

C.A.R.E.: A Methodological Framework for Using Pop Songs in the EL2 Classroom

Advocates of using songs and music in English as a second language (EL2) teaching and learning contexts emphasize the educational benefits of song lyrics. One claim is that “in language teaching, anything we can do with a text we can also do with songs, or texts about songs” (Murphey 1992, 10). As “performed lyrics” (Thaler 2016, 51), pop songs are considered creative texts of cultural, social, and literary significance, which can enrich the EL2 classroom. Yet despite stimulating teaching ideas and techniques for tapping into songs’ potential (see Murphey 1992 and Thaler 2018), teachers sometimes still miss out on their full range of educational merits.

To make the full potential of using songs more visible and accessible to EL2 teachers, this article presents a methodological framework they can use when planning a song unit for their learners. Building on current models of literary and communicative competences (see Meyer, Volkmann, and Grimm 2022; Alter and Ratheiser 2019; Thaler 2016), this framework proposes a *balanced* approach to teaching and learning with songs and song lyrics. While fostering EL2 learning in instructional settings, the framework not only uses songs as a language resource for EL2-focused teaching purposes, but also treats the song as a literary and cultural artefact itself.

After a brief introduction to the key dimensions of the approach, this article shows how the framework supports EL2 teachers when planning and teaching pop-song lessons in different learning contexts. Using “Here Comes the Sun” by the Beatles as a model, the article provides guidelines and a set of practical teaching ideas that EL2 teachers can

transfer to their own teaching with songs in the language classroom. The article also includes a description of a related task that learners can do outside the classroom with friends.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE FRAMEWORK

Pop-song lyrics can be considered as literature with a small *l*—that is, as texts “whose imaginative content will stimulate reaction and response in the receiver” (McRae 1991, vii). And, not least owing to Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize in Literature award in 2016, they can also be conceived of as literature in a more classic sense (with a capital *L*). Thus, songs can be used for developing a number of communicative *and* literary competences. Or, put differently, teachers can develop their learners’ language skills and competences through songs, while at the same time enhancing their literary learning through song-based language instruction. If we want to achieve this balance between language and literary teaching and learning, we need

to consider three key dimensions and their interplay when planning a lesson that includes pop songs (see Figure 1).

Dimension 1: Literary and communicative competences

Communicative competences include linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic communicative language competences as described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2020), while *literary competence* rests on empathic, interpretative, aesthetic–analytical, cultural, and attitudinal competences, among others.

Dimension 2: EL2 in the learner–song dialogue

Dimension 2 emphasizes that learners meet the song in an instructional EL2 setting where English is both the language of the song lyrics and the target language of classroom communication. From a literary teaching perspective, a dialogue between song (lyrics) and learner takes place in EL2 contexts (Delanoy 2002). It is therefore necessary that an EL2 pedagogy—which takes into consideration individual learner differences such as age, language proficiency, aptitude, motivation, and cultural background—supports this dialogue to benefit both EL2 learning and song-based literary learning. This support can be provided in *language input facilitating* phases and, as will be explained below, in phases specifically dedicated to *language-focused learning*.

Dimension 3: Modes of learning through songs

Dimension 3 encompasses three modes of learning through songs that need to be integrated into EL2 teaching and learning in a balanced way: response, creativity, and analysis.

1. *Response (3a)*. This mode refers to the learner’s subjective responses to the song; in EL2 contexts, these are usually articulated orally. First reactions to the song lyrics preceding a language-focused learning phase (Level 1 responses) can be revisited at a later stage when, after phases of language-focused learning

and/or creative and analytical work, the learners reconsider their initial reactions, respond to the text again (Level 2 responses), and eventually share personal evaluations of their song experience.

