

The Music Video as an Audio-visual Text: Transcribing Pete Seeger's "Forever Young" into an ELT Lesson

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Abstract

I argue that the music video of "Forever Young", recorded by Pete Seeger and a chorus of schoolchildren in 2012, is a nuanced audio-visual text, which could be used to plan a comprehensive English Language lesson (comprising grammar, vocabulary, and listening exercises) for advanced learners in India, specifically, undergraduate students. My paper identifies the limitations typical to the target learner (e.g. difficulty in comprehension via listening, confusion over the use of modal verbs etc.); examines the logistics of rectifying these deficits within the classroom (e.g. infrastructure, time constraints etc.); and, establishes that the proposed pedagogical method would uniquely meet the learners' requirements. I offer two detailed lesson plans to elucidate how the audio-visual text may be used in ELT.

Key words:

audio-visual text, multisensory learning, listening skills, modal verb, figurative language

Introduction

Bob Dylan wrote the song, "Forever Young", itemizing his blessings for his infant son. He hopes that the child might, among other things, always stand up for what is right and remain young at heart. Dylan first recorded two solos (a lullaby and a jazz version) in 1973. In 2012, a nonagenarian Pete Seeger and "The Riverside Kids", a choir of schoolchildren whom Seeger was mentoring, recorded a music video of "Forever Young". Here, the children sing the refrain, "stay forever young", while Seeger articulates the other wishes. The video was part of an album, "Chimes of Freedom", commemorating fifty years of Amnesty International.

Pete Seeger is as legendary a singer as a human rights activist. His proactive support for Amnesty indicates that his commitment is undiminished in old age. Given the background and dynamics of the performers, the reciprocity of the optative mood in this rendition and its new context, the song acquires a wider political relevance. The video, which communicates this import, becomes a nuanced audio-visual text. My paper demonstrates the efficacy of using this music video as a teaching-aid to prepare comprehensive English language lessons (in grammar, vocabulary and listening skills) for advanced learners in India, particularly, undergraduate students across academic disciplines.

English Language Skills Deficit among Undergraduates in India: Causes and Consequences

The lack of proficiency in English among such students has been established by surveys such as the 2017 ASER (Annual Status of Education Report). In many cases, even a score of eighty percent in English at the Higher Secondary level examination does not guarantee proficiency in the language. This is because the deductive grammar-centric methods of teaching English and the memory-testing

assessment techniques in Indian schools are not conducive to the acquisition of practical skills in a foreign language. The resultant skills deficit means that undergraduates cannot cope with course contents in English, fare badly in examinations, lose self-confidence and, finally, suffer a drastic reduction in employability.

While the logic of a higher education in English in India is debatable, vernacularizing of academic course contents at the tertiary level is yet to be achieved. Besides, since English is slated to remain the predominant language in worldwide use in business and academia for the next decade, English skills would continue to determine employability in a globalized job market. Therefore, the issue of a skills deficit at the undergraduate level needs to be urgently addressed.

A degree of heterogeneity notwithstanding, typical areas of deficit would include listening skills, comprehension of figurative language and negotiation of modal auxiliary verb forms, such as, “may” and “might”. An underrated perceptive skill, listening is seldom taught or tested in the Indian classroom. Yet, listening is more challenging than reading; first, because it entails application of metacognitive processes to comprehend meaning at one go, i.e., real-life oral texts cannot be revisited; second, it demands a simultaneous grasp of multiple linguistic aspects, including lexical semantics, pronunciation and intonation. For undergraduates, ineffective listening makes following class lectures difficult, besides impeding communicative competence. The inability to comprehend figurative language is a similar handicap. While learners know the literal meanings of individual words, they are baffled by connotations deriving from the deployment of these words in non-standard syntax or collocations. “Idiomaticity”, or “the capacity to speak and write in a natural idiomatic way” (Stanley, 39) is a marker of fluency. Its deficiency results from insufficient real-life use of English and, also, from not being trained into an awareness of this aspect of vocabulary. Conversely, the learner may well have acquired a theoretical understanding of auxiliary modal verbs at school, but is at a loss when required to use the forms in actual communicative contexts.

