



It Is Music to My Ears! Teaching English to High School Students Through Song

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ABSTRACT

Songs have been used in teaching English as a foreign language for several decades with considerable positive results. The purpose of our study was to assess the benefits of using songs in the EFL classroom. The study was conducted throughout the first semester of academic year 2020-2021, precisely between the months October-January, at Samuil Micu High School of Sărmașu, Romania and involved two groups of participants. The participants were divided into the study group represented by students in class 10 B, while the control group consisted of students in class 10 A. Pre- and post-tests were administered to assess students' knowledge of the investigated elements: grammar and vocabulary. Following the study, the post-test results of the study group were assessed and showed a significant increase in language acquisition.

Keywords: ELT, Teaching Through Music, High School Student

INTRODUCTION

Music has always played an essential role in people's lives: it is ubiquitous, it surrounds us everywhere, and it is broadly accepted all around the world. Music has been around, we can presume, even before humans started to inhabit our planet, various species of birds are undoubtedly the evidence that music, at least in its basic form, does not only belong to humankind, but it is a universal means of communication. Nevertheless, the passion for music is deeply rooted in human nature. Avoiding music is not an easy task, for it belongs

to many aspects of life. Various kinds of music may be heard in almost every place. Music may be found in every human culture, we can hear it almost everywhere: while listening to the radio, when watching television, on different family occasions, such as birthday parties, in restaurants, shops, cars, and even in the streets.

English is not only the *lingua franca* of international communication, but it is also the second language in several countries. As a foreign language, it is taught in schools across Romania as well as worldwide. Geographically speaking, it is one of the most relevant subjects

in Spanish primary schools (Torras-Vila, 2021) and teaching of it spans to Indonesia (Sukirmiyadi, 2018).

Songs can smoothly change the mood in a classroom from a monotonous to a more vivid and lively one. There is evidence that music can be so “sticky” that listeners keep hearing the music in their brains despite the cessation of the source. Earworms have been experienced by 98% of the Western population (Euser, Oosterhoff, and van Balkom, 2016). If this is the case, using songs in language teaching has multiple benefits due to their repetitiveness and the mental replay of the lyrics in the brain of the learner. Melodic and rhyming instances of linguistic elements will undoubtedly enhance language learning (Bebout and Belke, 2017).

The use of songs in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom has been shown to lower levels of anxiety and improve academic performance (Dolean, 2016). Songs have also been used to teach other foreign languages, the study by Keskin brings evidence that Turkish can be successfully taught with the aid of songs, the use of which improves student motivation (Keskin, 2011).

Moreover, songs have been employed in language teaching to a group of recently migrated primary school children some students benefitting exceptionally well (Busse et al. 2018). Young learners exposed to songs as teaching materials easily improve their speaking fluency and pronunciation as opposed to students

whose lessons do not include songs (Samiullah, 2018).

The study by Bokiev and Ismail investigated the beliefs and practices of Malaysian teachers of English as a second language concluding that music is a resourceful and useful tool in teaching ESL because music enlivens the classroom and makes it less stressful (Bokiev and Ismail, 2021). The teaching of EFL has also investigated the translation of songs from Indonesian to English for the 5-9 age group of learners with various advantages and benefits including encouragement, joy, and motivation (Sukirmiyadi, 2018).

In terms of learning vocabulary and improving pronunciation, the Kocaman’s study conducted on 60 students found that listening to songs also aided learners to remember not only words in isolation but as collocations as well (Kocaman, 2016). Multi-word units remain imprinted in the learners’ brains and can be easily retrieved if they were acquired with the aid of songs (Tomczak and Lew, 2019).

The role of songs has also been explored in examination practice (Yung, 2021) as well as self-learning of EFL (Jabak, 2021). In terms of the authenticity of materials, the potential of rock music in teaching English through songs has been investigated (Neisa 2008). Songs have also been utilized in the teaching of grammar, a study finding that a group of learners exposed to songs as a teaching tool recorded improved grammar knowledge and accuracy while also raising the motivation of the students (Alinte, 2013).

Additionally, significant results were encountered in learning morphology: inflection, derivation, and compound words when songs were used in the teaching process (Feng, 2016).

The improvement of oral production of 14-17 year-old students with the aid of songs was analyzed by the Cifuentes study (Cifuentes, 2006) conducted on 45 learners of EFL in Bogota. The study found that, at the end of the experiment, not only the clarity and accuracy of the students' oral production was improved, but also the level of interaction with one another. Listening comprehension has been shown to improve as a result of using songs in the EFL classroom (Rahbar and Khodabakhsh, 2013) which is due to the authenticity of the materials.

METHOD

Our research question was if students who are taught grammar and vocabulary through songs achieve better results than those taught with traditional methods. In order to confirm or refute the hypothesis, we designed a study considering the following: control and study group, the choice of grammar and vocabulary problems, the choice of songs. The study was conducted between the months of October 2020-January 2021, and involved 58 participants. They were divided into two groups, students from class 10 B (the study group), and students from class 10 A (the control groups). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent.

The investigated language problems were: grammar, vocabulary and writing (focusing on

both students' creativity and originality). The songs were selected based on the following criteria: the lesson aims, the syllabus, and last but not least, taking into account the students' preferences for the type of music, which was a relatively difficult task since teenagers can be rather fastidious when it comes to music. The lyrics of the songs were retrieved from song lyrics internet databases (Genius, Musixmatch, and Apple Music) and were listened to for consistency and accuracy.