2. *Creativity (3b)*. Using song lyrics for creative work has a place in EL2 teaching and learning right from the start. Even with young learners at a beginning level, playful activities based on songs can be used for experimenting with language features (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, pronunciation, intonation, and [nonsense] words) for pleasure, motivating learners to make their first EL2 *re-creations*. As will be exemplified below, tapping into learners’ creativity when using songs is achieved through action-oriented and production-oriented procedures (Surkamp 2012), such as acting out or rewriting the lyrics.
3. *Analysis (3c)*. Analytical engagement with songs need not only involve aspects of

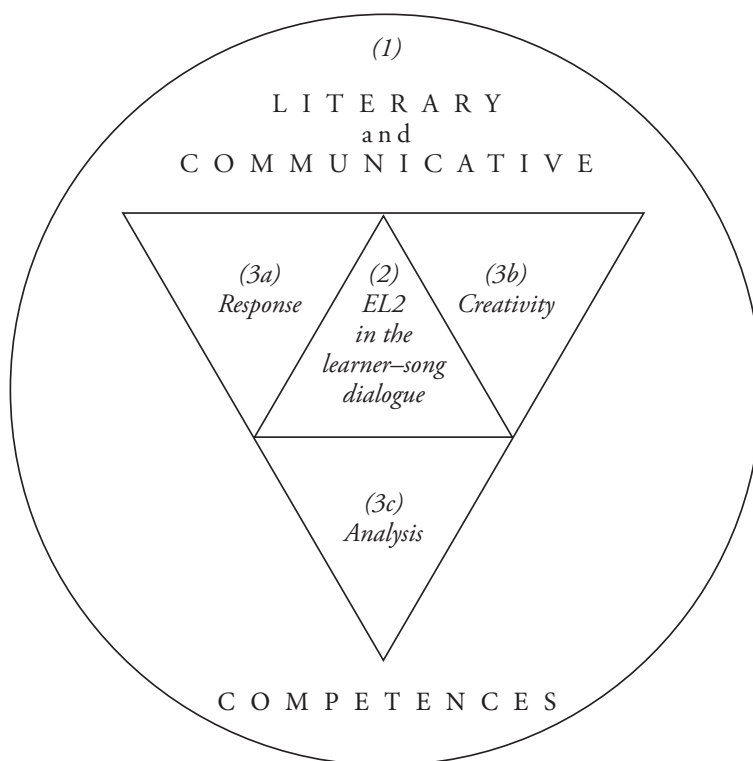


Figure 1. Key dimensions of a methodological framework for developing literary and communicative competences through songs in EL2 contexts

analyzing the language features (e.g., pronunciation, lexico-grammatical features) or, at higher proficiency levels, identifying formal elements and literary devices (e.g., metaphors and similes) in the lyrics. It can also focus on the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts and the time period when the song and lyrics were written, the stories they tell, and the life of the songwriter(s). Additionally, analysis can include questions on formal properties of the music (e.g., instrumentation) and musical genre. With younger learners, analysis is often limited to questions they can answer in basic formulaic language and needs to be strongly supported, for example, by using visuals.

THE THIRD DIMENSION IN PRACTICE

Depending on the literary and language-teaching goals we have in mind when choosing a song (Dimensions 1 and 2), Dimension 3 can be translated into multiple tasks and activities that help learners engage with the song accordingly. While such activities focus mainly on one learning mode, they often contain aspects of all three. What they all have in common is that they are rooted in the communicative language teaching (CLT) paradigm and encourage learners to use the target language in pairs or groups. Below are examples of activities and prompts for each mode.

Response

1. *Song mingle.* After the first listening, ask the learners to walk around in the classroom. Play the song again. Tell them that when you stop the music after 20 seconds, they should approach the nearest classmate and share their first general impressions of the song for about 20 seconds. Then continue the song for another 20 seconds and ask them to move on to another partner to share their impressions once again. Repeat this procedure three or four times. Possible talking points: “The song reminds me of _____”; “How do you like the singer’s

voice?”; “How would you rate the rhythm and sound?”; and “Would you like to meet the singer?”

2. *Four-corner song feedback.* Label the corners of the room with a number, from 1 (very much) to 4 (not at all). Ask the learners if the song made them feel happy (or sad, excited, etc.) and, after each question, tell them to move to the designated corner that reflects their feeling. Invite them to share the reasons for their decision with someone from the same or a different corner.

