

# Using Lyrics from the Great American Songbook as an ELT Resource in Japanese Universities

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## ABSTRACT

Music and song are invaluable resources in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom, and much has been written about the effectiveness of these tools in motivating students and promoting language learning in an enjoyable and productive way. Research into the process of specific song selection and the relative benefits of material from different musical eras and genres, however, is scant. This study evaluates the effectiveness of using lyrics from the Great American Songbook — the canon of American popular songs from theater and film in the first half of the twentieth century — as an ELT resource in Japanese universities, through assessment of formal structure and lyric content, as well as comparative analyses with other genres of popular music. Case studies demonstrating the processes of song selection, resource preparation and implementation are presented, and student feedback is examined.

## INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of using music and song in language learning has been the subject of academic research for over half a century, with studies as early as Bartle (1962), Techmeier (1969) and Coe (1972) examining the benefits — both linguistic and motivational — of incorporating music into the foreign language classroom. Some studies have analyzed the effectiveness of nursery rhymes and songs with repetitive lyrics as a pedagogical tool for language retention in elementary and pre-school children (Prosic-Santovac, 2015), while others have evaluated the use of familiar pop songs as a motivational gateway for university students (Oh, 2015).

As well as an engaging tool for language acquisition, the

study of song lyrics opens windows into different cultures and eras, offering new perspectives for context-specific language learning. This study focuses on the effectiveness of using lyrics from the Great American Songbook — the canon of early to mid-twentieth century popular songs from Broadway theater and Hollywood film — as an English language teaching (ELT) resource in Japanese universities.

Part 1 (Background) sets out the problems of English language education in Japan, and provides a brief historical overview of the Great American Songbook. Part 2 (Analysis) examines the structural characteristics and lyric content of the Songbook, drawing comparisons with other genres of popular song and assessing the relative suitability of the material for use as an ELT resource in Japanese universities. Part 3 (Case Study) assesses the practical application of exercises using Songbook lyrics in a Japanese university ELT setting, mapping the processes of song selection, preparation of resources and implementation. Student feedback is collected and examined through a series of surveys.

The aim of this research is to assess the effectiveness of using material from the Great American Songbook — a historically and stylistically specific body of music and lyrics — as an ELT resource in Japanese universities, through examining student development and response. The author intends this study to be the starting point for publishing further research and educational resources based on song lyrics.

## PART 1 - BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Problems of ELT in Japan

At the time of writing, English language education

in Japanese public schools starts with weekly “Foreign Language Activities”<sup>1</sup> in the third and fourth grades of elementary school, followed by two hours a week of English classes in the fifth and sixth grades, and a mandatory curriculum through junior high school and high school, as stipulated by MEXT, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Despite this, Japan ranks close to the bottom among 29 Asian countries in English language proficiency,<sup>2</sup> and speaking and listening skills are below par compared with neighboring countries. The low standard of practical communication skills stems in part from the focus on reading, writing and grammar in school, and in part from the lack of opportunity to speak English in everyday life, owing to Japan’s isolated geographical position and growing “inward-looking” trend.<sup>3</sup> Since 1987, the JET program has provided public schools with native English-speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs), but student response to compulsory English classes remains lukewarm, and the subject is generally regarded as one that is “not necessary for their lives” and a “waste of time and effort.”<sup>4</sup> ELT in Japan is typically based on American English, influenced in part by the post-war occupation by American troops and in part by American dominance on the world stage, and despite the presence of institutions such as the British-owned Shane English School in the private sector, preference for American English continues into the 21st century.<sup>5</sup> Courses for English qualifications such as TOIEC and TOEFL — highly favored by employers — are available nationwide, and private English conversation schools from pre-school to adult level have become a common fixture in Japanese towns and cities, but general progress in the areas of speaking and listening remains stagnant.

At university, language study is usually compulsory for first-year students. Institutions with a specific academic or vocational focus may offer tailor-made language courses that cover topics and vocabulary connected to the specialized field of study. Colleges of music, for example, will typically offer classes in German and Italian

to aid students with musical nomenclature, while the University of Tokyo — the leading academic institution in Japan — places first-year students in either the Active Learning of English for Science Students (ALESS) program or the Active Learning of English for Students of the Arts (ALESA) program based on their chosen field of study.<sup>6</sup> Course materials vary from university to university, some continuing in the vein of the grammar-heavy textbook style of high school teaching and others embracing a wider range of target language media such as literature, news reports, film, art and music. As the textbooks used in schools are written primarily in Japanese, sudden exposure to English-only materials at university level results in what Brock calls a “stumbling block” and the perception of English as a “heavy, unsocial subject.”<sup>7</sup> Familiar media such as film and music can be used effectively to motivate students and break through such negative perceptions. This study will focus on using material from the Great American Songbook to create an engaging language learning environment for Japanese university students.

## 1.2 The Great American Songbook

The so-called Great American Songbook is not a single volume or definitive collection, rather it is an umbrella term denoting the canon of influential popular songs from the first half of the twentieth century — predominantly from the 1920s to the 1940s — originally written for theater and film and later reinterpreted by popular artists and jazz musicians to become American “standards”. Most of the songs started life in a tightly-packed collection of music publishing houses in Manhattan, nicknamed Tin Pan Alley in 1903<sup>8</sup> because of the cacophonous sound of cheap upright pianos and song pluggers<sup>9</sup> auditioning new material by aspiring composers and demonstrating songs to promote sheet music sales. The songs number into the thousands, and often adhere to a simple 32-bar structural template and formulaic harmonic progressions. Despite the large volume of material, the breakneck speed with which it was produced and its deceptively simple format, the songs typically demonstrate a high level of musical

craftsmanship. Composers came from all walks of life, from the classically-trained German immigrant Kurt Weill to the wealthy socialite Cole Porter, but arguably the most skillful exponents of the genre were the second-generation Jewish immigrants Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Harold Arlen, who translated the nuances of their inherited and acquired musical cultures into prototypical American melodies.

The lyrics of the Great American Songbook were penned by talented wordsmiths who, more than anything, captured the zeitgeist of contemporary America and struck a chord with the general public, eclipsing the saccharine sentimentality and forgotten nineteenth-century aesthetic of earlier popular songs by Stephen Foster and Edward Harrigan. Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, two giants of the Great American Songbook, wrote both the music and the lyrics to all of their songs, but collaborations between composers and lyricists were commonplace. Even though songs about love account for some 85 percent of the canon,<sup>10</sup> the stylistic variety of the Songbook lyrics is unrivaled, a smorgasbord of rhyme, metaphor, seasonal images and contemporary historical references, with a spectrum of expression ranging from evocative poetry to provocative vernacular.

