

## **Music and its Usage in Education**

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## **I. Introduction**

There have been many studies done on the effect that music has on the human brain and the positive effects it has when played as background music in learning situations, but there have been far fewer studies done on its effectiveness as a medium of instruction in the language classroom. There have been, however, many claims made about its usefulness in the classroom by instructors for such things as teaching grammar, pronunciation, writing, speaking, spelling and many more, but little empirical evidence exists to support these claims. This paper will look at the effect that music has on the brain, the effect of positive and negative moods on people's performance, the effect that music has on people's ability to remember and recall information, and the role music has played in a sense to the human race. This paper will also look at the claims that are made about music and its role in the classroom situation and the research that has been done in that area to date.

There are many reasons proposed by instructors who teach English as a foreign language (EFL) for the inclusion of songs in the EFL classroom. One of the main reasons cited is the motivating power of music e.g., to make students more receptive to learning. The motivating power of music is not just limited to language study, but can be utilized in other disciplines as well. Who has not felt an upsurge in feeling, passion or desire to do something with more energy while listening to a song that they like? Songs are a major part of people's lives. Gugliemino (1986) states that adults sing during ceremonies, i.e., religious ceremonies, in bars, while driving along the road, and in the shower.

McLean, (1983) points out that since the younger generation listens to a lot of songs in daily life, songs can be used to motivate students to study a language. However, in relation to Japan, the majority of young people listen to Japanese songs. Through an impromptu show of hands in three classes this semester I found that there were fewer than one out of 10 students listening to English songs. This is down on a similar survey done 10 years ago when three out of ten students listened to English songs. When asked why they do not listen

to English songs, the most commonly cited reason was that they could not understand the lyrics of the songs.

One of the main reasons for using songs in the EFL classroom in Japan is to try to get students interested in learning the language. Most students at the university level in Japan are required to take English classes and many of them do the minimum amount of work necessary to get those credits. The number of students really interested in learning English and willing to put in the time and energy required to learn it is small. Yet this minority is interested in English for a variety of reasons. Some aim to study the language overseas, pursue a higher degree at a university in a foreign country, find work in a Japanese company where a foreign language is needed, work overseas, plan on traveling overseas or do it as a hobby.

## II. Music and the Brain

Stover (2009) claims that research has shown that music is a very important element in the development of school age children. According to O'Donnell (1999) music enhances the brain's ability to collect knowledge and to maintain it longer. This is made possible by music's ability to stimulate both sides of the brain at the same time. Music encourages a greater use of the right hemisphere of the brain, which can then lead to greater language acquisition (Cullen, 1998). Music also connects the functions of both hemispheres of the brain allowing them to work together and hasten learning (Davies, 2000). Countries with a high level of intellectual standing such as Japan and the Netherlands emphasize the importance of music in education, especially the learning of musical instruments (Neverman 1999). Davies (2000) states that research on the brain using electroencephalograms has demonstrated that music can change brain waves and make the person in question more responsive to learning.

Music is also cited as a behavioral modifier for students who have special educational requirements. Students who have difficulty maintaining their focus on a task for more than a few minutes or have trouble sitting still for long periods of time have benefited by having music played in the background (Savan, 1999). Of course the type of music selected is important, with slow tempo classical music proving to be the most effective. In Savan's study, she used Mozart's compositions to test to see whether the music would have any



effect on the behavior of 10 boys aged 12 and older that had special educational needs and emotional problems. She measured their blood pressure, body temperature and pulse rate before and after the music was played in the background and found that all three had dropped to more regular levels. She notes that these students were able to concentrate longer on the tasks at hand during this time.

### III. Positive vs Negative Moods

The wrong frame of mind or negative mood will interfere with learning by hindering the functioning of memory by either disrupting it severely or causing the retrieval of information to take much longer than usual which in turn causes task completion difficulty (Bower, 2004). The presence of negative thought can also lead to more negativity, which can spiral into depression. According to Kelley (1986) depressed students join in classroom activities less than other students and their scholastic level is often lower than other students.

