

# Music and Song for Language and Culture Learning

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## Introduction

Almost everyone enjoys listening to songs, but often English language learners in Japan are not acquainted with many of the most well-known English songs, and if they do listen, they may find these songs difficult to understand and talk about.

## The Solution

We can solve this problem by using easy-to-understand and culturally relevant songs, and we can introduce these songs with compelling stories. Stories can be about a musical genre, a musician, or a theme in the song for the day. These stories can inspire interest in the songs, genres, and artists they introduce.

As we choose popular or significant songs for lessons, we can do a vocabulary profile of the lyrics to check the difficulty of the text and to provide vocabulary support for learners as they interact with the song.

After choosing a song, we can prepare a lesson using a set format of materials. Activities can include an introductory story, a conversation starter related to the song, lyrics with a gap-fill, a short dialog for practice, and a problem solver activity that helps students engage with the ideas and cultural themes in the song.

## The Application

In what follows, I present sample lessons of stories and songs. I have used them in full 90-minute English language and culture courses. However, if time is an issue, teachers could use parts of these lessons as a supplement to a general English course, or they could use lessons like these over a period of a few weeks.

Before looking at the sample lessons, I will provide a brief rationale for using songs in language classes, and I will assume that we do not need to review the rationale for using stories as a part of this approach. For additional information regarding this topic, see Poulshock and Menish (2014).

## A Brief Rationale

Though people have wildly different musical tastes, music is a cultural universal (Brown, 1991), and we would be surprised to meet a person who said, "I hate all music." There are many reasons for the universal appeal of music, but perhaps we can just say that music is good for us. Neuroscientist and musician Daniel Levitin (2008, p. 74) sums up research about music and song, saying:

Music — and particularly joyful music — affects our health in fundamental ways. Listen-

ing to, and even more so singing or playing, music can alter brain chemistry associated with well-being, stress reduction, and immune system fortitude.

But music isn't just enjoyable and healthful; it is also memorable. Levitin (pg. 154) also says that the information in music is schematized. We may easily remember song lyrics because they are embedded in the grammars of melody, rhythm, and rhyme.

To a degree, these ideas may justify using songs in language classes, but we still face a basic question. Can we use songs in classes as effective tasks for promoting language acquisition? The answer appears to be positive. For example, Kanel (1997) compared listening comprehension for two separate groups of over 300 students.

One group practiced listening with traditional non-musical materials. The second group practiced listening with gap-fill exercises using songs. Kanel showed that "both groups improved equally and made significant progress," but the song group gave "higher approval for the time spent on the tasks and increased interest in English." (Kanel 1997, pg. 217).

If students in both groups improved listening equally, but the music group enjoyed the process more, then perhaps we need to use music and song more in our English language, culture, and communication classes.

## Classroom Materials

Now that we have seen a preliminary rationale for using songs in language classes, we will look at two sets of classroom materials that use stories and songs. The first introduces blues music and a classic blue song, and the second introduces Nobel Prize-winning songwriter Bob Dylan and one of his early songs.

## References

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## Master of Words: Bob dylan

It was January 1961. In the cold north of Minnesota, a young man of 19 years (1) \_\_\_\_\_ his bags. He was going to New York City. By car, the trip would take over (2) \_\_\_\_\_ hours. And he was travelling by his thumb. In other words, he was going to get free (3) \_\_\_\_\_ from passing cars.

His dreams were clear. He wanted to (4) \_\_\_\_\_ music in New York City. He wanted to meet his hero, the folk singer Woody Guthrie. He wanted to make records. He wanted to become a singer. Ordinarily, dreams like this would fail. But maybe this young man was (5) \_\_\_\_\_.

That was a long time ago. The young man became old. He gave (6) \_\_\_\_\_ of performances all over the world. He wrote over 600 original songs. He won many awards. He met (7) \_\_\_\_\_ and popes. Two universities made him an (8) \_\_\_\_\_ Doctor. Who is this man? What did he do? His original name was Robert Zimmerman. But today we know him as Bob Dylan.