What Scruton calls “the truncated and short-circuited character of the American songbook”<sup>11</sup> is actually a wealth of pocket-sized masterpieces with finely-crafted music and lyrics. This study attempts to unlock the potential of the Songbook lyrics as a valid resource for university ELT.

## PART 2 - ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Structure and Form

This section examines the structural and formal elements of the music and lyrics of the Great American Songbook. Comparative analyses with other genres of American popular music are presented, and the relative suitability of the material for use in ELT is assessed.

In the early days of twentieth-century American popular song and musical theater there was no prescribed song structure or form, but most choruses were made up of four-bar phrases, typically totaling 16 or 32 bars. From the mid-1920s, the 32-bar AABA structure — consisting of a repeated eight-bar melody (AA) followed by a contrasting eight-bar section with a different key center (B) and a reprise of the initial melody (A) — became the norm.<sup>12</sup> Early examples include Jerome Kern’s *Ol’ Man River* (1927), Johnny Green’s *Body and Soul* (1930) and Harold Arlen’s *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1931). Despite the inbuilt melodic repetition in the AABA structure, there is generally little or no repetition in the lyrics,<sup>13</sup> in stark contrast with later popular songs such as Ben E. King’s *Stand by Me* (1961) and The Beatles’ *Hey Jude* (1968), in which the refrain is repeated ad infinitum. These examples display a formal shift from the distilled poetic structure of the Great American Songbook to the anthem-like formula that would come to dominate popular music in the second half of the twentieth century. This is not to invalidate the importance of melodic and lyrical repetition in western music. From the chorus of ancient Greek drama to the call-and-response style of gospel music, repetition has played an important structural and developmental role, but the point here is to assess the effectiveness of the lyrics in a university ELT setting. Material with repeated lyrics, such as nursery rhymes and children’s songs, are effective pedagogical tools for internalizing phonics and simple linguistic structures through rote repetition at pre-school or elementary level. In higher education, however, where English students have already engaged in several years of formal study, the Great American Songbook offers a more concentrated alternative than other popular genres, characterized by non-repeated lyrics and a simple AABA form. This wealth of linguistic material within a compact structure can be utilized to create effective resources for university ELT.

When using song lyrics as listening exercises, the length of the source material is an important consideration. The majority of popular songs from the last 100 years are

between three and five minutes in length.<sup>14</sup> This is in part because of the limitations of early recording technology (specifically the 78 rpm and 45 rpm phonograph records that were the primary media from the second half of the nineteenth century to the dawn of the cassette tape in 1963) and in part because of the constraints of the average human attention span. By contrast, the listening section of the English examination for the 2020 National Center Test for University Admissions — a standardized test used by public and private universities in Japan — contained short dialogues ranging in length from 11 to 18 seconds, medium-length dialogues from 20 to 24 seconds, and longer dialogues from 69 to 130 seconds. The questions were grouped into sections, ranging from 64 seconds to 130 seconds, with an average length of 87 seconds for each section.<sup>15</sup> In a nutshell, the average length of a typical English examination listening question is significantly shorter than the average length of a pop song.

Classic recordings of songs from the Great American Songbook generally conform to the three- to five-minute model, but they differ from other genres of popular music in that the lyric is almost always presented in its entirety<sup>16</sup> before the instrumental interlude, in contrast with through-written or sectional popular songs, such as Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Assuming then that the initial presentation of the lyric is isolated for use as an ELT listening exercise, a 32-bar AABA song in 4/4 time at 114 beats per minute<sup>17</sup> would translate into an exercise of around 67 seconds — comparable in length to the National Center Test listening sections — with little or no repetition in lyric content. A number of songs in the Great American Songbook stray from the 32-bar AABA mould — Cole Porter's *Begin the Beguine* (1935), for example, stretches to an uncharacteristic 108 measures — but many of the well-known songs from the era conform to the compact AABA structure, and can be successfully adapted as concise listening exercises.

Another formal characteristic of the Great American Songbook is the sectional verse, a freeform musical

introduction with a separate set of lyrics that appears before the chorus of most songs and is typically sung rubato. The sectional verse of Gershwin's *Love is Here to Stay* (1938) begins:

The more I read the papers the less I comprehend  
The world and all its capers and how it all will end

These two lines alone contain the grammatical structure “the more... the less...”, idiomatic usage of the word “capers”, and rhyme (“papers/capers...comprehend/end”). The sung speech style of sectional verses is reminiscent of operatic recitativo, demonstrated in this excerpt from Ralph Blane's *The Boy Next Door* (1944):

But he doesn't know I exist  
No matter how I may persist  
So it's clear to see  
There's no hope for me  
Though I live at fifty-one thirty-five Kensington Avenue  
And he lives at fifty-one thirty-three

The sectional verse was originally an integral part of the song, but changing performance practices rendered it almost obsolete, and the standalone 32-bar AABA chorus came to define most songs in the canon.<sup>18</sup> Even though sectional verses are now largely unknown, when heard in context they add an extra dimension to the song. In the ELT classroom, verse lyrics can be converted into extension exercises for advanced students who want to gain a deeper understanding of the source material.

The concise AABA structure and succinct presentation of the lyrics, together with the length of the recorded source material and the option of the sectional verse, clearly validate the lyrics of the Songbook as an effective resource for university ELT.

## 2.2 Lyric Content

The Songbook contains some of the finest American poetry of the twentieth century, its contents as varied and

as multifaceted as the country it represents. This section examines rhyme and lyrical innovation in the Songbook, as well as instances of colloquial language and humor, comparing them with other genres of popular song and assessing their suitability for use as ELT resources.

Rhyme entered European poetry in the High Middle Ages, and found its way via English verse into popular song, permeating almost every genre of English lyrics, from sixteenth-century madrigals to modern-day hip-hop and rap. Japanese poetry and song, by contrast, are not based on the same principles of rhyme.<sup>19</sup> Traditional Japanese poetic forms including haiku, tanka and waka contain elements of rhyme, but there is no concept of a rhyme scheme in the sense that it exists in English poetry, and the form is defined instead by the syllabic (or moraic) structure. Just as rhyme is an effective way to expose elementary learners to simple English phonics, in higher education it is a constructive way to introduce students to the rudiments of English poetry and rhyme schemes.