A study done by Ikegami (1986) found that subjects with positive moods did better on a recall test than those who had negative moods. In this study, subjects self assessed their moods prior to the commencement of the test. The subjects were asked to imagine a person with both good and bad personality traits. These traits were read out to the subjects. The researcher found that subjects who self assessed their mood as positive remembered more good traits than bad traits and the people who considered themselves in a negative mood remembered more bad traits than good. More importantly, the positive mood subjects remembered more traits overall than the negative mood subjects.

It appears that having the right frame of mind improves learner performance. Nantais and Schellenberg (1999) also came up with the same conclusion after doing a study on students who listened to the music of Mozart while performing tasks in class. Though they found that Mozart was not any more effective than other pleasing auditory sources they did conclude that a positive affective mood increases cognitive performance while a negative mood decreases it.

One study, however, found no difference between the effect of positive and negative moods on a word recall test. Knight (2003) asked participants to write down a preferred listening list and a non-preferred listening list of songs. The participants were then given a word list to memorize for 30 seconds. Participants were then asked to listen to a specific

song through headsets, which the researcher chose at random either from their preferred listening list or their non-preferred one. After listening to the song, the participants were asked to state their current mood. The researcher then asked the participants to recall the list of words that they had read. Even though the researcher had successfully manipulated the mood of the participants, the word recall test did not show any real difference in the number of items recalled successfully.

How does music create a positive mood? The right kind of music can cause the release of substances such as endorphins, serotonin, cortisol and dopamine into the body. Endorphins can make people feel good about what they are doing and feel good about themselves in general. Endorphins help strengthen the immune system and also allow for the transmission of neural messages more quickly and efficiently (Glenn, 1990). Serotonin and dopamine are also important neurotransmitters. Cortisol is important as a regulator of adrenaline and blood pressure. Jensen (1998) states that since these types of chemicals influence behavior we should make use of them to modify self-concept, manage stress levels, manipulate social feelings, and regulate activity levels of our students.

#### IV. Music and Memory

Larsen and Rainey (2002) conducted a study to find out how music would affect information processing and its role in enhancing learning. Students were divided into two groups. One group had a list of names read to them while the other group had the list of names sung to them to a tune that they were familiar with. The researchers recorded the number of repetitions it took for both groups to learn the list of names. They found no difference in the number of sessions it took to learn the list. What they did find one week later was that the group who had had the list of names sung to them relearned the names much quicker than the group who had had the list of names read to them.

Searleman and Herman (1994) claim that music has a major effect on the ability to remember things and the ability to recall them at a later date. They claim that listening to music enhances both short-term memory and long-term memory. Music has also been found to improve cognitive work performance when played in the background (Isen, 2002). Boltz, Kantra and Schulkind (1991) and De l'Etoile (2002) found a connection between music and memory. Boltz et al., (1991) conducted a study on how background music in movies would

affect the ability to recall things that happened in the film. The researchers had two groups of test subjects, one that had background music played while they watched the film and the other group, which had no background music played while they watched the film. The researchers found the group that heard background music was able to recall scenes from the film more readily. In the study undertaken by De l'Etoile (2002) similar results were found. Two sets of subjects, one that listened to music while learning a list of words and one that had no music while learning the list of words, took part in the research project. The researcher found that the group that had music played to them recalled words better than the other group. Wright (1998) draws attention to the fact that parents in all societies sing to their young and that in English speaking societies children learn the alphabet by singing it first.

Gfeller (1983) investigated the effectiveness of melodic-rhythmic mnemonics in songs as an aid to short-term memory in a comparison of normal and learning impaired students. Both groups had 30 subjects, ranging from nine to twelve years of age. The study showed that retention for both groups significantly improved when musical rehearsal was done in conjunction with modeling and cuing. She concluded that musical mnemonics might be a useful aid in retention for both learning impaired and normal subjects.

Sousou (1997) found that it is not the lyrics that affects mood, but the music itself. The researcher did a study comparing the effect of lyrics versus music. The subjects were placed in two groups; one group listened to songs with happy lyrics and sad lyrics, and another group listened to happy melodies and sad melodies. Subjects were asked to report the state of their mood after listening to the lyrics/melodies and were given memory recall tasks to complete. The result was that it was the music itself that influenced mood and improved the level of recall. One point that was not apparent from this study is what was the effect of voice. Did the singer's voice affect the way people felt?

