

Melodies in the Classroom: Using Songs to Enhance English Language Learning

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Keywords	Abstract
<p>Songs English language teaching vocabulary acquisition listening comprehension pronunciation motivation cultural awareness</p>	<p>Songs have long been recognized as a useful resource in language education. This article examines how incorporating music and songs into English language learning can support vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, pronunciation, learner motivation, and cultural awareness. Drawing on current research and classroom experiences, we outline the theoretical foundations for using songs in language instruction and review empirical evidence of their benefits. Studies show that English learners can acquire new vocabulary incidentally through song lyrics, improve their listening skills via music-based lessons, and even develop better pronunciation by singing along in the target language. Songs also create an engaging, low-anxiety learning environment that boosts motivation and provides authentic insight into cultural contexts. Practical strategies are discussed for effectively integrating songs into English classrooms, along with potential challenges such as song selection and classroom management. The conclusion emphasizes that, with thoughtful implementation, songs are a powerful complementary tool for English teachers and learners, enriching the language learning experience in multifaceted ways.</p>

Introduction

Using songs to learn English is an approach that resonates with both students and teachers. In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, teachers play popular songs or nursery rhymes to enliven the atmosphere and engage learners. This practice is more than just a fun break from routine – a growing body of research suggests that music can facilitate language acquisition on multiple levels. Songs naturally integrate melody, rhythm, and linguistic content, creating a rich sensory experience that can make language input more memorable. Moreover, music is a universal element of human culture, and tapping into learners' existing interest in music can increase their enthusiasm for

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learning English. For English teachers, understanding the pedagogical value of songs is important in order to use them effectively. Students, too, benefit from knowing how listening to music in English or singing along can supplement their learning outside traditional study methods. From children singing alphabet songs to adults listening to English pop music, learners often intuitively use songs as an informal learning tool. The goal of this article is to provide a scholarly yet accessible overview of why and how songs can be harnessed for English language learning. We will explore relevant theories, highlight empirical findings on the benefits of using songs for language development, suggest practical classroom applications, and discuss challenges to consider. In doing so, we aim to inform teachers, students, and researchers about the multifaceted role of songs in English language education.

Theoretical Background

The idea of using songs in language learning is supported by several theoretical frameworks. One well-known concept is the *Affective Filter Hypothesis* (Krashen, 1981), which posits that learners acquire language more effectively when they are relaxed and emotionally engaged. Songs can contribute to a low-stress classroom environment: their “riskless” and enjoyable nature lowers learners’ affective barriers. As Murphey (1992) famously quipped, a favorite song can act like a “teddy-bear-in-the-ear,” providing comfort and familiarity that reduce anxiety while learning a new language. This emotional safety net encourages students to sing or listen without fear of mistakes, which can increase their willingness to practice English. In line with this, recent studies have found that frequent music listening has an inverse relationship with language anxiety – in other words, students who regularly engage with music tend to feel less nervous about using the foreign language. By lowering stress and creating positive associations, songs help keep the affective filter down, allowing more language input to be absorbed.

Cognitive and neurological research also sheds light on why songs aid language learning. Music and language share overlapping neural processing areas and cognitive patterns. For example, melodic and rhythmic patterns in music can function as mnemonic devices for language. Researchers have observed that the brain’s language centers respond to musical stimuli in ways that can bolster memory for words and phrases. The repetitive chorus of a song, for instance, naturally reinforces new vocabulary through repeated exposure. The rhythm of music can highlight syllable stress and intonation patterns, implicitly teaching elements of pronunciation. Some experimental studies demonstrate a “transfer effect” between musical training and language skills – for instance, learners with good musical pitch perception may more easily grasp the tonal or rhythmic aspects of a second language. Gardner’s theory of *Multiple Intelligences* further provides a rationale: learners strong in musical-rhythmic intelligence can leverage that strength to support linguistic development. In essence, songs engage auditory memory, pattern recognition, and emotional memory simultaneously, which can lead to deeper processing of language input.

From a pedagogical perspective, songs also align with principles of communicative language teaching and authenticity. Authentic materials are known to boost learners’ motivation and engagement. Songs are a form of authentic text – they are created by and for native speakers and are saturated with cultural references, slang, and natural expressions. Using such real-world content in the classroom helps connect language learning to real life. As Mishan (2005) argues (cited by Eng), music is an authentic social activity (think of karaoke, concerts, national anthems) that, when brought into the classroom, can make learning more meaningful and motivating. Learners perceive that they are engaging with “real” English rather than



textbook examples, which can increase their investment in learning. Additionally, songs often tell stories or convey personal themes, which can fulfill the narrative impulse in learning and make vocabulary and structures more contextualized.

Overall, the theoretical underpinnings from affective, cognitive, and communicative standpoints all converge to support the integration of songs into language learning. Songs create a multi-sensory learning context that can lower anxiety, enhance memory, and provide authentic language input – a combination of benefits rarely achieved by other single teaching techniques.