Johnny Mercer's lyric to *Midnight Sun* (1954) is one of the most sophisticated examples of rhyme in the Great American Songbook.

Your lips were like a red and ruby chalice,  
Warmer than the summer night.  
The clouds were like an alabaster palace,  
Rising to a snowy height.  
Each star its own Aurora Borealis,  
Suddenly you held me tight,  
I could see the midnight sun.

Meanwhile, the internal rhyme in Lorenz Hart's *It Never Entered My Mind* (1940) paints a poignant picture of lost love using colloquial language.

You had what I lack, myself  
Now I even have to scratch my back myself.

Ira Gershwin's lyric to the sectional verse of

*S'Wonderful* (1927) is built around a chain of rhyming clipped syllables, a humorous nod to the title of the song.

Don't mind telling you, in my humble fash  
That you thrill me through, with a tender pash  
When you said you care, 'magine my emoshe  
I swore then and there, permanent devoshe

He also toys with the conflicting American and British pronunciations of "either", "neither" and "tomato" in *Let's Call The Whole Thing Off* (1937), a lyric that could be utilized in ELT as an introduction to transatlantic variants in pronunciation and spelling.

If rhyme can be found across all genres of English popular song, why then focus on the lyrics of the Great American Songbook? Firstly, the sheer volume and variety of material facilitates a broad range of ELT activities at varying levels of difficulty. Secondly, the quality and precision of rhyme in the Great American Songbook stands head and shoulders above much of what dominated the pop charts in the following decades. From Oleta Adams' *Get Here* ("You can reach me by a caravan / cross the desert like an Arab man") to Mariah Carey's *Don't Stop* ("I'm like a bowl of gumbo / You ain't hotter than this, I'm what they play in the clubo") and Madonna's *I Love New York* ("I don't like cities but I like New York / other places make me feel like a dork"), the plethora of forced and imperfect rhymes in post-Great American Songbook popular music raises questions about its suitability as an ELT resource.

Rap, a style of rhythmic vocal music which started in 1970s New York and can be traced to the griot traditions of West Africa, is an example of a popular music genre that displays advanced rhyme<sup>20</sup> and innovative lyric content. The rhyme scheme is often multi-layered and complex, commended by music scholar Adam Bradley as "the largest and richest contemporary archive of rhymed words."<sup>21</sup> Look at the examples below.

I bomb atomically Socrates' philosophies



And hypothesis can't define how I be dropping these  
Mockeries lyrically perform armed robbery...

Excerpt from *Triumph* (1997), Wu-Tang Clan

Rappers I monkey flip em with the funky rhythm I be kicking  
Musician, inflicting composition  
of pain I'm like Scarface sniffing cocaine  
Holding a M-16, see with the pen I'm extreme, now  
Bullet holes left in my peepholes  
I'm suited up in street clothes  
Hand me a nine and I'll defeat foes

Excerpt from *N.Y. State of Mind* (1994), Nas

Despite the intricate rhymes and innovative lyrics, the references to drugs and weapons render these songs questionable for use in ELT. Closely associated with gang culture, rap is characterized by vernacular or “street” language, and frequently contains expletives, racial labels and references to violence. In addition, the rapid delivery and highly percussive style makes it difficult to hear the lyrics. The British Council’s online published guidelines for using songs in the ELT classroom recommend “a clear singing voice” and suggest avoiding “songs with lots of slang or cultural references.”<sup>22</sup> Oh (2015) remarks that “lots of American pop songs contain slangs [sic] or inappropriate words” causing students to “acquire the wrong grammar.”<sup>23</sup> Based on these observations, it can be concluded that using rap in ELT is problematic, although from the standpoint of understanding different dialects and subcultures it could be an effective resource at university level.

By contrast, recordings of material from the Great American Songbook — especially those by celebrated singers such as Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra — are characterized by clear diction. Furthermore, they eschew the hyper-melismatic style of singing that came to dominate — and often obscure the lyrics of — later twentieth-century popular music by artists such as Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston.

Aside from precise rhyme and clear diction, the Great American Songbook offers a wide range of linguistic nuances, from the African-American vernacular of *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* and *Is You Is Or Is You Ain't My Baby?* to the tongue-in-cheek antiquation of the sectional verse to *My Funny Valentine*:

Behold the way our fine feathered-friend  
His virtue doth parade.  
Thou knowest not, my dim-witted friend,  
The picture thou hast made.  
Thy vacant brow and thy tousled hair  
Conceal thy good intent.  
Thou noble, upright, truthful, sincere,  
And slightly dopey gent.

Colloquial idioms permeate the poetry of the American Songbook, from Dorothy Fields’ “Gee, I’d like to see you looking swell, baby / Diamond bracelets Woolworth doesn’t sell, baby” in *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* to Tom Adair’s tragicomic lines “I’ve telegraphed and phoned, I sent an air mail special too / your answer was goodbye and there was even postage due” in *Everything Happens To Me*. Furia remarks that “the lyricists of Tin Pan Alley took the American vernacular and made it sing.”<sup>24</sup> Seasonal references abound too, from the haikuesque *Moonlight In Vermont*<sup>25</sup> to *April In Paris* and *Autumn In New York*, a springboard for discussion with students familiar with *kigo* (words or phrases associated with a particular season) in traditional Japanese literature.

The Songbook is a compendium of historical references, chronicling key events of the second quarter of twentieth-century American history such as Prohibition, the Great Depression and the Second World War. The year before Prohibition was officially enforced, Irving Berlin warned of the boredom of a dry America in his 1919 song *You Cannot Make Your Shimmy Shake on Tea*, while Cole Porter penned *I Get a Kick Out of You* (“I get no kick from champagne / Mere alcohol doesn’t thrill me at all”) in

1934, just months after Prohibition was repealed. Dorothy Fields' 1930 lyric to *On the Sunny Side of the Street* ("If I never have a cent, I'll be rich as Rockefeller") is a cheery antidote to the recent stock market crash, and Ira Gershwin reminisces in his tragicomic lyric to *I Can't Get Started* (1935) that "In nineteen twenty-nine I sold short." The crumbling moral standards and stresses of modern marriage that caused one divorce in every six marriages by 1928<sup>26</sup> are laid bare in *Makin' Whoopee* (1928), and *These Foolish Things* (1936) paints a picture of contemporary urban life with its "lipstick's traces...airline ticket to romantic places" and "silk stockings".

