1, Activity D). This activity was carried out to gauge students' understanding of the song and to give them the opportunity to connect the text to their own experiences. Students had a choice of presenting their responses in oral and written forms in all the above activities.

As a learner-oriented approach was used in this study, the questions were congruent with reader response and focused on personal response to the themes and ideas present in the text. This approach steered away from detailed linguistic study and encouraged students' participation in the creation of meaning in the text. It was hoped that by using this approach, students were able to make the text their own. As students could also relate their personal experiences to the lyrics of the song, the reflection and connection between the song and their lives will indirectly be useful for their personal growth (Carter and Long, 1991).

Analysis of Data

The analysis presented below is focussed only on the students' written responses in Activity D. Eighty-four responses were collected after the activity. Students' responses were categorised into three sections: expressing views of the song, relating personal experience to the song, and connecting to other songs. Fifty-five students expressed their views towards the song, while seventeen students related their

Table 1: Views of the song

No.	Expressed Views	Frequency
1	The importance of knowing oneself	10
2	The importance of looking for direction in life	6
3	Do not escape from problems	4
4	Think positively	4
5	Loneliness	3
6	Help express frustrations	3
7	The importance of freedom	3
8	Young adults have their right	2
9	The importance of finding own happiness	2
10	Concerns of survival in the future	2
11	Be strong	2
12	Making choices in life	1
13	Reflection is a part of life.	1
14	Learn to let go and to forgive	1
15	Be confident	1
16	Reason for committing suicide	1
17	Leslie Cheung	1
18	Urgency to solve problem immediately	1
19	“Happy is he who is content.”	1
20	Don’t be afraid of speaking up	1
21	Pain of a loser	1
22	Examinations	1
23	Take life easy	1
24	Thankful for being alive	1
25	An encouraging song	1
	Total	55

personal experience to the song. Besides this, ten students mentioned other songs that have the same theme as ‘Somewhere I Belong’. Two students wrote about their change in attitude towards English language songs.

Views of the Song

Generally, students see different positive messages encrypted in the lyrics of the song. They tend to present philosophical views about life and articulate mostly positive reactions towards the song. As shown in Table 1, ten students stated that “knowing oneself” is important. Six students indicated that it was important to look

for direction in life. Being positive and not trying to escape from problems were the next two recurrent ideas that students expressed. Other themes, such as loneliness, help express frustrations and freedom, young people have their right, the importance of finding own happiness, concerns of survival in the future and be strong, are the messages that students thought were present in the song. Out of twenty-five views only three were negative views. The other views of the song are given in Table 1.

Relating Personal Experience to the Song

As individuals' experiences vary, the responses from students provide different dimensions of their life. Most students related the song with previous bad or unhappy experiences. These experiences were mostly related to the family or school. Their responses showed that the home and school were the two places that were of importance in the students' lives. The reflective process in this activity also provided the writer a glimpse of the problems faced by his young adult learners. The learners seemed to lack self-confidence and the ability to assert themselves.

The students' responses, through the reflective process, also presented some positive remarks. Among these responses were: choose to be happy although life is difficult, be thankful for his or her friends, parents, freedom and trust for being in places when he or she belongs. Table 2 presents the complete list of students' association of personal experience to the song.

Connections to Other Songs

Using songs that appeal to learners can be a rewarding teaching experience as learners respond positively to that which they are interested in. As I was interested in finding out what other songs my students listen to, asking students to state titles of songs which have similar ideas proved quite useful. The students provided titles of songs, one of which was a song in Mandarin. Students also gave reasons why they chose these songs. The reasons that students gave were all positive as well. Among the songs that were mentioned were "I Believe I Can Fly" and "I'm With You". Table 3 provides the full list of songs and the reasons given by the students.

After the activity, two students indicated that they had changed their minds about English language songs. One student mentioned that this activity had encouraged him or her to look for a message in songs in the future. Another student suggested that listening to the song had changed his or her view towards hard-rock music. Besides discovering that English language songs can be interesting and meaningful, both students said they had actually found a new way to learn English.

