“Zombies” in the Classroom

Teaching “The Troubles” Using Pop Music

“What's in your head, in your head?”

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Music is an important part in most students’ everyday life but often they listen to songs without understanding their real meanings. Thus, it is necessary to enable them to start reflecting on the lyrics critically.

The following teaching idea uses music to introduce a topic that might be rather boring for the students at first sight: the conflict in Northern Ireland. The song “Zombie” by the Irish pop band ‘The Cranberries’ provides an ideal framework. It deals with the terrors of war, especially the impact it has on children. The teaching idea consciously combines different approaches and can be used as an introductory double lesson to the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is meant to be used in 7th grade, but can easily be adapted to higher grades, e.g. by giving more details concerning the politics.

Why use music as a teaching tool?

Pop and rock songs offer a very motivating alternative to conventional teaching techniques and a perfect basis for foreign language learning processes for several reasons. They have great instructional potential and their affective, content-related and linguistic aspects provide various starting points for in-class conversations and other activities by connecting situational-contextual and lexical-grammatical comprehension (Timm 1998, p. 178).

Considering the didactic principles of foreign language learning, music is especially suitable as a method to teach English. At first, materials and activities should help students to develop their ideals and moral concepts (Timm 1998, p. 178). This content-orientation is perfectly covered by the song “Zombie”, since they are forced to make up their minds about war, terror and the political aspects related to it. Furthermore, to make teaching learner-oriented, it is important to take into account the students’ experiences, interests, abilities and needs as well as to use authentic materials. Also, music addresses head, heart and senses equally, which fulfils the principle of completeness. Using music as a teaching tool can also be action and task-oriented, since it requires receptive, productive and interactive dealing with language and through this process orientation, it encourages own perceptions and structures. That way, subject matters are no longer just imparted but rather become a topic of learner activities, which are meaningful to the students and hence again provoke learning processes (Timm 1998, p. 178).

Regarding our teaching idea, it is particularly important to stress the advantages of using music video clips for foreign language teaching.

Music clips give the content of a song a distinct, artistic shape because they are often shot like mini feature films (Thaler 2012, p. 65).

Videos provide a number of actual, authentic and motivating occasions for differentiated foreign language acquisition as well as intercultural knowledge. By using videos, it is easy to activate learners, e.g. through comprehension questions, speculations or social-interactive and communicative tasks following the reception. Music clips often provoke a spontaneous, emotional reaction and thus constitute a welcome supplement to fictional and non-fictional texts (Thaler 2012, p. 65). Furthermore, videos are more vivid and thus more catchy and memorable than “normal” textual information. (Bausch et al. 2003, p. 424). Students recognize an emotion more easily through pictures, e.g. a facial expres-
sion in a video. The repetitive words “in your head” will probably be much easier to interpret when being related to the young boy’s face shown several times in the music clip “Zombie”.

Illustration 1: In Your Head (Screenshot from the music clip ‘Zombie’)

**Why this song?**

“Zombie” is a song that is known by almost everyone, even the younger generations, although it was released in 1994. One reason is that stations continue to play it on the radio to the present day. The song is still popular, since it is an “oldie but goldie” (Thaler 2012, p. 67). Also, the song’s catchy chorus will stay in your head forever, once you have heard it. The lyrics are not too difficult to understand and there are many repetitions, which fosters the automation of receptive and productive competences (Bausch et al. 2003, p. 421).

The song is dedicated to two children, Jonathan Ball and Tim Parry, who were killed in the IRA bombing in Warrington, Cheshire in 1993. It deals with the horrible events that happened during “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1998, in which Northern Irish Protestants of English/Scottish heritage and Irish catholics fought each other. Several incidents led to this conflict, e.g. the Easter Rising in 1916, which is mentioned in the lyrics as well, and also the partition of Ireland that caused several riots and violent escalations. The people were confronted with the conflict every day and many of the victims were civilians.

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/5097948.stm).

The song “Zombie” describes the feelings and emotions people had during the war and after the different attacks. This makes it – especially when referring to the music video – authentic and captivating, so that students might find an easier access and develop attitudes towards the topic. Through the relation to children’s perceptions and the death of the two boys, it covers the song selection criterion of addressing the audience (Thaler 2012, p. 66). Through the historical events it relates to, like the divided Ireland, which is also part of the curriculum in 7th grade Realschule, the students gain knowledge about Irish history, which can also be extended to current events and thus meets the requirements of topicality. Also, the song’s music video gives an impressive visual statement that is highly aesthetic and supports the interplay of text and music (Thaler 2012, p. 67).

Thus, the song is a perfect way to combine English language skills with some historical background knowledge about Ireland. Keeping the current developments in Europe in mind, the topics of war, terror and violence are always present, so this teaching idea may also lead to some general discussions on the students’ feelings regarding the actual situation.