Creativity

1. *Creating a movie scene.* Assign learners to work together in pairs, or groups of three or four, to create a short movie (using a mobile phone or online video maker such as WeVideo). This movie should include a scene or a sequence where the song is used as background music to create a romantic (or thrilling, soothing, hilarious, etc.) atmosphere. Learners should feel free to act in the film and present the movie in class.
2. *Song mini-saga.* Have learners write a mini-saga (a story of exactly 50 words, not including the title) that tells their own story inspired by the song. (See www.cambridge.org/us/education/blog/2019/03/29/mini-sagas/ for tips on how to teach mini-sagas.)

Analysis

1. *Song chatbot challenge.* Have learners work with a partner. They should agree on three questions about the lyrics both of them are particularly interested in. They can start a chat with a chatbot (e.g., ChatPDF.com) to ask these questions. Have learners challenge the chatbot’s answers by asking follow-up interrogation questions such as, “What exactly do you mean by _____?” Afterwards, in pairs and as a class, learners can talk about how credible and insightful they felt the chatbot’s answers were.

The selected activities are integrated into a series of teaching phases, which also include explicit phases for language work, thus allowing for both song-based literary and language-focused learning in a balanced way.

- 2.** *Cultural-identity-in-the-song search.* Ask learners to work together, in pairs, to scrutinize the lyrics for possible aspects of cultural identity (e.g., gender, religious beliefs, language) reflected in the song and to make a list of their findings. Then, have each learner open a language model powered by artificial intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT, to generate two more lists for the same prompt, which might be something like, “List aspects of cultural identity you can find in the song.” Learners can then check the two AI-generated lists for similarities and differences and discuss how these lists compare with their own.

Dimension 3—One, Two, or All Three Modes?

When planning to use a song in the EL2 classroom, teachers can opt to pick out only one or two modes of Dimension 3, such as creativity and/or analysis, and incorporate respective task(s) in their lesson. This flexibility comes in handy when teachers have only limited time due to other curricular needs and therefore would like to use songs as a filler.

If, however, teachers can spend more time working with a song and aim to exploit its full potential in a more extensive teaching unit, they can employ all three modes. In that case, the selected activities are integrated into a series of teaching phases, which also include explicit phases for language work, thus allowing for both song-based literary and language-focused learning in a balanced way. While in practice the boundaries between these phases are blurred and without a pre-set order as to how they should be sequenced, a sample model could look like this:

Phase 1: Activating learners’ prior knowledge and facilitating language input

Phase 2: Learners’ first encounter with the song through reading/viewing/listening

Phase 3: Sharing Level 1 responses

Phase 4: Language-focused learning

Phase 5: Analytical work with the song

Phase 6: Creative work with the song

Phase 7: Sharing Level 2 responses

Phase 8: Evaluating the song experience

What would teaching a pop-song unit involve if all eight phases were implemented in the order suggested above? Let us look at an example.

EXAMPLE OF A SONG UNIT: “HERE COMES THE SUN”

The following lesson plan is designed for teaching a song unit (probably over two or three lessons) on “Here Comes the Sun” by the Beatles. It is aimed at learners of about 13 or 14 years old—but can be used with learners of other ages—with a CEFR language proficiency level ranging between A2 and B1 (see Council of Europe 2020). In addition to its positive sound and age-appropriateness, this song has been selected for two reasons. First, it lends itself particularly well to language-focused learning. Secondly, it provides cultural learning opportunities about a famous British band in the Swinging Sixties (i.e., the 1960s) and how this fame affected the band members. The eight phases suggested above are taught as follows:

