Teaching and Learning English through Songs: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review presents a report on research studies exploring the benefits of music at the cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical levels. Ten studies that deal with the effects of music for young learners carried out in various contexts and countries were included in this account. Increasing motivation, gaining vocabulary and grammar understanding, and recalling information are the main recurrent themes mentioned as a result of implementing pedagogical interventions using songs, and, in some cases stories. To conclude some ideas for further research were briefly considered.

Keywords: Music, Language gains, Cognitive process, Motivation

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The benefits of music have been extensively discussed from its aesthetic value to its therapeutic, cultural, social, and pedagogical features in the field of SLA and cognitive science. In the light of theory about music and its benefits in language learning (e.g. Cooper, 2010; Paquette and Rieg, 2008; Trinick 2011), the pedagogical value of music and songs in foreign and second language learning has been researched in numerous studies (Ajibade and Ndububa, 2008; Chou, 2014; Coyle and Gómez Gracia, 2014; Davis and Fan, 2016; Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal, and Carrero Olivares, 2012; Schön et al., 2008; Salcedo, 2010). Thus, this paper aims at providing an account of current studies involving music and songs by contextualizing them within a theoretical framework based on cognitive, behavioral, and linguistic works that support the use of music and songs in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) field. This literature review has been guided by the following questions: 1) What works have been published? 2) What skills have been studied? 3) What instruments have been used to measure gains? 4) What kinds of songs have been used and who has been the audience? 5) What aspects of songs seem to be the most helpful?

To begin, a theoretical framework about the benefits of music can be introduced by considering its great cultural and social value. For example, Mashayekh and Hashemi (2011) described music as a resource that promotes international communication among people from a diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Other researchers like Paquette and Rieg (2008) have highlighted the cognitive, affective, and linguistic benefits of music by arguing how it helps to develop automaticity, have a weak affective filter and promote genuine language interactions. They made the case for using music to teach language skills such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm and parts of speech as well as prosodic features of the language – stress, rhythm and intonation patterns. Also, while pointing out the importance of explicit instruction, they emphasize the idea of using music to create a more conducive learning

atmosphere in classrooms socially, academically and emotionally, since music motivates children to learn and take risks.

Cognitively speaking, music has been found to be of high value in recalling information. For instance, the advantages of using songs based on mnemonics effects are cited by Salcedo (2010), and Davis and Fan (2016). Similarly, Murphey (1990) hypothesized that using songs can enhance acquisition by means of din or involuntary mental rehearsal and the stuck-in-my head phenomenon, while Williamson, Jilka, Fry, Finkel, Müllensiefen, and Stewart (2012) reported on the mnemonics benefits that songs may constitute by becoming "earworms" (Williamson et al., 2012) that people repeat in their minds almost involuntarily.

Music has also been associated with benefits in language acquisition (Cooper, 2010; Trinick, 2011; Schön et al. 2008; Mashayekh and Hashemi, 2011). Trinick (2011), making the case for the use of songs in classrooms in New Zealand, mentioned how the common repetitive pattern found in songs help children internalize language and practice syntax and semantics while providing a meaningful learning context. Schön et al. (2008) conducted a study to add supporting evidence as to how learners of a foreign language may benefit from the structuring properties of music in songs. They designed a study with three experiments: In condition one, French students listened to a stream of spoken nonsense words; in condition two, a different group of learners listened to the same stream of words, but this time in sung mode; in condition three, a third group of learners listened to the sung stream of words but this time some features to the related contour of music were added. Findings showed significant statistical difference for the group of students in condition two, the sung mode. They were able to discern more segments than the two other groups, which could be attributed to the properties of the combination of words and music. The authors posed that songs might help language acquisition in three main ways: emotionally by increasing the level of attention, perceptually since the pitch contour aids phonological discrimination, (syllable change usually co-occurs with a change in pitch), and linguistically since "the consistent mapping of musical and linguistic structure may optimize the operation of learning mechanisms" (p. 976).

