

Gonna, Wanna, Gimme More: Teaching Listening and Pronunciation through American Music

Music is one of the most powerful and engaging tools for teaching listening and pronunciation. This session highlights how popular American songs can help learners notice and practice key features of natural speech, including contractions, reductions, and rhythm.

Together, we will examine short, classroom-ready song excerpts that feature authentic American English speech and discover simple listening and pronunciation activities suitable for a wide range of contexts.

By the end of the webinar, participants will have a toolkit of practical strategies and adaptable ideas for using music to build learners' listening comprehension and pronunciation skills across levels.



Tiffany Lao



Tiffany is an ESL professor at Irvine Valley College and Golden West College, with extensive experience teaching academic writing, pronunciation, and conversation courses. She recently served as a Virtual English Language Educator with the U.S. Department of State, designing and delivering medical English courses for nursing students in Pakistan.

Tiffany specializes in innovative approaches to engaging multilingual learners. She has previously taught at various colleges and universities in the United States and internationally through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. She has also worked as a Skill Architect for Duolingo to develop CEFR-aligned content for English learners, authored multiple ESL textbooks, and presented at regional and international conferences.



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In This Session, We Will...



...identify common reduced forms found in authentic spoken English and music.



...explain how connected speech affects listening comprehension.



...design scaffolded listening tasks using American music.

Your Turn! 



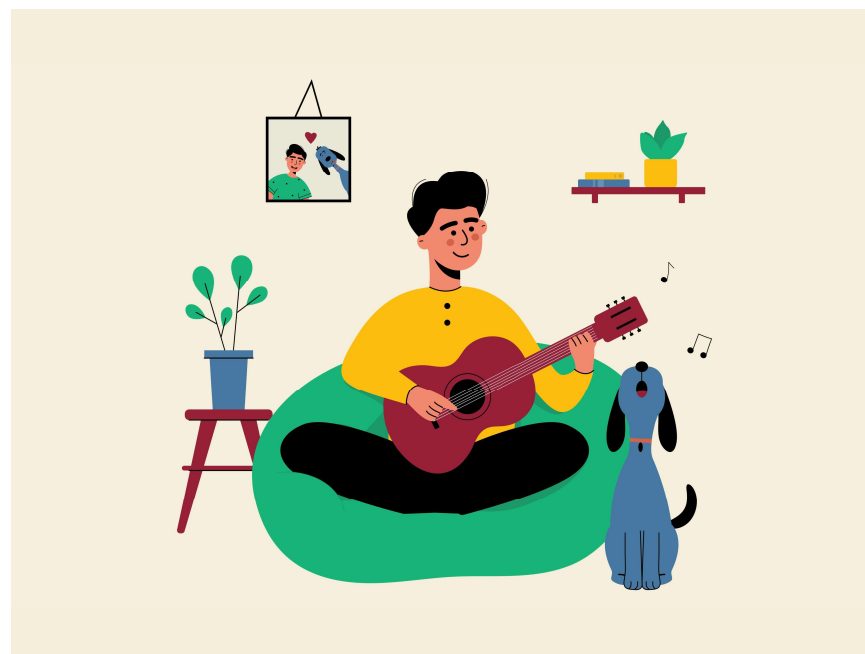
How do you currently use music to support language learning in your English classes?

Feel free to share strategies, ideas, or even let us know if you don't use music much yet.



Why Music?

- Students notice how real English sounds
- Songs repeat patterns (helps memory)
- Shows connected speech (wanna / didya / whaddya)
- Improves listening confidence
- Low prep + high engagement
- Easy to adapt for all levels



Today's Agenda



Part 1: Reduced forms in music

Part 2: Building Listening Tasks

Part 3: Rhythm and stress instruction

Part 4: Mini-lesson demonstration

What is Connected Speech?