Phases		Activities
<i>Facilitating EL2 learner-song encounter</i>	Phase 1. Activating learners' prior knowledge and facilitating language input	<i>Brainstorming words and objects</i> Select key words or a line from the lyrics. Ask the learners to brainstorm in groups about what springs to mind when they hear these words. Collect their answers and revisit them after listening to the song. Alternatively, you can show a picture of an object mentioned in the song and do the same.
<i>EL2 learner-song encounter</i>	Phase 2. Learners' first encounter with the song through reading/viewing/listening	<i>Words-for-Describing-the-Song Survey</i> Hand out a survey with a list of adjectives for describing the song (see the example in the Appendix). If necessary, go over these words. Then ask the learners to listen to the song (without reading the lyrics!) and, while or after listening, tick the words that they feel describe it best.
	Phase 3. Sharing Level 1 responses	<i>Song response group report</i> After the learners have filled in the Phase 2 survey, ask them to work in small groups and compare their responses. Tell them to take notes and to prepare a short oral group report for sharing with other groups (e.g., "In our group, three people think that the song ____."; "Only one person ____.").
	Phase 4. Language-focused learning	<i>Highlighting language features</i> Select language features in the lyrics you want to draw your learners' attention to, such as incidences of a tense. Enhance these features through highlighting, bolding, or underlining them on a PowerPoint slide. Provide concept questions that help clarify the function and meaning of these features with reference to the song lyrics. (For example, questions when focusing on the present-perfect tense in Taylor Swift's "Everything Has Changed" could include, "Is this about the past?"; "Is this connected to the present?"; and "What has changed for the singer now?") Have learners work in pairs to discuss these questions and report to the class.
	Phase 5. Analytical work with the song	<i>Song lyrics "deep dive" discussion</i> In groups, have the learners delve more deeply into the song by asking them to discuss questions such as, "Who is talking to whom?"; "How does the 'I' feel?"; and "What is happening in the song?" Ask each group to report their findings to the class. <i>Reading/viewing/listening for more context</i> Prepare a short text, audio, or video to provide song-related context, such as interesting facts and stories about the song, the singer-songwriter(s), or the time period it was written. Ask learners to discuss, in groups, whether this new context gives them additional ideas as to what the song is about, and to report back to the class. <i>Spot the instruments</i> While learners listen again, have them focus on the music and identify as many musical instruments as possible, as well as other details they can hear.
	Phase 6. Creative work with the song	<i>Change and create</i> Have learners use the lyrics and tune of the song to write their own verse(s). Suggest two options: (1) Use the same title, change a few lines, and write a new version; (2) Find a new title, change anything they would like to change, and write a completely new (fun?/nonsense?) version. Encourage students to share their new song in class, perhaps in a live karaoke performance.
	Phase 7. Sharing Level 2 responses	<i>Revisit the Words-for-Describing-the-Song Survey</i> Hand out a new copy of the same survey used in Phase 2 and ask the learners to fill it in again (without looking at their first responses!). Then, in pairs, they tell each other what has changed, using comparative forms (e.g., "At first, I thought the song was interesting, but now I think it's even more interesting.").
<i>Evaluating EL2 learner-song encounter</i>	Phase 8. Evaluating the song experience	<i>End-of-unit poll</i> Have learners evaluate and share their song experience in two steps. First, they conduct interviews with three to five peers on the following questions: (1) "What did you like best/least when working with this song, and why?" (2) "Is there anything new, useful, or interesting you have learned? If so, what?" (3) "Would you like to listen to more songs by this band/singer? Why (not)?" Second, they use their findings as a basis for a whole-class discussion.

