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## The Role of Music in Second Language Learning

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### Abstract

Through the ages, art has been an expression means for conveying various ideas especially intangible ones. Among numerous types of art, music has been an important aspect of every culture with which we use to express our thoughts and feelings. However, its role in learning a language and especially learning a foreign language has not received great attention in educational research. Music due to its affective power in reducing pressure and stress will enhance language learning environment. In this regard, the present study was conducted to examine the relative effectiveness of the use of songs (lyrics and music) on vocabulary acquisition. Using an experimental approach, results of this study showed that varying degrees of the use of songs would yield different English language achievement. The subjects who were exposed to the most music obtained higher achievement.

**Key words:** Music; Song; Vocabulary acquisition; EFL/ESL Learning

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### INTRODUCTION

Different animals have various kinds of cries and songs to communicate with each other. Similarly human beings use their language and/or music to express their thoughts and feelings to their fellowmen. We can hardly imagine a

culture without music. Thus, music is an essential part of any culture which is highly recognized as an indispensable component of human existence. As special short musical compositions, songs are also rooted in culture. They are regarded as rich sources of information about human values, beliefs, customs, relations, ethics, and cultural differences.

Cognitive scientists, therapists, musicians, singers and teachers can easily support the relationship between music and language. They mainly refer to these aspects of human life as two “separate, though complimentary systems of structured communication... language primarily responsible for content and music evoking emotion” (Jourdain, 1997, p.293). Regarding the significance of music on learning, Plato believed that “musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten... making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful” (Jowett, 1994, p.271).

Music is considered as a strong candidate for making language learning classroom an optimum learning environment in which learners can increase their vocabulary, enhance their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, and develop cultural knowledge. Numerous teachers confirm the excessive power of music as a relaxation tool in classroom environment and as a warm up or background for other tasks being carried out to facilitate learning processes (Eken, 1996). Educators have found several features in songs which allow second-language learners to manage their learning effectively. For instance, songs contain conversational language, short words and many personal pronouns which are spoken at a slower rate with various repetitions allowing them to be processed easily, efficiently and amusingly. These factors make songs as magnificent tools for learning vocabulary or for fortifying words already learned. However, research on the role of music and songs in second/foreign language

learning has not received great attention in educational research even though the impact of music on society and culture is highly recognized. Halpern (1999, p.1) states that “of the many factors that influence learning, few are as far-reaching - or little understood - as sound and music”. This paper looks briefly at research and examines the importance of music and songs in second/foreign language learning, especially in the realm of word study and offers strategies for using song in enhancing vocabulary learning and retention. So, the main research question of this study is:

Does the use of songs in classroom influence EFL learners’ vocabulary acquisition?

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## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Through the ages, language and art have complemented each other. In countless cases, art is a means of conveying various kinds of concrete and abstract ideas. Maess and Koelsh (2001) have concluded that although language and music are different forms of communication, they are processed in the same area of the brain with the same mechanism. As Ayotte (2004, p.10) have suggested, music and language have the “same auditory, perceptive, and cognitive mechanisms that impose a structure on auditory information received by the senses”.

Mora (2000, p.9) has claimed that the first thing we learn about a language is its musicality. Wilcox (1996) has also confirmed that “songs comprise a vast literature of music as each country has songs that have been handed down by generations to add rhythm and pacing to group work efforts. Some of these are rowing songs, marching songs, and harvest songs.” According to Mora (2000, p.152), musicality of language provide a rich environment for sound learning by enhancing fluency through imitation and by developing an awareness of sounds, rhythms, stresses, and intonations and that “The musicality of speech has an effect not only on the pronunciation skills of EFL students but also on their entire language acquisition process” (Mora, 2000, p.148). By using music to facilitate language processing, instructors can improve learners’ motivation, lower their inhibitions, develop cultural understanding, enhance their working memory, and facilitate long-term recall of vocabularies (Stansell, 2005).

