

## Content Analysis: Pop-Songs in the English Language Teaching Classes

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### Abstract

*Along with Hindi, English is given a status of an official language in India as per the Official Language Act, 1963. (Dept. of Official Language, India). English is studied in India as a Second Language and so English is the most sought after language in India. There are many university students who aspire to obtain a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in English. With a view to make the process of teaching English language interesting as well as enriching, some popular English songs were selected for the class of postgraduate students of English Language. It was realised, during and after the activity, that pop songs can be effectively used in an English Language class. Songs and music have a natural quality to induce interest and enthusiasm to the listeners/learners and so it was aimed to redirect the students' attention to the linguistic varieties present in the songs. As the songs are easy to memorise, they effortlessly develop English vocabulary of the students. These songs are selected to learn the use of adjectives, figures of speech and idioms. The whole process of learning English Language through popular songs also helped students to improve their listening comprehension. The present paper is an attempt to study how content analysis of the selected pop songs is proved effective and impactful in the postgraduate class of English Language. The songs for the present study are selected from a popular album named Imagined Dragon.*

**Keywords:** content analysis, English language acquisition, official language, pop-songs

### Introduction

The non-native speaker of English can acquire accuracy over English language through skilful learning which can be developed with the help of a few techniques. With English Language Learning and Teaching, there is associated a two way process : learning through grammar or through speech practices. Out of these two, speech practice is found as a fruitful technique as the learner finds it interesting and engaging. For my post graduate class of English Language Teaching, speech practice is employed through making a content analysis of the select songs from the popular musical album *Imagined Dragon*.

Language is our basic identity as it springs from our culture. The native language is learnt naturally. Like the family name and the skin complexion, the language proclaims our originality. But human movement is a non-ending process and it is this process that makes the world dynamic and rich in all sectors; exponential rise in trade collaborations, university affiliations and tourism interests. It has been

rightly said by Ali Mazrui that globalization has now become the single word that captures all the exchanges and processes (Mazrui, 2019). The global exchanges and processes are possible when a common code of language is established across the world. English language carries the potential and competency to bridge the linguistic gaps and so it has been given a “special position in the . . . educational and administrative system [in India] for over a century”. (Raj, 1968). This further opens up doors of education through schools and universities that teach in language English. Indian schools, in general, teach English language through grammar. But at universities, English language is being taught in the light of teaching English through LSRW – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Under the head of LS – Listening and Speaking – I planned to teach English language to my post graduate students through using content analysis of the selected pop songs from America. The young students liked this idea and participated enthusiastically to make a meaningful study of the songs. A pre-study-test was carried out to check the students’ acquaintance with the linguistic and grammatical varieties used in the songs. Despite the fact that they knew the songs well, they could not explain the parts of grammar. The result of the post-study-test was quite different. Student knew the idioms and many other linguistic varieties as shown in the tables given below.

Having believed that the students are well versed with the English language (as they have studied through English Medium Schools), it was planned to analyse the grammatical and linguistic contents of the select songs. It is generally observed that English Language teachers effectively use innovative methods like studying language through role plays, story-telling or poetry recitations sessions. The present study can also be seen as one of those innovative ideas that is applied to gain learning through fun.

### **Review of Literature**

Pop music and its influence on culture are undeniable, and so interestingly various studies depict that pop music can be used as a tool in teaching English language. A study by Oh (2015) suggests that American pop songs can be used as part of the syllabus to improve students' language ability, as it adds motivation and fun. After experimenting with a group of language learners, Oh finds that students' grammar, vocabulary and spoken language skills are substantially improved as she states *"It boosts the English learners' motivation and interest by using American pop songs in a fun and enjoyable manner."* (Oh, 2015). Various scholars like Kuśnierek (2016), Murphey (1992), Eken (1996), Lenka (2011), Baoan (2008), and Jolly (1975) have worked on the idea that curriculum can have pop songs. Stanislawczyk and Yavener (1976) believe that song is a useful tool in linguistic practice. She states:

In the era when guitar players are ubiquitous, music must be an integral part of language study. It is a part of classroom activities from the start of the work in language, supplying additional language learning and cultural insights. At the advanced level, students become even more actively involved in music by creating song's (p. 60)

Kuśnierek (2016) has specifically worked on the aspect of vocabulary and found that pop music is useful in improving the vocabulary of students. Eken (1996) has interestingly summarized the whole idea in eight points on why one should use a song in class.

- A song may be used to present a topic, new vocabulary or a language point.

