

The Use of Songs in English Language Teaching : A Literature Review of Benefits and Theoretical Foundations

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ABSTRACT

This research examines various scholarly works that discuss the use of songs in English language teaching (ELT), focusing on their pedagogical benefits and theoretical foundations. The main objective of this research is to identify how songs support language acquisition from linguistic, cognitive and affective perspectives. The research used a systematic literature review method, with a qualitative content analysis approach and narrative synthesis of ten selected sources published between 2000 and 2024. The analysis shows that songs can improve students' vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, grammar awareness, motivation and emotional engagement. These findings are reinforced by various learning theories such as Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Although songs proved to be an effective tool in teaching English, some challenges were also identified, such as curriculum limitations, lack of teacher training, and inappropriate song selection. This study concludes that songs are a powerful learning medium if applied carefully and adapted to the context. It also recommends further development of structured and theory-based song-based teaching materials and teacher training to support their effective implementation in the classroom.

Keywords: English language learning, songs, language acquisition, affective filters, multiple intelligences

INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching (ELT) continues to evolve by adopting innovative pedagogical approaches aimed at increasing learner engagement and facilitating more effective language acquisition. Among the various methodologies used in the modern language classroom, song integration has emerged as an interesting and multifunctional instructional tool, combining entertainment with education (Murphey, 2013). Musical characteristics in songs-such as rhythm, melody, and repetition-form unique cognitive pathways and are capable of significantly enhancing the language learning process, making them increasingly relevant for application in today's diverse educational contexts.

The theoretical foundations supporting the use of songs in language learning are firmly rooted in various learning theories.(Krashen, 1982) Input Hypothesis states that comprehensible input in a low-anxiety environment will naturally facilitate language acquisition - and songs are able to provide this engaging and non-threatening form of linguistic exposure. In addition, (Gardner, 2011) Theory of Multiple Intelligences recognizes musical intelligence as a separate cognitive capacity, so the use of songs can accommodate musically-rhythmically inclined learners while developing their linguistic competence. (Paivio, 1990) dual coding theory also supports song-based learning, as music and lyrics create auditory and verbal memory traces simultaneously, potentially improving retention and recall of language structures.

Despite the growing recognition of songs as valuable pedagogical tools, there remains a significant gap in the comprehensive literature review that systematically examines their benefits and the theoretical frameworks underpinning their use in English language teaching. While some studies have shown positive results in specific contexts-such as improved pronunciation (Ludke et al., 2014), better vocabulary retention (Salcedo, 2010), and increased cultural awareness (Jolly, 1975) studies that bring together this full spectrum of benefits across different learning domains and age groups are limited. This fragmentation of research findings poses a challenge for educators seeking evidence-based guidance in effectively implementing song-based instruction.

This problem is further compounded by the absence of a unified theoretical framework that explains why and how songs can support language learning in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. While practitioners often report positive student responses to music-infused learning, the underlying mechanisms that drive these improved learning outcomes have not been sufficiently theorized and documented in a format that is easily accessible to the wider educational community. This gap between practice and theory hinders the systematic adoption of song-based methodologies and limits their impact on language learning outcomes.

This literature review aims to address this gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of empirical studies on the use of songs in ELT, while systematically linking the findings to relevant theoretical constructs. The novelty of this paper lies in its dual focus: first, it categorizes and evaluates the benefits of song-based learning from cognitive, affective, linguistic, and cultural dimensions; second, it proposes an integrated theoretical framework with reference to cognitive psychology, second language acquisition theory, and educational neuroscience. This approach not only deepens the understanding of the pedagogical value of songs, but also provides a solid foundation for their strategic use in language classrooms.

The significance of this review lies not only in its contribution to academic discourse, but also in its application in practice. By synthesizing scattered research findings and linking

them to established learning theories, this paper provides valuable insights for language educators, curriculum developers and educational researchers. The comprehensive benefit mapping and theoretical foundations put forward here serve as an important reference source to encourage the systematic integration of song in English language teaching programs in different parts of the world, in order to create more engaging and effective language learning experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of songs in English language teaching (ELT) is gaining increasing attention due to its multidimensional impact on learners' cognitive, affective and linguistic development. This literature review examines several important studies related to the use of songs in English language learning, highlighting their main findings, theoretical frameworks, and limitations, while pointing out the novelty contribution of this article.