There are several theoretical and physiological support for incorporating music in language teaching. Numerous studies have confirmed the role of music as an effective tool for developing memory of vocabulary and many other language components such as grammar, pronunciation, etc. For example, Hazel-Obarow (2004) studied the short-term and long-term effects of music on vocabulary acquisition in younger learners of English. The results revealed that the inclusion of music is significantly motivating for students in the learning of vocabulary.

Ayotte (2004) examined the effect of songs on the acquisition of second language verb forms in second language learners. The lessons in one of his experimental groups were based on using songs while teaching verb forms and the other group’ lessons were included no music. The results showed that the former group performed with more grammatical accuracy on the posttests than the latter group.

However, the proposition of the inclusion of music in teaching ESL students is the ultimate conclusion of individual instructor’s experiences or action research. Moreover, Ayotte (2004) asserted that only a small number of studies examined the role of songs and lyrics in language learning, especially with adult ESL learners. He has also noted that it is “most necessary . . . to determine if songs can indeed facilitate acquisition of a second language . . .” (Ayotte, 2004, p.4)

Therefore, investigating any possible effectiveness of songs and lyrics on aspects of language learning may provide an insightful appreciation of motivating, interesting and efficient nature the use of music in second/foreign language teaching, and thereby coming up with effectual suggestions for conducting EFL classroom.

### Method

A group of 105 out of 155 university students at a large university in Zanjan were randomly chosen. They were aged 20 to 23, all pursuing their bachelor degree in engineering. This is to avoid their age and major difference to have an impact on the findings of the study. Based on their scores on Nelson English Test, their level of English proficiency was pre-intermediate. These subjects were randomly assigned to three different treatment groups as follows: Group 1 or all-music group in which the instructor was exclusively using music in teaching; Group 2 or half-music group in which the instructor was using music half the time in teaching; and Group 3 or no-music group in which the instructor was using no music in teaching.

The same instructor, holding MA in TEFL and having eight years of teaching experience, tried to teach the same material to these three groups in a period of ten 90-minute sessions. Following the pretest, the teacher started instruction, and then he administered the first posttest immediately after the instruction and a delayed posttest three weeks after the instruction. No classes were held after the end of instruction and before the delayed posttest.

The treatment for the music and half-music groups consisted of American and British pop songs aiming at developing learners’ grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, reading and speaking skills. For instance, regarding grammatical content of the songs, the instructor can ask about the usage and structure of a particular utterance (e.g. past perfect tense). The individuals worked on their listening comprehension, with an intensive focus on word order and vocabulary.

The teacher encouraged the learners to circle the new words and then cooperatively define their meanings through explaining and exemplifying. Afterwards, they tried to practice pronunciation and speaking by singing the same songs. With no music group, the teacher work on vocabulary, grammar or other ESL skills with non-music materials. Eventually, to assess the individuals' vocabulary acquisition, an instrument was developed for both pretest and posttest, consisting of 30 multiple choice and sentence completion items. This number of items guarantees a rather high reliability index (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.90) for the test. This instrument designed to assess the individuals'

knowledge of words such as "dull", "passage", "except" or some phrases and brief sentences presented earlier in class.

### Results

Subjects' test scores were analyzed by SPSS, using descriptive statistics, *t*-tests and ANOVAs. The three groups of music, half music, and no music learners were the independent variables and the scores on the vocabulary test were the dependent variables. The aim is to examine any probable significant differences in language achievement in learners before and after instruction.

**Table 1**  
**Standard Deviations and Mean Scores for the Groups (N = 105) in the Pretest Achievement Scores (N = 105)**

Tests	All-Music Group		Half-Music Group		No-Music Group	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	3.29	2.0	3.17	2.04	3.20	2.37
Posttest	10.19	2.23	8.37	2.74	9.73	2.33
Delayed posttest	8.3	2.31	6.66	2.48	7.77	2.27

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of pretest scores and Table 2 displays no significant differences ( $F(2,103) = 0.45, p = .64$ ) on the vocabulary

test among these three groups. So, we can infer that the three groups are similar regarding their levels of English vocabulary before the instruction.