The Second World War brought commercial success not to the patriotic fighting songs that had defined earlier conflicts, but to a wave of ballads — what Zinsser calls "the sentimental glue of the war years"<sup>27</sup> — that represented the nostalgic longing of the soldiers and their sweethearts at home. *I'll Be Seeing You*, although composed in 1938 before the outbreak of war, was one of the biggest hits of the period, with its elegiac images of "all the old familiar places that this heart of mine embraces" such as "the children's carousel, the chestnut trees, the wishing well." *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1940) personifies a city whose "heart was warm and gay" and whose "trees were dressed for spring" before the ravages of the war in Europe.

All of these historical insights are catalysts for discussion and extension work in the ELT classroom, and they are a portal into a deeper understanding of early twentieth-century American society and culture.

### 2.3 Familiarity

The Great American Songbook — a body of work written around a hundred years ago halfway across the globe — is largely unknown to the younger Japanese audience. However, the canon has been widely disseminated throughout Japan through the long tradition of jazz kissaten and live music clubs, as detailed by E. Taylor Atkins in his volume *Blue Nippon: Authenticating*

*Jazz in Japan*. The ubiquity of jazz as background music everywhere from department stores to noodle houses and convenience stores in modern-day Japan, as well as the popular manga *Blue Giant* and the jazz-soaked novels of popular writer Haruki Murakami, helps to form at least a subconscious sense of familiarity with the American Songbook among the younger generations.

Disney enjoys massive popularity in Japan among both children and adults, its resort park hosting over 550 million visitors since opening in 1983. Early Disney movies such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Cinderella* (1950) contain songs that belong stylistically to Tin Pan Alley, with compact formal and lyric structures.<sup>28</sup> The familiarity of songs such as *Someday My Prince Will Come* and *When You Wish Upon a Star*, coupled with the imaginative lyrics and rhyme schemes, makes them a useful gateway resource for ELT at university level in Japan.

## PART 3 - CASE STUDY

This section presents a case study using the lyrics of three songs from the Songbook in a Japanese university English classroom setting. The process of song selection is discussed, and the preparation and implementation of resources is documented.

### 3.1 Song Selection

Choosing material from a canon as extensive as the Great American Songbook is no easy task. The first hurdle is that there is no definitive book or collection per se. Rikuo Murao's 20-volume series *The Complete Collection of Jazz Lyrics*, with Japanese translations of the lyrics as well as historical information and suggested recordings, is the most comprehensive collection on the Japanese market, while Hisaki Satoi's *Let's Sing Jazz Standards in English* is a useful tool for Japanese singers wanting to improve their pronunciation and understand the idioms and nuances of the lyrics. Hal Leonard's four-volume *The Real Vocal Book* is a comprehensive resource for singers and musicians, and

Philip Furia discusses the highlights of the Songbook in *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*. Lyrics of lesser-known songs from the period can be found in Gottlieb and Kimball's *Reading Lyrics*.

Songs that contain racial stereotypes (*The Sheik of Araby* (1921), *Shanghai Lil* (1933)) or racial slurs (*We'll Wipe You Off the Map*, *Mr. Jap* (1942)), as well as lyrics that depict women as delicate and submissive, such as *A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody* (1919) and *Poor Butterfly* (1916) (“pretty girlie...I’ve studied girls and music, so I’m qualified to say”/“a little Japanese sitting demurely ‘neath the cherry blossom trees”) are useful starting points for discussion but should be approached with discretion.

Lyrics with excessive use of slang such as the dated colloquialisms of *Jeepers Creepers* (1938) (“peepers... Gosh all git up...Golly gee”), or extended use of scat and onomatopoeia (12 of the 32 bars of Ellington’s *It Don’t Mean a Thing (If it Ain’t Got That Swing)* (1934) are consumed by “Doo wah, doo wah”) are of little practical value in the ELT classroom, but a degree of colloquial language, as discussed in Part 2, is useful for introducing elements of American English vernacular. Songs with extremes of tempo or uncharacteristically long or short formal structures should be avoided.

Songs which contain specific linguistic structures should be identified and explored. *Too Marvelous For Words* (1937) is a treasure trove of rhyming adjectives (“glorious, glamorous, and that old standby, amorous”), while *I’m Glad There Is You* (1942) plays cleverly with antonyms (“ordinary people, extraordinary people... overrated pleasures and underrated treasures...many play at love, and hardly any stay in love”). The level of difficulty should also be assessed when building a syllabus and choosing lyrics for the ELT classroom. Gershwin’s *Love is Here to Stay* is an appropriate choice for an entry-level class, whereas Billy Strayhorn’s *Lush Life*, with its long form and intricate lyrics, is more suitable for advanced students.

Songs with catchy melodies, and those that have been used in movies and commercials, can help to motivate and engage students, and lyrics with seasonal references — including Christmas songs and the countless odes to spring, summer, autumn and winter — can be successfully incorporated into the curriculum.

When selecting recordings, clarity is key, both with regard to audio quality, diction and arrangement. Pre-1940s recordings are often unclear and scratchy, and the early Broadway and Hollywood singing styles tend towards the dramatic, even the operatic, making it hard to distinguish the lyrics. For this reason, recordings by popular singers from the 1940s and 1950s — valued for their audio quality, diction and expert arrangements — are generally more suitable than the original Broadway or Hollywood versions. Later recordings of Songbook material by pop stars, such as Rod Stewart’s 2002 album *It Had to Be You: The Great American Songbook* and those by “subsequently...virtually every aging rocker”<sup>29</sup> are useful references, but the singing style tends to be over-melismatic and exaggerated, interpreted through the prism of rock and modern popular music.

A distinct advantage of using Great American Songbook lyrics as a base for creating ELT resources is that there are numerous valid interpretations of each song, and the most appropriate version can be chosen for use in the classroom.

Three songs were chosen for this study; *Anything Goes* (Cole Porter, 1934), *When You Wish Upon a Star* (Ned Washington/Leigh Harline, 1940) and *Pick Yourself Up* (Jerome Kern/Dorothy Fields, 1936), performed by Frank Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney and Nat King Cole respectively.

### 3.2 Preparation and Implementation

Appendix I contains the worksheets — one for each song — that were prepared for the case study. Supplementary Powerpoint resources were prepared and implemented by the instructor. Each worksheet begins



with a short description of the song, including year of composition, composer and lyricist, source information and selected recording. The recommended time frame for each worksheet is between 30 and 45 minutes.