Redressing the Deficit: Problems and Methods

Redressing these deficiencies at the undergraduate level poses problems. Time constraints in intensively subject-specific courses like a B.A. in Sociology or a B.Tech. preclude comprehensive individual lessons on the disparate language components. The conventional deductive methods of teaching grammar and vocabulary would be particularly inefficient as these do not inculcate analytical thinking, which is required in practical applications of language. Further, for most learners conventionally taught grammar is a bogey. On the other hand, those with higher levels of language skills would find such lessons a juvenile project. To be effective, ELT for undergraduates must be interesting, challenging and demonstrate its relevance to real-life situations. My paper proposes that the music video of “Forever Young” may be used to teach / test for the aforesaid components of language, catering specifically to the needs of undergraduate students.

This music video has the foremost advantage that it constitutes authentic material, introducing the target forms in a real-life linguistic context. The reciprocity of wishes between Seeger and the children generate the modal verb, ‘may’, multiple

times in the lyrics, which employ figurative language abundantly to explicate the wishes. For developing listening skills, the video offers several advantages; first, it has the linguistic characteristics of real spoken English; second, it has enough items and a summarizable content, which permit testing for basic transactional and interactional listening; third, the figurative language and visual images make it an appropriate audio-visual text for a test of critical comprehension. The latter requires application of inferred data knowledge and linguistic knowledge in the act of comprehension, making listening an interpretative process. The video, thus, makes for a tiered listening experience.

Generally, the music video offers a multisensory language learning experience, which enhances cognitive connection to the forms taught and makes them memorable. In the course of the lessons the text acquires a three-dimensional quality; besides its primary aural aspect and visual images, a print version might be generated via a gap-fill listening exercise. The latter can be used to teach grammar and vocabulary. This pedagogical approach saves time and labour; it interconnects the different aspects of language and makes learning cogent and meaningful.

Such multimedia applications make ELT interesting and interactive. Learners feel motivated and engaged. The choice of this music video has a further justification; it communicates cultural values, which are universal and relevant to a heterogeneous learner profile. Finally, the resource is readily accessible on YouTube. The lessons can be set up easily with a whiteboard, a projector and either a smart phone or a computer with Internet connection. The lessons cater to large classes as well as smaller groups.

Ideally, two one-hour lessons may be planned. The first should test for gist and detailed listening skills and teach grammar; the second should teach vocabulary and test for critical comprehension. Accordingly, two tentative lesson plans are outlined below.

Lesson Plan 1

- Learners are to be oriented by letting them know that they would be viewing a music video and answering questions based on the auditory experience.
- The video (which runs for five minute, nineteen seconds) is to be played once.
- To test for basic listening skills, handouts with the following exercises are distributed among learners:

a. Choose the correct words to fill in the gaps:

May God ____ and keep you always, (forgive, bless, help)
May your ____ all come true, (wishes, dreams, fantasies)
May you always ____ for others, (live, die, do)
And let others do for you.

May you build a ____ to the stars (pathway, ladder, bridge)
And ____ on every rung. (climb, mount, step)

May you stay
Forever young.

Forever young,
Forever young,
May you stay
Forever young.

May you grow up to be righteous,
May you grow up to be ____, (loyal, just, true)
May you always know the truth,
And see the ____ surrounding you. (lights, wonders, people)

May you always be ____, (daring, courageous, bold)
Stand ____ and be strong. (tall, straight, upright)
And may you always stay
Forever young.

Forever young,
Forever young,
May you stay
Forever young.

b. In the next part of the song there are typing mistakes. Replace the underlined words with the correct ones.

May your hands always be gentle,
May your feet always quick,
May you have a strong foundation,
When the sands of changes shift.
May your heart always be whole,
May your song always be played,
And may you always stay
Forever young.

Forever young
Forever young
May you stay
Forever young.

- These exercises would generate the lyrics as a print text, which can now be used to teach grammar. The target language is to be elicited with the following questions:
 - a. Identify the word that occurs with maximum frequency in the song?
 - b. Why is it so frequently used?

- Once “may” is located as the target language, learners would also be able to suggest that the term is used to express the speaker’s hopes and wishes for the addressee(s).
- Next, it might be pointed out that there are other linguistic contexts in which “may” is typically used. The following exercise would elicit these contexts:

Match the following usages of the word “may” with the appropriate grammatical principles:

a. You may be right.	i. A typical occurrence
b. We may go scuba diving next summer.	ii. Prohibition
c. She may have missed her train.	iii. Possibility in the present
d. May I put the TV on?	iv. Asking permission
e. Students may not use the staff car park.	v. Possibility in the past
f. In women, hormone treatments may cause cancer.	vi. Possibility in the future