Reductions

Sounds become shorter/simpler in fast speech

- going to → **gonna**
- want to → **wanna**
- let me → **lemme**

Linking

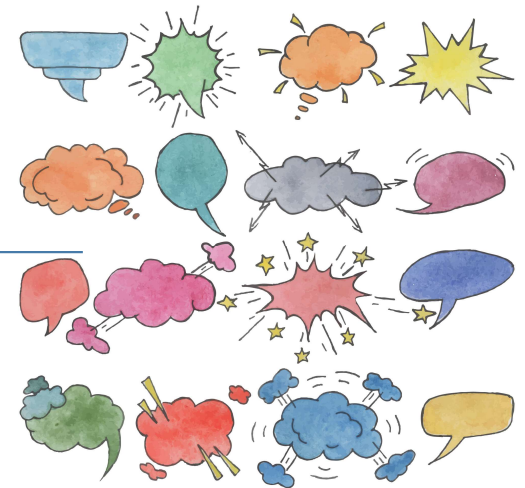
Final consonant links to next vowel sound

- pick_it_up
- see_it

Contractions

Two words combine into one written + spoken form

- I am → **I'm**
- we are → **we're**
- they have → **they've**



Your Turn! 



What challenges do your students face when listening to fast, connected speech in English?



English Language Through Lyrics

- Wordplay is an exciting program between American English, U.S. Department of State, American Music Abroad, and American Voices to bring music and lyrics into the English Language classrooms across the world.



- Sub Radio: What You Want to Hear
- Tamara Jade: Better
- Tony Memmel and His Band:
I Am Never, Never, Never Gonna Give Up
- Jessica Lynn: Run To

<https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/english-language-through-lyrics>

Sub Radio: What You Want to Hear



Genre: Indie Pop, Pop

Level: Intermediate-Advanced

Focus: Reduced forms, Contractions

Long night, caught up in the details
Texts, calls, and emails from my broken friends
Long time since I thought I could fix them
Now everything is mixed up, man it never ends
Ooh, call up everyone I know and tell them
I love 'em and their problems
Hey, are we all as lonely as we say
Is a phone call all it takes?
Why don't you tell me what you want
Nine to five in a nightmare, we're not scared
We're bigger than the fear
Run away with me somewhere, anywhere
I'll tell you what you want to hear (repeated 3x)
(What you want, what you want, what you want)



Sample Activity: Pronunciation Word Hunt

Student Instructions

1. Read the lyrics silently. **DO NOT** listen to the song yet.
2. Look for words or phrases that may sound different when sung.
3. Use the symbols below to mark the lyrics.

Pronunciation Symbols

-  Circle reduced forms (e.g., want to → wanna).
-  Underline linked words (words that connect together).
-  Star phrases that sound like one long word (did you go → didyougo)

Sub Radio: What You Want to Hear Lyrics



Why don't you tell me what you want
Nine to five in a nightmare, we're not scared



Why don't you tell me what you want
Nine to five in a nightmare, we're not scared

Student
samples

Talk to a Partner and Check Answers



4. Compare your answers with a partner.



5. Listen to the song and check your ideas.



Let's Listen and Check the Answers



Why don't you tell me what you want

 *don't-you*
 *tell-me*
 *what-you*
 *whatyouwant*



Nine to five in a nightmare, we're not scared

 *to → /tə/*
 *five-in-a*
 *in-a*
 *we're-not*
 *werenotscared*



Post-Listening Activity

Post-listening discussion questions:

- Put students in pairs
- Talk for 3-4 minutes

- Which words or phrases were hardest to hear clearly?
- Did any words sound different than you expected?
- Which phrase sounded like one long word?



Post-Listening Activity

Speaking Practice

- Practice saying this sentence:

“I’ll tell you what you want to hear.”

[I’ll tellyou whatchu wanna hear]

- Say it slowly, then naturally, then with rhythm.



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Scaffolding Listening Tasks

What is scaffolding?

- Teacher/material support that helps learners understand input

Why use it?

- Activates background knowledge
- Focuses on attention
- Builds confidence
- Makes authentic input accessible

Techniques

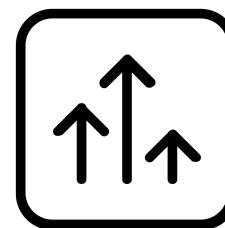
- Prediction
- Visuals
- Guiding questions
- Key words / partial scripts



Scaffolding Listening Tasks

Procedure Roadmap

- **Pre-Listening:**
 - Prediction (Activates background knowledge, sets purpose, reduces anxiety)
- **While Listening:**
 1. First Listen – global (What’s happening? Main idea?)
 2. Listen Again – details (Vocabulary, content, structure)
 3. Comprehension Check (Quick validation through tasks (T/F, match, order, gap-fill, etc.)
- **Post-Listening:**
 - Speaking Practice (retell, summarize, opinion, personal connection, “what would you do?” prompts)



Your Turn! 



