

Singer-Songwriters — Poetries, Pop-try, Poe-try

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“Master poet”, “voice of a generation”, “music giant”, “teenage messiah”, “guiding spirit of the counterculture movement”, “caustic social critic”, “Shakespeare of his generation” – the list of glorifying labels for Bob Dylan is as endless as his “Never Ending Tour”. In 2016, the Swedish Academy awarded him the Nobel Prize in Literature making him the first musician to have ever received this accolade. Describing Dylan’s place in literary history, Horace Engdahl, a member of the Academy, praised him as “... a singer worthy of a place beside the Greek bards, beside Ovid, beside the Romantic visionaries, beside the kings and queens of the blues, beside the forgotten masters of brilliant standards” (Coscarelli 2016).

When he finally submitted his Nobel lecture, after having had a tumultuous relationship with the Swedish committee for half a year, he – and the literary commentariat – wrestled with the question whether song lyrics can really be called literature (Dylan 2017a, 2017b). Can something from the dirty depths of pop music rise to the almighty pantheon of Great Lit?

The following paper will not answer this question, but suggest paths to integrate music and poetry into foreign language teaching. After briefly summarizing the state of teaching poetry in TEFL, a triple opening is recommended, i.e. enlarging the canon (**poetries**), including music (**pop-try**), and varying methodology (**poe-try**) – because, as H. W. Longfellow once claimed, “Music is the universal language of mankind – poetry their universal pastime and delight.”

1. Current State

In classrooms, poetry has always led a Cinderella existence (Thaler 2018a, Thaler 2008). As they are syntactically and semantically rather complex, poems in general are hard to understand. This challenge is augmented when pupils face poems written in a foreign language. Moreover, the self-referentiality of poems creates a distance to the students’ personal spheres of life. Therefore a lot of teachers neglect lyrical texts in their classrooms to avoid demotivating the learners. Furthermore, a one-sided teaching approach, which focuses on closely

analyzing the poem in order to “find the meaning”, has widened the gap between poetry and pupil.

This is a deplorable fact as lyrical texts have considerable teaching potential. These benefits can be seen in the following grid, which combines a descriptive definition based on Müller-Zettelmann’s multi-component model (2000) with the resulting implications for teaching poetry in the TEFL classroom (Thaler 2018a, 2008).

Features of poetry		Benefits for teaching
Brevity		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible use (various goals, all levels) • Use in one lesson
Density of subject matter (reduction, compression)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close reading required • Focus on essentials
Increased subjectivity (individual experience)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional loading • Personal reader’s response
Musicality (proximity to songs)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nice listening experience • Activation of different senses • Easy to remember • Songs as material
Aesthetic self-referentiality (artificiality)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal appeal • extraordinariness
Complexity (structure, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linguistic exploitability • Interpretational openness • Stylistic analysis • Model for creative activities

Fig. 1: Definition and potential of poetry

To exploit this potential and overcome the Cinderella existence of poetry, a triple opening seems necessary.

2. Poetries

First, the canon of lyrical texts has to be opened up. “If it ain’t fun, it ain’t poetry” (Taubenböck 2004): Taking this motto seriously, teachers have to complement traditional forms of poetry like Shakespeare sonnets by alternative genres. Indeed, there is a wealth of poetic forms including innovative, unconventional, humorous forms. Thus, the singular form “poetry” may be substituted by the

plural “poetries”. “Mit diesem zu ‘poetries’ hin erweiterten Lyrikbegriff müsste es gelingen, die für SchülerInnen meist abschreckende Vorstellung von einem Gedicht als ehrfurchtsvoll zu bewunderndem hermeneutischen Mysterium abzubauen” (Taubenböck 2004: 5).

These lyrical subgenres, which are often shorter, easier and more appealing to young learners than the canonical texts, comprise, among others, limericks, haikus, clerihews, spoonerisms, acrostics, aphorisms, ads, tongue twisters, shape poems, nonsense rhymes, oral poetry – and songs.

