

Promoting Creative Thinking, Speaking, and Writing in the EFL Classroom Through the Use of Instrumental Music

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In recent years, the use of alternative media in the EFL classroom has become commonplace. From graphic-heavy computer software to slick videos and sing-along music, teachers—particularly in situations where student motivation is lacking—have been opting for increasingly diverse methods of instruction in hopes of boosting the ability, participation, and enthusiasm level of their students. Drawing on previous experience using instrumental music with native speakers, I first began experimenting with the use of instrumental music in the EFL classroom on the hunch that providing students with the tools to react creatively in English would somehow be as beneficial as any other form of alternative media exercise I could conceive of.

Fortunately, the results of these exercises surpassed my initial expectations. I found that students were not only extremely interested in the material; in addition to expressing themselves creatively in English, they were also motivated to learn new vocabulary and to attempt increasingly descriptive sentence combinations. The activities simultaneously boosted student enthusiasm and provided an opportunity to explore creative thinking, writing, and speaking in their target language. An unforeseen benefit was the internationalization that came through the use of soundtracks that crossed many cultures and genres; through the exercises with instrumental music, many had their first contact with sounds, cultures, and lifestyles.

Background and Methodology

Our daily lives are full of curiously predictable soundtracks: perhaps Mozart is what your mother listens to while she gets dressed in the morning, Metallica is your cousin's music of choice while driving on the highway, and listening to Natalie Cole helps you fall asleep. In an elevator you may hear muzac versions of old pop songs, and your doctor may play easy-listening music in an attempt to soothe his sick patients. Quite naturally, we learn at an early age to associate certain activities with certain sounds. Television and film soundtracks reinforce these tendencies tenfold; we have learned to recognize the building of tension along a storyline, or perhaps the eventual murder of a character, by simply listening to the ominous soundtrack accompanying tension-filled images. Eventually we come to expect certain types of soundtracks—particular rhythms, tonal qualities, and chord structures—to accompany preconceived images and scenes. When filmmakers toy with these expectations, such as playing a children's lullaby during a high-speed car chase, for example, we become disoriented and nervous. We may even feel deceived. Classroom exercises using instrumental music play on these expectations yet also challenge them.

I first began using instrumental music in the classroom years before beginning my EFL career in Japan. While teaching descriptive writing to predominantly native speakers of English at Northern Arizona University (NAU), I found that while most students could pound out a biology report with little pain, few could accurately and richly describe the intricate details of their dorm room, favorite drinking establishment, or even the interior of their car. When asked to write something based on their perceptions of it, or worse, their imaginations, most students became plagued with severe bouts of writer's block. Providing students with examples of descriptive writing and asking them to imitate landscape writers such as Barry Lopez or Annie Dillard provided some relief, but most students still had trouble. The breakthrough began when I began occasionally bringing a stereo and some CDs into the classroom.

By listening to carefully chosen segments of music and imagining shapes, scenes, environments, and actions triggered by the particular feel and mood of the piece, students could often unlock their largely stifled imagination, producing long, descriptive passages in rich language surpassing anything they had written previously. In time some students began taking the initiative and using my classroom technique while writing at home. Some of my student musicians later began conceiving ideas for their own essays, many of them rhetorical in nature and heavily academic, then composing and recording an accompanying soundtrack, which they would later perform as spoken-word essays/performance pieces for the entire class.

When I began teaching in Japan, I looked for ways to incorporate this type of creative language activity in the EFL classroom. Faced with four classes of beginning-level EFL students, however, I quickly dismissed an exercise with instrumental music. It would prove too difficult, I decided. As time passed, however, I began to find ways to adapt these types of exercises for use with beginning-level students. By providing the necessary structure, some starter vocabulary, and a sampling of wildly diverse soundtrack material, I have found that it is possible for students to begin thinking, writing, and speaking in such a way that piques their imagination and increases enthusiasm, even in low-level teaching situations.

Teacher Preparation

Since all but the most advanced language students may find writing descriptive images onto a blank piece of paper too intimidating, it is necessary to create a starter handout such as the one provided in the Appendix. Ideally, this handout will include only a few basic instructions, an example of the product, and completed sentences in which the student need only to fill in nouns, adjectives, verbs, and/or adverbs. I have found that it is preferable to provide students with a short list of sample words so that they may pastiche them together into sentences. Ideally, however, the students will combine this type of “word looting” with searches for other words in their dictionary; it is remarkable how, when placed in a creative context, even usually unmotivated students become inspired to find and use words which they might later remember and use again.

I prefer to provide them with a handout (see Appendix) on the day before the activity, then ask them to familiarize themselves with new words. The more advanced the language learner, the less need there is for this type of structure and help. Ideally, students will graduate from this type of structured handout and move on to writing short descriptive scenes in their target language.

When selecting music for the exercise, it is important to select a variety of different pieces, each with its own distinct character. Secondly, it is essential to play just enough of each track to give students something tangible to visualize, yet not beyond the point where the music transcends keys, mood changes, and character. In other words, each piece may set five or ten different scenes within its own framework, and it is important that students aren’t confused by conflicting images. It may be wise to avoid selecting a piece that contains too much dynamic movement within the span of a minute or so.

