

# LET'S PRACTICE PRONUNCIATION THROUGH SONGS!

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“Music, one of the joys of life, can be one of the  
joys of learning as well.”

Chris Brewer

## Introduction

Nobody can deny how powerful music is, it affects our feelings and energy levels in a great way. “Without even thinking about it, we use music to create desired moods -to make us feel happy, to enjoy movement and dance, to energize, to bring back powerful memories, to help us relax and focus” (Brewer, 1995). Throughout time, people have used sounds for different purposes, which has surely enhanced our learning and living in different ways.

Many people consider music to be a very important part of their lives; however, it is not often used in work and school. The teaching/learning process can become a very enriching experience if using music because it provides the necessary atmosphere for both, the teacher and the students. In addition, it has the power to create interesting and fun activities everybody in the classroom will enjoy.

Songs have become an integral part of our language experience; therefore, they constitute a very useful tool in the language setting. They are a great source for improving language skills as well as learn more about the culture. “Music exposes learners to rich content, language, culture and has a tendency to relax the students and create a comfortable atmosphere in which these areas can be absorbed” (Reimann, 2006).

## Theoretical Background

There are many different advantages on the use of songs, which include establishing a positive learning state, energizing learning activities, increasing attention, improving memory, releasing tension, enhancing imagination, developing inspiration and motivation, and adding an element of fun. Songs usually have simplified and colloquial language, use natural rhythm, stress, intonation, contractions, slang, expressions, idioms, authentic material and communicative repetition, which help to build vocabulary and other language structures in a stress-free manner.

Language classes can become tedious sometimes and a good solution to turn them lively is listening to music. “Songs offer a change from the routine procedures in the classroom. They are invaluable tools to develop students’ language abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing and can be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythms, adjectives, adverbs and so on” (Lo and Li, 1998).

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According to Stephen Krashen, comprehensible input and a low affective filter are necessary for acquisition to take place. Comprehensible input is defined by Krashen as “that bit of language that is heard / read and that is slightly ahead of a learner’s current state of grammatical knowledge” (200). The notion of the affective filter claims that if the filter is high, input is prevented from passing through; if the filter is low, the input will reach the acquisition device and acquisition will take place.

Considering Krashen’s notion of the Input Hypothesis, in which he states that we acquire language instead of learning it, songs become a great opportunity for students to acquire the new language. Foreign language teachers need to change the traditional learning-based activities, and use the acquisition-based comprehensible input more due to developments in the second language acquisition theory.

Music can be really helpful as comprehensible input for students because it makes them understand the language better and acquire new rules. Besides, it has the power to motivate learners and make them feel more relaxed. By creating a low affective filter and an interest in what is to be learned, songs become a great tool for teachers when dealing with language.

Since motivation is an essential factor in a second language classroom, students need to feel encouraged to learn and use the language in different real-life situations. Therefore, it is the teacher’s responsibility to help learners find this motivation in them and provide activities in class so that extrinsic motivation takes place. Any person who is learning a L2 knows how challenging this process is and so, having interesting and fun activities such as listening to songs becomes the key for success.

The effects of music (including all kinds of songs) on the emotions are commonly known, but the effects of music on the brain and thinking have also been proved. “Research has shown that during an electroencephalogram (EEG), music can change brain waves and make the brain more receptive to learning. Music connects the functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain so that they can work together and make learning quick and easy” (Rahman).

In 1983 Howard Gardner, psychology professor at Harvard University, presented his Multiple Intelligence theory based on many years of research. Gardner has claimed that there is not just one intelligence, but different forms of it. Multiple Intelligence teaching methods recognize eight forms of intelligence: visual-spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and most recently naturalist. This has definitely changed the way teaching and learning have been considered to be for years. Nowadays, teachers are more aware of the need to offer a variety of activities in the classroom to fulfil students’ needs.

Development of the musical intelligence can be greatly aided by the use of songs throughout the curriculum. “In addition to learning about musical elements and how to create music, the musical intelligence involves developing an ability to respond to musical sound and

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the ability to use music effectively in one's life" (Brewer, 1995). Besides, listening to songs in class contributes to the different learning styles students have. Through the use of several activities with songs, visual, aural as well as kinaesthetic students can learn English the way they need it.