Benefits of Using Songs in English Learning

Integrating songs into English learning can yield a range of linguistic and affective benefits. This section examines five key areas – vocabulary, listening, pronunciation, motivation, and cultural awareness – highlighting empirical evidence for each.

Vocabulary Acquisition

Songs can serve as effective vehicles for incidental vocabulary learning. Unlike rote memorization of word lists, learning new words through songs occurs in context and often with emotional resonance, which aids retention. Empirical studies have documented measurable gains in vocabulary knowledge from song exposure. For example, Nie et al. (2022) conducted an experiment with 114 Chinese college students to test vocabulary learning through listening to English songs. The researchers found significant improvements in the students' word knowledge, especially in word recognition (the ability to recognize and understand new words) after listening to songs. Even more encouraging, these gains were still evident when tested again after four weeks, suggesting that songs aided long-term retention of vocabulary. The repetition inherent in music likely reinforces memory: a catchy chorus might repeat a phrase multiple times, giving learners repeated exposure to new terms. There is also evidence that combining songs with lyrics reading can enhance the learning of word meanings and usage. In the study by Nie et al., the optimal results were achieved when students listened to the song several times (three exposures were better than one), indicating that repeated listening helps consolidate vocabulary. Other research has similarly found that song-based instruction can improve vocabulary recall and retention in EFL settings (e.g. Alipour, Gorjian, & Zafari, 2012, as cited in Rahbar & Khodabakhsh, 2013). By embedding new words in memorable melodies and meaningful contexts, songs offer a powerful supplement to traditional vocabulary teaching. Learners often find themselves humming lyrics and inadvertently practicing the language outside of class, leading to additional “incidental” vocabulary gains.

Listening Skills

Improving listening comprehension is a central challenge in language learning, and songs provide rich listening material to develop this skill. The acoustic complexity of real music (with varied speeds, accents, and intonation) trains learners to parse spoken English in a way that simplified classroom listening texts may not. Research supports the positive impact of songs on listening ability. In a controlled study by Rahbar and Khodabakhsh (2013), adult EFL learners in Iran who received two months of English listening practice through songs showed significantly greater improvement on listening comprehension tests than those in a traditional (non-music) control group. Both groups started at the same level, but by the end of the study the song-trained group performed notably better in understanding spoken English. This suggests that regular



exposure to song lyrics can sharpen learners' ability to catch spoken words and grasp meaning from context and intonation. Songs often contain colloquial expressions and connected speech (e.g. *gonna*, *wanna*, reductions, etc.), so by working with songs, students get used to the real sound of English. Even young learners benefit: there is evidence that children who learn English songs develop better listening discrimination for English phonemes and rhythms, which lays a foundation for overall listening comprehension. Furthermore, the enjoyment factor of music keeps learners engaged during listening practice. Instead of the anxiety that sometimes accompanies listening tests, students relax when listening to a favorite song, yet they are still training their ears. As one study noted, students reported feeling more confident in listening after practicing with English songs, describing the process as both fun and beneficial. Thus, incorporating songs can make the challenging skill of listening more accessible and enjoyable, while effectively boosting comprehension abilities through authentic auditory input.

Pronunciation and Intonation

Songs provide a natural and often unconscious way for learners to improve their pronunciation. When singing along to a song, learners mimic the singer's pronunciation of words, including difficult sounds, stress patterns, and intonation contours. Over time, this mimicry can lead to clearer articulation and more native-like prosody. Recent empirical evidence confirms that singing can have measurable benefits for L2 pronunciation. A study by Zhang, Baills, and Prieto (2023) with 95 Chinese adolescents compared two groups: one learned English song lyrics by singing them, and the other group learned the same lyrics by simply speaking them rhythmically. Both groups improved their English after the training, but the singing group outperformed the speech group in pronunciation accuracy on post-tests. The act of singing appeared to help students more accurately reproduce English sounds and stress patterns. Notably, this study found gains not only in individual word pronunciation but also in sentence-level intonation and fluency, suggesting that singing supports broader oral skills.

Another study focusing on Iranian children (Moradi & Shahrokhi, 2014) found that those who learned English through listening to and singing songs had significantly better post-test results in both segmental pronunciation (consonant and vowel sounds) and suprasegmental features (stress and intonation) compared to a control group. The music provided a consistent rhythm and melody that the children could align their speech with, resulting in improved pronunciation. Beyond formal studies, teachers often observe that students who regularly sing English songs develop a more natural-sounding accent and better mimicry of native pronunciation. Songs help by exaggerating certain pronunciation features – for example, linking and reduction in lyrics, or the sustained vowels in singing that draw attention to vowel quality. They also encourage learners to practice pronunciation repeatedly (each time they sing the chorus or replay the song). In sum, singing is a productive pronunciation exercise hidden within a pleasurable activity. By engaging the vocal apparatus in tandem with listening, songs provide a dual input-output practice that can refine learners' pronunciation skills.