In that winter of 61, Dylan did not know the success that waited for him. And this success came quickly. By February, he was singing in all the best (9) \_\_\_\_\_ clubs in New York. In September, Dylan performed at a top club. By chance, a writer from the New York Times was in the (10) \_\_\_\_\_.

The writer's name was Robert Shelton. Shelton wrote a (11) \_\_\_\_\_ story about Dylan. He praised Dylan's style as special and (12) \_\_\_\_\_. He said that

**Opener: What are some of your favorite songs?**

Dylan was full of talent. He said Dylan's voice showed the (13) \_\_\_\_\_ beauty of a working man. His songs burned with power.

The New York Times is the biggest newspaper in America.

And when Shelton (14) \_\_\_\_\_ his story about Dylan, it changed everything. Dylan's big success started with that story. Soon Dylan recorded his first record. And in December, he returned home to his family in Minnesota. But this time, he had a record (15) \_\_\_\_\_ in his hand. (Read more at [ReadOasis.com](http://ReadOasis.com).)



LIST NEW WORDS.	MAKE NEW PHRASES WITH NEW WORDS.
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<b>THINK ABOUT IT!</b>	
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1. "Extraordinary" means (A) amazing, (B) normal, (C) regular.
2. Unique" means (A) one of a kind, (B) strange, (C) special.
3. Find the word that means "traditional art or culture."
4. What phrase means "He got the degree from school without going to school?"
5. Who was Dylan's hero, and what kind of music did he sing?

ReadOasis Step	SE	1	>> 2 <<	3	4	5
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## Master of Words (Part 2)

(A) But signing a record contract was just the beginning. Dylan had memorized hundreds of folk songs. And on his first record, he recorded only two original songs. But for his second record (The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan), the world saw his talent as a writer of songs. He wrote songs that became classics, such as Blowing in the Wind:

**How many roads must a man walk down**

**Before you call him a man?**

**Yes, and how many seas must a white dove sail**

**Before she sleeps in the sand?**

As time passed, Dylan wrote many songs that became classics. In 2004, Rolling Stone Magazine made a list of the top 500 songs of all time. Blowing in the Wind was #14. But Dylan had 13 more songs on the list. (The Beatles had 25, and the Rolling Stones 14.) But Dylan had the #1 song, Like a Rolling Stone.

The words in Dylan's songs amazed people. The words were deep, serious, forceful, and sometimes funny. The songs and words had an endless quality about them. They felt old and new at the same time. Dylan was youthful and playful. But his songs came from wisdom and experience beyond his years.

(B) In those early years, people said that Dylan was the voice of the young, a great protest singer, a hero. But Dylan didn't like these labels. He did not let people define him. Instead, he tried new styles. He mixed "pure" folk music with "commercial" rock music. This upset many of his fans. Later, he did gospel music, and again fans and artists attacked him.

But Dylan kept moving, performing, writing songs, and recording into his old age. In 2006, his record, Modern Times, reached number one in the US. Dylan was now the oldest living artist to release a top record. By 2016, he had released 79 records. This includes 11

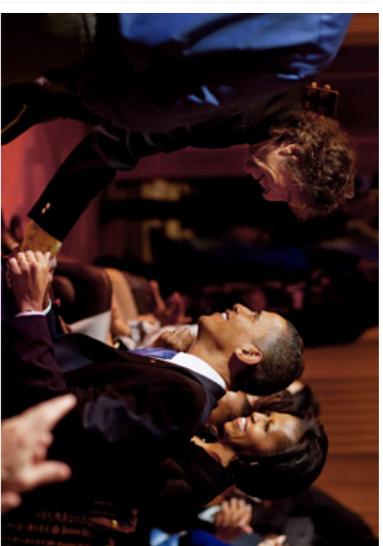
live records, and his 37th studio record, released in 2016. In all, he has sold over 100,000,000 records.

But Dylan's life of music isn't about numbers. It isn't about success. It isn't even really about singing. Many people don't like Dylan's rough voice. Rather, if you listen carefully to Dylan, you'll hear amazing

words. Dylan is words. His words reach a level of high art. Oxford

Professor of Poetry, Christopher

Ricks says this: "Bob Dylan's ways with words are a wonder!"



