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TEACHING THE GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL ASPECTS OF MODERN ENGLISH THROUGH POPULAR SONGS' LYRICS: A PRACTICAL APPROACH

Abstract

Teaching grammar and vocabulary is an essential part of any language instruction. However, along with books and theory, there can be other activities, more widely used and more motivational, to help students master the grammatical and lexical aspects of contemporary English. These include analyzing the linguistic content of pop songs as a way to acquire the language efficiently.

Key words: language teaching, learning, grammar, English verb structures, lyrics

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ҚАЗІРГІ ЗАМАНҒЫ АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІНІҢ ГРАММАТИКАЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ ЛЕКСИКАЛЫҚ АСПЕКТІЛЕРІН ӘН МӘТІНДЕРІ АРҚЫЛЫ ОҚЫТУ: ТӘЖІРИБЕЛІК КЕҢЕСТЕР

Аңдатпа

Грамматика мен лексиканы оқыту кез-келген тілдік оқытудың ажырамас бөлігі болып табылады. Дегенмен, студенттерге қазіргі ағылшын тілінің грамматикалық және лексикалық ерекшеліктерін білуге көмектесу үшін кеңінен қолданылатын оқыту практикасына қоса, басқа да ынталандырушы іс-шаралар түрлері пайдалануы мүмкін. Сыныптағы мұндай жұмыс түрлерін етілді тиімді игерудің жолы ретінде танымал әндер мәтіндерінің лингвистикалық мазмұнына талдау жүргізуді жатқызуға болады.

Түйін сөздер: тілді оқыту, грамматика, ағылшын етістіктерінің құрылымы, ән сөздері

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ОБУЧЕНИЕ ГРАММАТИЧЕСКИМ И ЛЕКСИЧЕСКИМ АСПЕКТАМ СОВРЕМЕННОГО АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА ЧЕРЕЗ ПЕСЕННЫЕ ТЕКСТЫ: ПРАКТИЧЕСКИЕ СОВЕТЫ

Аннотация

Преподавание грамматики и лексики является неотъемлемой частью любого языкового обучения. Однако помимо широко применяемых учебных практик, могут быть также эффективно использованы и другие мотивирующие виды деятельности, для того чтобы помочь обучающимся освоить грамматические и лексические особенности современного английского языка. К таким видам работы в классе можно отнести анализ лингвистического содержания текста популярных песен как одного из путей эффективного овладения языком.

Ключевые слова: преподавание языка, изучение грамматики, структуры английских глаголов, тексты песен

Introduction. Native-speakers rarely master their language from text books and classroom instruction alone. Rather, as they hear their language around them every day, they pick up a repertoire of idiomatic expressions. At the same time, they learn to discriminate good, “power” grammar from less

prestigious varieties. It is in the classroom that they practice, sharpen, and ultimately perfect these skills. Language learning is in this sense akin to music appreciation. It is largely a matter of training the “ear.”

Pop songs are simple, catchy “earworms” that are almost always written in highly idiomatic language, often to the extent that the title of the song is itself an idiom or collocation. The most successful pop songs have a “catchy” combination of words and music that can be easy to remember and pleasurable for its own sake. Pop songs thus make excellent tools, not only for teaching idiomatic expressions, but also for teaching complex grammatical constructions. The classroom instructor who encourages students to listen to, analyze, and even memorize English pop songs is taking grammar and vocabulary out of the dusty realm of textbooks and into the students’ daily lives. However, this is more than just a matter of making a potentially dull topic more interesting. It is also a way of fostering the link between language and culture that is essential for the students’ future self-development in English. Here we use two classic pop songs, readily available on YouTube, as examples of how to teach common idioms and collocations in English, while at the same time practicing complicated verb structures: if-clause constructions and participial phrases.