Songs are regularly used by language teachers for purposes such as grammar practice, listening comprehension, vocabulary enhancement and even as inspiration for writing exercises. Why not use it to help students improve their pronunciation in English? When studying a second or foreign language, it is essential to have a good pronunciation so that communication is achieved. Students at all levels should work on their pronunciation skills to assure success in the language. However, most of the time pronunciation is not considered as necessary as the four skills and is therefore, often left behind in a teacher's planning of lessons.

Miyake (2004) has claimed, "Pronunciation has been called the Cinderella of ELT (being locked away and out of sight). One of the criticisms of pronunciation teaching is that it is thought to be boring. Perhaps this is due to the dominant image of audio-lingual methods drilling minimal pairs". If speaking is such a necessary skill when learning a second or foreign language, pronunciation should be as well. They go hand-in-hand into having the accomplishment of being understood.

Pronunciation plays a very important role in language learning because even if grammar and vocabulary are used correctly, if the sounds of vowels and consonants and aspects such as intonation, linking, rhythm and stress are not produced accurately, the intended message cannot be delivered. This leads to misunderstanding and as a consequence, failure in communicating and frustration from the learner. Song lyrics are different from other kinds of texts because they are closely linked with rhythm, which makes them incredibly useful for teaching different pronunciation aspects in a natural way. All the features of connected speech and reductions can be easily identified and practiced through songs, which pronunciation can be contrasted to isolated words.

Willing (1988) has stated that recent investigations of language learners' demands in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language have shown that pronunciation is one of the highest-ranking aspects of student interest in many different countries (cited in Miyake, 2004). In surveys conducted and by teaching experience, it is well known that students frequently mention a desire to understand the speech of native speakers, and to sound like native speakers themselves.

Students learning English as a second or foreign language might have difficulties in pronunciation depending on their native language and how similar its sounds are. Spanish speakers, for instance, find it hard to pronounce vowel sounds such as /ə/ and recognize the difference between /i:/ vs. /ɪ/ and /u:/ vs. /ʊ/. Regarding consonants, making the distinction

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between /b/ vs. /v/ vs. /f/, /è/ vs. /ð/ and /ʔ/ vs. /? / is what represents the biggest challenge to them. By listening to songs, Spanish speakers can learn to identify these sounds and understand the difference among them. In addition to vowels and consonants, they can comprehend connected speech by analyzing assimilation, linking and reductions; and other aspects such as -ed endings since song lyrics provide lots of examples.

Nowadays, any song lyrics can be easily found in the Internet, so language teachers have access to an infinite variety of music to bring to class. How to choose the songs then? It is important to think about the students. Which level are they in? How old are they? What kind of music/songs do they like? In addition, it is essential to evaluate the song to be used. Does the rhythm make it understandable? Is the singer's voice clear enough? What is the speed of the song? How about the language used? There are many different aspects that, if well chosen, provide the teacher and students with a great opportunity to practice the pronunciation in English.

The use of music in the classroom requires instructors to carefully select the songs to use. The students' level is highly important to take into account; short and slow songs should be used with beginners so that it is easier for them to understand. On the other hand, advanced students would feel more challenged if songs have a certain degree of difficulty. Moreover, the students' age is as significant because obviously adults and teenagers would not like to listen to a childish song. A very important aspect that can be left out is students' likes. Many teachers decide to use songs in classes, but they choose the ones they like. If using songs students feel attracted to, there would be more stimulus; hence, it is definitely something to consider. "Students are often strongly motivated to learn the lyrics of a new pop song or an old favorite they have heard and never understood, so their choices for classroom music should not be overlooked" (Lems, 2001).

Besides keeping in mind students' level, age and likes, teachers should analyze the song they want to bring to class. Evaluating the song's level of difficulty, its content, vocabulary, rhythm, pace, popularity and artist is of importance because it can determine the attitude students have towards it, as well as success in the objectives. "Songs should be pre-screened for potentially problematic content, such as explicit language, references to violent acts or sex, or inappropriate religious allusions" (Lems, 2001).