Students were instructed first to listen to the song<sup>30</sup> and circle any unfamiliar words or phrases. For worksheets with gap fill listening exercises (*Anything Goes* and *When you wish upon a star*), the song was played twice, and students were instructed to fill in the gaps during the second playback. For all three songs, the students were asked to identify instances of rhyme, and during the class the instructor explained terms such as rhyming couplets and internal rhyme, pointing out examples in the lyrics.

Exercise ④ of *Anything Goes* called on the students to think of ways in which society and fashion have changed in the last 100 years, a class discussion task prompted by the first two lines of the lyric: “In olden days a glimpse of stocking / was looked on as something shocking.” The prevalence of antonyms in the B section (“good’s bad... black’s white...day’s night”) was the basis for exercise ⑤, a vocabulary building exercise in which the students looked for antonym pairs. After exercise ⑥, a word-matching exercise using vocabulary from the lyrics, students were introduced to the word “gigolo” and other English words with Italian etymology. Finally, in exercise ⑦, the students wrote a sentence using the grammatical structure “bound to...” prompted by the phrase “bound to answer when I propose” in the song lyric.

Exercise ④ of *When You Wish Upon a Star* introduced abbreviation and syllabic clipping, based on the line “Makes no diff’rence who you are.” Students were asked to apply the same process to shorten words including “memory” (“mem’ry”) and “wondering” (“wond’ring”) and say them out loud. The idiomatic expression “Like a bolt out of the blue” in the last A section of the lyric was used to segue into the presentation of other English idioms based on weather-related vocabulary, such as “on cloud nine” and “like lightning.” In connection to the title

of the song, students were asked in exercise ⑥ to list three of their wishes, an opportunity to practice modal auxiliary verbs and subjunctive phrases. In exercise ⑦, the students completed another gap fill listening exercise based on the sectional verse,<sup>31</sup> and advanced students were invited to complete the extension work (exercise ⑧) by translating the verse lyrics into Japanese.

The worksheet for *Pick Yourself Up*, the longest of the three songs with a 36-bar structure, contained no listening or gap fill exercises. Instead the focus was on the imperative form, and in exercise ④ students were asked to find examples of imperative clauses in the lyric. Double meanings and puns were introduced via the words “pleasant trip” (exercise ④), and other examples of English word play were presented by the instructor. In addition to other completing other exercises, students were informed that former US President Barack Obama had quoted a section of the lyrics from this song in his 2009 inauguration speech.

All four skill areas — listening, speaking, reading and writing — were developed in the course of this case study. In addition, the students had the opportunity to discuss social and cultural issues, and they were introduced to idiomatic and colloquial expressions, etymology, rhyme and historical events. The final part of this study will assess student response and feedback.

### 3.3 Student Feedback

Two independent surveys were carried out to collect data for this study, and the survey templates can be found in Appendix II. The questions and instructions were printed in both English and Japanese.

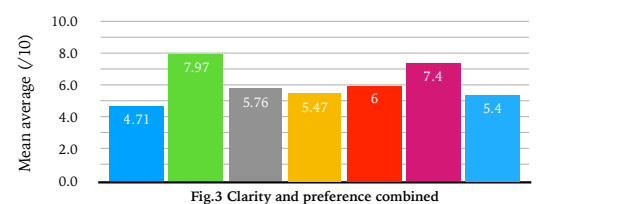
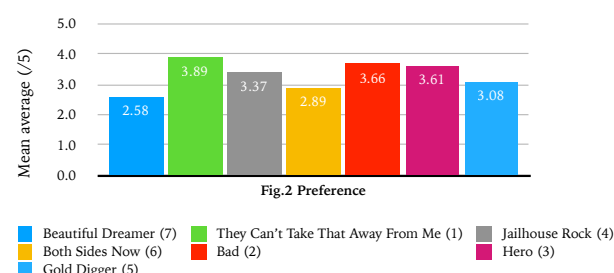
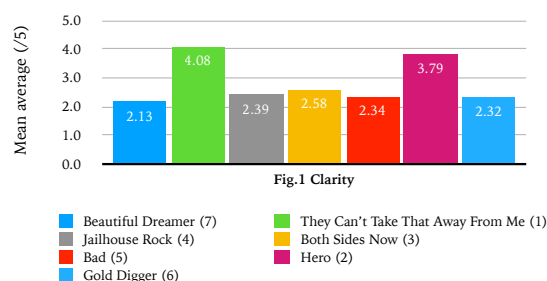
Survey I was carried out before the worksheet exercises, and its objective was twofold: (i) to assess how clearly students could hear the lyrics of material from the *Great American Songbook* in comparison with other popular genres (hereafter labeled **clarity**), and (ii) to assess the relative popularity of material from the *Great American*

Songbook in comparison with other popular genres (hereafter labeled **preference**). Seven short audio clips (between 12 and 34 seconds) were prepared from a representative cross section of American popular music across a wide range of eras and genres, and each clip was played twice. The students were shown the lyrics only on the second playback, in order to focus initial response on aural perception. The students answered two questions: (1) How clearly can you hear the lyrics (1=very difficult to hear...5=very clearly), and (2) Do you like this song? (1=I dislike it...5=I love it), circling the corresponding number on a scale of one to five for each question. There was space on the printed sheet for students to add optional comments after each clip. The songs are listed chronologically from oldest to newest in the list below and in the chart data, but the order was changed when implementing the survey to avoid bias.<sup>32</sup>

1. *Beautiful Dreamer*, 1864, Stephen Foster (sung by Leslie Guinn)
2. *They Can't Take That Away From Me*, 1937, George and Ira Gershwin (sung by Ella Fitzgerald)
3. *Jailhouse Rock*, 1957, Elvis Presley
4. *Both Sides Now*, 1968, Joni Mitchell
5. *Bad*, 1987, Michael Jackson
6. *Hero*, 1993, Mariah Carey
7. *Gold Digger*, 2005, Kanye West (feat. Jamie Foxx)

*They Can't Take That Away From Me* is the only selection from the Great American Songbook. The other songs, highly popular at the time they were released, have been selected as typical representations of their respective genres. 38 students enrolled in English Conversation classes at a women's art university in Japan took part in Survey I and the data was processed anonymously. Figs. 1 and 2 display the mean average and ranking data for clarity and preference respectively. Fig. 3 combines the data for clarity and preference.