3. Pop-try

If Bob Dylan had lived in the Elizabethan age, he might have written sonnets – and if Shakespeare lived today, he might write songs (Thaler 2015). Music and song have always had considerable motivational potential in English language classrooms. According to the *A-Dekalog* (Thaler 1999: 134ff.), songs are attractive, authentic, up-to-date teaching material (*Attraktivität, Authentizität, Aktualität*), which provide a change from everyday routine (*Abwechslung*), are omnipresent (*Allgegenwärtigkeit*), reflect young people’s concerns (*Adressaten-Orientierung*), are part of teenagers’ daily lives (*Anwendbarkeit*), work as teddy-bear-in-the-ear or ersatz-lover-mother (*Affektivität*), are suitable for discursive negotiations of meaning due to their semantic ambiguity (*Auslegbarkeit*), and can foster student-centred learning (*Aktivität*).

In addition, music meets literature in several ways. Faulstich (1978) designates pop lyrics as modern mass poetry, Lorch (1988) analyzes the music video Money for Nothing by Dire Straits as a neo-metaphysical poem, and Duxbury (1988) finds a lot of literary references in rock music, e.g. with singers (Bob Dylan & Dylan Thomas), song titles (Dire Straits’ Romeo and Juliet), lyrics (Cat Stevens’ Morning Has Broken & Farjeon’s A Morning Song), concept albums (Eurythmics’ 1984 & Orwell’s 1984), and music videos (Men at Work’s Dr Heckyll and Mr Jive & Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde). The *Lit-Lied* or SIBL, i.e. song inspired by literature, can enrich the literature classroom in many ways (Thaler 2009).

Song texts that are worthy of literary analysis have frequently been created by singer-songwriters. The following table lists a few representatives across the last six decades (Fig. 2, also cf. www.indiepedia.de).

Chronological survey of singer-songwriters	
Since the 60s	Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Johnny Cash, Leonard Cohen, Robert Wyatt, Scott Walker, Donovan ...
Since the 70s	John Lennon, Nick Drake, Lou Reed, Jonathan Richman, Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith, Carole King ...
Since the 80s	Bruce Springsteen, Sheryl Crow, Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman ...
Since the 90s	Elliott Smith, Will Oldham, Ben Lee, Fiona Apple, Cat Power, Tori Amos, Noel Gallagher, Alanis Morissette, Tom Petty ...
Since the 00s	Adam Green, Patrick Wolf, Josh Rouse, Brendan Benson, Bright Eyes, Jamie T, James Blunt ...
Since the 10s	Archy Marshall, Jake Bugg, Ed Sheeran ...

Fig. 2: Songwriters since the 1960s

But what is a singer-songwriter (e.g. Reclam/Sony 2015)? A definition of this artist is not as easy as it seems. One may distinguish between a weak and a strong version. In the weak version, singer-songwriters are musicians who write, compose, and perform their own musical material. A strong version may include a few additional features (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singer-songwriter>, www.laut.de/Genres/):

- lyrics: personal, confessional, serious, veiled by elaborate metaphors, vague imagery
- creative concern: emphasis on the song
- musical arrangement: mild
- performing style: understated

The influential Rolling Stone music magazine has compiled a list of the 100 greatest songwriters ever (www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-songwriters). Knowing that rankings are always dubious, and *de gustibus non est disputandum*, you may compare your own favourites with Rolling Stone's Top Ten (Fig. 3).

Top ten songwriters	
No. 1	Bob Dylan
No. 2	Paul McCartney
No. 3	John Lennon

No. 4	Chuck Berry
No. 5	Smokey Robinson
No. 6	Mick Jagger & Keith Richards
No. 7	Carole King
No. 8	Paul Simon
No. 9	Joni Mitchell
No. 10	Stevie Wonder

Fig. 3: Top Ten songwriters

4. Poe-try

Thirdly teaching methodology has to be opened up, i.e. personal, creative, experimental and fun responses to lyrical texts should complement the more cognitive approaches – because, as Wallace Stevens put it, “the purpose of poetry is to contribute to man’s happiness” (cf. Thaler 2018b). This is not to say that close analysis in itself is a bad thing. It illuminates the poem / song and contributes to a deeper understanding and appreciation, but it should be done in moderation and the right spirit. A balanced approach also offers up poetry for students to find their own connection to it by trying out alternative ways. Six of these paths will be delineated here:

a) Distorted lyrics

To avoid the omnipresent gap-fill exercise, the teacher can hand out an altered text, employing various techniques (Thaler 2008):

