

A REFLECTION ON HOW MUSIC AND SONGS ARE USED IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This purpose of this article is to reflect and document what I have noticed music and song can do in my International Baccalaureate (IB) Higher- level literature classroom. The emphasis was on how music and song lyrics can be used to teach poetry. As a literature teacher I am aware of the importance poetry plays in our lives. I am also aware of the difficulty and complexity of this genre. Luckily, teaching poetry does not need to be a daunting task if music and song can be incorporated. Like poetry, song lyrics can “awaken our senses, connect us with ourselves and others, link familiar images with strange ones and transform the way we see commonplaces” (Zwicky, 2000; Peacock, 1999). As this was not an academic research there was no data collected. The only evidence is the written commentaries done by students over the two- year duration of the course. If their commentaries show deeper understanding of the poetic devices, greater sensitivity to the use of language and a wider cultural appreciation, then I believe that incorporating music and songs into my teaching has had a positive impact on my students.

Introduction

According to Gardner, in his book “Frames of Mind” (1983) there are eight distinct intelligences namely- linguistic, spatial, kinaesthetic, logical, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. All humans possess these multiple intelligences in varying degrees. If this is true, teachers should be taking into account these individual differences when preparing or delivering lessons. However, in the course of my teaching, I noticed teachers placed great emphasis on the linguistic, logical and spatial intelligences. The other intelligences were sidelined most of the time.

My observation was echoed by Mora (2000) when he applied Gardner’s multiple intelligences hypothesis specifically to language teaching. Mora went on to assert, “Students should not only be taught to increase their verbal, spatial and numerical intelligences, but also to nurture their musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.” His assertion clearly showed that there was a disparity with the other intelligences. Thus, for language teaching and learning to be effective and to cater to individual differences, teachers need to take a more all-encompassing approach that looks into the multiple intelligences of children.

This realisation on the importance of the other intelligences became more apparent when I had the opportunity to visit and observe two Tamil preschool children having an English lesson. They were singing, clapping, nodding and moving their bodies in tune with the alphabet song and nursery rhymes. The children were completely engaged, enjoying each other’s company and having fun. Beaton (1995) reiterated my observation when he noted, “a child’s anxiety is decreased and confidence is increased when chanting, singing or clapping either in large circle groups or smaller group exercises.” He also commented that this benefit can “collectively exert a deep effect on the overall learning outcome.”

If early childhood practitioners can see the importance of using music, rhymes and songs to develop children’s communication, literacy and language skills, why does this practice stop at secondary and high school? If music and songs have such a positive impact on preschool

children then surely it can have a similar effect on older children. So what is stopping teachers in primary, secondary and college from using music and songs in their language classrooms? Gardner's (1983) claim that musical intelligence runs in an almost structural parallel to linguistic intelligence further reinforced Beaton's claim.

The evidence supporting the use of music and songs in the teaching of English made me stop and reflect on my own language teaching methods. Unfortunately, as the years went by I got into a comfort zone and became complacent. After all my students were not complaining about my teaching methods so why rock the boat at this stage?

Background

However, in 2009, Taylor's decided to start the International Baccalaureate Programme (IBDP) in Sri Hartamas. I was asked if I would like to take the challenge and move from teaching Language in the Cambridge 'A' Level programme to teaching Literature in the IB programme. Though my degree is in English Literature, I had never taught Literature since graduation. I accepted the offer and in July 2009 I had my first batch of 24 IB students.

The IB programme is structured in a unique way in that it is compulsory for all students to do English Literature in Group 1 irrespective of whether they are from a science or humanities background. The problem I encountered was that many of the students, with the exception of a few, who took Literature at either SPM or 'O' Level, came with no background in Literature. The course itself was demanding and required students to read 10 works at Standard Level (SL) and 13 works at Higher Level (HL). For many of them this was a daunting task. I was faced with the challenge of not only getting them to read and enjoy the selection of works but to also find a way to engage them and make them enthusiastic readers cum learners.

