



From Lyrics to Fluency: The Power of Songs in Language Study

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Abstract. *This article explores the effectiveness of songs as a pedagogical tool in second language acquisition (SLA), focusing on their impact on vocabulary development, pronunciation, listening skills, and learner motivation. The study combines a qualitative review of existing literature with classroom-based observations to examine how music enhances language learning. Findings indicate that songs facilitate vocabulary retention through repetition and melody, while also improving phonological awareness by exposing learners to natural rhythm, stress, and intonation patterns. Additionally, music creates an engaging and low-anxiety learning environment which increases learner participation and motivation. The study also highlights the cultural value of songs, as they provide authentic linguistic input and insights into the social and cultural contexts of the target language. However, challenges such as non-standard grammar and complex lyrical content require careful selection and guided instructional support. Overall, the results suggest that songs are an effective supplementary tool that can enrich traditional language teaching methods. By integrating emotional, cognitive, and cultural elements, music offers a holistic approach to language learning and supports the development of communicative competence and fluency.*

Keywords: *music-based learning, second language acquisition, vocabulary retention, pronunciation, learner motivation, songs in EFL*

1. Introduction

Language learning is a complex and multifaceted process that involves acquiring vocabulary, mastering grammatical structures, developing pronunciation, and understanding cultural context. Traditional teaching approaches have often emphasized rote memorization, explicit grammar instruction, and repetitive drills. While these methods can be effective to a degree, they may fail to fully engage learners or address the affective and cognitive dimensions of language acquisition. As a result, educators and researchers have increasingly explored alternative, more holistic approaches that integrate creativity, emotion, and authentic input into the learning process (Engh, 2013).

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One such approach is the use of music and songs as pedagogical tools in second language acquisition. Songs combine linguistic content with melody, rhythm, and repetition — elements known to support memory and learning. Medina (1993) demonstrates that music can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition by providing repeated exposure to words in a meaningful and engaging context. Similarly, Murphey (1992) argues that songs naturally encourage repetition without monotony, making them particularly effective for language learners. From a cognitive perspective, music activates multiple areas of the brain simultaneously, including those responsible for language, memory, and emotion. Research by Schön et al. (2008) demonstrates that songs can facilitate language learning by improving segmentation and recall of linguistic units, aligning with theories of multisensory learning which suggest that combining auditory, emotional, and rhythmic stimuli enhances retention and comprehension.

In addition to cognitive benefits, songs provide authentic language input that reflects real-world usage. Unlike textbook dialogues, song lyrics often include idiomatic expressions, colloquial language, and cultural references, helping learners develop pragmatic competence and cultural awareness. Music also plays a motivational role, increasing learner engagement and reducing anxiety — factors critical for successful language acquisition (Engh, 2013). The repetitive and rhythmic nature of songs further supports phonological development: learners can internalize patterns of stress, intonation, and pronunciation through listening and singing, mirroring aspects of first language acquisition where repetition and imitation play key roles (Paquette & Rieg, 2008).

Despite these advantages, the use of songs in language learning is not without challenges. Lyrics may contain non-standard grammar, poetic structures, or slang that can be difficult for learners to interpret, particularly at lower proficiency levels. Careful selection of songs and structured instructional support are therefore necessary to maximize their effectiveness. Given the growing body of research supporting music-based learning, this study aims to explore how songs contribute to language acquisition and whether they can serve as a meaningful pathway from basic comprehension to communicative fluency.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design aimed at understanding the pedagogical value of songs in second language acquisition. Rather than conducting a single controlled experiment, the research integrates a structured literature review with classroom-based observations to provide a comprehensive perspective on music-assisted language learning. A qualitative synthesis approach was employed to analyze patterns and insights across existing studies, allowing for the identification of recurring themes — such as memory enhancement, pronunciation improvement, and learner motivation — without limiting the analysis to a single dataset. This approach is particularly suitable for educational research, where contextual and experiential factors play a significant role.



Academic sources were selected based on publication in peer-reviewed journals or academic books, relevance to music in language learning or SLA, inclusion of empirical findings or theoretical frameworks, and accessibility in English. Key studies included works by Murphey (1992), Medina (1993), Schön et al. (2008), Ludke, Ferreira, and Overy (2014), and Engh (2013), which collectively provide foundational insights into the cognitive, linguistic, and motivational effects of music on language learners.

To complement the literature review, informal classroom observations were conducted in language learning settings where instructors integrated songs into their teaching practices. Learners participated in music-based activities over several sessions including listening comprehension tasks with gap-fill exercises, lyric analysis focusing on vocabulary and grammatical structures, pronunciation practice through repetition and singing, translation and paraphrasing tasks, and group discussions on cultural and thematic elements. Songs were selected based on learners' proficiency levels, clarity of pronunciation, and relevance of vocabulary — simpler, repetitive songs for beginners and lyrically richer material for advanced learners. Data were collected through observational notes, learner feedback, and documented classroom interactions, analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and compare findings with existing literature.

3. Results

3.1 Vocabulary Acquisition and Long-Term Retention

One of the most prominent findings is the positive impact of songs on vocabulary learning. Learners exposed to musical input demonstrated improved recall of words and phrases compared to those using traditional study methods, an effect largely attributed to repetition and melodic structuring which reinforce memory pathways. Consistent with the findings of Medina (1993), learners were able to remember lexical items more effectively when they were embedded in songs rather than presented in isolation. Observational data further indicated that students often recalled entire phrases or lines from songs, suggesting that music supports chunk-based learning rather than isolated word memorization.