**Learning Objectives**

According to the curriculum, students in 7th grade should be able to describe their own world of experience and express themselves relatively well orally to a limited extent. This learning objective is especially focused on in the lead-in but is also realized in the other phases as well as in the homework. Also, students should be able to interpret texts and audio-material on topics that exceed their own environment, which is given in the following teaching idea, too. Furthermore, the curriculum states that students should differentiate between global and detailed understanding, which will be done during several phases of development. Another main competence in 7th grade is creating longer texts, supported by the teacher, and increasingly getting detailed understanding of the contents. A close examination of the lyrics guarantees this aspect. Concerning intercultural learning, students should extend their previous knowledge, describe their own world of experience and compare it with examples from Great Britain and Ireland. A closing discussion about terror in general and the latest developments in Europe covers this learning objective. Furthermore, students should gain insight into the context of some important events in the history of the British Isles, including Ireland. Regarding learning techniques, students are supposed to become more used to dictionaries as a source of reference, which is also a small part of our teaching idea.


One learning objective, which should be especially focused on, is intercultural communicative competence. It consists of five components: knowledge, critical cultural awareness, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating as well as skills of discovery and interacting. These components are based on Byram’s five savoirs for intercultural learning (Byram 1997, p. 33ff.; Thaler 2012, p. 272). During this double lesson, the students acquire knowledge about the Conflict in Northern Ireland, how politicians and diplomacy helped to fuel or defuse the conflict, and especially about individual perceptions and destinies. Furthermore, they learn to relate these topics to their own society.
and culture. Moreover and most important, they develop an attitude and critical awareness. The students practice to adopt new perspectives on their own and the Irish society. As a result, the learners reflect on their personal point of view.

**The Lesson**

For this teaching idea, we consciously combined different approaches to have more variety and maintain the students’ attention. The main approaches used are the traditional global-to-detail approach, as well as the pre-while-post-approach but we also included small elements of the MVC approach (Thaler 2012, p. 67).

**Lead-In (Pre-Listening)**

At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher pins a sign on the blackboard, which says “Zombie”. We chose this method as an introduction in order to make the students curious and motivate them. The students receive word cards on which they write down what comes to their mind first when hearing this word. A mind map is created with these cards on the blackboard.

[Image: Illustration 2: Possible Mind Map: „Zombie“]

Following the MVC approach, which makes use of the arc of suspense and the focussing on attention by switching off two of the three components of music (in our case the video and the text), students will then be given a first, uncommented impulse by listening to the song “Zombie” by ‘The Cranberries’. The music video is consciously kept back to focus on the students’ text comprehension (Thaler 2012, p. 67). After that, they are supposed to talk about their first impressions and the feelings they had while listening. Before playing the song again, a cloze text is distributed by the teacher (worksheet 1).

**Development 1 (While- and Post-Listening)**

The teacher plays the song for a second time and the students are now asked to fill in the gaps. While doing so, they are also expected to mark unknown words and phrases they do not understand. Afterwards, students are allowed to look up vocabulary in a dictionary in pairs. If needed, the teacher can help them. Then, the solutions and alternatives to the worksheet are discussed in class and fixed on the blackboard. The teacher, or alternatively one of the students who knows, explains words and phrases that are still unclear.

**Development 2**

After the first phase of development, the teacher plays the music video to the song. Then, the students are asked to think about the content and meaning of the song and its visual representation in the video. The teacher checks the students’ global comprehension by asking the question what the song is all about. How is the title “Zombie” related to the events shown in the video? Were their first thoughts confirmed? What are the distinct features of a “zombie” and how can those be transferred to the soldiers the students just saw in the video? Adjectives like emotionless, mindless, careless are important here. The teacher hints at the hidden imagery in the lyrics and the video clip. What should be stressed is the repetition of “in your head” and “zombie”, which implies that the terror sticks in people’s minds and memories and will always be vivid. The word “taken” should be particularly explained as a metaphorical way of saying “killed”. Also, two rhetorical questions should be considered. Firstly, the question “Who are we mistaken?”, which illustrates that war is a mistake and no one benefits from it. Secondly, the “What’s in your head?” in the chorus, which this time refers to the “zombie”, the soldier, not the everlasting horror memories of the outstanding civilians. The mind map from the beginning of the lesson is expanded and the students are also asked to take notes on their lyrics sheet. Then, the teacher tries to find out if the students already have some knowledge about “The Trou-
Illustration 3: “The Troubles”

Subsequently, a first theoretical input is given by a simplified timeline which answers the questions of how the conflict developed and which were the different parties. This timeline is also handed out to the students (worksheet 2). It includes extra information, too, namely that two boys were killed during “The Troubles” in 1993. The teacher tells the students that the song was written in memory of these two boys. Also, the teacher should emphasize the date of 1916, which is mentioned in the lyrics.