- It may also be used as a practice of lexis.
- Songs may be used as a material for extensive and intensive listening.
- It can be used to focus on frequent learner errors in a more indirect way.
- Songs are a perfect source for stimulating discussions about feelings and attitudes
- Learners may talk over with another in pairs or in small groups what happened in the song and then share their opinions with the rest of students.
- Songs may arrange a relaxed classroom atmosphere and contribute to fun and variety in language teaching.
- Songs may be said to encourage the use of imagination and creativity during foreign language lessons. (p. 46)

Also, a few of the interviews of the song writer and the singer Dan Reynolds have been instrumental in understanding the theme and the context of the songs.

### **Methodology**

The study which aimed to find-out the techniques of content analysis through pop-songs and to analyze the linguistic aspect of the selected pop-songs is a content analysis design under qualitative approach. The approach is analytical and the method is qualitative. The aim of the present study is to determine how the selected popular songs can be made instrumental in acquiring accuracy in English language. The songs aggressively and assertively portray the concepts like faith, energy, confidence and spirit to fight against adverse conditions. The songs have used figures of speech like simile, metaphor and personification. The grammatical varieties like adjectives, gerund, pronoun, phrasal words, compound noun, prepositional phrases and the linguistic varieties like idioms are used that embellish the song and make it more delightful. The study is aimed to be carried out in a class of five students from the Master of Arts (in English). The students' basic exposure to English language through their schooling made them competent to find out and analyse the linguistic varieties of the songs. The students knew the songs and that made the study more interesting. Still, as a pre-study-test, a semi-structured question-bank was prepared with questions like; Who the songs are addressed to?, Find out the adjectives from the song?, How does a gerund function?, What is a compound noun?, What is a phrasal verb?, How do idioms add value to the spoken language?

In addition to these questions, students were also given peer reviewed assignment to write a 500 word long essay on the theme of the songs. As it was peer reviewed, the exchange of comments and remarks benefitted students to build a conceptual clarity. The analysis is based on the following research questions:

- Can popular songs be studied in an ELT class?
- How can content analysis of pop-songs make ELT more engaging?

### **Results and Discussion**

As a teacher in English Language Teaching class, and blessed with students who are well versed with English Language; I took a few popular English songs and tried to apply the method of content

analysis to study how accuracy can be attained through studying songs. The most noticeable quality of song is its lyrics. From lullaby to rhymes to poems to songs, the lyrical quality has always made an impression on us. We respond to songs immediately. Learning from songs is a fun activity too. We all would agree that songs occupy an important place in our lives. We have songs that celebrate festivals, occasions, situations, locations, human nature, scenic beauty and also the songs that preach philosophical wisdom as well as motivational learning. We have songs that are monologic as well as dialogic. Monologic songs narrate a story of a person's failure or success whereas dialogic songs are interactive and so help learn communicability. It is not only the content but also the rhythm and lyrics that help us learn the valuable meaning embedded in the expression. Sometimes silence is also used as a technique to enhance the expressional qualities in a song. This general truth is emphatically presented through songs. Another important feature can be learnt from songs is the sound mechanism as in the production of unvoiced consonants and whistling and whispering sound. We can also study how vocal cords vibrate to use airflow from the lungs to make the sound audible.

The select songs are taken from an American pop rock band. The lead singer is Dan Reynolds. The songs of this band are motivational. As it is a pop music band, the music of this band is highly loud but very much in synchronisation with the moral that these songs preach. For the English Language class, the select songs were taken as tools to study the grammatical parts (phrasal verbs, compound noun, repositional phrases and idioms) as well as to decode the deeper meaning blanketed in the linguistic simplicity.

The first select song is titled as Radioactive (Dragons Imagine, 2012). To make the task of content analysis easy, table 1 is prepared.

Table 1

*Content Analysis for the Song Radioactive*

Sr. No	Phrasal Verb	Compound Noun	Prepositional Phrases	Idiom
1	Waking up	Prison bus	On the chair	Ash and dust
2	Breathing in		straight from inside	To feel in bones
3	Checking out			To raise flags
4	Shaping up			To don clothes
5	Breaking in			To fit right in wipe my brow Paint it red

Some students were familiar to these parts of grammar and some referred to the Wrenn and Martin grammar book. It was found that the grammatical property of the prepositional phrases and compound nouns were not identified by them. Once having prepared this table, students were asked to use them in separate sentences. All in all, this content analysis helped them know the basics of the English grammar.

The next and a comparatively heavy exercise was to identify the undertone of the song. Whether it is a song of complaint, gratefulness, acceptance or rejection was the question for them. With a meaningful

discussion, we reached a conclusion that it is a self-motivating song. Students were also asked to make content analysis to substantiate their answer. They unanimously selected a word from the song that conveys the message of self-motivation. The word was Radioactive. Also because it is the hook line and the title of the song. Radioactive can be defined as something that emits radiation. The word radioactive is to be seen in opposition to the word apocalypse – the complete and final destruction of the world followed by God’s arrival, defeat of the Satan and establishment of peace as described in the Biblical Book of Revelation. It increased the interest of the learner’s when the connectivity was built with the Biblical reference through the word apocalypse.