Table 2: Relating personal experience to the song

No.	Experience	Frequency
1	In dream, a strong person; in life, a helpless person	2
2	Reminded of past experience (did not say what experience)	2
3	A friend who was lost	2
4	Accused of stealing classmate's money	1
5	Left alone at home by parents when small	1
6	An unhappy grandmother	1
7	Life is difficult but choose to be happy	1
8	Being bottom in the class	1
9	Lost before and it is part of growing up	1
10	Lost between social expectation and own desire	1
11	Confused in studies	1
12	Scolded by mother	1
13	Always look for the purpose of living	1
14	Appreciate friends, parents, freedom and trust because these are the places where I belong.	1
15	Bad experience when first moved into the residential school	1
16	Miserable and discontentment during younger days	1
17	Disappointment in love	1
18	Bad relationship with family members	1
19	A cousin who was lost	1
20	Lack of freedom	1
21	Dual personality	1
	Total	17

Discussion

The students responded positively to the activities carried out while working on a popular song. They immediately recognised the song when they read the lyrics in the handout. There was also enthusiasm on the part of the students as they wanted to know how the song would be taught in the class. Further, student involvement in all the different stages of the lesson was high and there was interaction between students and between teacher and students. Individual student's views were accepted. Students also appreciated the fact that some of them shared similar views.

Table 3: Connecting to other songs

No.	Title	Reasons	Frequency
1	I Believe I Can Fly	1. Perseverance 2. Confidence	1
2	I'm With You	1. Loneliness 2. Spend quality time with family	1
3	Do You Know What You Want?	1. Making choices 2. Confused in love	1
4	It's All Coming Back to Me	1. Love	1
5	Losing Grip	1. Need not worry about life 2. Be happy	1
6	Stronger	1. Be strong	1
7	Beautiful	1. Love ourselves 2. Be strong	1
8	<i>Min Tian Hui Gen Hao</i> (Mandarin Song)	1. Be positive 2. Encouragement	1
9	My Way	Learn how to protect oneself and do it in one's own way	2
	Total		10

Students' written work has shown that interactive and reflective learning processes have taken place. Students' general views of the song, the concerns in the song, and the students' personal experiences are related to the common themes that appear in the young adult literature. Most young adults are searching for their identity. The formulation of identity is a major task for young adults when they grow up (Erikson 1963). The changing social structure and human interaction have shaped their views of their surroundings. Being self-aware of their responsibilities towards their own lives and being positive are crucial in the process of their growing up.

Students' positive views towards the song show that they are able to identify the problems that are faced by the protagonist in the lyrics. They revealed their fear and confusion in life when they were asked to relate their personal experience to the song. However, when they expressed their views towards the song, almost all of them agreed that the song had positive messages. Students' views towards the song show that they acknowledge the importance of positive attitudes in life and the challenges that lie ahead.

The students' ability to connect with songs shows their ability of understanding different kinds of texts. Some students are able to compare, contrast and subsequently reorganise the information in different types of texts. Finally, the change of students' views of songs indicate students' discovery of a new learning tool besides the conventional language textbooks.

Conclusion

Rosenblatt (1991) suggests that the education of youth cannot be in the formal didactic manner. Instead knowledge should be imparted through experiencing, absorbing, accepting, incorporating in the personality through emotional and aesthetic experiences. Songs are good teaching tools and good motivational tools. They facilitate the learning of a language in interesting and effective ways (Murphey, 1992; Cranmer 1993; Hardisty, 1993; Horner, 1993; Laroy, 1993; Kaur, 2001). Most of our students, especially those who stay in urban areas, have access to this form of popular culture. Using a song that suits the teaching purpose but being able to not arouse interest among students is an activity done in vain. Therefore, songs that are chosen must be of students' liking. The melody of the song must be contemporary. The lyrics should be of students' interest too. Songs that touch upon young adult issues, such as isolation, frustration and certain ideology, are appropriate choices.

Young adults are in a state of uncertainty when they grow up. Using songs as texts to help them cope with the growing pains is of utmost importance. By adopting a learner-centred approach, students are able to participate, exploit and experience the meaning of the texts themselves. The interactive and reflective learning process will generate an abundance of language output from the students. Using songs as young adult literary texts to teach the language is a challenging task for teachers. It requires teachers to find out about students' lives and concerns and also about what songs they are listening to. It is a student-centred approach that can be rewarding for both the teacher and students.

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