



Global Issue Songs for the English Classroom

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Introduction

Songs can be used in a variety of ways in the English language classroom:

- they can form the main content of a lesson
- they can be used at the beginning of class as ice-breakers
- they can be used as a warm-up to prepare students for speaking out through singing
- they can be tied to language activities
- they can also be used to end a lesson

Songs can be chosen to highlight specific seasons and events. They can also be adjusted to the mood of the class to boost morale through celebration, stimulation or encouragement.

In this article, I'd like to introduce a number of songs that can be linked to global citizenship. These focus on the three key themes of peace, human rights and the environmental – all topics which are included in Japanese EFL textbooks.



SONGS ABOUT PEACE

- **Happy Xmas: War is Over** (John Lennon)
- a great song to sing at Christmas time
- **Imagine** (John Lennon)
- a classic appeal for peace which is known and loved by people in countries around the world.
- **Where Have All the Flowers Gone** (Pete Seeger)
- a powerful peace song by U.S. folk singer Pete Seeger, known as “the conscience of America”.
- **Fragile** (Sting)
- this song, by British singer and social activist Sting, is dedicated to Ben Linder, an American volunteer who was murdered by the US-funded Contras while working to alleviate poverty in rural Nicaragua. It includes the line “nothing comes from violence and nothing ever could”.
- **Goodnight Saigon** (Billy Joel)
- this song can be used as part of a unit about the Vietnam War. Like John Lennon’s “Imagine”, it was banned in the U.S. during the Gulf War.
- **Give Peace a Chance** (John Lennon)
- this classic – and very sing-able – peace anthem urges us to cut through the jargon and ideology of war and just “give peace a chance”.

- **Zero Landmine** (Ryuichi Sakamoto)
- this song brought together singers from around the world to work for a world free of landmines
- **Sunday Bloody Sunday** (U2)
- this song sings about violence and the 1972 “Bloody Sunday” massacre in Northern Ireland



SONGS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

- **We Shall Overcome** (Pete Seeger)
- this classic song was the anthem for the US civil rights movement and its struggle against racism
- **Ebony and Ivory** (Paul McCartney)
- this song uses a piano metaphor of black keys (ebony) and white keys (ivory) with an appeal to people of all races to live together in peace. It includes the line “Ebony and ivory live together in perfect harmony / Side by side on my piano keyboard / Oh Lord, why don’t we?”
- **Hope in a Hopeless World** (Paul Young)
- this song urges us to live with hope and respect, no matter how difficult our situation may be.
- **Strange Fruit** (Billie Holiday)
- the “strange fruit” in this song refers to the bodies of innocent blacks, hanging from the trees, who were lynched by white racists in the Southern States. The tragic lyrics and Billie’s sultry voice will move the hearts of listeners.
- **Beautiful Boy** (John Lennon)
- the unique birth and life of every person should be celebrated. This song tells of the love and joy on the birth of a baby, something our students should start to think about as future parents.
- **True Colors** (Cyndi Lauper)
- students need to live their lives treasuring their own uniqueness. This song promotes the respect that our world needs for individual differences.
- **Black Eyes Blue Tears** (Shania Twain)
- in a world of domestic violence, this song calls out, “No more crying. No more bruises. Give me freedom!” It encourages students to speak out and to act for a world free of violence.
- **Black or White** (Michael Jackson)
- this song gives a strong message about human rights: “It doesn’t matter if you’re black or white. We shouldn’t put labels on others without striving to understand their situation.”

- **Is This the World We Created?** (Queen)
 - this beautiful ballad by Queen asks a powerful question: "The world is full of suffering children. Is this the world that we created?"
- **She Has Gone** (Smoky Mountain)
 - this song, by a Filipino band, tells the story of a Filipina worker who leaves her poor village. She goes overseas hoping to build a better life for her family but becomes a victim of exploitation. A good song for thinking about the human rights of the Filipinos who come to work in Japan.
- **Sister Rosa** (Neville Brothers)
 - this song celebrates the life of Rosa Parks, the courageous black woman who sparked the 1955 Montgomery Alabama bus boycott and thus helped to launch the civil rights movement in the United States. The song includes the line, "Thank you, Miss Rosa, you are the spark / You started our freedom movement".
- **Equal Rights** (Peter Tosh)
 - this song has a light reggae beat but heavy lyrics. It describes the anger of those driven to crime by poverty and exploitation: "We got to get equal rights and justice / And there will be no crime."



SONGS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

- **Toxique** (Youssou N'Dour)
 - this song, by an African singer from Senegal, criticizes those rich nations which export their toxic waste to developing countries. The English accent might be hard to follow but the words and ideas are clear and simple. This is a good chance to expose students to one variety of World English.
- **Yes We Can** (Artists United for Nature)
 - this is an environmental version of "We Are the World" with Herbie Hancock and Chaka Khan.
- **Mercy Mercy Me** (Marvin Gaye)
 - this song calls out to God to forgive us for the way we have polluted our world. If we think of the Fukushima disaster, its line "radiation under ground and in the sky" is all too painful.
- **Don't Go Near the Water** (The Beach Boys)
 - this lesser known Beach Boys song is both a warning as well as a call to learn about how we're polluting the world's water. It says "help the water right away, do what we can do".
- **Water** (Bob Reid)
 - this song, a favorite in American schools and communities, includes a rousing chorus which runs "Animals need water / People need it, too."

- **This Pretty Planet** (Tom Chapin)
 - this short song (only 6 lines) has a beautiful melody plus an important message about water pollution. It's very sing-able with multiple parts, so students can split into groups and enjoy some great harmony. Great for children's classes!



SONGS FOR A BETTER WORLD

- **Earth Song** (Michael Jackson)
 - this powerful song portrays the ways that we humans have harmed the Earth through war and environmental destruction, and calls out for us to stop the harm we do and restore the planet.
- **Why?** (Tracy Chapman)
 - this haunting song asks why there is war, poverty, starvation and violence in our world.
- **From a Distance** (Julie Gold)
 - this powerful song contrasts the beauty of our planet as seen from space with the reality on the ground of war, hunger, hate and poverty. It calls for us to work together to make a better world.
- **We Are the World** (USA for Africa)
 - this classic song brought together America's top singers to raise money for a famine in Ethiopia. It calls for all of us to take action saying, "it's true we make a better day, just you and me."
- **Heal the World** (Michael Jackson)
 - this beautiful song calls on each of us, if we really care, to work together and do what we can to heal the world and make it a better place.

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