### PAIRED READING FOR FLUENCY

**When we practice fluency, we use language that we already know.**

1. Partner A reads out loud from "A" for 60 seconds. Partner B listens.
2. When you hear the ALARM, stop reading. Mark the place where you stop!
3. Partner A reads from "A" again for 60 seconds.
4. When you hear the ALARM, stop reading. Mark the NEW PLACE where you stop!
5. Did you read more words the second time? How many? Write the number here: \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Partner B, repeat steps 1-5. But start from "B." And now Partner A listens.

### WORD FOCUS: LIST NEW OR HARD WORDS

ReadOasis Step	SE	1	>> 2 <<<	3	4	5
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## Opening Connection

If you are feeling sad, what do you like to do? Example: “When I’m said, I eat chocolate!”

Introduction. He may be the greatest songwriter in modern times. He even won the Nobel Prize in 2016, but many people cannot listen to Bob Dylan. They don’t like his rough voice. This is not Dylan’s song. (It’s a cover). But it shows that he could sing, if he wanted to. This is a folk song. It was first recorded in 1928. Eric Clapton recorded an Alberta version. There are 160 recorded versions of this song. Dylan’s version changes the melody and words.

## Corrina, Corrina

Corrina, Corrina,  
Gal, where you been so long?  
Corrina, Corrina  
Gal, where you been so long?  
I been worrying about you, baby  
Baby, please come home

I got a bird that whistles  
I got a bird that sings  
I got a bird that whistles  
I got a bird that sings  
But I ain’t got Corrina  
Life don’t mean a thing

Corrina, Corrina  
Gal, you’re on my mind  
Corrina, Corrina  
Gal, you’re on my mind  
I was sitting down  
Thinking of you  
I just can’t keep from crying

1. Listen. Circle new words and phrases in the song. Ask classmates (in English) about meanings. “What does X mean?”

2. Rate the song. Then do #4.

Vocals			Music			Words		
Yuck!	Bad	Good	Great	Yuck!	Bad	Good	Great	Yuck!

3. Ask a partner. “How do you rate the song? Why do you think so?”

• Example: 2 thumbs up! I think the vocals are powerful & emotional.

4. Practice the conversation with a partner.

- A: Where’s Corrina?
- B: She left!
- A: I’m sorry to hear that!
- B: Me too!

5. Talking Music – Talk about topics in the song.

- Where did Corrina go? Where is she now?
- Translate this into your 1st language: “I ain’t got Corrina. Life don’t mean a thing.”
- In your group, take turns asking Siri, “What is the meaning of life?” (You need to change her language to English. Settings >> Siri >> Language >> English).
- Report Siri’s answers to the class!

Word List	What are the TOP WORDS in the song?
High: 1-2000	folk modern prize rough
Mid: 3000+	whistle melody

## The Blues: Music of Survival



Four men were walking across a field. They were carrying a body (1) \_\_\_\_\_ up in white cloth. Their strong, black hands and arms supported the body as they walked on. Other men, women, and children walked behind. And the tall green trees listened. They listened to the (2) \_\_\_\_\_ of the people in the wind.

The men stopped by a hole in the ground. Their feet stood softly on the green grass. After a moment of (3) \_\_\_\_\_, they lowered the body into the ground. A man gave a speech. And the people played.

Then a woman began to sing. Her voice was big and (4) \_\_\_\_\_. It was a full voice, full of dreams and pain. And she sang these words:

**Roll Jordan, roll, Roll Jordan, roll.**

**I want to get to heaven when I die to hear Roll Jordan roll**

One man (5) \_\_\_\_\_ alone. He looked down for the body. But it was gone, deep under the (6) \_\_\_\_\_. "My love..." he said to himself, as he started to cry. "Why did they kill you?"