*They Can't Take That Away From Me* — a popular song from the Great American Songbook — ranked highest for both clarity and preference. Students commented on the clarity of diction, the absence of strong dialect and



Numbers in parentheses indicate rank (1-7)

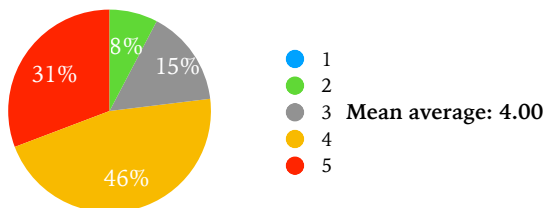
the relaxed interpretation. Some students commented that they like jazz, and others remarked that it sounded sophisticated and fun to listen to. The lowest ranking song in both categories was *Beautiful Dreamer*, and even though some students commented that they had heard the song before, the general consensus was that the heavy vibrato and operatic style obscured the lyrics. One student mistook the language for Italian, while another commented that she emphatically did not want a song like this to be used as an English listening exercise. *Hero* ranked second for clarity, but students commented that some parts were hard to hear because of the ornamental style of singing, echoing observations made earlier in this study about the hypermelismatic trend of late twentieth-century popular music. *Bad* ranked second for preference, with many students recognizing the artist as Michael Jackson, but it ranked fifth for clarity — the biggest discrepancy between clarity

and preference in the survey — and one student remarked that the backing track was more prominent than the voice. *Gold Digger* ranked sixth for clarity, with students struggling to decipher the rap verse, and only fifth for preference, despite being the newest song in the selection. *Jailhouse Rock* ranked fourth in all categories, and *Both Sides Now* was generally unpopular, with students commenting that it made them feel sleepy.

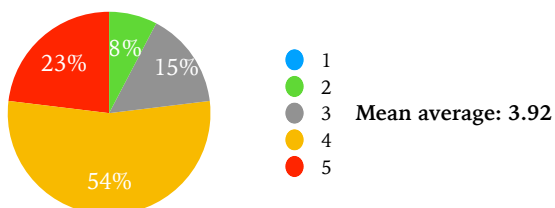
The data collected from Survey I shows that material from the Great American Songbook not only offers greater clarity than other genres of American popular music but that it is also generally popular with Japanese university students.

Survey II was conducted after the implementation of the worksheet exercises. 13 students enrolled in English Conversation classes at a women’s art university in Japan took part in the survey, and they were asked seven questions, ranging from their views on the effectiveness of using song lyrics in English language classes to their preferences regarding genre. At the end of the survey there was a space to write optional comments. The data is presented below.

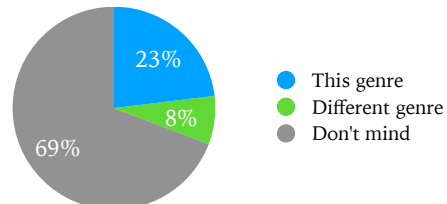
Q1. Do you think using song lyrics is an effective way to learn English? (1=not at all...5=yes, very much so)



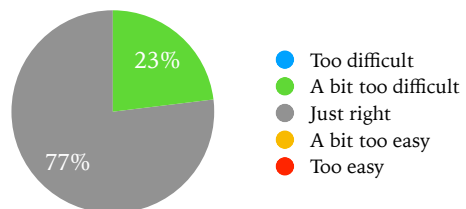
Q2. Did you like the songs used in class? (1=not at all...5=yes, very much so)



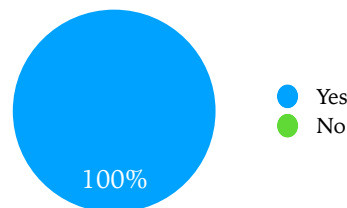
Q3. If you took another class like this, would you prefer songs in this genre, or a different genre?



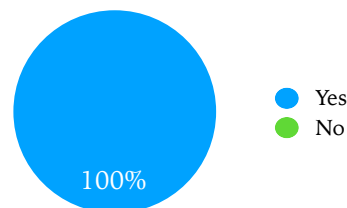
Q4. How was the level of difficulty?



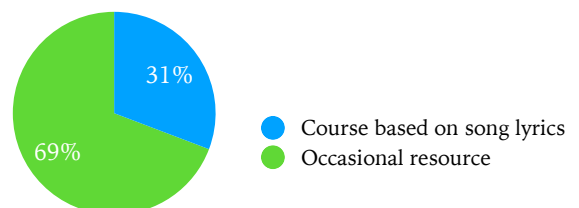
Q5. Did you learn any new vocabulary from the lyrics?



Q6. Would you be interested in taking similar classes in the future?



Q7. If your answer to Q6. is yes, would you be interested in taking an English course that was based mainly on song lyrics, or would you prefer a course that used song lyrics as an occasional resource?



The data collected from Survey II shows a generally positive response to the classes, with 100% of participants answering that they had acquired new vocabulary (Q5) and would be interested in taking similar classes in the future (Q6). Most students considered song lyrics to be an effective resource in learning English (Q1), and the level of difficulty was assessed as “just right” by 77% of respondents (Q4). While the song choices were generally well received (Q2), 69% of respondents showed no specific preference for genre (Q3). 69% of students expressed a preference for song lyrics to be used as an occasional resource in the classroom rather than taking an English course based exclusively on song lyrics (Q7), but some students commented that they were fond of music and had especially enjoyed this approach to language learning.

Through assessing the student feedback from Surveys I and II, it is clear that material from the Great American Songbook is suitable for use in the ELT classroom in Japanese universities. The quality and clarity of the lyrics, together with a general appreciation for the genre, form a solid foundation for developing motivational ELT resources. However, the survey data also reveals a preference to use song lyrics as an occasional resource rather than as the basis for an English course. The author intends to expand upon the current research by developing a syllabus to work in tandem with other ELT resources, thereby creating a well-balanced and engaging curriculum for university students in Japan.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was not to champion the lyrics of the Great American Songbook over all other genres of American popular music. Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Stevie Wonder and countless other wordsmiths have inspired generations worldwide with their inimitable lyrics. From an analytical perspective, however, the Great American Songbook is unrivaled in its volume and variety, unparalleled in its cohesiveness and craftsmanship. While the Songbook is rooted in 1920s to 1940s America, it

continues to be loved and respected by an international audience, especially in Japan. This study focused on unlocking the potential of lyrics from the Songbook as a key resource for university ELT in Japan.

Part 1 assessed the problems of ELT in Japan and provided a historical overview of the Great American Songbook. The structural and lyrical characteristics of the Songbook — as well as comparisons with other genres of popular music — were analyzed in Part 2, and Part 3 mapped the complex process of song selection, and the preparation and implementation of worksheets based on three songs. Two independent surveys were carried out, and positive responses from both surveys pointed to the benefits of using Great American Songbook lyrics in ELT.