The second song for the study was “Whatever It Takes” (Dragons Imagine, 2017) from the same album. Table 2 is the result of the classification of grammatical parts prepared for the content analysis.

Table 2

*Content Analysis for Whatever It Takes*

Sr. No	Adjectives for the world	Adjectives for the persona	Adjectives followed by nouns	Compound adjective	Gerund	Simile	Metaphor
1	dangerous,	Hypocritical	Prodigal son	Half diseased	Tripping	Like a racehorse	I am an apostrophe
2	vulturous,	Egotistical			Falling	Like a ripcord	I am an epoxy
3	Negative	Parenthetical				Like a martyrdom	
4	Nepotism	hypothetical					
5		Apostrophe					
6		Product of the system					
7		Catastrophe					
8		Master piece					
9		Half diseased					

With these contents from the song, the class learnt various grammatical functions and also some figures of speech. Having collected many adjectives, the students classified the adjectives for the world, adjectives for the persona, adjectives followed by nouns and compound adjectives. This exercise further led to appreciate the rhythmic flow of the selected adjectives. As the persona is a fighter, the adjectives selected for him speak for his fighting spirit. The arrangement of adjectives is also a wonderful way to comprehend how the persona is subjugated and how he rubs shoulders with the world and promises to rise. He says that people think that he is *hypocritical* and *egotistical* but he doesn’t want to be *parenthetical* and *hypothetical* as he believes that he is a *product of the system* - a *catastrophe* itself. He does not want to lose courage

and so he says that he is a *masterpiece*. Though *half-diseased* but being a *prodigal son*, he promises to reach his ultimate destination. The additional amazement was felt during the content analysis of this song where the persona negates a comparison of his status to that of a parenthetical and hypothetical sentence. A parenthetical sentence is not a part of an original sentence but establishes its contextual reference. A hypothetical sentence is also a sentence to be tested and might result into null and void. He says he is rather an apostrophe – a symbol that combines binary ideas/concepts/processes or time zones. Here, apostrophe stands as a link between his past failures and future successes.

Gerund is a part of grammatical structure that is usually gets mistaken as a continuous present tense. It is used in this song through the words *tripping* and *falling*. Gerund was further explained by using it in a few other sentences like

1. Watering plants is a good time pass.
2. Cycling is the best exercise.
3. Visiting the past nurtures our ethnic emotions, etc.

The song also gives a dual imagery of the persona and a carcass on one side and the world and vultures on the other. The third line says, “everybody circling, it’s vulturous”. As a flock of vultures circle a carcass and lavishly feed themselves, so is the world (*negative* and *nepotist*) where tripping and falling is dangerous.

Two new words “adrenaline” and “epoxy” are added to the students’ dictionary. The first is a biological word figuratively used here to represent the excitement that one feels while doing something remarkable – here breaking the chain of conventionality. Epoxy is a chemical concoction used in paints as adhesive and sealer. Stickiness and shine are the basic qualities of epoxy. Metaphorically the persona says he is an epoxy that will work as an adhesive and give the world a glorious look.

By the end of the song we see that the persona emerges as a catalyst. That is reflected when he says:

At least I go down to the grave and die happily  
Leave the body and my soul to be a part of thee  
(Dragons Imagine, 2017)

These lines build a direct communication with the listeners. It enhances its connectivity with the touch of classical tone reflected in the addressing pronoun “thee”.

The third select song is titled as “Believer” (Dragons Imagine, 2017). This song can be precisely studied to learn the role of personification, the figure of speech that is used to ascribe human quality to an abstract idea or a non-living thing. “Believer” addresses pain and holds it responsible for giving strength and making him a “believer”. The tone of this song is aggressive. He portrays how bit by bit pain tries its best to subjugate him and how vehemently he bounces back, gathers courage and emerges as a believer.

Unlike the method employed for the first two select songs – “Radioactive” and “Whatever It Takes” “Believer” was treated differently for the study. The first two songs were studied for their Physical contents (grammatical features) whereas “Believer” was treated for its expressional content. Some open ended questions were framed to discern the undercurrent of faith and confidence in the song. The questions and answers with students, as presented below, add to the understanding of the song.

- Q. 1 What is the tone of the song?

The song actually remakes the perception for pain. It sets the tone of almost a revolution when subjugation is challenged by faith in God and oneself.

Q. 2 Who the song is addressed to?

The song is addressed to pain – the abstract noun.