Which scaffolding technique do you already use, and which one do you think you need to add or strengthen in your next listening lesson?



Tamara Jade: Better



Genre: Pop, Soul

Level: Intermediate-Advanced

Focus: Informal contractions and colloquial phrasing

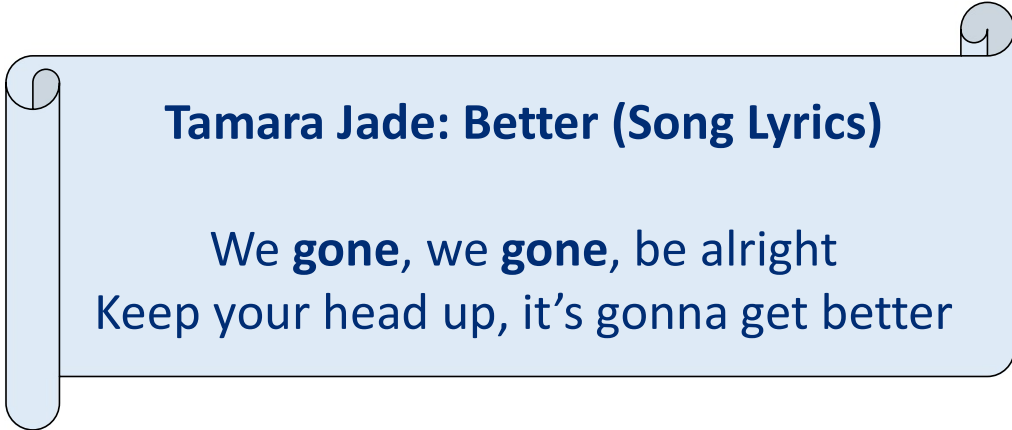
New year, new me, new trees, new leaves
Finally got the hang of this thing called life
Taking it all in stride
On my own two feet,
traveling, living this dream
seeing places I ain't never seen before
Ready for so much more

Here you come to mess things up for me,
Walls are closing in on me,
It's just all too much for me,
Stop, and breathe



Pre-Listening Task (prediction)

- Look at the lines below. **DO NOT** listen yet.



Tamara Jade: Better (Song Lyrics)

We **gone**, we **gone**, be alright
Keep your head up, it's gonna get better

- Answer the questions:
 1. What do you think “we gone” means?
 2. Do you think this song will be slow or fast?

Listening Task 1: First Listen

1. Listen to the chorus.
2. Circle the words you hear

gonna

gone

going to

we are going to



Listening Task 2: Listen Again

- Listen again. Check (✓) the words you hear.
 - ☐ going to
 - ☒ gonna
 - ☐ we are going to
 - ☒ we gone
 - ☒ be alright



Meaning Check

What does “**We gone be alright**” mean in this song?

- ☒ Things will improve
- ☐ Things are finished
- ☐ Nothing will change



Post-Listening Speaking Practice

- Practice saying the sentence below with your teacher:

“We gone be alright.”

Say it:

- Slowly
- Naturally
- With rhythm

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What is Rhythm and Stress?

- **Word stress** = stronger syllable
→ re**LAX**, to**DAY**
- **Sentence stress** = key words louder
→ “I **WANT** to **GO**”
- **Rhythm** = beat from stressed peaks
→ **YOU** · got a · **FRIEND** · in · **ME**
→ **I WAN**·na **HOLD** · your **HAND**



Here the bold syllables = rhythmic “beats” and the dots = weaker fillers.

- **Why teach it.**
→ helps listening, recognizing reductions + linking

Your Turn! 



What do your learners typically notice first, meaning, rhythm, or stress? How can we shift their attention?