Together with cognitive theory favoring the use of music and songs in language learning and foreign language learning, several research studies in a variety of contexts have been carried out. A wide range of rationales have been provided for such studies. Some of them have been focused on the motivational features of songs and how these help create a more relaxed learning environment, (Ajibade and Ndububa , 2008; Coyle and Gracia, 2014; Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal, and Carrero Olivares, 2012), while other studies have emphasized the cognitive and linguistic facets of songs and how they help vocabulary and language learning (Coyle and Gracia, 2014; Chou, 2012; Davis and Fan, 2016). The most relevant ones will be summarized as follows for the purpose of this paper.

Let us begin by considering the studies conducted to explore songs as a motivational strategy, which have mainly addressed young sixth graders. Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal, and Carrero Olivares (2012), guided by objectives related to how to use songs and their impact on students' oral production, set out to do an action research study as they found out that their students were afraid to talk and lacked motivation. Eighty-four sixth-graders in two different courses at a public school in Bogota, Colombia participated in the study. The researchers specifically identified five students with diverse profiles to account for individual differences: "a high-achiever, a smart student, a lazy student, a difficult student and, a naughty student" (p. 12).

They followed an action research model approach consisting of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. Lessons around pop songs content were planned following a workshop format. A qualitative approach was followed for data collection and data analysis by using instruments such as observation, field notes and video-recorded lessons, and surveys, during four stages: assembling, coding and comparing data, interpreting, and presenting the outcomes. At the end of their study, they found that students showed more motivation and willingness to talk in a "non-threatening" environment (p.20) and the combination of curricular activities helped students to develop their speaking and grammar skills.

A second study focused on motivation is that by Ajibade and Ndububa (2008). The authors set the context of the study by stating that even though English is an official language in Nigeria, learners at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level fail to learn the language, which is partly attributable to teachers' beliefs, lack of preparation, and the methods they use. In an attempt to explore more motivational activities, the researchers set out to implement lessons based on games, and songs. Questions related to motivation and English performance guided the study, which followed a pretest-posttest design with control and experimental groups. 100 senior secondary students were placed in the experimental and controlled groups randomly. Four instruments were used for data collection: Questionnaire on Students' Motivation in the Learning of English (QSMLE), Achievement Test in English Language (ATEL), Instructional Package, and oral interview. Data analysis included statistical tests such as t-tests and Pearson's correlation, which revealed statistical significance for the experimental group. After the treatment, researchers found that game words and culturally relevant activities such as songs had a significant effect on students in terms of motivation and performance.

Both of these studies were carried out in the context of public schools, and even though they were set in two countries far apart from one another, the lack of motivation in secondary school students was common in the two contexts. The first study, qualitative in nature, made use of a variety of artifacts and was focused on designing materials to teach the chosen songs. The authors succeeded in providing a description of students' behavior, but a possible limitation of this study is the lack of instruments to measure vocabulary and language gains beyond the descriptive level. In contrast, the second study provides a more systematic approach to measure language gains. As stated earlier, the motivational power of songs has been acknowledged by different authors, and the findings of these studies corroborate such an acknowledgment.

Another group of studies includes research done on vocabulary and language gains in foreign language learning. For example, Coyle and Gracia, (2014), within the curricular demands for students to learn English in Spain, set out to explore activities that would help pre-school children start to learn English as foreign language. More specifically, they wanted to research the effectiveness of activities such as using songs and vocabulary learning both at a productive and receptive level. A group of twenty-five preschoolers participated in the study in which lessons including songs were given in three sessions of thirty minutes each. Students took vocabulary picture tests before and after the three lessons organized around a popular children's song. Children heard the song seven times in total while class sessions were video recorded and four children were interviewed to gain further insights. A post-test was administered five weeks after the last lesson had finished. Based on Friedman and Wilcoxon test results, the researchers concluded that using a song to teach English to preschoolers helped them develop their receptive knowledge of vocabulary, but no changes in productive knowledge were found. Also, the two

researchers cautioned teachers on the overuse of onomatopoeia and gestures on the teacher's part as children may pay too much attention to these rather than the words themselves in the song.

A similar study involving kindergarten students took place in mainland China. Davis and Fan (2016) implemented a study to measure vocabulary acquisition through songs as compared to choral repetition in two private kindergartens in Beijing. They did it during fifteen classes of forty minutes in length over a period of seven weeks. The study involved three groups that participated under three conditions: experimental (songs), choral repetition, and control group (no song or choral repetition treatment) in a within-subject repeated measures design. A task consisting of picture description was carried out before and after the instruction period to measure vocabulary gains (pre-test, posttest). Results showed significant difference for the songs and choral repetition conditions at an equal level, but no evidence in favor of songs alone was found. In other words, they concluded that both songs and choral repetition held pedagogical value reflected by students' vocabulary gains and while having a positive effect on students' motivation to learn.