The Songbook is a source of endless discovery, and — to quote Steven Brull — its lyrics “go beyond the scope of English language instruction offered in Japanese schools.”<sup>33</sup> It offers the perfect balance of poetry, wit, vernacular, history and art, condensed into a compact formal structure — an ideal catalyst for developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in the Japanese university ELT classroom.

## NOTES

- 1 [https://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/gai.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/gai.pdf)
- 2 <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/01/21/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-going-wrong-way-english-education-reform/#.XretdRMzauU>
- 3 Tada, 2016, p. 25.
- 4 Ikegashira, Matsumoto and Morita, 2009, p. 19.
- 5 McKenzie, 2013, reports that “students evaluated the American variety of English more positively in terms of status than any of the outer-circle speech varieties.”
- 6 Brock, 2017, p. 10.
- 7 Brock, 2017, p. 6.
- 8 Graham, 2013, p. 12.
- 9 Pianists and singers employed by publishing houses to promote songs. Gershwin started his career as a song plugger.
- 10 Furia, 1990, p. 15.

- 11 Scruton, 2019, p. 224.
- 12 Wilder, 1972, p. 56.
- 13 With the exception of the title which may appear numerous times in the course of the song.
- 14 <https://www.vox.com/2014/8/18/6003271/why-are-songs-3-minutes-long>
- 15 Data collected by the author. Timings exclude replays and instructions.
- 16 Exceptions include songs with built in codas such as Matt Dennis' *Angel Eyes*.
- 17 114 bpm is the average track tempo of *Frank Sinatra — The Platinum Collection*, a compilation of 75 songs by one of the most popular Great American Songbook recording artists.
- 18 Notable exceptions include *Lush Life* and *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered* which are typically performed with the verse.
- 19 With the exception of popular music modeled on specific Western paradigms such as Japanese rap.
- 20 Rap is known colloquially as “rhyme”
- 21 Bradley, 2009, pp. 51–52.
- 22 [teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-songs\\_0](http://teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-songs_0)
- 23 Oh, 2015, p.8.
- 24 Furia, 1990, p. 12.
- 25 *Moonlight In Vermont* (1944) is the only song in the canon that does not contain a single rhyme. The song has an irregular 28-bar AABAC structure, and in addition to the total absence of rhyme, the melody and the lyrics follow a 5-7-5 meter, mimicking the structure of Japanese haiku.
- 26 Holloway and Cheney, 2001, p. 259.
- 27 Zinsser, 2001, p. 10.
- 28 By contrast, *Let it Go*, the hit song from Disney's 2013 *Frozen* has a complex formal and lyrical structure.
- 29 Yagoda, 2015, p. 9.
- 30 The recordings were edited to include only the first chorus (AABA) of the song.
- 31 A different recording of the song by June Christy is used for this exercise.
- 32 The order of the survey was 3, 6, 1, 2, 5, 4, 7.
- 33 Murao, 1992, p. 2.

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## グレートアメリカンソングブックの歌詞を日本の大学の ELT のリソースとして使用することについて

サイモン・コスグローブ

音楽は英語教育 (ELT) の貴重なリソースの一つであり、初心者から上級者まで効果的なツールとして使用されている。音楽を通して言語学習を促進することについて多くの研究が実施されているが、特定の曲の選択プロセスや、時代やジャンルの素材の時代やジャンルの異なる素材のもたらす効果の差異に関する研究は不十分である。本研究の目的は、グレートアメリカンソングブック (20 世紀前半のプロドウェイのミュージカルや映画のために作曲された曲) の歌詞を、日本の大学の ELT のリソースとして使用し、どのような有効性があるかを評価することである。他のジャンルのポピュラー音楽と比べ、グレートアメリカンソングブックの歌詞の内容、曲の構成、歴史的背景、現在の日本の大学生の曲への親しみやすさ等を探り、ELT の教材として効果的に活用する方法を提唱する。ケーススタディーでは、曲の選択・資料の作成を解説したうえで、学生の反応と評価を定量的に分析・考察する。

# APPENDIX I - Worksheets (1, 2 and 3)

## Learn English Through Song 1

**Anything Goes** was written in 1934 by Cole Porter for the Broadway musical of the same name. Listen to this version, sung by Frank Sinatra, and complete the exercises below.

● Listen to the song and circle any words that you don't know.  
 ● Fill in the gaps in the lyrics.  
 ● Find words that **rhyme** (example: know/now).

1 In odden days a glimpse of stocking  
 2 Was looked on as something (i) \_\_\_\_\_  
 3 Now heaven knows, anything goes  
 4 Good authors too who once knew better words  
 5 Now only use (ii) \_\_\_\_\_ words writing prose  
 6 Anything goes.

7 The world has gone mad today  
 8 And good's (iii) \_\_\_\_\_ today  
 9 And black's (iv) \_\_\_\_\_ today  
 10 And day's (v) \_\_\_\_\_ today  
 11 When most gyps today that women prize today  
 12 Are just silly giggles

13 So though I'm not a great romancer  
 14 I know that you're bound to (vi) \_\_\_\_\_  
 15 When I (vii) \_\_\_\_\_ anything goes.

● Match the words from the song to their meanings.

1. glimpse a. writer  
 2. author b. text  
 3. prose c. crazy  
 4. mad d. playboy  
 5. gigolo e. a quick look

● Look at the words "you're bound to answer" in line 14. Bound to... means "sure to" or "obviously". Read the example sentences below, then write a sentence of your own using bound to.

- She read my diary. She's bound to find out my secrets.
- There's a big black cloud in the sky. It's bound to rain today.

MY SENTENCE: \_\_\_\_\_

**Changing society, changing fashions**

This song talks about a time when it was taboo to even see a woman's ankles, but by the 1930s society and fashion had changed and mini skirts and bikinis were popular.

● Can you think of any other ways that society and fashion have changed in the last 100 years in your country? Discuss with the rest of your class.


**Antonym pairs**

Antonym pairs are words with opposite meanings, such as dark and light. Find antonym pairs from the words below.

enact	retract	beneficial	misleading
coast	feature	qualify	outward
insect	wing	significant	limited
enact	strut	casual	professional

**Interesting fact**

This song appears at the beginning of the 1986 movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom", sung comely in Chinese!