I prefer to use a tape consisting of cross-genre, cross-cultural pieces that may evoke a variety of emotions and visions in the listener’s mind. It is important, I think, to use pieces that are relatively obscure, so that the majority of students won’t recognize and therefore have preconceived notions about each piece in their head. Listed below is an abbreviated sampling of selections I have used with low-level EFL students (a discography is listed at the end of this essay):

Delta MKII, performed by Orb
Untitled Hidden Track, performed by Nirvana
Public Information Film, performed by St. Etienne
Impossible Mission, performed by Danny Elfman
A Fifth of Beethoven, performed by Walter Murphy
Fiesta Medley, performed by the Pogues
Piku, performed by the Chemical Brothers
Maids of Cadiz, performed by Miles Davis

The Exercise and Results

The exercise itself is simple and, thankfully, the results are generally rewarding. For my EFL students I usually begin by drawing a picture of a person’s head on the board—inhumanly large and spacious—and filling its upper portion with day-glo images, either drawn with colored chalk or crammed with surreal cut-out pictures from magazines. I do this only to convey the idea that the students should let the soundtracks terraform the landscape of their imagination.

Once the students are ready with their handouts, I have them close their eyes and listen while I play a single sampling of a pre-selected track (pieces average about a minute in length).

Then I play it again. After this second playing, students begin writing: taking words from the given word lists, drawing on their own memory, or looking up other words or phrases in their dictionaries. Occasionally the students may ask you to play the selection again as they write.

After finishing the writing on each selection, students verbalize the scenes they have written. This is perhaps the best part of the exercise. Students will be amazed when they find that others visualized the same exact scene as they did, and others may be startled at how wonderfully diverse and unique their perception was. Often students who have looked up or discovered new vocabulary will share it with other students.

Due to the inventive word choice and unexpected phrasings written by the students, many of the results also read like poetry. When exposed to a searing piece of noisy free-form grunge from Nirvana, one student wrote, "This music makes me think about breaking into cars. It's impatient, nervous. It makes me feel like a violent clown." When listening to an ambient electronic piece from Orb, many students conjured celestial images: one student explained, "This music makes me think of snowy planets," while another wrote, "This music makes me think about calling UFOs."

Each round of music can be followed by the playing of another piece. As the exercise goes on, the students generally become more imaginative. Should you want to take the exercise a step further, you can ask students to create a drawing of the scene they imagine, accompanied by their own text, or to incorporate their description into a conversation with another student. The preceding directions are but a beginning. The more advanced the students, the more possibilities there are.

Unlike using music with lyrics, the magic in using instrumental music is that the language involved all comes out of students' imaginations. They have to use their minds, and for many students, the process of creativity is perhaps the one thing that can draw them into a language like nothing else.

References

Beethoven, Ludwig Van (17xx). A fifth of Beethoven. [Arranged and recorded by Walter Murphy]. On *Saturday Night Fever: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* [CD]. Detroit: Casablanca Records. (1977)

Chemical Brothers (1997). Piku. On *Dig Your Own Hole* [CD]. London: Virgin Records.

Elfman, Danny (1996). Impossible mission. On *Music From and Inspired by the Motion Picture Mission Impossible* [CD]. Los Angeles: Mother Records.

Macgowan/Finer (1988). Fiesta medley. On *If I Should Fall From Grace With God* [CD]. Stiff Records.

Nirvana (1991). Untitled hidden track. On *Nevermind* [CD]. (American) Seattle: David Geffen Company.

Orb (1997). Delta MK11. On *Orblivion* [CD]. New York: Island Records.

Stanley/Wiggs (1997). Public Information Film. On *Continental* [CD]. Tokyo: Photo Records.

Appendix A

“Seeing” Instrumental Music

Please close your eyes and listen carefully to each piece of music. What does it make you think of? Can you see the music? Use the word lists below to help you complete each sentence. If these words are not right for you, please look up others in your dictionary.

Example: This music makes me think about running horses.

This music is powerful.

This music makes me nervous.

- 1) This music makes me think about _____ (verb/adj.) _____ (noun).
This music is _____ (adj).
This music makes me _____ (adj).
- 2) This music makes me think about _____ (verb/adj.) _____ (noun).
This music is _____ (adj).
This music makes me _____ (adj).
- 3) This music makes me think about _____ (verb/adj.) _____ (noun).
This music is _____ (adj).
This music makes me _____ (adj).
- 4) This music makes me think about _____ (verb/adj.) _____ (noun).
This music is _____ (adj).
This music makes me _____ (adj).
- 5) This music makes me think about _____ (verb/adj.) _____ (noun).
This music is _____ (adj).
This music makes me _____ (adj).
- 6) This music makes me think about _____ (verb/adj.) _____ (noun).
This music is _____ (adj).
This music makes me _____ (adj).

Adjectives

Angry
Beautiful
Cool
Depressed
Freezing
Happy
Nervous
Obnoxious
Powerful
Scary
Sexy
Stealthy
Stealthy

Nouns

Birds
Clowns
Criminals
Horses
UFOs
Monkeys
Monsters
Mountains
Movies
Planets
Children
Clouds

Verbs

Blowing
Burning
Crying
Dancing
Drifting
Drinking
Exploding
Fighting
Flying
Playing
Running
Sleeping