

Songs as a Tool for Developing Students' Descriptive Writing Skills

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Abstract

With the ready availability of music videos via online video-sharing sites, teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can draw on an enormous quantity and variety of such videos as listening, language learning and language development resources. Since students find it familiar and enjoyable to view such music videos, they tend to respond enthusiastically to learning activities that make music videos and songs the focus. This article discusses two learning activities with songs as the focus: (1) Grammar pattern and creative writing combination exercises and (2) Descriptive language devices. In the first activity, the conditional tense is featured prominently in The Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice", and students are given a set of frames in which they can insert their own ideas to generate writing topics. In the second, descriptive linguistic devices like adjectives describing sense details and vivid verbs are highlighted in The Eagles' "Hotel California," after which students use a story frame to insert their own ideas to write a creative story.

Introduction

Students in the humanities program at Nagasaki University are required to take the English Communication classes (I~3), and come from many different departments including Pharmacy, Medical, Nursing, Economics, Education, Fisheries, Environmental Science. Given the compulsory nature of these classes, students' attitude toward their participation in the classes is often one of passive acceptance, and it can often be a challenge to motivate them to study. With the ubiquitous influence of social networking sites and video-sharing sites, teachers have a ready source of enjoyable and authentic English learning materials to engage the interest of

students. Not only are music videos in particular a great source for audio-visual input for student listening activities, the songs themselves are a wellspring of descriptive language and multi-word expressions. In addition, students can explore cultural differences when viewing videos and listening to songs.

Combining Grammar Patterns and Creative Writing

One use of English songs used by the author in his English Communication classes involves a song with numerous examples of the conditional tense. The lyrics for the song, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” by The Beach Boys, are shown in Appendix 1. This activity is conducted in four stages. In the first stage, students read the song lyrics, along with the Japanese translation. In the second stage, students search the lyrics for examples of the conditional tense. Figure 1 shows the instances of the conditional tense in the lyrics:

Figure 1: Conditional Tense Usage in “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” lyrics

1. *Wouldn't* it be nice *if we were* older?
2. Then we *wouldn't* have to wait so long
3. *Wouldn't* it be nice *if we could* wake up
4. Happy times together *we'd* be spending
5. *I wish* that every kiss *was* neverending
6. Maybe *if we* think and wish and hope and pray it *might* come true
7. Baby then there *wouldn't* be a single thing we *couldn't* do
8. We *could* be married
9. And then *we'd* be happy

In the third stage of the activity, students watched the music video. In the fourth stage, students were given a set of conditional sentence frames in which they could insert their own word ideas to form a topic about which they then write as a creative writing exercise. The sentence frames given students are shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Conditional Sentence Frames for Creative Writing Topics

Writing Topics: (こうだったら---まず仮定分を作って、そしてその仮定が事実になった世界を想像して、その話を作って下さい。)

(1) *Wouldn't* it be nice if I had-----, Then I would/could-----

[**Example:** *Wouldn't* it be nice I had unlimited money? Then I would/could.....

“ “ “ a twin “ “

(2) Wouldn't it be—(形容詞)---if there was-----? Then we'd---
[Example: Wouldn't it be cool if there was a special door to take you anywhere in a second?
“ “ “ “ life on another planet? Then...
“ “ “ “ a machine to tell us what others were thinking?

(3) Wouldn't it be—(形容詞)---if I was (a)-----? Then I could-----
[Example: Wouldn't my life be different if I was born in China. Then...
“ “ “ “ “ a boy instead of a girl?
Wouldn't the world be better if everybody-----
Wouldn't Japan be a better country if-----

(4) Wouldn't -----be-----if I could---/if I had---/if I was---Then---
[Example: Wouldn't it be exciting if I could be somebody else for one day? Then...

Figure 3 shows sample student-generated topics using the conditional form:

Figure 3: Student-generated topics using conditional form

Wouldn't it be sad if there was not animals? Then we'd be bored when we go to anywhere.

Wouldn't my life be different if I did not have a interest in drawing? Then I could not enjoy drawing, it meanted there was not my good point.

Wouldn't it be nice if I had played soccer more earlier. Then I could more enjoy soccer.

Wouldn't it be exciting if I was in family with brothers or sisters and parents? Then I could speak a lot in my house.

Wouldn't it be sad if I was a totally blind person.Then I could not enjoy art things.

Wouldn't it be nice if I were born in area which was spoken in English

Wouldn't it be nice if people's hearts never turned cold.