His brain filled up with the (7) \_\_\_\_\_ of anger. He imagined the killers. He saw their cold, white faces, and he hit and kicked at them. But they (8) \_\_\_\_\_ from his imagination. He took a breath. A tear fell from his eye, and then the music took hold. Its power was unstoppable. And he began to sing.

He sang it over and over, "Roll Jordan, roll." What did it mean? Jordan is a river (9) \_\_\_\_\_ in the Bible. But for this man, Jordan was a river that rolled and took him

away to freedom. And heaven was a place far away from slavery and the slave (10) \_\_\_\_\_.

He didn't know the future. He didn't know the present. But there was music. It was like water in the (11) \_\_\_\_\_. It was like sweet honey in his mouth. It was like fresh air in an old, dark room. It was like the golden sun after a (12) \_\_\_\_\_.

The pain was a power pushing down on him. But the music lifted him up. And so he sang. He sang that song like a fight for his life. He sang that song so that he could (13) \_\_\_\_\_. He sang that song so that he could live on.

In this way, African Americans sang their spiritual songs. They took the music from the church. They took African rhythms and mixed them with "blue" (14) \_\_\_\_\_, and over time they created a new kind of music. Today we call this music the blues.

Nowadays blues music is a (15) \_\_\_\_\_ of American culture. What's more, it stands as the foundation for practically every form of American music in the 20th century, including gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop. Blues music... (to finish the story go to [ReadOasis.com](http://ReadOasis.com)).

ReadOasis Step	SE	I	>> 2 <<<	3	4	5
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LIST NEW WORDS.	MAKE NEW PHRASES WITH NEW WORDS.
<b>THINK ABOUT IT!</b>	
1. "Disappear" means (A) stop, (B) pass away, (C) remember	
2. A person who is bought or sold as property is called a _____.	
3. He was full of <u>anger</u> means that he was (A) sad, (B) happy, (C) mad.	
4. Where does blues music come from?	
5. How did slaves change the meanings of church songs.	

## Openers

- What kind of music do you listen to when you are sad or blue? Example: "I don't listen to music when I'm sad!"

## Introduction.

This is a song by Blind Willie Johnson. There are over 40 versions of it on iTunes. And many artists have covered Blind Willie's songs: Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, and Nobel Prize winner, Bob Dylan. Blind Willie's music is important culturally. It shows the relationship between Blues and Gospel music. People say that Blues and Gospel are musical twins and that they are songs of survival. That is, this is "survival music."

## Nobody's Fault But Mine

Nobody's fault but mine. Nobody's fault but mine.

If I don't read it my soul be lost.

I have a Bible in my home. I have a Bible in my home

If I don't read my soul be lost.

Mmm, father he taught me how to read. Father he taught me how to read

If I don't read my soul be lost. Nobody's fault but mine.

Ah, Lord, Lord. Nobody's fault but mine

If I don't read my soul be lost.

Ah, I have a Bible of my own. I have a Bible of my own.

If I don't read my soul be lost.

Oh, mother she taught me how to read. Mother she taught me how to read

If I don't read my soul be lost. Nobody's fault but mine.

Ah, Lord, Lord. Nobody's fault but mine.

If I don't read my soul be lost.

And sister she taught me how to read. Sister she taught me how to read.

If I don't read my soul be lost. Nobody's fault but mine.

Ah, mmm, Lord, Lord. Nobody's fault but mine  
If I don't read my soul be lost, mmm.

1. Listen. Circle new words and phrases in the song. Ask classmates (in English) about meanings. "What does X mean?"

2. Rate the song.

Vocals		Music			Words	
Dislike	Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike	Like	
						

3. Ask a partner. "How do you rate the song? Why do you think so?"

- Example: 2 thumbs up! I think the vocals are powerful & emotional.

4. Practice the conversation with a partner.

• A: Who taught you to play guitar?

• B: My father taught me.

• A: Wow, that was nice of him.

• B: Yes it was. I'm thankful!

5. Talking Music – Talk about topics in the song.

(a) Besides religion, what is important to the singer of this song?

Word List	Learn the important words in this lesson.
High: 1-2000	blind culturally fault prize versions
Mid: 3000+	bible gospel soul twins