The 10 or 13 works for the Literature course are selected from the Prescribed List of Authors. This course consists of four parts. Part 1-Literature in Translation, where works written in a foreign language and translated into English are studied. This part is assessed through a 1500 word essay. Part 2- Detailed Study, consists of works from three different genres. These works are studied in detailed and examined orally. Part 3- Genre Study, focuses on one literary genre. Students study and sit for a final written exam (Paper 2). Part 4- Options, the three works selected by the teacher are not necessarily from the Prescribed List of Authors. This part is assessed orally. Finally, all students sit a written exam for Paper 1 which is an Unseen Commentary. This paper consists of a prose passage and a poem. Students choose one genre and write a critical commentary.

What I Have Learned from Distant Colleagues

When I started with the 2009 cohort, I did not encounter any problem teaching drama, the novel and short stories but I found it difficult to teach Poetry. This fact is asserted in many research papers by Andrews (1991), Benton (1999) and Pike (2000) who all pointed out that teaching poetry is more difficult than any other genre. Students were intimidated by this paper; even those with literature background showed little confidence when dealing with this component. After this batch sat their final exams in 2011, I was forced to re-think the approach I used to teach poetry. So while I did give the matter some thought, I never took any concrete action. When the results were released, I obtained 100 percent passes. I was quickly reassured that my approach was effective and there was no reason to change something that was working well and giving me the desired results. This again put me into a comfort zone, a zone I did not come out from until 2013.

In late 2013, I came across Gardner's (1983) 'Frames of Mind' in our Hartamas library. Browsing through the book, the chapter on "Musical intelligence" caught my eye. The opening

line in this chapter states, 'of all the gifts with which individuals may be endowed, none emerges earlier than musical talent.' This view coupled with my personal observations of the Tamil preschool classes years earlier, made me reflect on my teaching methods once again. This time around, I was beginning to find my approach jaded and I wanted to try something new. Furthermore, since my first batch in 2009 the teaching of the poetry component was still a challenge for me and my students.

In July 2015, I was given only the Higher Level class to teach, while the Standard Level class was given to another teacher. Generally, the HL classes are much smaller in size and easier to work with. This provided the opportunity for me to experiment with this batch. At this point I knew I wanted to use music and songs to teach, engage and develop their literary proficiency.

I tried looking for articles and research carried out on the use of music and songs to teach poetry to young people between the ages of 17-19. Unfortunately, there was very limited material in my area of interest. What I noticed though, was that there was an abundance of information, articles and research on the use of music in the early childhood language curriculum, in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms for both children and adults. The lack of research in this area reiterated what I had already noticed years earlier, that as students move into the higher classes/levels, music and songs are no longer seen as a viable teaching tool. This observation of mine was also echoed by Murphey (1992) who said, "in our time, it is hard to escape music and song as it occupies ever more of the world around us: in operating theatres, restaurants and cafes, shopping malls, at sport events, in our cars and literally everywhere. It would seem that the only place music and song is slow to catch on is in schools".

Clarifying My Action Research Project

It was this gap that I wished to address in my Action Research. I wanted to see if music and songs can be just as effective a tool to teach literature as it has been in teaching language. I specifically wanted to use music and songs in the teaching of poetry and poetic devices to IB students. Hence, my Action Research question, "A reflection on how music and songs are used in the literature classroom."

This project involved the July 2015 intake students. I was given the Higher-level (HL) class that year. There were only six students. Out of this number two students had done Literature at 'O' Level, the rest were doing it for the first time. So, I was also keen to find out if the use of music and songs would have a positive impact on these four students who did not have a literature background.

HL students have 4 hours of class each week. The project was conducted during this time for a duration of one month between July - August. This one month is crucial because students need to quickly become familiar with the poetic and literary devices. This knowledge is necessary to enable them to be confident and proficient when doing their written commentaries. As mentioned earlier, this is Paper 1- Unseen Commentary which is examinable in the final exam.

At this juncture, let me define the terms 'song' and 'music'. According to Griffiee (1992) in his book, 'Songs in Action', he refers to 'songs' as pieces of music that have words, especially popular songs such as those one hears on the radio. 'Music' on the other hand refers to instrumental music. In my project I used both instrumental and popular songs.