Classroom example #1. Our first example is the pop song “Boys Don’t Cry” by the British band *The Cure*. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that no 1980s-era college dance party felt complete without this song – at least in the USA and UK. The song has been covered by countless artists since it first appeared in 1979 and still features regularly in karaoke clubs and “retro” music nights. *The Cure* was among the first “alternative” rock bands to find mainstream commercial success, and with their whimsical haircuts and existential lyrics, they helped to inspire the moody “Goth” and “Emo” sounds through the 1990s. “Boys Don’t Cry” probably remains their best-known song:

BOYS DON’T CRY

I would say I’m sorry if I thought that it would change your mind,
But I know that this time I have said too much, been too unkind.
I try to laugh about it, cover it all up with lies.
I try to laugh about it, hiding the tears in my eyes.
‘Cause boys don’t cry. Boys don’t cry.
I would break down at your feet and beg forgiveness, plead with you,
But I know that it’s too late and now there’s nothing I can do.
So I try to laugh about it, cover it all up with lies.
I try to laugh about it, hiding the tears in my eyes.
‘Cause boys don’t cry. Boys don’t cry.
I would tell you that I loved you if I thought that you would stay,
But I know that it’s no use and you’ve already gone away.
Misjudged your limit, pushed you too far,
Took you for granted: I thought that you needed me more.
I would do most anything to get you back by my side,
But I just keep on laughing, hiding the tears in my eyes.
‘Cause boys don’t cry. Boys don’t cry.

Discussion. The first item to observe about the song is that its title and “hook” line – *boys don’t cry* – is an idiomatic expression in English. Just the title of the song contributes to students’ lexical knowledge. The lyrics are brimming with useful collocations, including: *to change (someone’s) mind*; *to beg forgiveness*; *there’s nothing I can do*; *it’s no use*; *to take (something or someone) for granted*; *to push (someone or something) too far*; *most anything* [for almost anything]; and *by my side*.

Moreover, and just as importantly, memorizing the lyrics to this song can improve students’ understanding of how English makes “if-clause” conditionals – that is, how it uses the modal verb *would* to make hypothetical propositions on the pattern of: “If X ... then (imaginary) Y.” For this example, we’ll limit ourselves to *would*, leaving out other modal verbs that work on the same pattern (like *could*, *should*, or *might*). There are three basic rules for if-clause conditionals in English:

1. The present tense hypothetical is signaled by the word *would* (\approx Russian *бы*) and the past tense hypothetical by the words *would have* (\approx Russian *было бы*).
2. The words *would* or *would have* only appear in the hypothetical proposition (the main clause), never in the condition for it (the if-clause). This is a major difference between English and Russian!
3. The verb in the if-clause always comes one step in time before the verb in the main clause, following the order: past-perfect [comes before] \rightarrow past \rightarrow present \rightarrow future.

We can now apply these rules to the opening line of the song. In the first two clauses, the singer imagines apologizing to his girlfriend: “I *would say* I’m sorry ...” This proposition is hypothetical because it depends on a condition: “... if I thought that you would change your mind.” The condition is unreal: the speaker already knows that his girlfriend will not forgive him (he has “said too much, been too unkind”). Because the entire song is in present tense, the speaker uses a present tense hypothetical construction. However, he could also use a future or a past tense construction, following the patterns below:

Future: I will say (simple future) ... if I think (simple present) ... X

Present: I would say (present hypothetical) ... if I thought (simple past) ... X

Past: I would have said (past hypothetical) ... if I had thought (past perfect) ... X

Notice how in all three cases, the verb in the if-clause is one step in time before the verb in the main clause. Thus, in the future time, the if-clause verb is in the present. In the present time, the if-clause verb is in the past. In the past time, the if-clause verb is in the past perfect.