- Jumbled lines: The lyrics are cut into separate lines, and the students have to put the lines into the correct order.
- Alternatives: Some words of the text are given two alternatives, and the students have to choose the one they think fits best.
- Two in one: Two different song texts are mixed into one, and the students have to sort them out.
- Prose and poem: The lyrics are set like a prose text, and the students have to put them back into their lyrical form.
- Mondegreen version (*Freudscher Verhörer*, misheard words): Some words of the song are replaced by others, and the students have to underline and correct them (cf. the first stanza of John Lennon’s *Imagine* in Fig. 4).

John Lennon: Imagine	Mondegreen version (for students)
<p>1. Imagine there's no countries It isn't hard to do Nothing to kill or die for And no religion, too Imagine all the people Living life in peace</p> <p>Chorus: You may say I'm a dreamer But I'm not the only one I hope someday you will join us And the world will be as one ...</p>	<p>1. Imagine there's no county It isn't a heart to woo Nothing to kill a fly for And know religion two Imagine all the people Living like a beast</p> <p>Chorus: You may say I'm a dreamboat But I'm not the lonely one I hope Sunday you'll get us a joint And the world will be as won ...</p>

Fig. 4: Imagine by John Lennon

The advantages of working with such distorted text versions result from their puzzle-like nature as they prompt the learners to play the sleuth, find missing things, and reconstruct the order. During this detective work, the students gradually develop a feeling for the constituent features of poetry, dig below the surface of the written words, and may arrive at a deeper understanding of the lyrics.

b) Singing and reciting

Singing along usually is no problem with younger learners. Asking intermediate and advanced students to sing may be met with refusal but emphasizing the fun experience of this communal activity can overcome students' inhibitions. The teacher, of course, has to act as a role model even if – or rather particularly if – he / she is an untalented singer.

However, if singing is beyond debate, teachers should at least realize that song texts consist of sounds and rhythm, and should consequently be read aloud and recited. This can be turned into a fun experience, and make students aware that active readers impart their own meaning to a stanza. Several techniques may be tried out:

- choral reading: The whole class – or smaller groups – recite the text.
- role reading: The lyrics are read with different roles (e.g. boys and girls take turns)
- mood reading: The tone or volume may be changed (e.g. happy vs angry, loud vs whispering)
- chain reading: Each student of the class reads one line only until the whole class has participated.

- stop and go: One student starts and stops whenever he / she likes. His / her neighbour has to go on.
- commented reading: A student reads out and from time to time inserts asides, i.e. says what he / she likes or does not understand.

c) Creative activities

As poetry should not only be studied in a receptive mode, productive tasks can encourage learners to play about and experiment with it. Based on the various channels of perception, the following categories can be distinguished:

- written forms, e.g. adding another stanza
- visual forms, e.g. putting the lyrics into a collage
- musical forms, e.g. mixing the song text with a different melody (mash-up)
- audiovisual forms, e.g. producing a short video clip – and uploading it onto YouTube
- interactive forms, e.g. making a contribution to one of the various poetry websites

d) Intermediality

Modern media of communication are frequently interconnected. As instruments of expression and exchange, the various media refer to each other, both explicitly and implicitly. Intermediality as the combination and adaptation of separate material vehicles of representation and reproduction should also find its way into the TEFL classroom (e.g. Engelhart 2017, Thaler 2017a, 2014).

Two examples focusing on the Bard may be suggested here. With Shakespeare sonnets, you can compare the original text, a modern translation, an audio translation and a song (e.g. Wolf Biermann's translations and songs, 2005). Or you contrast sonnet 18 (Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day), which celebrates the stability of love and its power to immortalize the subject of the poet's lines, with No. 130 (My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing like the Sun), which subverts and reverses the conventions of the Petrarchan love sequence, and Tom Lehrer's 1950s song *When You're Old and Grey*, a cynical example of stark realism, pointing out that the years ahead will almost certainly destroy every vestige of the partner's feminine charms (excerpt see Fig. 5, audio version: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NOZH0y7VxE).