Motivation and Engagement

One of the most commonly cited advantages of using songs in language learning is the boost to student motivation. Songs are inherently engaging; they can energize a classroom, capture students' attention, and break the monotony of routine drills. But beyond these surface effects, music can deeply influence learners' attitudes and enthusiasm for learning English. A study in Peru by Aguirre, Bustinza, and Garvich (2016)



specifically examined how songs affect motivation in young ESL learners. Through classroom observations and student questionnaires, they found a “clear correlation” between song-based lessons and increased motivation to participate in class. Students in classes that incorporated songs were more eager to join activities, showed better focus, and displayed more positive attitudes toward learning English, compared to classes that did not use songs. Teachers in the study noted that when music was used, children who were otherwise shy or indifferent became more involved and confident in using English.

These findings echo what many teachers have informally reported: music tends to light up the classroom and the learners. The motivational power of songs can be explained in several ways. First, songs trigger emotional responses – a lively, upbeat song can uplift mood and reduce the boredom factor that sometimes hinders language classes. Second, songs often hold personal meaning for students (especially adolescents with strong musical preferences), so incorporating their favorite music can create a sense of personal connection to the lesson content. Third, success with understanding or singing a song in English can give learners a sense of achievement and confidence. On a psychological level, music also fulfills an intrinsic human enjoyment, which can translate into a more positive association with the language learning process as a whole. By tapping into this enthusiasm, teachers can create a more dynamic and motivating learning environment. As one survey of the literature concluded, using music and song in the language classroom is supported by strong theoretical rationale and can significantly increase learners’ motivation and effort in acquiring a new language.

Cultural Awareness

Language and culture are intertwined, and songs provide a window into the cultural context of English. Through music, learners can experience aspects of English-speaking cultures – values, history, humor, and regional accents – in a way that textbooks often cannot convey. Many English songs, whether pop, folk, or traditional, carry cultural references and use idiomatic language that reflect the life and society of their origin. Utilizing songs in instruction can thus heighten students’ cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

Failoni (1993) described music as an “interesting mirror of the history, literature, and culture” of a people, noting that song lyrics and musical styles offer glimpses into the lives of those who speak the target language. For example, an American blues song might introduce learners to the historical experiences and emotions of African American communities, or a Beatles song might spark discussion about social change in 1960s Britain. Even contemporary pop songs can reveal current slang, social trends, or perspectives on love, friendship, and other universal themes as expressed in English-speaking cultures. By engaging with these cultural products, learners don’t just learn English words and grammar – they also learn what those words mean to the people who use them.

Research supports this cultural benefit: one analysis pointed out that songs help familiarize students with the target culture’s “beliefs, values and attitudes”, thereby promoting intercultural understanding alongside language proficiency. Additionally, songs often contain examples of dialects or varieties of English (for instance, a song in British English versus one in Jamaican English) and thus expose learners to the linguistic diversity within English-speaking cultures. This exposure can increase learners’ sociolinguistic awareness – they learn to appreciate that English is not monolithic and that understanding culture is part of mastering the language. Finally, discussing a song’s background or lyrics in class can lead to rich cultural exchanges,



with students sharing interpretations and relating the content to their own culture. In this way, songs become a springboard for cultural comparison and dialogue, an important aspect for developing well-rounded language competence.

Practical Applications in the Classroom

For teachers interested in leveraging songs in their English classes, a variety of practical techniques can be employed. It is important to choose activities that align with learning objectives (e.g. focusing on vocabulary, listening, etc.) and to select songs appropriate to the learners' age, language level, and interests. Here are some effective ways to integrate songs into English teaching:

- Lyric Gap-Fill Exercises
- Sing-Alongs and Karaoke
- Vocabulary and Idiom Hunts
- Grammar through Songs
- Cultural Projects with Music

Challenges and Considerations

- *Song Selection*: Some songs may have inappropriate content, fast tempo, or complex lyrics.
- *Perception*: Songs may be seen as entertainment rather than serious learning; linking them to clear objectives helps.
- *Classroom Management*: Enthusiasm can cause distraction; clear rules and varied genres maintain focus.
- *Learner Confidence*: Singing may make some students uncomfortable; alternatives should be offered.
- *Assessment*: Learning outcomes from songs can be hard to measure; short quizzes or reflections can help track progress.

Conclusion

Songs have emerged from the periphery of language teaching to become a respected and research-backed component of English learning. This article has explored how music, often thought of as mere entertainment, can in fact play a significant pedagogical role. By weaving together melody and language, songs create a unique learning context – one that is rich in linguistic input, cognitively engaging through rhyme and rhythm, and emotionally appealing to learners. We have seen that songs can bolster vocabulary acquisition, sharpen listening skills, improve pronunciation and intonation, and provide cultural insights. They also enhance student motivation and confidence.

For teachers, the practical applications are vast and adaptable. Whether used occasionally as a warm-up or as the basis of an entire lesson, songs can bring engagement and meaning to language learning. As long as activities are thoughtfully planned and linked to learning objectives, music becomes a valuable and flexible teaching tool. Continued research and classroom experimentation will only deepen our understanding of its full potential.



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