The data collected was in the form of their written commentaries which my students are still doing every two weeks and will continue to do until their final exams in May 2017. However, the intention of this project was not to collect data but merely to provide my students with a

fun, less intimidating way to identify and understand the poetic devices so as to be able to incorporate them in their commentaries.

The Roadmap of My Action Research Project

Each year I begin the IB English course by teaching the poetry component. In the earlier years, I used to introduce this component by throwing the student into the deep end of the pool by giving the students a poem and asking them to read and try to make sense of the poet's use of language and intended meaning. My approach was more like a flipped classroom. Then based on their response I slowly 'unpacked' the literary devices one by one and tried to get them to understand how these devices that poets used worked to create the effect and impact they wanted to communicate to the readers. This method of teaching the poetic devices went on for almost a month. Each week, the students were given one poem to identify the devices, analyse their effects and to discuss with their partners. This was more or less the method which prevailed for the next 3 years albeit with different poems. On hindsight, this must have been very boring as well as an intimidating experience for all the students irrespective of whether they had a literature background or not.

It was becoming more noticeable that the new students coming into college were becoming increasingly more plugged into music. They all had headphones on and were listening to music either on their smart phones or laptop computers. This was a common sight when students were moving from one class to the next or when working on their assignments. Even in class when written work was assigned, out came the headphones and smart phones.

We all grew up listening to music and songs by our favourite bands and the young people today are no different. Perhaps what was different was the repertoire of music they were exposed to. They could be listening to anything from pop, rock, hip hop to techno, indie, grunge and numerous other new age music. Since music was an integral part of their lives, present everywhere and available anytime, I realised it would be the most viable teaching tool to use, as students would be able to identify with the music and appreciate the song lyrics.

The Story of My Action Research Project

So finally in 2015, I began my foray into using music and songs to introduce the poetry component. As mentioned earlier, I had 6 students so it was easy to implement and see the project come to fruition.

I began by teaching them the Poetic devices. Below was the list of songs I used to teach the different poetic devices.

Title of Song	Singer
1. Fireworks	Katy Perry
2. Roar	Katy Perry
3. Grenade	Bruno Mars
4. Ironic	Alanis Morissette
5. Diamonds	Rihanna
6. Mean	Taylor Swift
7. Shake it Off	Taylor Swift
8. Cat's in the Hat	Harry Chapin
9. Annie's Song	John Denver

First, I played the songs and got them to relax and enjoy it. Then, I played the music video with showed the lyrics so they could follow the song or even sing along. Next, we discussed the words used and the reason for such a choice. This is a useful way to get students to think

of the many layers of meaning a word can have. This led to a discussion on the denotative and connotative meaning of the words and phrases in the song. Next, I got them to discuss what they thought was the singer's intended message (theme) in the song and to explain how they knew this.

After I did this with a few songs, I introduced them to the literary terms and poetic devices (diction, metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration, onomatopoeia, imagery) and identified these in the song lyrics. This exercise was repeated with different songs over four lessons. When they were confident with these devices, I moved on to the complex ones which Higher Level students needed to know. Devices such as hyperbole, enjambment, anaphora, epiphora, assonance, repetition, rhyme, and symbolism were introduced and identified in the song lyrics.

Here is an example of how the song lyrics for '**Fireworks**' by **Katy Perry** can be analysed:

Do you ever feel like a plastic bag	simile
Drifting through the <u>w</u> ind, <u>w</u> anting to start again?	alliteration
Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin	metaphor
Like a house of cards , one blow from caving in?	simile
Do you ever feel already buried deep?	anaphora
<u>S</u> ix feet under <u>s</u> cream but no one <u>s</u> eems to hear a thing	alliteration
Do you know that there's still a chance for you	
Cause there's a spark in you?	
You just gotta ignite the light and let it shine	internal rhyme
Just own the night like the 4th of July	simile
Cause baby, you're a firework	metaphor
Come on, show 'em <u>w</u> hat you're <u>w</u> orth	alliteration
Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh	
As you shoot across the sky	hyperbole
Baby, you're a firework	
<u>C</u> ome on, let your <u>c</u> olors burst	alliteration
Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh	
You're gonna leave 'em falling down	
You don't have to feel like a waste of space	simile
You're original, cannot be replaced	
If you only knew what the future holds	personification
After a hurricane comes a rainbow	
Maybe you're reason why all the doors are closed	symbolism
So you could open one that leads you to the perfect road	
Like a lightning bolt , your heart will blow	simile, hyperbole
And when it's time, you'll know	
You just gotta ignite the light and let it shine	
Just own the night like the 4th of July	internal rhyme
Cause baby you're a fire <u>w</u> ork	
Come on, show 'em what you're <u>w</u> orth	assonance
Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh	
As you shoot across the sky	