The test was used as an instrument for measuring students' vocabulary and grammar development. The pre-test designed before the implementation period was exactly the same as the post-test at the end of the research: the same content, level of difficulty, number of items, and scoring; the tests were the same both for the study and the control group.

Following the pre-test, in the case of 10 B, the activities for teaching, practicing, and consolidating grammar and vocabulary issues were planned using various song-based techniques, while in the 10 A the same topics were taught without the use of songs, therefore the methods were different.

The types of exercises designed for the teaching of EFL through songs were:

- a. gap-filling, matching pairs of items and statements in order to activate previously acquired grammar knowledge and to practice new grammar structures;
- b. brainstorming, open cloze in order to activate previously acquired vocabulary on various

topics, to revise or consolidate new vocabulary issues and practice students' listening skills;

- c. debate, role-play, dos and don'ts list in order to develop students communicative and creative skills.

The songs were chosen as follows:

a. Grammar chapters:

- *An Angel* – Robbie Williams (Present Simple vs Present Continuous)
- *I still haven't found what I'm looking for* – U2 (Present Perfect Simple)
- *If I were a boy* – Beyoncé (Second Conditional)
- *Fighter* – Christina Aguilera (The Comparative)

b. Thematical chapters:

- *One moment in time* – Whitney Houston (Success and achievement)
- *Hooray! Hooray! It's a holi-holiday* – Boney M (Going places)
- *Earth Song* – Michael Jackson (Planet issues)
- *Mistletoe and Wine* – Cliff Richard (Christmas and traditions)

A brief description of four sample lessons is presented below:

- a. Present Perfect Simple: students listened to the song *I still haven't found what I'm looking for* – U2, followed the lyrics of the song and wrote down all the verbs used in the Present Perfect Simple that they could find. Then, students were given handouts with various sentences removed from the song and filled

them in with the missing past participle forms of the verbs selected from a box. They also mixed half-sentences selected from the songs (*It was warm in the night – I was cold as a stone; It turned like fire – this burning desire; I have **climbed** highest mountains/ I have **run** through the field/ I have **held** the hand of a devil*).

- b. The Conditional (Second Type): while listening to the song *If I were a boy* – Beyoncé, students filled in the gaps with the missing words listed on the worksheet. They were also asked to identify and note down all the conditional sentences found in the song (*If I **were** a boy ... I'd roll outta bed in the mornin'/ I **would turn** off my phone/ I think I **could** understand*).

- c. Success and achievement: students listened to the song *One moment in time* – Whitney Houston and while following the lyrics, they drafted a short list of the steps which can lead to success and could serve them as a life lesson: (*give the best of you, fight every gain, face the pain, lay the plan, want it all/ no time for less*). The lesson ended with a class debate on the lines: *You are a winner for a lifetime/ If you seize that one moment in time*, where students had to present their opinions taking into consideration the topic of the lesson and the message of the song.

- d. Planet issues: students listened to the lyrics of the song *Earth Song* – Michael Jackson and added to the spidergram other environmental problems presented in the

song. They also had to fill in the gaps using words from the song (listed here in boldface): *what about **sunrise**/ what about **rain**/ what about **elephants**/ what about **crying whales**/ we're ravaging the **seas**/ what about **forest trails***. Students were invited to stand in a semicircle and come up with answers and solutions to Michael Jackson's question and awareness: *What have we done to the world?* (an activity based on a previous one where students had to write a 10 thing-list they can do to save the planet).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Both the pre- and post-tests consisted of 8 tasks, measuring students' vocabulary and grammar knowledge and covered the grammar and thematical chapters previously mentioned in the research.

Analyzing the results of the pre- and post-tests, the general results were as follows: students (30 in total) from 10 B, the study group, achieved an average of 32.1 points on the pre-test, while on the post-test this value increased to an average of 70.4 points. Thus, members of the study group improved their initial score with 38.3 points.

In the case of 10 A (28 in total), the control group, the same number of students scored an average of 31.39 points on the pre-test, while on the post-test the value increased to an average score of 59.03. As we can observe, the difference between the average post-test scores – 70.4 (10 B) and 59.03 (10 A) points – is higher, precisely 11.27. The improvement of each group is

obvious, but the numbers speak for themselves, the experimental group had a two-fold increase.

Following the results of this study, the hypothesis, students who are taught vocabulary and grammar through the use of songs can achieve better results than those taught through other conventional teaching methods, was confirmed. After the implementation period, the average post-test results showed that the 10th grade students' vocabulary and grammar knowledge improved. Besides the natural and relaxed atmosphere brought to the class, the wide range of song-based teaching and consolidating techniques enriched students' vocabulary and strengthened their grammar knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Songs can be used as a valuable teaching and learning tool. Using songs can help learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation; they can also be useful for teaching vocabulary and sentence structures. Learning through songs creates a non-threatening atmosphere, reduces anxiety, rigidity, and formalism. Most of the songs contain authentic, natural language, and provide a variety of new vocabulary which can be easily obtainable. Additionally, speaking skills, pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy are considerably improved. Moreover, teaching through songs should be considered as a regular part of classroom activities as they offer enjoyable speaking, listening, vocabulary and practice both in and out of the classroom.

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