Tom Lehrer: When You're Old and Grey

Since I still appreciate you
Let's find love while we may
Because I know I'll hate you
When you are old and grey

...

An awful debility
A lessened utility
A loss of mobility
Is a strong possibility
In all probability
I'll lose my virility
And you your fertility
And desirability
And this liability
Of total sterility
Will lead to hostility
And a sense of futility
So let's act with agility
While we still have facility
For we'll soon reach senility
And lose the ability . . .

Fig. 5: Tom Lehrer's When You're Old and Grey (excerpt)

e) Current songwriters

We teachers sometimes forget about the age gap between our students and ourselves, clinging to the revered songwriters that accompanied our growing up. Unfortunately, the names of these "oldies but goldies" often do not ring a bell with our young learners, who are likely to prefer contemporary artists. So it is a good idea to also give modern representatives a chance in our TEFL classrooms.

For example, the popular English singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran mixes Irish traditional music with pop on his single Galway Girl, reaching No. 1 on the Irish chart. The corresponding music video, which was shot from Sheeran's perspective, finds the singer spending a night out in Galway. All of the competences

laid down, for example, in Germany's National Educational Standards (KMK 2012) can be promoted with Galway Girl (Thaler 2017b, 2012, 2007):

- Functional communicative competences: listening to the song and viewing the music video – reading background information on Sheeran's deplorable youth – writing a blog entry about one's personal impressions – speaking about his incredible popularity in spite of his off-the-beaten-track looks – mediating a few lines into German – exploring lexical and grammatical items – singing the chorus (pronunciation) – studying the orthography of selected words (céili / Cèilidh)
- Intercultural communicative competence: explaining Irish references in the lyrics (Grafton Street, Carrickfergus, fiddles, céilis, trad tunes), and discussing whether Galway is really „quintessential Ireland”, as Sheeran put it
- Text and media competence: analysing the production and make-up of this video, which Sheeran himself shot on his steadycam, and the music genre, a mix between trad folk and pop, which his label did not want to have on his album
- Language awareness: pointing to pars-pro-toto (or metonymy) phrases like Jamie for Jameson Whiskey, Jack for Jack Daniels, Arthur for Guinness beer, Johnny for Johnny Powers whiskey, and Van for the rock singer Van Morrison – and making it clear that Sheeran does not portray a promiscuous Irish girl here

... She took Jamie as a chaser, Jack for the fun
 She got Arthur on the table, with Johnny riding as a shotgun ...
 Then put Van on the jukebox ...

- Language learning competence: making students familiar with online platforms like www.songfacts.com, on which they can find out the stories behind the songs, get the lyrics and watch the music videos.

A mixture between classical songwriters and contemporary artists seems to be a balanced approach (cf. Thaler 2007). When the venerated hero of your youth happens to celebrate his decadal birthday or passes on to music heaven, you can present Suzanne by Donovan or Into the Great Wide Open by Tom Petty.

f) Becoming a songwriter

The productive climax of working with singer-songwriters is to actually become a songwriter oneself. With a sound-editing software like Music Maker Jam

(www.chip.de), students can compose their own pieces of music. The user-friendly package can be downloaded online for free, is available for computers and mobile devices, and has a rather self-explanatory interface, which offers a range of different styles, e.g. hip-hop, house, dubstep.

5. Conclusion

In his Nobel Lecture (see Introduction, 2017), Bob Dylan argues that songs both are and are not literature. “Songs are unlike literature ... they’re meant to be sung, not read.” The words in Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be acted out on the stage – just as lyrics in songs are meant to be sung, not read on a page. Dylan calls upon people to face his texts the way they were intended to be heard, “in concert or on record or however people are listening to songs these days” (2017). He then refers to Homer, the grandfather of Western literature, who also was a singer and a lyric writer, and cites the archetypical scene of epic narration, i.e. his invocation of the muse: “I return once again to Homer, who says, ‘Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story.’” The muse does not speak, but sings – just like Bob. “Vielleicht sind gerade Singer-Songwriter die literarisch Geküssten” (Kedves 2017).

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