Buck and Axtel (1986) examined whether there was any discernable relationship between a person's musical ability and his or her ability to hear phonemic sounds in a foreign language. They analyzed scores on a listening comprehension test for music majors and non-music majors, and found that the students with musical training scored significantly higher than those without a musical background.

## V. Songs in the EFL Classroom

There have been many papers written on the subject of using music to teach English to speakers of other languages over the last 30 years. The use of songs in the Japanese EFL classroom though still popular at kindergarten and elementary school level, seem to be used less often in universities today.

Several studies have shown that songs can be used in enhancing both receptive and productive skills. In fact, they are useful in teaching all four major skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as well as promoting vocabulary acquisition and deepening cultural knowledge. The most common use of songs by instructors is to improve the listening skills of students (Kanel & Grant, 1993). One of the tasks that students are most often asked to do is gap-fill exercises where the instructor deletes certain words from the lyric sheet and students try to fill in the blanks as they listen to the song. Another method used with more advanced classes is to give the students a list of questions, either wh- or true/false questions either before or after they have listened to the song. Cullen (1999) advocates using songs for dictation as a means of improving listening skills and claims that since most students do not enjoy dictation, songs can make this activity more palatable to them. Using slow ballads may be better than simply reading a passage to students because the instructor may not read the passage at the right tempo nor use natural rhythm and stress. In fact, students will hear English closer to the spoken norm through listening to songs than by listening to a passage being read out aloud. This is because teachers tend to adjust their speed and tempo to suit the level of their students.

Hypothesizing is an important skill that language learners need to become proficient at in order to become competent in the target language and gap-fill exercises can help to build that skill. This can be done by having students look at the gap-fill lyric sheet while trying to work out what word might go in each gap before they listen to the song (Lems, 2001). They could also do an activity, which would require them to decide what part of speech, e.g., verb, would fit into the blank space.

Song use in the EFL classroom can also facilitate discussion about the meaning of songs (Orlova, 2003) or to negotiate the meaning of songs. Songs can also be used as a stimulus for classroom discussion regardless of the level of the class. Basic level students could

simply ask and answer questions about the contents of the song. In the case of more advanced students, they could discuss the deeper meanings of the song. Students can do oral presentations on a song or present on a particular musician or singer (Lems, 2001). Rivers and Temperley (1978) refer to discussion in a language-learning environment as an activity that is skill using rather than skill getting, as is the case with most other language learning activities.

Milano (1994) maintains that songs contained in Broadway musicals can aid language students in familiarizing themselves with colloquial English. They contain authentic language immersed in authentic or every day topics that have been important in the lives of people for thousands of years, namely friendship, happiness, sadness, love, dreams, and disappointment (Baoan, 2008).

Monreal (1982) advocates the teaching of intonation, stress, and rhythm through the use of songs. Hubricka (1980) asserts that the incorrect stressing of words can cause problems in communicating ideas and thought to others. Thompson, Taylor and Gray (2001) believe that listening to songs will help students overcome the problems they have with intonation and stress. It has been asserted that the best thing to do when starting to learn a language is to concentrate on the rhythmic patterns of the language (Chela-Flores, 2001). Hall (2005) states that singing songs will help students to acquire the sounds and rhythm of English.

Proponents of songs state that reading the lyrics of songs is a beneficial way to improve reading skills (Cooper, 1979). Any of the techniques used with other reading materials can be used with song lyrics such as global understanding, understanding the general idea of a particular passage as well as working on specific reading skills such as skimming for specific information. Instructors can have students read the lyrics after listening to the song, before they listen to the song or simply use the lyrics by themselves without listening to the song though most students may want to hear the song at least once before the class finishes. Rivard and Bieske (1993) claim that the reading confidence and fluency of students improved after using songs.