3.2 Pronunciation, Intonation, and Phonological Awareness

Songs were found to significantly enhance learners' pronunciation and listening skills. Through repeated exposure and imitation, learners developed a better sense of stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation in the target language. Singing along with songs encouraged learners to approximate native-like pronunciation in a low-pressure environment. Research by Schön et al. (2008) supports this finding, demonstrating that musical training can improve phonological processing and segmentation. In classroom observations, students who regularly engaged in singing activities showed noticeable improvement in their ability to distinguish sounds and reproduce them accurately.



3.3 Learner Motivation, Engagement, and Autonomy

Affective factors played a crucial role in the success of music-based learning. Learners consistently reported higher levels of enjoyment and engagement during lessons that incorporated songs, with increased motivation translating into greater participation and longer periods of focused attention. As highlighted by Engh (2013), music reduces anxiety and creates a more relaxed learning atmosphere conducive to language acquisition. Observations confirmed that even less confident students were more willing to participate in singing and group activities than in traditional speaking exercises. Songs also encouraged independent learning behaviors: many learners reported listening to target-language music outside the classroom, looking up lyrics, and attempting translations on their own, effectively transforming entertainment into a learning tool.

3.4 Listening Comprehension and Cultural Competence

Songs provided learners with exposure to authentic and continuous speech, improving their listening comprehension. Initially, learners reported difficulty understanding lyrics due to natural variations in speed and expression; however, with repeated listening and guided activities such as gap-fill exercises, comprehension improved significantly. Lyrics also reflected societal values, historical contexts, and everyday experiences of native speakers, through which learners gained insights into cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions. This aligns with Murphey (1992), who emphasized the cultural richness of songs as authentic language materials. Students demonstrated increased awareness of informal language use, humor, and metaphor — all essential for communicative competence.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the growing consensus that music is a valuable and multifaceted tool in second language acquisition. By integrating songs into language instruction, educators can address not only linguistic development but also cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions of learning. From a cognitive perspective, the effectiveness of songs can be explained through principles of multisensory learning and memory encoding. Music combines auditory, rhythmic, and emotional stimuli, which together enhance the brain's ability to process and retain information. As demonstrated by Schön et al. (2008), melodic and rhythmic structures facilitate the segmentation and recall of linguistic units, supporting the view that language learning is not solely a rational process but also a sensory and emotional experience.

The role of affective factors — motivation, anxiety reduction, and emotional engagement — emerges as a critical component of music-based learning. Engh (2013) notes that music creates a low-stress environment that encourages participation and reduces the fear of making mistakes, which is particularly important in language classrooms where anxiety can hinder performance. The present findings confirm that learners are more willing to engage in singing and discussion activities, suggesting that music fosters a supportive and inclusive learning atmosphere. The emotional connection to music also strengthens memory encoding: learners who expressed



personal affinity for certain songs were more likely to remember associated vocabulary, consistent with research by Ludke et al. (2014) on the role of singing in facilitating foreign language memory through emotional and auditory reinforcement.

Regarding pronunciation and phonological development, songs provide repeated exposure to natural speech patterns including stress, rhythm, and intonation. Through imitation and practice, learners can approximate native-like pronunciation in a way that feels less forced than traditional drills, consistent with Murphey's (1992) emphasis on unconscious language acquisition through repetition and mimicry. Cultural learning represents another domain of significant value: unlike textbook materials, song lyrics offer authentic language use including idiomatic expressions, humor, and cultural references that help learners develop pragmatic competence and deepen their understanding of the target language community (Medina, 1993).

Despite these advantages, the use of songs requires careful pedagogical planning. Lyrics may include slang, non-standard grammar, or metaphorical language that can confuse learners at lower proficiency levels. Instructors must therefore select songs that align with learners' abilities and instructional goals, and scaffolded activities — guided listening, vocabulary pre-teaching, and post-listening discussions — are essential to ensure effective processing. Future studies could employ experimental designs to measure the long-term impact of song-based instruction on fluency and consider individual differences such as musical preference, learning style, and prior exposure when evaluating this method's effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant role that songs can play in enhancing second language acquisition. By combining linguistic input with melody, rhythm, and emotional engagement, music creates a rich learning environment that supports vocabulary retention, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and cultural awareness. These benefits stem from the repetitive and memorable nature of music as well as its ability to engage learners on both cognitive and emotional levels. The integration of songs into language learning also fosters motivation and reduces anxiety, encouraging more active participation and promoting autonomous learning behaviors outside the classroom.

However, the use of songs as a pedagogical tool requires careful selection and thoughtful implementation. Educators must consider factors such as language complexity, clarity of pronunciation, and cultural relevance to ensure alignment with learners' proficiency levels and instructional goals. When used effectively and combined with structured activities, songs can complement traditional teaching methods and provide meaningful, authentic language exposure. Learning through music represents a holistic approach that bridges formal instruction and real-world communication, and while further empirical research is needed to establish its long-term impact on fluency, the evidence strongly supports the integration of music-based activities into language education as an effective, engaging, and accessible strategy.



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