It is worth pointing out that *will say* is just the simple future in English. It is not necessary to call it hypothetical, because the future is hypothetical by definition. It is also worth lingering on the second *would* that appears in the X-clause: “... if I thought that it *would* change your mind.” This appears to be a violation of Rule 2 above. How is it possible to use the word *would* twice in one sentence? The answer is that the second *would* is not in the if-clause. It is in a defining clause attached to the if-clause. In other words, it is not the hypothetical *would*, but the past tense of *will*. The singer uses it instinctively to agree in time with the verb *thought*. The same construction is repeated later in the song. Compare these two uses of *would*: “I *would* tell you that I loved you ... if I thought that it *would* change your mind.”

Classroom example #2. Our second example is the 1970 wedding classic “We’ve Only Just Begun” by Paul Williams. This song is listed as #414 in “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time”; it is associated with the soft-rock singer Karen Carpenter, who was blessed with one of the most beautiful voices in all of American popular music. “We’ve Only Just Begun” made her famous, and has been a fixture at wedding parties ever since. Carpenter wasted away from an eating disorder at the height of her fame in 1983, a tragic early death that first brought attention to the problem of eating disorders in women. But almost forty years later, her rich, mellow tones remain instantly recognizable almost anywhere in the English-speaking world:

WE’VE ONLY JUST BEGUN

We’ve only just begun to live:

White lace and promises,

A kiss for luck, and we’re on our way.

We’ve only begun ...

Before the rising sun, we fly.

So many roads to choose,

We’ll start out walking and learn to run.

And yes, we’ve just begun.

Sharing horizons that are new to us,

Watching the signs along the way,

Talking it over, just the two of us,

Working together day to day.

Together ... together ...

And when the evening comes, we smile.

So much of life ahead.

We’ll find a place where there’s room to grow.

And yes, we’ve just begun.

As with the previous example, we can begin our analysis by pointing out that the title of the song is a common collocation. The lexicon is relatively simple, however, with only a handful of other collocations, such as *on our way* or *just the two of us*. However, the grammar is surprisingly complex, with some excellent examples of how everyday English uses its present participle verb forms. There are actually six examples: 1) *to rise = rising*, 2) *to walk = walking*, 3) *to share = sharing*, 4) *to watch = watching*, 5) *to talk = talking*, and 6) *to work = working*.

Note that these present participles have various grammatical functions. For example, in the second verse, a present participle is used as an adjective to modify a noun: *the rising sun*. Two lines later, a present participle is used in combination with a phrasal verb: *start out walking*. The fact that verbs combine in English in unpredictable ways makes a good grammatical topic for beginning to intermediate

level students. Compare for example *start out walking* with *learn to run* – which appears in the same line. There is no clear-cut grammatical rule in English for when the second verb in a verb combination takes a participial form and when it takes an infinitive form. These combinations must be memorized – another good argument for using “earworms” in the classroom.

Finally, the soaring refrain of the song has a nice string of participial phrases:

- 1) *Sharing horizons...*
- 2) *Watching the signs ...*
- 3) *Talking it over ...*
- 4) *Working together ...*

Participial phrases are used in more advanced forms of English to add descriptive details to a clause. Strictly speaking, they are phrases, because they do not contain an explicit subject-verb relationship. Nonetheless, in each phrase, a subject-verb relationship is implied: *we [are] sharing ... watching ... talking ... working*. It is worth mentioning that in English – unlike in Russian, for example – the verb tense and aspect of the main clause is irrelevant. Here the main clause could also be *we begin, we began, or we will begin* – and in each case the attached participial phrase would be the same.

One last point of interest: the word “evening” in the song *looks* like a present participle but is actually a noun. How is this possible? The explanation is etymological. The modern English noun “evening” comes from the Anglo-Saxon verb *æfen*, which meant “to grow dark.” When the verb as such vanished from the language, its participial form survived as a noun (i.e., gerund), with a meaning that sounded something like “the darkening.”

Conclusion. Thus, even the simplest pop song can yield deep insights into language. To these two examples, countless others could be adduced. It is only up to the individual language instructor to listen carefully to popular music in English in order to find endless teachable moments of this kind.

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