Various techniques can be used with songs to improve writing skills (Gaunt, 1989). Students can write summaries of the song, formulate questions regarding the song's contents, put their reaction to the song into words or write an extra refrain for the song. Songs are like

stories and these stories can be rewritten in the narrative form, in either direct or reported speech. Eken (1996) points out that many instructors have reported success when basing writing exercises on song lyrics. Moi (1994) states that the meaning of pop songs is open to interpretation in the same way that poetry is and this makes them important tools for writing activities.

The fact that songs repeat words and phrases over and over make them very good vocabulary learning tools (Sekara, 1985). This repetition reinforces vocabulary that they have learned or are in the process of learning. Songs also tend to use high frequency words, which students will need to internalize in order to understand and engage in everyday conversations. Upendran, (2001) promotes songs as a way to teach phrasal verbs. DeSelms (1983) claims metaphors can be taught through songs and McBeath (1986) states that songs can also be used to specifically teach idiomatic expressions.

Student spelling ability can be improved using songs (Froehlich, 1985). Teachers could modify the lyric sheet before handing them out to students. They could change the spelling of certain words throughout the song sheet either randomly or select certain word categories such as adjectives or verbs and let the students find and correct misspelled words. If students are completing a gap-fill activity on a lyric sheet, the teacher could ask them to write the answers on the blackboard. This is one way for students to check their spelling and to make them pay more serious attention to it.

Grammar can be taught using songs (Martin, 1989, Futonge 2005) through the medium of lyric sheets. The instructor can focus on a certain grammatical item, such as prepositions, deleting this category of words from the lyric sheet so that students' attention will be focused on prepositions. Of course, the instructor would have to select a song like Tom's Diner by Suzanne Vega that has many prepositions contained within it. Instructors could also change all verbs in the sheet to present tense and have students change them as they are listening to the song or change them as a pre listening exercise.

Listening to songs may help students attain a certain level of cultural competence (Orlova, 2003). There is more to a song than just the words in the lyric sheet. There are all sorts of external baggage, including both social and cultural meanings (Cullen, 1998). Saricoban and Metin (2000) state that students who are intermediate level and above will



benefit from listening to songs, which reflect cultural ideas and aspects. Garza (1994) maintains that music, especially music videos, allows students to get a deeper understanding of the culture of the language they are studying. Culture is an important component of language and music helps students gain insights into the culture of the language by listening to songs, especially if the songs are culturally rich (Pederson, 2009).

Lazar (2004) suggests that music can be regarded as a multi-sensory approach to learning language. A multi-sensory approach helps to address the needs of students with different learning styles. Content is presented in various ways, aural, visual and experiential, meeting the varying needs of students. Harris (2008) states that the use of music in the EFL classroom is consistent with the theories governing multisensory learning.

## VI. Problems

Not all songs are suitable for use in class and the degree to which these problems need to be addressed by instructors will depend on what they are using the song to accomplish. If a teacher is using a song to teach stress, particular attention must be made to find a song that lends itself to that function. Richards (1969) advocates extreme care when selecting songs as many of them feature archaic vocabulary, dialect, low frequency words, different syllable stress, non-standard stressing of sentences, and irregular sentence structure. Urbancic and Vixmuller (1981) point out that caution needs to be taken because the melody often affects the choice of lyrics, which can result in non-standard sentence structure or exaggerated enunciation on the part of a singer. There is also the problem of questionable lyrics, and the speed and clarity of songs that teachers need to check for when selecting songs. Choosing a song is no different than choosing any other material for classroom use, in that, special care must be taken to ensure that it is suitable for a particular class level and it is appropriate to the aims and goals of the class.

## VII. Studies

There have not been many research projects undertaken to investigate the effect of song-based language learning activities on the learning of language (Webb 2003). Schoepp (2001) claims that even though there is a lot of literature written on the subject of using songs in the EFL classroom, there is little empirical evidence to support those assertions. Shoepp's conclusion is echoed by Castellanos-Bell (2002) and Huy Le (2000) who say that

research into the effectiveness of music/songs in the EFL environment is still in its early stages and until now has not received very much attention.