**Table 2**  
**ANOVAs of the Pretest Achievement Scores Among the Group (N = 105)**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Groups	4.23	2	2.11	.45	.64
Error	456.33	103	4.66		
Total	460.55	105			

The comparison of the pretest and the immediate posttest was revealed a statistically significant difference ( $t(105) = 14.237, p < .01$ ) in the students' achievement scores which is the result of the teacher's instruction for all the groups (see Table 3), regardless of the extent of

using songs in instruction. All-music group achieved the highest posttest score, followed by the no-music group, and then the half-music group with the lowest score on the posttest.

**Table 3**  
**T-Tests Between Pretest and Immediate Posttest for the Groups (N = 105)**

Source	M	t	p
All-Music group	3.75	7.33	.01
Half-music group	2.81	8.48	.01
No-music group	3.67	9.28	.01
Three groups combined	3.40	14.24	.01

Further analysis using ANOVA (Table 4) revealed that there was a statistically significant difference among the performance of the three groups in the immediate posttest ( $F(2,103) = 5.25, p < .01$ ). Post-hoc t-tests revealed the

significant difference to lie between the half-music group and the no-music group ( $t(63) = 2.135, p < .05$ ) and between the half-music group and the all-music group ( $t(69) = 3.077, p < .05$ ).

**Table 4**  
**ANOVAs of the Immediate Posttest Achievement Scores Among the Groups (N = 105)**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Groups	63.02	2	31.51	5.25	.006
Error	456.33	103	5.99		
Total	650.69	105			

The delayed posttest which was administered three weeks after the instruction also revealed similar results of the first posttest; All-music group achieved the highest posttest score, followed by the no-music group, and then the half music group. Furthermore, ANOVA (Table 5)

revealed a statistically significant difference ( $F(2,103) = 4.59, p < .05$ ). However, Post-hoc t-tests revealed the significant difference to lie only between the half-music group and the all-music group ( $t(67) = 2.935, p < .05$ ).

**Table 5**  
**ANOVAs of the Delayed Posttest Achievement Scores Among the Groups (N = 105)**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Groups	51.16	2	25.58	4.59	.01
Error	535.02	103	5.57		
Total	586.18	105			

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The few studies on the role of songs in the ESL classroom learning have either involved younger students or have yielded contradictory results. The experimental approach of this research study investigated the influence of the use of songs on vocabulary acquisition in adult university-level EFL learners. In other words, the research question of this study sought a significant difference between the performances of EFL/ESL learners in vocabulary proficiency tests with varying degree of exposures to song in their learning.

The findings of this study revealed that varying degree of song incorporation into class procedures could produce different vocabulary achievement scores. The individuals with most music exposure gained higher scores in the immediate posttest as well as the delayed posttest. Additionally, no-music group outperformed half-music group leading us to infer that instruction can be most effective when music is used intensively in teaching. One reason for this could be that some students might find it confusing, distracting, or even inhibiting when the instructor used music inconsistently. Consequently, teaching of English can be highly effective if it is based on intensive music/song usage. Medina's (1990, p.8) findings have also confirmed this conclusion since he asserted that "the use of music to promote second language acquisition should occupy a more important role in the second language curriculum. This can easily be accomplished by increasing the frequency with which songs are used in the curriculum."

The findings of this study can help ESL/EFL teachers modify their instruction procedures to maximize the quality and effectiveness of ESL/EFL students' learning. With more music incorporation into L2 classrooms, English teachers, teacher trainers, course book writers and curriculum designers become more aware of the role of music/songs in prompting the quality of their work in lessons, course books and curricula decisions. The teaching procedures including intensive use of songs possess the "middle ground between linguistics and musicology, possessing both the communicative aspects of language coupled with the entertainment aspect of music" (Jolly, 1975, p.11).

This research study investigated the effectiveness of utilizing music on vocabulary acquisition with Iranian EFL learners in Zanjan, so further research can be done investigating its influence with learners of other countries

and cultures and on other aspects English teaching (e.g., speaking, listening, writing, or reading).

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