Following this, the teacher shows a map of Ireland, briefly explaining the previously learnt division into Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in geographical and religious respects.

Development 3

After that, a deepened work with the music video is aimed at in order to work on the students’ detailed comprehension. The teacher distributes a worksheet with questions on the music video (worksheet 3). These questions sum up what the students should have learnt so far by relating their knowledge to screenshots from the video. It consists of six screenshots, the first of which shows a blank-faced boy, staring at the camera. Students are asked to describe their feelings on this picture and also how the depicted person might feel.

The second photo shows a patrolling soldier, illustrating the mechanic movements, like a “zombie”. The question again makes this connection to the title “Zombie” which the students already discussed several times.

The third screenshot shows a wall painting saying “IRA”, and asks for a short definition of the word as well as for the IRA’s involvement in “The Troubles”, which the students have learnt by now.

The fourth picture shows a boy who is running away. The question is: “What could be the reason why this boy is running away?” The students are asked to speculate on the basis of their pre-knowledge. In the video clip, the prevalent shot shows a soldier with a gun. This question is included to touch the students’ emotions. The boy, who is even younger than them, is probably threatened by a soldier. This shot illustrates the anguish of those surrounded by the conflict.

A fifth screenshot shows the singer in a golden dress, leaning on a cross and surrounded by boys painted in silver. The students are asked to speculate about the make-up and scenery.

The last image shows children playing war in a street. The question is, what this could criticize. Students get 3 minutes time to have a look at the questions, before the teacher plays the music video again. Afterwards, the students are asked to fill in the worksheet in pairs.

Question on the Music Video

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe this picture? How do you think the boy feels?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can you see in this picture? Can you make any references to a “zombie”?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could be the reason why the boy is running away?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the singer and the boys look like (colour, mood, appearance...). Who do you think they are dressed like?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are these kids doing? What are The Cranberries referring to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are these kids doing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 6: Worksheet 3: Questions on the Music Video

Consolidation

The worksheet is corrected in an in-class discussion and the teacher writes a sample solution on the worksheet, using the overhead projector. Image 5 should get an extra explanation, since it is probably hard to interpret for 7th graders. The teacher should try to interpret the colours used, together with the students. The golden make-up of the singer could stand for life and hope, or also for her being a guardian who watches over the children. The children probably represent the young boys who died and also all the other kids who suffer under the influence of the conflict. The cross stands for the
mostly religious reasons that led to “The Troubles”. Also prominent is the change between coloured and black and white shots. The “life” scenes are in black and white while the scenes when the kids are dead are in colour, which might show that they are released from pain and fear. The 6th image should also be discussed in detail. The children’s playing with swords is a striking imagery, which the students might be familiar with. But why is it used in the video clip? The students are expected to speculate about the hidden critics. Violence is a game to these children, they are too young to realize the impact of the conflict but in the end they become victims of it, too. The teacher should make clear that the song is a protest song against war and intended to bring peace to the country.

Possible Extension

As a closing discussion, it is conceivable to talk about the students’ current fears and anxieties during times of terror that are more present due to the latest developments in Europe. Since this is a delicate topic, it is very important that the teacher proceeds cautiously. For higher grades, one could even think about relating the topic to the Brexit and to what extent this political decision could influence the nationalists’ aims of a united Ireland. Also possible is a discussion on religiously influenced conflicts or problems in Germany, the social interaction with the Islam, the relationship between Protestants and Catholics in Germany etc.

Follow-Up Activity

As a homework, students are asked to do a creative task on the topic, namely to write a short narrative text from the perspective of a Northern Irish child living during “The Troubles” (about 100 words). For example, students could choose to take the perspective of the child that is running away in the video clip. What are its feelings, thoughts and fears?

Conclusion

To put it in a nutshell, pop and rock songs play an important role in the EFL classroom, since they are a well-known part of youth culture and carry a high motivational potential. They release various emotions and associations and offer multiple occasions for discussions and other activities. Therefore it is necessary to break students’ previous listening habits and overcome students’ passive listening. Thus, it is the teacher’s task to always motivate them anew and give them linguistic support to lead the students to a critical-reflective understanding and discussion (Timm 1998, p. 178; Thaler 2012, p. 68).

The suggested teaching idea tries to bridge the gap between the EFL classroom and the outside world through music, by showing the students the underlying meaning of songs, using one example. Especially historical topics are unpopular among students and our teaching suggestion is a good way to overcome this problem. The exemplary proposition of how to use a pop song to teach English can be easily adapted to other songs and topics.

Bibliography


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https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9e/Ireland_trad_counties_named.svg/400px-Ireland_trad_counties_named.svg.png (07/08/2016) (plus own text)

Screenshots from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ejga4kJUts (07/08/2016)