Table 1. Sample model for sequencing teaching phases with generic activities

1. *Activating learners' prior knowledge and facilitating language input.* Before the learners listen to the song, their schemata and prior knowledge are activated through two brainstorming activities. These activities involve questions based on a picture of the sun—"What springs to mind when you hear the word *sun*? What words do you think of when you hear *sun*?"—and on a photo of the Beatles—"Have you heard of this band before? If so, what do you know about them?" Facilitating language input through pre-teaching of lexical items does not appear to be necessary for the lyrics of "Here Comes the Sun."
2. *Learners' first encounter with the song through reading/viewing/listening.* The learners' first encounter with the song is aural, without reading the lyrics while listening. Since they are expected to share their responses with the teacher and peers after listening, they receive a copy of the Words-for-Describing-the-Song Survey before the song is played (see the Appendix).
3. *Sharing Level 1 responses.* After filling in the survey individually and jotting down ideas on how the song makes them feel, the learners, in pairs or groups, tell each other about their listening experience. Here, they are asked to talk about their responses to the personal first encounter with the song, and they can already share and discuss questions the song lyrics have raised. They are then invited to report their personal feelings about the song to the whole class and to turn their attention to questions about what is going on in this song and what might have inspired the songwriter to write it. Note that here, after listening to the song only once, the learners are not expected to justify their responses by referring to the song lyrics. Rather, the aim of this phase is to gradually approach "global comprehension" (Thaler 2016), inviting the learners to use the aural cues of mood, voice, and style; this will raise their interest in engaging with the song.
4. *Language-focused learning.* After sharing their first responses to the questions in Phase 3, the learners read the lyrics (this is the second learner–song encounter) to share further comments or questions about the song with their teacher and peers. Before addressing these points in a class discussion, students go through a language-focused learning phase. In general, language-focused learning "involves the deliberate learning of language features" and makes a useful contribution to a learner's language proficiency (Newton and Nation 2021, 7); however, the main aim here is to develop knowledge of what a particular feature contributes to the song. With "Here Comes the Sun," the feature targeted is present-perfect tense to indicate change that occurs in the song. This is achieved by focusing explicitly on the form, meaning, and use of this tense with the help of highlighting techniques and can be followed by asking concept questions such as, "There are quite a few *it's* in this song. Do they all mean the same thing?" Despite this explicit grammar focus, the song remains in the foreground: The primary goal is to deepen the learners' understanding of the song lyrics by drawing their attention to a language feature (in this case, present-perfect) and the effect it has on the meaning of the song (in this case, change).
5. *Analytical work with the song.* While Phase 4 draws the learners' attention to aspects of change in "Here Comes the Sun," Phase 5 focuses on contextualizing these changes to delve more deeply into the song. Thus, at the beginning of this phase, learners, in groups, discuss questions such as, "Who is the 'I', and who is the 'little darling'?" and "How does the 'I' feel? Has this person always felt this way?" After sharing their ideas with the class, the students read a short text about the Beatles (such as <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/the-Beatles/390013>) in class to find out more about the band and their popularity in the Sixties;

learners can be prompted with questions such as, “Who were the members?” and “Why did the band break up?” Eliciting answers to these questions can be accompanied by the teacher providing additional information—perhaps on presentation slides—including a quote by George Harrison about how he felt at the time of writing “Here Comes the Sun.” Building on this new contextual input, the questions introducing Phase 5 are taken up and discussed again. Prior to Phase 6, the learners listen to the song once more, this time focusing on questions concerning musical properties and arrangement (e.g., “What is the song’s tempo?” and “What instruments can you hear?”) and on rhyming words in the lyrics.

6. *Creative work with the song.* The creative-work phase involves a *change and create* task where the learners, in pairs or groups, are expected to create their own song lines based on the original “Here Comes the Sun” lyrics. Students who want to share their new song—in whole or in part—are invited to present their versions in a live karaoke performance.
7. *Sharing Level 2 responses.* In Phase 7, the learners reconsider their initial responses to the song in Phase 2. They fill in the Words-for-Describing-the-Song Survey again on their own. Then, with a partner, they compare their first reactions to the song with how they feel and think about it now. After that, they share their findings with the whole class. The learners need not demonstrate their thoughts, feelings, and changes regarding their song experience. They are now encouraged, however, to make their arguments stronger by referring to particular lines of the song lyrics or to what has been discussed in the previous phases.
8. *Evaluating the song experience.* Finally, in brief interviews with peers, followed by a whole-class discussion, learners talk

about their experiences working with the song, what they liked about it, and what they have gained from it.

A GENERIC MODEL FOR WORKING WITH SONGS

The activities employed during each of the phases above are generic. Therefore, they can be used for designing song lessons or shorter teaching sequences for almost every song that teachers (or their learners) choose. The right-hand column of Table 1 summarizes these activities for the eight phases of the model.

NOT ONLY FOR THE CLASSROOM!

Working with songs, as suggested in this approach, does not always need to include all modes of learning, nor is it confined to the classroom. In principle, language teachers, building on this model, can set tasks for autonomous engagement with songs in and outside schools.

Below is an example of a task that learners (at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels) could do without their teacher’s in-class guidance, perhaps as a home assignment. It focuses on the learners’ responses and contains a creative phase, but it does not provide for a distinct language-focused learning phase.