Through the use of different songs and activities related to them, teachers can help their students distinguish difficult sounds and improve their production. This is an innovative way of making learners more aware of the importance to have a good pronunciation in English and practice it while having fun. Music is a fantastic source all language teachers can have access to and which will definitely make a difference in the classroom.

Being a Spanish speaker myself and having learned English as a foreign language, I have found songs a really valuable tool for improving my pronunciation. As a current EFL teacher, I have been able to notice the obstacles Spanish speakers face when producing certain English sounds and supra-segmental features. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to provide English instructors with a variety of activities using engaging songs for both teenagers and young adults. By focusing on the pronunciation, students will understand to distinguish minimal pairs in both, vowels and consonants. At the same time, they will be more familiar with connected speech, which will lead to a better understanding of native speakers and the obtainment of a native-like accent.

Now let's take a look at a single song and the way it could be presented in class for different pronunciation aspects Spanish speakers find very difficult. Instructors, of course, can make changes and design other activities. The song "Sand in my Shoes" (Dido), as well as many others, could be used for identifying differences in vowels, consonants and other pronunciation aspects such as assimilation, linking, reductions and -ed endings. The following are some ideas for English teachers to use with students and help them practice their pronunciation in the target language.

**Choose the correct pronunciation in parenthesis**

**Vowels /i?/ vs. /I/**

Two (/wi?ks/ /wIks/) away (/fi?lz/ /fI?lz/) like the whole world should've changed  
 but I'm home now, and (/èi?ngz/ /è?ngz/) (/sti?l/ /stI?) look the same  
 I (/èi?nk/ /è?nk/) I'll (/li?v/ /I?v/) it (/ti?l/ /tI?) tomorrow to unpack,  
 try to forget for one more night  
 that I'm back (/i?n/ /In/) my flat on the road...

**Classify the underlined words according to their pronunciation**

**Vowels /u?/ vs. /?/**

I've still got sand in my shoes  
 and I can't shake the thought of you  
 I should get on, forget you  
 but why would I want to  
 I know we said goodbye,  
 anything else would've been confused  
 but I wanna see you again

/u?/	/?/

Fill in the blanks with the correct words

Schwa /ə/

Tomorrow's back to \_\_\_\_\_ and down to \_\_\_\_\_  
should run a bath and then clear up \_\_\_\_\_ mess  
I made before I left here  
try to remind myself that I \_\_\_\_\_ happy here  
before I knew that I could get on a plane and fly \_\_\_\_\_  
from \_\_\_\_\_ road where \_\_\_\_\_ cars \_\_\_\_\_ stop going through  
\_\_\_\_\_ night  
to a life where I can watch \_\_\_\_\_ sunset and  
take my time, take all our time

Complete with the correct words given in the chart below

Consonants /b/ vs. /v/ vs. /f/

Two weeks away \_\_\_\_\_ like the  
whole world should \_\_\_\_\_ changed  
\_\_\_\_\_ I'm home now, and things still look the same  
I think I'll \_\_\_\_\_ it till tomorrow to unpack,  
try to \_\_\_\_\_ one more night  
that I'm \_\_\_\_\_ in my \_\_\_\_\_ on the road  
where the cars \_\_\_\_\_ stop going through the night  
to a \_\_\_\_\_ where I can't watch the sunset,  
I don't \_\_\_\_\_ time, I don't \_\_\_\_\_ time

flat* never * but * feels * have (2) * for * 've * forget * back * life
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Choose the correct symbol and write the number on the space provided

Consonants /θ/ vs. /ð/

1. /θ/

2. /ð/

Tomorrow's back to work and down to sanitation  
should run a /bæ\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_εn/ clear up /\_\_\_ə/ mess I  
made before I left here  
try to remind myself /\_\_\_æt/ I was happy here  
before I knew /\_\_\_æt/ I could get on a plane and fly away  
from /\_\_\_ə/ road where /\_\_\_ə/ cars never stop going /\_\_\_ru□/ /\_\_\_ə/ night to  
a life where I can watch /\_\_\_ə/ sunset  
and take my time, take all our time

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Select the correct transcriptions and write the words

Consonants /ʃ/ vs. /tʃ/

Two weeks away feels like the  
whole world \_\_\_\_\_ 've \_\_\_\_\_  
but I'm home now, and things still look the same...  
I've still got sand in my \_\_\_\_\_  
and I can't \_\_\_\_\_ the thought of you  
I \_\_\_\_\_ get on, forget you  
but why would I want to...

