

## ROCKIN', ROLLIN' AND WRITIN': USING FAN LETTERS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

**Balou Antia**

As shown in a survey by Clermont (1982), pop and rock music are the types of music most liked by many French-Canadian secondary school students in the Montreal area. In addition, Little (1982) points out that for francophone students pop and rock usually means English-language pop and rock. It is therefore clear that songs of this kind can and should be used in the second language class to enhance the level of student motivation while at the same time improving the students' language skills in English.

Several authors including Urbancic and Vizmuller (1981) and Knott (1985) have suggested ways of using songs in the ESL classroom while taking into account the needs and interests of the students. However, the students' interest in the lives of rock stars and rock culture is an area that has been left unexplored. It is with this in mind that I would like to suggest that you encourage your students to write fan letters to their favourite pop singers or rock groups.

Before introducing this activity to your students you must obtain the addresses of most popular singers and rock groups. You can do so by consulting the many magazines aimed at teenagers which generally publish lists of fan club addresses. It is most appropriate to introduce this letter writing activity after having used several pop songs as language learning activities in prior lessons. Specifically, this type of activity will give students tangible rewards for writing English letters in the form of replies from fan clubs accompanied by photos and posters of their favourite singers and groups. In addition, this type of activity will help students to develop better writing skills by performing a genuine communicative task rather than writing a composition on an imposed topic. Finally, this activity may also motivate teenaged students to work harder at improving their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary because these skills will enable them to write clearer and more sophisticated fan letters.

This fan letter activity should be carried out in different ways depending on the ability level of the learners involved. However, because it can take up to two months for fan letters to be answered, it is important to introduce this activity at all levels by displaying letters, photos and posters received by students in previous years.

With beginner level students, it would be a good idea to introduce the activity by having the students read and discuss sample fan letters written by other teenagers. Then, a fill-in-the-blanks version of a fairly standard fan letter could be distributed to the students who would fill in the missing

information with details about their own lives. This information would include such things as name, age and hobbies. The students could then copy out the letter in their own handwriting adding personal details or asking additional questions if desired.

With more advanced students, you could introduce this activity by having the students brainstorm on all the kinds of things they would say and all the questions they might include in a letter to their favourite singer or rock group. Students could then write their letters on their own or in small groups with other students who want to write to the same singer or group.

Once your students start receiving replies from different fan clubs, it is important to encourage them to share these materials in class. You could ask students to read their replies to the class or they could tell the class about the replies they received in their own words. Another alternative would be to have the students exchange their letters in pairs or small groups and compare the types of replies received. Finally, you can encourage your students to write to other fan clubs in the hope of receiving more interesting information regarding another singer or group of interest to them.

Fan letters can be both motivating and rewarding for secondary level ESL students because they help to bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world by bringing authentic documents of interest to them inside the classroom. In addition, by channelling most teenagers' fascination with pop and rock music, this activity turns letter writing, considered a chore by most students, into a cheerful challenge.

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## THE AUTHOR

Balou Antia completed a diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language at McGill University and has taught adult ESL.