Tony Memmel and His Band:

I Am Never, Never, Never Gonna Give Up



Genre: Indie

Level: Intermediate-Advanced

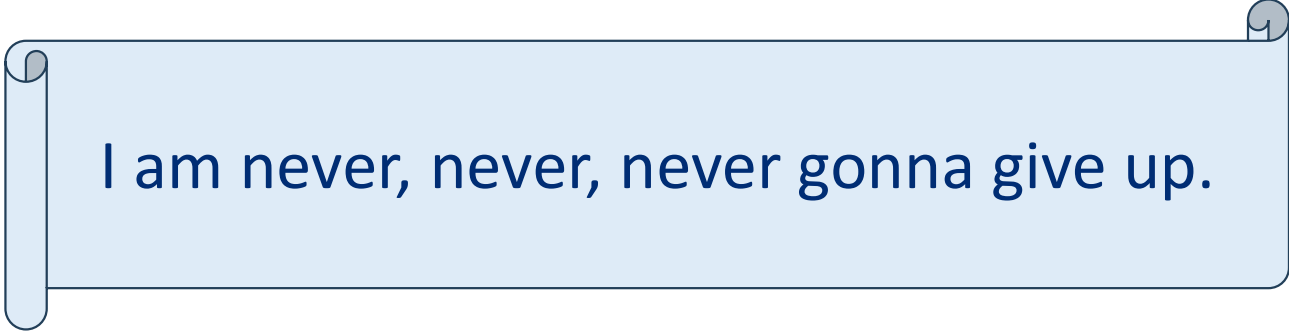
Focus: Informal contractions and colloquial phrasing

In the heart there lives a call to a longer haul, A dream
that demands your all.
It's the hardest, clearest choice, when you hear its voice,
Step up and stand tall.
There's an old and simple code you'll learn as you go,
A truth the wise come to know:
You get out what you put in,
then come lose or win,
Sing this anthem of the soul:
I am never, never, never gonna give up. (repeated 6x)



Pre-Listening

- Look at the line below. **DO NOT** listen yet.



I am never, never, never gonna give up.

1. **Circle** the words you think are **STRONG** (loud or long).
2. **Underline** the words you think are **FAST** or **WEAK**.

Listening Task 1

- Listen to the line once. **DO NOT** speak.

I am never, never, never gonna give up.

- Does this line sound smooth and musical?
- Do some words sound faster than others?



Listening Task 2 – Shadowing: Speak Together

- Listen again and speak at the **SAME TIME** as the singer.
Do not stop if you miss a word.

Shadowing means
speaking at the same
time as the singer
without stopping.

Conduct a Survey!

- How did it feel?
☐ Easy ☐ A little hard ☐ Very hard



Listening Task 3

1. Whisper the Rhythm:

- Listen again, and whisper the sentence.
Focus only on the rhythm and beat.

2. Tapping/clapping:

- Tap or clap on the strong words if it helps.

3. Say It with Feeling

- Now say the line with confidence and emotion.
Use a strong voice and body language.



Post Listening-Speaking Activity

- Complete and say the sentences below using natural rhythm:

1. This year, I'm never gonna _____.
2. When things are difficult, I'm never gonna _____.

Sample Answers

1. This year, I'm never gonna eat too much junk food.
2. When things are difficult, I'm never gonna quit.

Your Turn! 



How do you bring rhythm into your lessons in a way that keeps learners engaged? Share one activity or approach that works well for you.



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Jessica Lynn: Run To



Genre: Country, Pop, Rock

Level: Intermediate

Focus: Reduced forms,
contractions, emotional
intonation

I can't just quiet my mind
It talks all the time now
Figuring us out
Where do we go?
All of the questions at hand
They feel like quick sand how
They're pulling me so down
But I'd never show, that I already know...
I wanna run to
Anything that makes me feel you
I'm tryin' my best,
What would lying do?
I've lied to myself for so long



Mini Lesson Steps

Warm-up

Lyric preview

Listening

Pronunciation

Reflection



Choose a Pronunciation Target

Pronunciation Target Examples

Reductions

wanna, tryin'