Baby, you're a firework
Come on, let your **colors burst**
Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh
You're gonna leave 'em falling down

synaesthesia (visual, tactile)

Boom, boom, boom
Even brighter than the **moon, moon, moon**
It's always been inside of **you, you, you**
And now it's time to let it through

onomatopoeia
repetition
repetition

Cause baby you're a firework
Come on, show 'em what you're worth
Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh
As you shoot across the sky

Here is another example taken from Magical Musical Tour: Using lyrics to teach literary elements by Lisa Van Gemert, for the Mensa Foundation's Gifted Children Specialist on how song lyrics can be used in class.

Annie's Song by John Denver

You fill up my senses like a night in the forest. → **what is a night in a forest?**

like the mountains in springtime, → **what senses are engaged?**

like a walk in the rain. → **How can a person make you feel this way?**

like a storm in the desert. → **what happens when it rains in the desert?**

like a sleepy blue ocean. → **Is the ocean always blue?**

You fill up my senses, come fill me again. → **What image of Annie is Denver trying to convey?**

Come let me love you,

let me give my life to you,

let me drown in your laughter, let me die in your arms,

let me lay down beside you,

let me always be with you.

Come let me love you, come love me again.

You fill up my senses like a night in the forest,

like the mountains in springtime, → **what is the difference between the**

like a walk in the rain → **mountains n spring versus winter?**

like a storm in the desert

like a sleepy blue ocean. → **Why 'sleepy' not stormy?**

You fill up my senses, come fill me again. → **How does this line change**
→ **When I tell you Annie and**

John eventually divorced?

When we had gone through most of the poetic devices, I asked my students to give me a list of their favourite songs. These were some of the songs on their lists and the literary device present in each song.

Title	Artist	Literary Device
I See Fire	Ed Sheeran	Personification, repetition
Death of a Bachelor	Panic at the Disco	Symbolism
Mockingbird	Eminem	Diction
New York City	Chainsmokers	Personification
Breezeblocks	Alt J	Metaphor, diction
No Surprises	Radiohead	Simile, metaphor
Retrograde	James Blake	Anaphora, repetition
Bittersweet Symphony	The Verve	Metaphor, symbolism
Home by Now	Bombay Bicycle Club	Symbolism, repetition
Don't You Cry For Me	Cobi Caillat	Oxymoron, metaphor
Tears	Clean Bandit	Simile, personification
Gold	Kiiara	Repetition, simile
Buffalo Soldier	Bob Marley	Alliteration, internal rhyme
Writings On The Wall	Sam Smith	Rhetoric, personification
Take Me to Church	Hozier	Metaphor, simile
Numb	Marina and the Diamonds	Alliteration
Unconditionally	Katy Perry	Anaphora
Seven Years	Lukas Graham	Metaphor, end rhyme
Flashlight	Jessie J	Contrast, metaphor
Chandelier	Sia	Repetition

I looked through this list and watched the music videos to ensure that the lyrics were appropriate for classroom consumption. Then I got each of them to select one song and do an oral presentation. This exercise was done over two lessons. Students were required to identify as many of the poetic devices as possible in their chosen song and explain the theme, meaning and impact diction had on the listener. Through their presentations and from the questions the class asked, I was able to gauge their understanding.

Once I noticed the students were able to analyse the song lyrics and identify the poetic devices, they were introduced to proper poems. I always start with the poem "Blessing" by Imtiaz Dharker and "The Daffodils" by Wordsworth. When they begin to read, understand and analyse the poem, I get them to draw the similarities between song lyrics and the words in the poems. When they are no longer intimidated by the language and words in the poem because they see it as song lyrics, they are more confident and better able to analyse the poem.