- It should be mentioned that “may” is a modal auxiliary verb. Like “can”, “will”, “would”, “shall” etc., it is “used before infinitives of other verbs to add certain kinds of meaning connected with certainty or with freedom or obligation to act” (Swan, 321).
- The learners are asked to name another auxiliary modal verb, often used as a synonym for “may”; namely, “might”. Differences in usage of the two terms in similar contexts might be explicated by referring to the following paired examples:
 - a. i. I may go to school tomorrow.
 - ii. It might rain tomorrow.
 - b. i. May I join you?
 - ii. I wonder if I might have some more cheese.
- The learners are required to indicate, first, which statement in (a) represents a thirty percent possibility and which a fifty percent; second, which of the two statements in (b) is the more formal request for permission. Once correct answers are elicited, the underlying grammatical principles should be clarified: first, that “might” is used to suggest a smaller chance of something happening and, “may”, a far stronger likelihood. Second, while “may” and “might” are both employed to ask permission politely, the latter is more formal and used in indirect question structures.

- The next step is to guide the learners into an awareness of the context-specific usages of “may” and “might” through the following exercise:

Choose either “may” or “might” to fill in the gaps and match each usage with the relevant grammatical principle:

a. I said that I ____ go to Scotland next year.	i. Might is used in affirmative clauses to make suggestions.
b. ____ you live long.	ii. May is used to refuse permission.
c. You ____ have killed yourself climbing that steep slope.	iii. Might is used in past indirect speech.
d. You ____ try asking your uncle for a job.	iv. May is used to express a hope or wish.
e. No, you ____ not borrow my car.	v. Might is used to refer to something that was possible but did not happen.

- This entire exercise on testing basic listening skills and teaching grammar should take an hour.

Lesson Plan 2

- The second lesson, planned for another hour, would check the text for figurative structures and test for critical comprehension. Attention is to be drawn to the text’s easy vocabulary, which, paradoxically, is interspersed with difficult language structures. As examples, one might cite:
 - a. May you. ... stand upright
 - b. May you always do for others
And let others do for you.
- In (a), “stand upright” literally means ‘to be in an erect position’, whereas the collocation is used in the sense of ‘always doing what is morally right’. Thus, the meaning of the structure does not coincide with the literal meaning of the constituent words. In (b), the unusual syntax in the structure “do for”(where “do” is employed as the main verb without a supporting noun) causes ambiguity. The confusion is reinforced because the lines evoke and distort a familiar proverb: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. The proverb and its significance (‘You should treat others with the same concern and kindness that you would like to be treated with.’) might be elicited from the learners, as also, the altered significance of its derivation in the song (‘one must help others and not be too proud to receive others’ help’).

- Here, it would have to be explained that the two cited structures are illustrative of ‘figurative language’, which marks “a conspicuous departure from ... the standard meaning of words, or else, the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect” (Abrams, Harpham, 107). Such linguistic freedom, called ‘poetic license’, is accorded to creative writers whereby they can alter the rules and conventions of language to suit the requirements of their compositions.
- The following exercise would guide learners into identifying the figurative structures in the text:

Find sentences or phrases in the text that mean the following:

- a. to be dynamic and full of youthful enthusiasm when one is old (“stay forever young”)
 - b. forces that have the power to change things (“winds of changes”)
 - c. plan to achieve the highest success and follow the plan through (“Build a ladder to the star/ and step on every rung”)
 - d. appreciate the positive things in one’s life (“see the lights around you”)
- It might further be pointed out that b, c, and d are metaphors, that is, a particular figurative structure in which two different objects are indirectly compared. Learners are required to identify the objects that are compared in each case and the points of comparison. In each case, the comparison happens to be with aspects of nature. The following exercise has metaphors similarly derived from nature. Its purpose is to familiarize the learners with metaphorical structures:

Fill in the gaps with appropriate words from the list below to form metaphors. Explain each comparison.

List of words: fiery, flood, icy, stone, stormed, stormy, thunder, sunny

- a. They have a ____ relationship.
- b. He gave me a ____ smile.
- c. The leader made a ____ speech.
- d. The ____ of his voice echoed in the hall.
- e. She broke into a ____ of tears
- f. He ____ out of the room.
- g. He expressed his anger with an ____ look.
- h. He has a heart of ____.