Wouldn't it be nice if we were always full of joy!

Wouldn't it be fun if I could chat with many animals.

Wouldn't the world be different if everybody lives in one island and no culture or religion?

Then we would be same life and I couldn't feel cultural differencies. So I think this is so boring.

Wouldn't it be nice if I had more considerate younger brother ? These days, He sometimes says "Shut up " to me

Would't be happy if there are an island which don't require any home work for us, I could spare more time for my family.

Wouldn't be peaceful if there was no war or conflict?

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a machine which can operate the weather? then we'd hang out the laundry anytime.

Raising student awareness of descriptive language

Another useful application of song lyrics in stimulating student's language awareness and development is found in songs that tell a story and set a scene using descriptive language such as adjectives and vivid verbs. One song which is an excellent source of descriptive language is The Eagles' song "Hotel California". (The lyrics to the song are shown in the Appendix 2) This is a popular song from the 1970's. The 1970's were known in the US as the "Me Decade," in which, as a reaction to the political and social activism of the 1960's, people tended more toward introspection, private pursuits and, in extreme forms, hedonistic indulgence and drugs and sexual promiscuity. This trend was especially strong in California - life was just a party, no responsibilities - a big hotel! This song is about the dark side of that lifestyle - including drug abuse, which was especially prevalent in the 1970's. This activity is conducted in four stages. In the first stage, students read the song lyrics, along with the Japanese translation. In the second stage, students search the lyrics for descriptive words and images. By way of explanation, students are reminded that descriptive words tell us how something *looks, sounds, feels, smells* and *tastes*. Images in this case are defined as words, phrases or sentences that paint a picture and enable the reading/listener to imagine the scene clearly. After the teacher has invited selected students to come to the front and write the descriptive words and images they found on the whiteboard, the remaining examples are identified by the teacher. All of the examples of descriptive words and images are shown in Figure 1:

Figure 4: Descriptive Language & Images in "Hotel California"

<p>How it looked Dark desert / in the distance / shimmering / my sight grew dim /</p>
<p>How it sounded / What he heard I heard the mission bell / There were voices down the corridor / voices are calling from far away</p>
<p>How it felt cool wind in my hair / my head grew heavy / sweet summer sweat</p>
<p>Images There she stood in the doorway / Then she lit up a candle / mirrors on the ceiling / pink champagne on ice / stab it with their steely knives / I was running for the door</p>

In the third stage students watch the video of the song being performed in concert. The last stage, the students are given a story frame with a basic outline of the story

with blank spaces followed by the appropriate word called for by the context in parenthesis. The frame is shown in figure 3 below:

Figure 5: "My-----Evening" Creative Writing Outline

My-----Evening
<p>Last weekend, I had a/an _____ (adjective) night. _____ (someone you know) and I decided to go to a movie, and then get something to eat. On the way to the movie theater, we saw a _____ (noun). It/he/she was _____ (adjective) and it was _____ (what was it doing?) _____ (adverb) at/towards us. We were really _____ (feeling), and so we _____ (verb) it.</p> <p>The movie we saw was set in _____ (name or type of place), which was a (adjective) _____ place. In the movie, _____ (famous person) falls madly in love with _____. It was love at first sight, and they decided to _____ (verb). But then _____ (famous person) discovers that _____ is really a (shocking thing) _____ which is why s/he is always _____ (something s/he's always doing). When s/he discovers this, s/he decides that s/he must _____. I thought it was a _____ (adj) movie.</p> <p>After the movie, we went to a restaurant called "The _____ (adjective) _____ (animal). There were some very unusual foods on the menu. We asked the waiter about some of them. First we asked about _____ (strange food#1). The waiter said, "Oh, that's _____ (adjective). Then we asked about _____ (strange food#2). The waiter made a/an _____ (adj) face and said, "Well, that one is _____, (adj.) but it's also somewhat _____. (adj) Finally, I decided to order the _____ (strange food #3) _____. I will never forget the way it tasted!! It was very _____ (adj) and also _____. (adj) I put too much _____ (something you put on food) on it and I had to drink a lot of _____. After I ate it, I felt _____.</p> <p>I will never forget that _____ (adj) night. After I got home, I wrote, "I don't think I will ever _____ (verb) _____ (person's name) again!" in my diary.</p>

The students are given the option of choosing their own words to fit each blank, or finding one in a sample list at the end of the print. The list of hints and words are shown in figure 6:

Figure 6: List of possible word-choices by part of speech:

Examples

1. (what kind of evening?) amazing / surprising / unusual / exciting / weird / strange / cool / interesting / relaxing / scary / fun / funny / exhilarating 気分を浮き立たせる・そうかいな/ thrilling わくわくさせる, 感激的な, スリル満点の /
2. bank robber / spaceship / creature from another planet / monster / naked man / fire / giant gorilla / giant cake / flock of killer birds / flying car / witch / hobbit / man dressed as a woman / rock band / [your own idea.....]
3. Adjectives short, funny-looking, big, mean-looking (意地悪そう), friendly/ happy/ old, frail-looking (もろい, はかない, 体が弱っている) armed (=凶器持ちの), masked (仮面をかぶった) dangerous, bald (はげた), silly-looking(見たら笑わないでいられない) chubby (まるまる太った, 丸ぼちゃの) pudgy (ずんぐりした, 太った) clumsy-looking (ぎこちない, 動きの鈍い) red / reddish-brown / square / huge (=immense/enormous/gigantic)/ bird-like / bat-like / ape-like / snake-like / Slimy (ぬるぬるした, 粘性性の) / fuzzy (けぼのような, けぼだった) / sleek (なめらかな, つやのある) / Shiny (ぴかぴかの) well-dressed (着飾った) / gooey (べたべた[ねばねば]する) / transparent (透明な) / shaggy (毛深い, 毛むくじゃらの) furry (柔毛質の) evil-looking, timid (おずおずした) bug-eyed ((驚いて)目を丸くした) scaly (うろこのある; うろこ状の) sexy-looking / ugly / horrible (恐ろしい) / gruesome (ぞっとする) suspicious-looking (怪しい)
4. Verbs laughing / smiling / grinning (歯を見せて笑う)/ making ___faces / making noises/ moaning(うめく) / growling(うなる) / charging(〈人に〉チャージする) / glowing(光を放つ)/ sparkling (きらめく) / shimmering(ちらちら光る) / flickering(明滅する) / singing / floating (漂う) / staggering (よろよろ歩く) / stumbling (つまづく) / zooming (ブーンと音を立てて走り過ぎる) / slithering(ずるずる滑る) / snarling(歯をむきだして)うなる) / screeching(聞き苦しい鋭い叫び声をあげる) / snorting(鼻を鳴らして荒い息をする) / running / dancing / spreading(広まる) / looking / grunting(〈豚などが〉ブーブー鳴く) / melting(溶ける) / vibrating (振動する) / flying / pounding(ぼんぼん鳴らす) / crackling(パチパチ]音をたてる) / blazing(燃え立つ) / rolling (転がる) / bouncing(弾む) / skidding(横滑り) / aiming at (狙う) / skipping (跳ね回る; スキップする)
5. run away from / sample (味見する) / steal / try / flirt with (いちゃつく) / tickle (くすぐる) give (it) a (present / manicure / massage / kiss / hug / haircut / nickname /...) get in / take a bite of / run away together / get married / fight with / attack /
6. Adverbs loudly / happily / cheerfully / hysterically(ひどくおかしい, 笑いの止まらない) / ominously (陰悪に) / mischievously (いたずら好きな, わんぱくな) / quietly / warmly / sweetly / shyly / strangely / ferociously (凶暴) / fiercely (猛烈に) / furiously (激しく) / suddenly / softly / briefly / brightly / passionately (情熱的に) / peacefully / beautifully / badly / blankly (ぼんやりと, ぼかんとして) / angrily / quickly / frantically (半狂乱で) / blindly (やみくもに) / mysteriously (なぞめいた) longingly (あこがれの) helplessly (どうすることもできず, 力なく) intensely (熱烈な, 強烈)