Contractions

I've, I'm, I'd

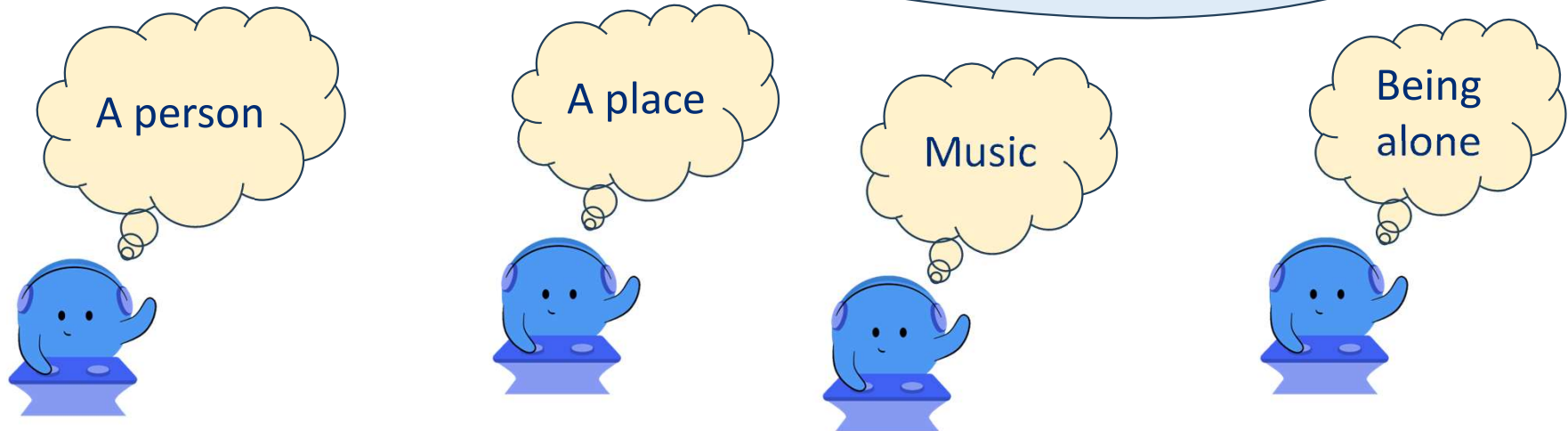
Intonation

emotional rise/fall in personal statements

Step 1: Warm-Up

Student Prompt – Think & Share:

When you feel confused, sad, or emotional...
Who or what do you want to run to?



Step 2: Lyrics Preview

Show **ONLY** these lines:

*I wanna run to
I'm tryin' my best
I've lied to myself for so long*

Teacher prompts:

- What do you notice about these words?
- Do they look **formal or informal**?
- What do you think *wanna* means?



Step 3: 1st Listen

Listen and check what you hear:

- ☐ I want to
- ☒ I wanna
- ☐ I am trying
- ☒ I'm tryin'
- ☐ I have lied
- ☒ I've lied



- (Play 30–40 seconds of the song)



Step 4: Focus on Pronunciation

Model on slide:

- Full form → Natural form
 - *I want to* → I wanna
 - *I am trying* → I'm tryin'
 - *I have lied* → I've lied
- Choral Practice:
 - Say it slowly
 - Say it naturally
 - Say it **with emotion**



Step 5: Post Listening Reflection

Student reflection (choose one):

- When I feel overwhelmed, I wanna run to _____.
- I've told myself _____ for a long time.

Students share with a partner.

Takeaways

What teachers should notice:

- ✓ Clear pronunciation target
- ✓ Short, scaffolded listening
- ✓ Minimal explanation
- ✓ Emotional engagement
- ✓ Speaking at the end

Your Turn!



Thinking about your own classes, which of these Mini Lesson components do you already use, and which one would you like to integrate more intentionally?

Mini Lesson Steps:

Warm-up, lyric preview, listening, pronunciation, reflection



In This session, We Learned How...



*music supports real-world listening
and pronunciation*



small, focused tasks train the ear



rhythm-first speaking builds fluency



Reflection: Your Classroom



What's one small change you can make tomorrow to support pronunciation through music?



References

- American English. (n.d.). *English language through lyrics*. U.S. Department of State. <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/english-language-through-lyrics>

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