## Learn English Through Song 2

**When You Wish Upon A Star** was written in 1940 by Ned Washington and Leigh Harline for the Disney movie *Pinocchio*. Listen to this version, sung by Rosemary Clooney, and complete the exercises below.

● Listen to the song and circle any words that you don't know.  
 ● Look for rhyming couplets and underline them.  
 ● Fill in the gaps in lines 7 and 8.

1 When you wish upon a star,  
 2 Makes no difference who you are,  
 3 Anything your heart desires will come to you,  
 4 If your heart is in your dream,  
 5 No request is too extreme,  
 6 When you wish upon a star as dreamers do.

7 \_\_\_\_\_ is kind, she brings to those who love  
 8 The sweet fulfillment of their \_\_\_\_\_ longing.

9 Like a bolt out of the blue  
 10 Fate steps in and sees you through  
 11 When you wish upon a star  
 12 Your dream comes true

● Match the words from the song to their meanings.

1. desires a. chance/destiny  
 2. fulfillment b. too much  
 3. fate c. completion/satisfaction  
 4. request d. wants  
 5. extreme e. something you ask for

● This song has a **verse** (or introduction) with different lyrics. Listen to the verse and fill in the nouns in the gaps below.

When a \_\_\_\_\_ is born  
 They possess a \_\_\_\_\_ or two.  
 One of them is this.  
 They have the \_\_\_\_\_  
 To make a \_\_\_\_\_ come true

● Extension work - Have a go at translating the verse lyrics.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

An abbreviation is a shortened version of a word. In this song **difference** (three syllables) is abbreviated to **diff'rence** (two syllables) so that it fits the melody.

● How would you abbreviate the following words?

(a) memory	(d) history
(b) wandering	(e) coast
(c) every	(f) impractical

Here are some more nouns (nouns) that use weather words:

on cloud nine	→	very happy
stormed under	→	very busy
like lightning	→	very fast
it's a breeze	→	it's very easy

**A bolt out of the blue** (line 9)  
 This idiom is used to express something that is sudden and unexpected. The word **bolt** comes from lightning bolt, and **blue** refers to the blue sky.

Example: I wish I could visit Italy.  
 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
 3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Learn English Through Song 3

**Pick Yourself Up** was written in 1936 by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields for the movie *Swing Time*. In the movie, the song is performed by a dance teacher who is trying to encourage her student not to give up. Listen to this version, sung by Nat King Cole, and complete the exercises.

● Listen to the song and circle any words that you don't know.  
 ● Look for rhyming couplets and underline them.  
 ● The green words in lines 6-10 are **imperative phrases**. Can you find any more in the song?  
 ● The red words ("pleasant trip") have a **double meaning**. What do you think it is?

1 Nothing's impossible I have found,  
 2 For when my chin is on the ground,  
 3 I pick myself up,  
 4 Dust myself off,  
 5 Start all over again.

6 Don't lose your confidence if you slip,  
 7 Be grateful for a **pleasant trip**,  
 8 And pick yourself up,  
 9 Dust yourself off,  
 10 Start all over again.

11 Work like a soul inspired,  
 12 Till the hands of the day is won,  
 13 You may be sick and tired,  
 14 But you'll be a man, my son!

15 Will you remember the famous men,  
 16 Who had to fall to rise again?  
 17 So take a deep breath,  
 18 Pick yourself up,  
 19 Dust yourself off,  
 20 Start all over again.

● Match the phrases from the song to their meanings.


1. sick and tired a. belief in yourself  
 2. rise again b. thankful  
 3. grateful c. fight/struggle  
 4. battle d. weary or bored  
 5. confidence e. flourish


● Extension work  
 Choose any two lines and translate them.

I chose lines \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

**INTERESTING FACT**

Former US President Barack Obama quoted the lyrics from this song in his 2009 inauguration speech, saying: "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America."





Swing Time (1936) starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers

# APPENDIX II - Surveys (I and II)

## SURVEY

●①-⑦の音源を聴いて、問題の数字に○をつけてください。  
 Listen to the audio samples and answer the questions by circling the numbers of your choice.

歌詞の聞き取りやすさ How clearly can you hear the lyrics? (1=とても聞き取れない, 5=とても聞き取れる) (1= very difficult to hear - 5 = very clear)	曲の好み Do you like this song? (1=あまり好きでない, 5=とても好き) (1 = I dislike it - 5 = I love it)	コメント Comments
① 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____
② 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____
③ 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____
④ 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____
⑤ 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____
⑥ 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____
⑦ 1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	_____

## Survey II アンケート②

Please answer the following questions.  
 下記の質問に答えて下さい。

1. Do you think using English song lyrics is an effective way to learn English?  
 英語の歌詞を使うことは英語の勉強に効果があると思いますか。  
 (1= not at all, 5= yes, very much so)  
 (1=全く思わない, 5=強くそう思う)

1 2 3 4 5

2. Did you like the song(s) used in class?  
 授業で使った曲は気に入りましたか。  
 (1= not at all, 5= yes, very much so)  
 (1=あまり気に入らなかった, 5=とても気に入った)

1 2 3 4 5

3. If you took another class like this, would you prefer songs in this genre, or a different genre?  
 このような授業をまた受ける場合、今日使った曲のジャンルがいいですか、それとも違うジャンルがいいですか。

This genre このジャンルがいい	Different genre 違うジャンルがいい	Dont mind どちらも気にしない
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4. How was the level of difficulty?  
 授業の難度はどうでしたか。

Too difficult 難しすぎた	A bit difficult ちょっと難しかった	Just right ちょうど良い	A bit too easy 簡単すぎる	Too easy 簡単すぎる
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5. Did you learn any new vocabulary from the song lyrics?  
 歌詞を勉強して、新しい単語を習うことができましたか。

Yes はい	No いいえ
-----------	-----------

6. Would you be interested in taking similar classes in the future?  
 また同じような授業を受けたいと思いますか。

Yes はい	No いいえ
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7. If your answer to Q.6 is yes, would you be interested in taking an English course that was based mainly on song lyrics, or would you prefer a course that used song lyrics as an occasional resource? もし⑥に「はい」と答えたら、英語の歌詞を中心にした授業を受けたいですか、それとも歌詞を時々使う授業がいいですか。

Course based on song lyrics 英語の歌詞を中心にした授業を受けたい	Song lyrics as an occasional resource 英語の歌詞を時々使う授業を受けたい
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Comments/コメント

\_\_\_\_\_