- To test for critical comprehension vis-à-vis the audio-visual text, the video should be played again. The following information is to be elicited:
 - a. Who is the author of the lyrics?
 - b. Does the author feature in the video?
- The learners should be able to name Bob Dylan from the credits and spot his graphic image at the start. Dylan's reason for writing the song might be discussed.
- The new context of Seeger's rendition modifies the song's original significance. The following questions would allow the learners to reconstruct the changed context:
 - a. Name the person expressing the hopes and wishes in the video.
 - b. Why does he recite these instead of singing?
 - c. Who are his wishes addressed to?
 - d. What is the occasion for the recording of this video?
 - e. What is the objective of the organization mentioned in response to (d)?
 - f. Identify the lines sung by the children.
 - g. Why are they given particularly these lines?
 - h. Compare the original occasion for the song with its present context. How does the song's meaning change?
- In response to (a) and (c), the learners should be able to name Pete Seeger and The Riverside Kids' choir from the credits. For (b) they would gauge that Seeger recites the lyrics because he has lost his singing voice with age. Again, the credits would indicate that the video commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of Amnesty International. If the learners are unaware of Amnesty's objectives, a reference to the 'Passport of Human Rights' featuring in the video would help explain the organization's role in campaigning against the violation of human rights across the world. Questions (f) and (g) require the learners to recognize that the children's singing "Stay forever young" is an acknowledgement and celebration of such youthfulness in Seeger. Here, a discussion of Seeger's heroic youthfulness would be pertinent. It tests for the critical ability to comprehend textual nuances; for instance, how the passionate intensity of an old man's rendition of Dylan's song and his support for the cause of human rights (evinced in his performing for Amnesty) constitute an affirmation of all the values the song mentions (righteousness, uprightness, courageousness etc.). The learners should be able to perceive that, first, Seeger

demonstrates through personal example how to “stay forever young” and, second, in this video the song is not merely a blessing or a prayer by the older generation for the younger (as in was in Dylan’s version), but both exhortatory and an inspirational anthem.

- A third follow-up lesson may be planned with any of the following productive activities: a. learners could be asked to speak for two minutes on any public figure who conforms to their idea of ‘staying forever young’; b. a list of occasions may be offered (such as birthday, promotion in a job, bereavement etc.) for which learners are to frame wishes with the form “may”; c. learners form groups to create ‘metaphor sets’ on an area, for instance, ‘colour’ (‘a black mood’, ‘to see red’ etc.) The last two activities would produce the target forms / language. In the first case, the ideas received via listening would be personalized through speaking practice.

Conclusion

ELT in India tends to be regimented, both the conventional deductive techniques in government schools and the inductive practices in private institutions teaching English. The former (as indicated earlier), are not suitable for the target learners. The inductive techniques, while effective, become mechanical through repetition of set practices. The objective of my paper is to suggest an opportunity to circumvent such regimentation by using multimedia technology.

The increase in the availability of such technology has led to an explosion of interest in its use in ELT. At one level, the Web is a huge resource library for teachers in terms of authentic materials such as videos, documentaries etc. The proliferation of hand-held devices such as smartphones, tablets and mp3 players allow access to these resources and scope for an array of personalized activities within the classroom. At another level, multimedia technology has shifted the teaching-learning process to virtual classrooms via online English learning portals.

In the process, however, ELT runs the risk of becoming over-technologized. Teachers can be seduced by “the ‘wow factor’ of technology, with pedagogy being pushed to the sidelines” (Stanley, 3). The method my paper proposes avoids just this. It integrates multimedia into classroom practices “only when it serves the language aims of the lesson, and avoids using technology for technology’s sake” (Stanley, 3). It represents “a principled approach” (Hockly) where the use of multimedia in teaching language is conditioned, first, by the age and educational background of the learners, second, by their specific language requirements and finally, by the availability of the technology in typical learner situations. The last factor is important in framing teaching methodology as in large parts of India the institutions of undergraduate learning would not have the infrastructure (language labs, for instance) to support sophisticated ELT web tools.

Under the circumstances, the average Indian classroom is best equipped for “blended learning”, of which my method is an example. It “combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology” (Sharma and Barrett, 7). As conventional pedagogy demands, learning tasks are prioritized. The activities have been chosen to offer variety; graded from easy to difficult; and may be done by

individual learners or in pairs or groups depending on class size. The method constitutes “an alternative” to teaching language within a “tightly structured system” by “allowing learners simply to experience the language through communication” (Thornbury, 17). Methodology-wise, this is a flexible approach. It combines the freedom of guided discovery with some controlled activities. It might be said to approximate Harmer’s “engage-study-activate” formula (Harmer, 11). Encouraging such approaches would make classroom teaching creative, dynamic and effective.

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