There have been a few studies done to try to determine through empirical data whether or not songs are beneficial to students studying foreign languages. However, it must be noted that nearly all of the studies described here were undertaken more than 15 years ago and this situation shows no signs of changing. Below are some of the studies that have been undertaken. The contention above that research is in its early stages seems an understatement as very little appears to have been done recently. The assertion that not much attention had been shown to songs until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is not true either.

A study by Hahn (1972) with junior high school students studying German found that male students who used songs to study vocabulary scored significantly higher scores on vocabulary tests than male students who studied vocabulary through textbook dialogues. However, the female students in both groups showed no difference. He attributes the better performance of the song group to the affective elements of rhythm and melody, which aids the retention of the text. It may be that the boys were less interested in learning German than the girls and the songs might have got them a bit more interested in the lesson than usual. However, without knowing the interest levels of either gender in the subject or their level of proficiency in the language, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the implications of this study.

Bottari and Evans (1982) undertook a study aimed at determining if the retention abilities of learning-disabled children with strong visual-spatial skills and weak verbal skills would be improved if verbal material was presented within a song context. The material was presented to the subjects under two conditions: the lyrics sung with and without musical accompaniment. They were tested for recall and recognition of the verbal material contained in the lyrics. The results showed that the visual-spatial group had significantly higher recognition scores when the lyrics were sung and not spoken, regardless of whether instrumental music was supplied or not. The researchers also found that musical accompaniment did not diminish the learning effectiveness of subjects in the verbal groups, implying that teachers of such children might use background music to enhance the educational environments of their classes.



Alley (1990) compared the progress in listening comprehension of two first-year high school student groups studying Spanish, one through songs and the other through dialogues. The 10-week study showed that the song group tended to do better on the unit tests given throughout the 10 weeks than the dialogue group. However, the researcher found there was no significant difference between the two groups on a general listening test prompting the researcher to say the results found were inconclusive.

Medina (1993) compared 48 second-grade Spanish-speaking limited-English-proficient students from two classrooms. All students were enrolled in an elementary school in Los Angeles during the 1990-91 academic year. She found that the group studying vocabulary through songs did as well as the group that studied the same material read by the teacher. She claims that songs are just as effective a medium for language learning as other non-musical material.

Kanel (1995) undertook a study of 700 mainly male first and second-year students studying English at a university in Japan. One group received listening practice through textbook materials and the other with cloze song quizzes. A pre- and post-listening test was administered to the students to ascertain the level of improvement. The results showed that both the song and textbook groups made significant improvement, though neither treatment proved more effective than the other.

A total of 208 female first year university students participated in a study by Grant and Clark (1996) aimed at comparing the effectiveness of the cloze and question methods on improving listening comprehension. The results showed that in both groups, listening ability had improved significantly, but neither method proved more effective than the other. After the completion of the study, the methods were reversed for each group. The cloze group were given songs with questions to answer and the question group were given songs with cloze. This was undertaken over a five-week period. A questionnaire was given to both groups at the completion of this period aiming at soliciting student opinions on the cloze and question methods. The results showed that a majority of both treatment groups felt that the cloze method benefited their listening ability more and aided their pronunciation, intonation, and their ability to recognize contractions. Both groups agreed that questions improved their

comprehension more, and required more concentration to complete the worksheets than cloze.

## VIII. Conclusion

As has been shown quite clearly in this paper there has been a lot of research done on how music affects people in general as well as when it is played as background music in the classroom situation. Many studies have validated music use in regards to memory, both short and long term. However, in spite of all the literature claiming that songs are ideal for teaching nearly all aspects of language, there has been very little research done to test these theories. Of the few research projects, few found overwhelming evidence that songs are an effective medium for language teaching. At best, most studies come to the conclusion that songs are at least no less effective than other methods and materials. There is a dire need for research to be carried out on a large scale to find out if indeed the claims made about songs being used in the classroom are well founded. Apart from Kanel (1995), Grant & Clark (1996), and Alley (1990) there appear to be very few studies that were done over a lengthy period of time and very few indeed that have had more than a few subjects involved in the studies. It must also be said that many of the studies dealt with vocabulary and not listening comprehension in general. This also needs to be addressed in the future.

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