1. /ʃʊd/
2. /ʃeɪk/
3. /ʃuɒz/
4. /tʃeɪndʒd/
5. /ʃʊd/

Write the symbol of the sound you hear

Assimilation

I've still got sand in my shoes  
and I can't shake the thought of you I  
should get on, forget you  
/\_\_\_\_/  
but why would I want to  
I know we said goodbye,  
anything else would've been confused but  
/\_\_\_\_/  
I wanna see you again

Write the word you hear and the -ed ending it belongs to

-ed Endings

Two weeks away, all it takes,  
to change and turn me around I've fallen  
I \_\_\_\_\_ / / away, and never said,  
that I \_\_\_\_\_ / / to see you again

Draw the symbol (◡) to show the linked sounds and classify them

Linking

Two weeks away feels like the  
 whole world should've changed  
 but I'm home now, and things still look the same I  
 think I'll leave it till tomorrow to unpack,  
 try to forget for one more night  
 that I'm back in my flat on the road  
 where the cars never stop going through the night to  
 a life where I can't watch the sunset,  
 I don't have time, I don't have time

CONSONANT+CONSONANT	VOWEL+VOWEL	CONSONANT+VOWEL

Fill in the blanks with the sounds you hear

Reductions

I \_\_\_\_\_ still got sand in my shoes  
 and I \_\_\_\_\_ shake the thought of you I  
 should get on, forget you  
 but why would I want to  
 I know we said goodbye,  
 anything else would \_\_\_\_\_ been confused but  
 I \_\_\_\_\_ see you again

This last activity could be used with advanced students or those who take Pronunciation courses, and therefore need to know the IPA symbols very well. It is very useful for practicing the symbols and improving their pronunciation.

Order the slips of paper according to the song

Transcription

/tra? tu? ri?'ma?nd ma?'s?lf ðæt a? w?z 'hæpi? hi?r/  
 /tu? ? la?f ? ?r a? kæn w?t? ð? 's^ns?t/  
 /b?'fo? r a? nju? ðæt a? k? d g?t ?n ? ple?n ænd fla? ?'we?/  
 /t?'m?'ro?z bæ:k tu? w?rk ænd da?n tu? sæn?'te??n/  
 /?? d r^n ? bæè ænd ð?n kli?r ^p ð? m?s a? me?d b?'fo? r a? l?ft  
 hi?t/  
 /ænd te?k ma? ta?m, te?k ?l ?r ta?m/  
 /fr^m ð? ro? d ? ?r ð? k?rz 'n?v?r st?p g???? èru? ð? na?t/



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All these activities were done with the same song to make emphasis on how a single one can be used for different purposes. Of course depending on the aspect to be practiced, teachers should carefully choose the song to make sure it provides many examples and it is adequate to the students' level, age and likes.

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Annex  
"SAND IN MY  
SHOES"  
DIDO

Two weeks away feels like the  
whole world should've changed  
but I'm home now, and things still look the  
same I think I'll leave it till tomorrow to unpack,  
try to forget for one more night  
that I'm back in my flat on the road  
where the cars never stop going through the night  
to a life where I can't watch the sunset,  
I don't have time, I don't have time

(Chorus)

I've still got sand in my shoes  
and I can't shake the thought of  
you I should get on, forget you  
but why would I want to  
I know we said  
goodbye,  
anything else would've been confused  
but I wanna see you again

Tomorrow's back to work and down to  
sanitation should run a bath and then clear up the  
mess I made before I left here  
try to remind myself that I was happy here  
before I knew that I could get on a plane and fly away  
from the road where the cars never stop going through the night  
to a life where I can watch the sunset  
and take my time, take all our time

(Chorus)

I've still got sand in my shoes  
and I can't shake the thought of  
you I should get on, forget you  
but why would I want to  
I know we said  
goodbye,  
anything else would've been confused  
but I wanna see you again (x2)  
I wanna see you again

Two weeks away, all it takes,  
to change and turn me around I've fallen  
I walked away, and never said,  
that I wanted to see you again

(Chorus)