<p>7. Food adjectives crispy (パリパリ[カリカリ]する)/ spicy / creamy / rich / moist (適度に水気のある, しっとりした)/ crunchy (ザクザクと音がする)/ fresh / soggy (生焼けの, ふやけた)/ stale (新鮮でない, 古くさい) / mouldy (かびた; かび臭い)/ juicy (汁の多い)/ tender (柔らかい (↔tough).) / roasted / baked / bitter/ tangy (ぴりっとする)/ tart ([おいしく]酸っぱい) / sour ([おいしくない]すっぱい)/ salty / sweet / smoky (こぼしい)/ minty / dry / leathery (ひどく硬い)/ slimy / chewy / tasty /</p>
<p>8. Feelings moved (感動した)/ touched (感動した)/ confused / ecstatic (有頂天の)/ angry / disgusted (胸くそを悪くした)/ terrified (恐れた)/ embarrassed / enraged (ひどく怒った)/ ashamed / lovestruck (一目で惚れた)/ jealous / surprised / shocked / amused / curious/ sad/Happy / sorry (for it) / sick / depressed</p>
<p>9. Place Adjectives beautiful / great / wonderful / dangerous / terrible / strange / hot / Warm / cool / cold/ remote = out-of-the-way(へんぴな) / relaxing / polluted (汚染がひどい) / dry / tropical unusual / unique / uplifting / inspiring /</p>
<p>10. Making__noises strange / animal / machine / computer / funny / buzzing / banging</p>
<p>11. Making__faces cheerful / friendly / funny / rude / sly / secretive / silly /</p>
<p>12. Verb + Adverb Examples Smile (warmly/shyly/mysteriously/strangely...)/ Moan ominously / Laugh (hysterically/helplessly/happily/shyly/...)/ Growl (ferociously/fiercely/...)/ Charge (furiously/suddenly/...)/ Glow (warmly/brightly/...)</p>

The aims of this exercise were (1) to raise students' awareness of the wide range of descriptive language available to convey a vivid impression of particular phenomena; and (2) to enable students to see language as a source of pleasure, not merely as focus of anxiety over correct or incorrect answers.

Conclusion

In this article the argument was made that the proliferation of video-sharing sites provide teachers with a valuable resource for interesting and authentic language input, namely, music videos. It was argued that in particular, two features of English songs are beneficial to students' language development. The first benefit is in combining grammar patterns and creative writing. The song "Wouldn't It Be Nice" by The Beach Boys was cited as an example of this. In the lyrics of this song, the conditional tense is featured numerous times, and after students searched the song to find all examples of this, they were given a creative writing exercise. The second benefit of songs cited in this article is in raising students' awareness of the wide range of linguistic devices in

descriptive writing including sense adjectives, vivid verbs and verb-adverb combinations. In future articles the author will explore assessing the degree of appropriate modifiers for a given context.

Appendix 1: “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” lyrics

Wouldn’t it be nice if we were older?
Then we wouldn’t have to wait so long
And wouldn’t it be nice to live together
In the kind of world where we belong

You know its gonna make it that much better
When we can say goodnight and stay together

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could wake up
In the morning when the day is new
And after having spent the day together
Hold each other close the whole night through

Happy times together we’d be spending
I wish that every kiss was neverending
Wouldn’t it be nice

Maybe if we think and wish and hope and pray it might come true
Baby then there wouldn’t be a single thing we couldn’t do
We could be married
And then we’d be happy

Wouldn’t it be nice?

You know it seems the more we talk about it
It only makes it worse to live without it
But let’s talk about it

Wouldn’t it be nice?

Goodnight, my baby
Sleep tight, my baby

Appendix 2: "Hotel California" lyrics

On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance, I saw shimmering light
My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim
I had to stop for the night
There she stood in the doorway;
I heard the mission bell
And I was thinking to myself,
'This could be Heaven or this could be Hell'
Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way
There were voices down the corridor,
I thought I heard them say...

Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place (Such a lovely place)
Such a lovely face
Plenty of room at the Hotel California
Any time of year (Any time of year)
You can find it here

Her mind is Tiffany-twisted, she got the Mercedes Benz
She got a lot of pretty, pretty boys she calls friends
How they dance in the courtyard, sweet summer sweat.
Some dance to remember, some dance to forget

So I called up the Captain,
'Please bring me my wine'
He said, 'We haven't had that spirit here since nineteen sixty nine'
And still those voices are calling from far away,
Wake you up in the middle of the night
Just to hear them say...

Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place (Such a lovely place)
Such a lovely face
They're livin' it up at the Hotel California

What a nice surprise (what a nice surprise)
Bring your alibis

Mirrors on the ceiling,
The pink champagne on ice
And she said 'We are all just prisoners here, of our own device'
And in the master's chambers,
They gathered for the feast
They stab it with their steely knives,
But they just can't kill the beast

Last thing I remember, I was
Running for the door
I had to find the passage back
To the place I was before
'Relax,' said the night man,
'We are programmed to receive.
You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!'