Q.3 What the song is in favour of and against of?

The song is in favour of self esteem and confidence and it is clearly against any marginal status given by the society.

Q.4 How many figures of speech are used in this song?

Personification and metaphor are amply used to make a unique impression towards the subjugator, pain. “Pain, you made me a believer” (personification) and “Fire and flames are the face of the future” (metaphor).

Q.5 What qualities of pain are presented here?

Pain has been seen for its two fold qualities. It can break one down as well as build one up. Pain acquaints the persona to the real love, true life and the enlightening prophet.

Q.6 Who is powerful? Pain or the believer?

It’s a combat between two. The believer fights back courageously all the blows that are given by pain. This is presented through the lyrical arrangement of a positive line following the opposite one. The persona teaches fighting spirit that converts an adverse situation into a victorious feelings. It also a matters how we perceive pain.

Q.7 Where does the song writer take a poetic liberty?

Poetic liberty is taken in reframing the idiom ‘ebb and flow’. The song writer uses present continuous form as ‘ebbing and flowing’. This is also to show the frequency of the recurrent pattern of destruction and reconstruction that happens in human life.

Q.8 What is the essence of this song?

The essence of this song lies in its fighting spirit. It almost challenges the invisible enemy identified as pain. The song has a potential to transform a loser to a winner. It essentially preaches the importance of persistence, patience and prayers. It is from the very outset of the song, the tone of clarity is set. The use of the idioms *first things first*, *second things second*, *third things third* and *last things last* add constructional as well as conceptual meaning to the song. With every stanza, the persona’s faith in life, prayers, grace of spirits is accentuated.

The themes of self-confidence and self-reliance, as presented in the select pop-songs, remind us of the Afro-American poet Maya Angelou’s inspirational poem *Still I Rise*. She writes:

You may write me down in history  
 With your bitter, twisted lies,  
 You may trod me in the very dirt  
 But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

(Angelou, 1994)

Due to their excessive sound effects and loud music, pop songs are academically less popular to

study and explore. Pop music originated with the ragtime of the 1890s. The world noticed it during the time of Harlem Renaissance when the Afro Americans gave voice to their pain and subjugation and invented Jazz music, represented their tolerance and thus became a medium to bridge the gap between the white and the black Americans.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study is focused at studying some of the basic parts of the English grammar and also the linguistic ornamentation that makes the teaching learning process more meaningful and student-friendly. The same study can further be extended with a larger sample size and with additional data collection. Some comparative analysis can also be carried out. Such self moduled learning activity creates a favourable ambience for both, a teacher as well as a student.

The findings obtained within the framework of the study have shown that popular songs can be used in English Language Teaching class. As the theme of the songs revolve around the reality of life, young students could easily connect to the songs. The aim of the study was to find out linguistic varieties from the songs and thus to study how the views of linguistic variety can enhance the competency of a learner. As a result of this study, the learners' language skills were developed and their perception towards pop songs – that is primarily used only for entertainment – got a new vision. Post-study the learners' found the songs as the efficient tools to learn English language. The select songs are from the contemporary times and so these songs can also be studied in the light of post-modern concept of popularity. It is hoped that these songs will also be studied to establish their relevance between the concepts of popularity, success and contemporary music industry.

The present study uses content analysis that has a two-fold benefit. Exposure to the art of listening a song appreciating a song's aesthetic as well as linguistic aspects. In an English Language Teaching class, such songs can be used as tools to make the teaching learning process more comprehensive and conducive. As the instructor, it was realised that this method was found interesting, interactive and inclusive. There was not any chance of copying as it was based on innovative questions and answers. The study could successfully establish the educational value. In addition, along with language acquisition, these songs provided stimulus to explore the socio-cultural, political, psychological and historical relevance of the songs. The theme of these songs is to motivate and psychological empower those who are suffering from any major disease or depression. Imagine Dragons is a rock band that carries out many philanthropic activities. The band works for the cancer patients and also supports the LGBT group.

As the songs were played many times, some unusual pronunciations were also corrected and grasped easily. The class was interactive so students' opinions, ideas and thoughts were shared throughout the study. In such classes, a teacher is more a facilitator than the conventional advisor. Content analysis of popular songs in the English Language class is an innovative method of engaging the students intellectually as well as joyfully. As it is a thorough activity based learning, learner's resistance is reduced and the learning aptitude is enhanced. The basic requirement for this innovative techniques is 1. a few select songs and 2. Enthusiasm and willingness to learn and teach. This approach provides a structure that is flexible. The



intellectual exchange of ideas and opinions between students and teacher enhances the learning of the students. Such studies encourage students to be actively participatory in the process of learning.

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