In conclusion, I was glad my first attempt at using songs had gone down well with my class. Using song lyrics has proven to be an effective and engaging way to teach the poetic devices. As one of my students puts it, "It is less scary and so much fun." Another student said, "It's easier to see how the poetic devices function when used in song lyrics." I encourage teachers to use songs to teach not just poetic devices but any subject or topic. You will be pleasantly surprised at how much more engaged your students will become.

Here is a suggestion for teachers who want to use music and songs to teach poetry.

Making the link with Poetry

- 1) At the start of the course get students to post 3 of their favourite songs on the class face book page. This collection will provide a 'song bank' which will be useful for teaching as well as for providing background music when doing written work.
- 2) For the next two weeks, one student's favourite song from the list will be featured. The teacher picks the song and the student is notified to prepare for the presentation. The student is required to provide an overview, give their personal interpretation, identify the themes and the literary devices. Provide 20 minutes for this activity each lesson.
- 3) In the next two weeks of the course, get students to post 3 poems on the class face book page. Similar to the 'song bank.' This 'poetry bank' will be used for teaching, discussing and writing commentaries.
- 4) One student will again be selected to talk about the poem and give his/her personal and literary interpretation, identify the poetic devices, themes and rhyming schemes. Remind students to see the similarities between song lyrics and poetry.
- 5) Keep doing these exercises until they become confident and proficient in the literary elements. This will ensure that they approach the Unseen Commentary with no fear or reservations.

At this point it is interesting to note that what started out as an 'experiment' to teach poetic devices soon crept into the other parts of the IB Literature course. In January 2016, I began Part 1- Literature in Translation with my 2015 intake students. Students were required to study works in foreign languages that had been translated into English. Depending on the works we studied, I asked the students to do research on the historical, cultural (food, festivals and music), social and economic aspects of the country and do a presentation to the class.

The first work we did was a Japanese author, Kawabata's "Thousand Cranes." To get the students into the mood, the soothing and haunting music of Kitaro's "Heaven on Earth" was played not only to enjoy the piece but to get them to appreciate the importance the Japanese gave to balance, harmony and the connection between Man and Nature. This was necessary so that they could easily make the connection with Kawabata's novel. One of the students translated the *Impressions of the West Lake* which was in Mandarin to English and did a presentation about this beautiful love story for the class. Though it was a Chinese song, the cultural elements were similar to the Japanese culture. These activities allowed them to see that lyrics were not always necessary to appreciate songs and that instrumental music can have as big an impact on the listener as songs with lyrics.

This activity was well received and when we started on the next work which was Algerian literature, the students took the initiative to source for various Algerian music. These songs were played in class and in this case it prompted a discussion on the musical instruments that were observed in the music videos. The same process was carried out for our next work, Russian literature.

Music in this context serves to build connections between people and to make us more appreciative, understanding and tolerant of our diverse cultural differences. As Griffiee (1995) rightly puts it, "bringing a song into the classroom entails bringing the culture of the song with it". Thus, "songs can be used as a way of looking at a culture and comparing it with other

cultures". Griffie sums this up when he states, "songs are part of what makes a generation a generation and the current generation is a global generation rather than a parochial one. The world is evolving a common culture and pop songs are its backbone. By using pop songs in your classroom, you and your students are participating in the emerging world culture". His view was also shared by Failoni (1993) and Mishan (2005) who felt, "music, while universal, is culturally specific in that the musical content and style mirror a particular culture, acting as a cultural artefact that may both reflect and influence that culture".

Recently, I used the song *Vincent* by Don McLean to teach yet another important aspect of the IB curriculum. Theory of Knowledge (TOK) is a subject that cuts across the whole curriculum and teachers and students are required to make meaningful connections with the Areas of Knowledge (Mathematics, Natural sciences, Human sciences, History, The Arts, Ethics, Religious knowledge systems and Indigenous knowledge systems) and the Ways of Knowing (sense perception, reason, emotion, faith, imagination, intuition, memory and language).