A third study with young learners was conducted by Chou (2012) in Taiwan. The researcher wanted to investigate the effect of games, songs, and stories on students' motivation and vocabulary learning and whether or not different testing techniques would influence students' performance in the vocabulary test given. Seventy-two primary school students between eight and eleven years old participated in the study as follows: Second grade: 20; third grade:16; fourth grade: 17; and fifth grade: 19. They were given five 100-minute lessons about international holidays. To collect data, the researcher followed a mixed-method approach using instruments like classroom observation, field notes, and a semi-structured interview for qualitative data, while a pretest, post-test, and self-assessment questionnaire were used for quantitative data. The vocabulary test administered before and after intervention consisted of four techniques, namely, true/false, matching, anagram with pictures, and gap-filling with pictures. Field notes and the self-assessment questionnaire revealed that games, songs, and stories had a positive effect on vocabulary learning. Thus, children reported that songs helped them understand vocabulary and topics in the story (especially in the lower levels), but stories had a higher impact. Vocabulary gains were found too, especially for students in higher courses, and it was also found that results were influenced by test technique.

Putting it all together, the three studies presented above were administered to young learners and focused on vocabulary gains and motivation. The leading researchers succeeded in using a variety of designs and instruments to account for vocabulary gains in a systematic way. Another factor present in this group of studies is stories, which, along with songs, have been used as a resource to help develop cognitive capacity and vocabulary (Cooper, 2010). This explains the presence of stories in these pedagogical interventions. Simply put, these studies contribute to a deeper understanding and further evidence to use stories and songs in the EFL/ESL classroom.

Even though both songs and spoken stories have proved fruitful in language learning, Salcedo (2010) analyzed whether songs and spoken texts had the same effect upon text recall based on involuntary mental rehearsal (din). The study consisted of a quasi-experimental design where participants were tested in three different conditions while exposed to a text. Ninety-four students enrolled in Spanish classes in four courses in the U.S. (L1: English) participated in the study and were tested in three different conditions: participants in condition 1 listened to the

sung text; those in 2 listened to the same text but the text was read out loud, and those in condition 3 did not listen to the text in any form. Three ballads were used for students in condition one, while students in condition 2 listened to the same text of the song, which was spoken rather than sung. A cloze test was used to measure language recall while a questionnaire was used to collect information about the occurrence of the din phenomenon. Results showed a significant difference in text recall for the group that listened to the sung text as compared to the one who listened to the spoken-read text. However, no difference was found for delayed recall. As for involuntary mental rehearsal (din), participants in the sung text condition reported more occurrences than those in the spoken text, which was found statistically significant by means of a Chi square test. This study constitutes empirical evidence for the positive effects of music and word recall. Some limitations to this study, however, were the small sample, the lack of a proficiency measure before the intervention, and the need for longer exposure to songs to determine effects on long term memory.

Conclusion and Ideas for Future Studies

In sum, the studies considered for this paper contribute to making the case for the use of songs with positive effects at the cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical levels while promoting motivation. It can be seen from this review that a wide range of studies have been conducted in various settings from kindergarten to high school. Moreover, the main audience has been children and young learners. A variety of research designs involving quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods along with various instruments for data collection has been used. Thus, having answered the questions that guided the present research review, it would seem logical to conclude this paper by establishing possible areas for further research on the topic. Therefore, some areas to explore are, first, conducting studies with adult learners to determine if the effect of music for learning English (or a foreign language) is comparable to that found for children. Transferability of language gains through songs can still be further explored, too, for example, what features seem to be more transferable: grammatical ones, vocabulary ones, or pronunciation ones? Finally, none of the studies presented particularly focused on pronunciation and prosodic features; therefore, it would be worth studying what features of pronunciation songs benefit more. All in all, this literature review aimed at constituting an initial stage for the possible studies suggested in this concluding comment.

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