The song-sharing meetup

You are going to listen to a song with some friends. Here is what you need to do:

1. Choose a song, preferably one that is not well-known. (Don’t tell anybody which!)
2. Find the song lyrics on the internet and read them. If you have difficulty understanding, use an online translation tool.
3. Check the internet for interesting facts about the singer/band and possible meanings of the song.
4. Meet up with one or two friends.

5. Tell them that they are about to listen to a song. (Don't tell them anything about it before listening!)
6. Ask them to listen to the song and, after listening, to send you a text message with a few emojis (without text) that describe how the song makes them feel.
7. Look at the emojis and tell them what feelings *you* think the song made them have, then ask them to tell you whether you were right or wrong.
8. Ask them to read the lyrics and come up with thoughts about possible song

C.A.R.E. Acronym	Tips and Ideas for Using the Framework
C REATIVITY	• Whenever possible, include a creative activity your learners can work on in pairs or groups. • Make sure the song itself does not "get lost" during creative work. • Use transformation activities that encourage your learners to change the song into a different kind of medium (e.g., role play, collage, film script). • Use rewriting activities that encourage your learners to rewrite (parts of) the lyrics from their own or someone else's perspective. • Have your learners do gap-fill activities to create their own verses. • Have your learners do activities where they need to put themselves in the shoes of the singer, songwriter, or a person addressed in the song.
A NALYSIS	• If you analyze poetic devices, make sure you engage your learners to discuss their effects on the meaning of the song. • Search the internet for interesting facts, stories, and background information about the song and/or singer(s) that may help your learners gain further insight into the song's meaning. • Always include an analysis activity that focuses on the music in the song.
R ESPONSE	• After listening, always provide pair/group-work activities for learners to share their first reactions to the song. • Use feedback forms or surveys and ranking activities to help learners record their first responses. Accept first reactions without asking your learners to justify them. • Always encourage your learners to revisit their first reactions at a later stage of the song unit.
E NGLISH (L2)	• Always help learners gain access to the textual world of the song lyrics through activating their prior knowledge and raising their expectations about the topic(s) before listening to the song. • Make sure that during language-focused learning phases, the song remains in the foreground. • Direct your learners' attention to language features that are crucial for understanding the song better. • Use teaching techniques (e.g., highlighting, bolding, underlining) that support noticing language features in the lyrics. • When using lyrics that provide numerous examples of a certain language feature, make sure the examples are used for deepening the learners' understanding of this feature <i>and</i> the lyrics.

Table 2. C.A.R.E.—General tips for working with songs

Most EL2 teachers would agree that pop songs are motivating, fun, and an excellent resource for language teaching and learning. Yes, and they are even more than that!

meanings. (Feel free to have them listen to the song again.)

9. Share some of the facts and interpretations you have found on the internet and discuss what you think the song is about.
10. With your friends, prepare a podcast interview for a pop-music channel. It should contain (1) a short summary of your friends' and your own song interpretations and (2) a description of the best (most fun?) part of this song-sharing experience.

TAKE C.A.R.E.! SOME TIPS FOR WORKING WITH POP SONGS

Creativity, analysis, response, and EL2—the pillars of the framework outlined in this article—can be used to form the acronym C.A.R.E., which serves as a mnemonic, reminding us of the numerous teaching possibilities when incorporating pop songs into English teaching. Building on C.A.R.E., Table 2 provides useful tips and ideas for using the framework in practice.

CONCLUSION

Most EL2 teachers would agree that pop songs are motivating, fun, and an excellent resource for language teaching and learning. Yes, and they are even more than that! If we consider them as literary texts, they offer even greater potential for teachers and learners to tap into. The aim of this article is to make these benefits visible and, with the C.A.R.E. framework, easily accessible to give EL2 teachers further ideas for planning song lessons and, above all, inspire them to try out new song-related activities for both literary and language development in the classroom.

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APPENDIX: Words-for-Describing-the-Song Survey

What Words Best Describe This Song?

	Strongly agree 😊😊	Agree 😊	Neither agree nor disagree 😐	Disagree 😞	Strongly disagree 😞😞
optimistic					
peaceful					
happy					
sad					
boring					
interesting					
cheerful					
strange					
confusing					
romantic					
exciting					
warm					
cold					
calm					
pessimistic					
depressing					