I projected Van Gogh's painting, 'Starry Night' on the screen. Then I gave them time to write 5 things they noticed about the painting. Then they had 5 minutes to share their observations with their partner. Next, I gave them the song sheet containing the lyrics to the song *Vincent*. I asked them if the lyrics brought the painting to life. Had their initial impressions of the painting changed? Now, I played the music video of the song by Don McLean and asked if listening to the song had changed their perception of how they viewed and now see the painting. Finally, I asked, "What ways of knowing had contributed to their response"? "What ways of knowing did the songwriter and artist use"?

It was an interesting experience for me to deal with TOK using song. The reaction and response of the students were encouraging and I would definitely find more songs to touch on the many other Areas of knowledge and Ways of knowing in the months to come.

Further Reflections and Continuing Questions about My Action Research Journey

For the current July 2016 intake, I have 7 HL students. Three of them do not have literature background. But this time, I decided that I would not be the one introducing poetic devices to the class. They were going to learn this from the four who had done literature. All seven had to choose one favourite song and do a research on the singer. They had to find out the background of the band, background of the singer and the songwriter's motivation for writing the lyrics to the song. Finally, they had to explore the layers of meaning or message the singer wanted to convey to the listeners. When this was completed, the four who had literature background were made to do their presentations. They were asked to highlight the poetic and literary devices in the song lyrics and explain them to their three classmates.

My job was merely to reinforce the student's explanation and to provide more examples to strengthen their understanding. Some of the songs that the four students did their presentations on were *The Sound of Silence* by Simon and Garfunkel, *Try* by Cobi Caillat, *Vanilla Twilight* by Owl City and *The A team* by Ed Sheeran.

After these presentations, the three remaining students did theirs. The songs they choose were *Sweater Weather* by Neighbourhood, *Fight Song* by Rachel Platten and *Ordinary People* by John Legend. I was quite frankly impressed by their presentations and surprised at how quickly they were able to identify the devices just by listening and observing the presentations of their peers earlier.

This made me wonder if I was spending too many lessons teaching the poetic devices. Should I take a more student centred approach? Is giving ownership to students with Literature

background to teach their peers without Literature background a good approach? These are some of the questions I will have to reflect and work on with this current batch and with subsequent new intakes.

When all the presentations were completed, students were given a Song Analysis sheet. They were required to pick one of their peers' presentation and do an analysis. In the future, I will require them to do a commentary on the selected song. This will help prepare them when it comes to writing proper poetry commentaries.

With this July 2016 batch I went a step further in my exploration of using music and song lyrics by not only identifying poetic devices but other literary elements as well. I made them look for literary "sound" elements like rhythm, meter, tone and mood in their song choices. This will also enable them to be more sensitive to how the poem 'sounds' when they start writing poetry commentaries

My only concern about using songs to teach is the time it takes to vet the lyrics and watch the music videos to ensure their suitability for use as a teaching tool.

Conclusion

I like to conclude by listing some of the effects I have observed when using music and songs in my literature classroom. Firstly, playing music in class has had a positive impact and is a good way to release tension and to get students ready for the learning task at hand. "This is the only lesson I feel happy to come to", "music makes me feel good", "this is so cool" are just some of the positive comments that have encouraged me thus far. Secondly, I have found that allowing them to listen to their own song when doing their written commentaries in class has helped them stay alert and focussed on the task. Thirdly, playing instrumental or classical music when students are writing their commentaries can improve their imagination and personal reflection. Fourthly, "pop song lyrics are fluid, and like poetry allow for different interpretations" Moi (1994). Finally, playing songs of different genres and listening to the lyrics can stimulate the different senses and affect them mentally, physically and emotionally. This is an important precursor for the study of poetry, where the student has to be sensitive to the diction, connotations and imagery used in the poem and how our senses are affected. One of my students from the 2016 intake had this to say about the use of songs, "learning about the literary devices through songs has definitely helped me look at the written words or lyrics from a more technical point".

I hope this piece of Action Research provides some evidence or insight on how music and songs can be introduced and incorporated into the teaching of not just language and literature but the other subjects too. My advice to my colleagues is not to be sceptical but be willing to try something different. This generation identifies with music and as educators half our battle is won if we use tools they can readily relate to in order to motivate and inspire them.

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