The study conducted by (Hadi, 2019) is a classroom action research that examines the use of songs in junior high schools in Indonesia. The results showed a significant improvement in students' English proficiency, with the average score increasing from 60 in the initial stage to 80 in the final cycle. Hadi emphasized that songs encourage student participation, help with speaking and pronunciation skills, and promote independent learning through the process of automation-a concept also proposed by (Schoepp, 2001), that repeated exposure through songs enables unconscious language processing. However, this study is limited to one context and does not go into depth on learning theory or how it relates to the wider context.

Furthermore, (Lems, 2018) offers a neuroscience perspective, explaining that music and language are processed in overlapping areas of the brain, such as Broca's area (which processes syntax) and the limbic system (which manages emotions and memory). Music creates a learning atmosphere that matches the way the brain works and supports motivation and memory-two important aspects of language acquisition. He also emphasizes that pop songs, which are rich in high-frequency vocabulary and repetitive structures, are particularly effective for second language learners. However, although this article is very interesting in terms of theory, its approach is more conceptual and has not empirically tested its direct impact in classroom practice.

Meanwhile (Karolina, 2024), in his undergraduate thesis, highlighted the effect of songs on learners with various needs, including those with attention disorders and learning difficulties. Her research shows that music aids vocabulary acquisition, improves memory, and strengthens emotional connections to the material. By referring to figures such as Plato and researchers such as (Mora, 2000), she explains that rhythmic patterns in music mimic the intonation and rhythm of language, thus accelerating the process of language acquisition in children. In addition, her simple survey of adolescents showed that students really enjoy learning with songs. However, the scope of her research is limited as it is a thesis work, and has not comprehensively reviewed academic studies from reputable scientific journals.

Research by (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021) provides qualitative insights into the beliefs and practices of English teachers in Malaysia, ranging from primary to tertiary levels, regarding the use of songs in learning. Most teachers believe that songs increase motivation, reduce anxiety, and strengthen student engagement. However, they also face practical constraints such as curriculum limitations, lack of training, and difficulty selecting appropriate songs. Using Borg's (2006) model of teacher cognition, this study shows the gap between beliefs and practices in

the field. While valuable, this study emphasizes more on teachers' perspectives and has not offered a thorough review of the theories or pedagogical mechanisms that make songs an effective tool in learning.

Beyond that, a number of other researchers have linked song-based learning to established learning theories. (Murphey, 2013) explains that pop songs are effective because they contain high frequency vocabulary and first/second person pronouns, which create personal relevance and increase engagement. (Krashen, 1982), through the Affective Filter theory, emphasizes that lowering students' anxiety will facilitate the process of receiving language input. (Gardner, 2011) in his Multiple Intelligences theory states that music activates musical and linguistic intelligence simultaneously, thus deepening student engagement.

However, while there are many studies showing the positive benefits of songs in learning, most of them focus on classroom practice or theoretical discussions, without systematically linking the two. It is still rare to find literature reviews that bring together empirical evidence with cognitive, linguistic and affective theories. Therefore, this article fills this gap by synthesizing various studies and categorizing the benefits of songs in English language learning into four theoretical domains: cognitive processing (memory and attention), affective engagement (motivation and emotion), linguistic input (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary), and social context (participation and cultural learning). This approach not only summarizes existing knowledge, but also provides a coherent theoretical framework for future research and teaching practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review (SLR) design to examine the use of songs in English language teaching (ELT). Rather than conducting experiments or field surveys, this research focuses on collecting, evaluating and synthesizing existing scholarly literature to understand the benefits and theoretical basis of using songs in language learning. The systematic literature review method was chosen as it allowed the researcher to thoroughly analyze the trends, theories and findings from different studies and identify strengths and weaknesses in previous studies. (Boote & Beile, 2005) state that a strong literature review not only summarizes existing knowledge, but also evaluates and structures it to build a conceptual framework for future research.

The research process followed the framework proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007), which includes three main stages: planning, conducting and reporting the review. In the planning stage, the researcher formulated key questions to determine the scope and direction of the study. These questions included: (1) What are the linguistic, cognitive, affective and motivational benefits of using songs in English language learning? (2) What theories support the use of songs in the language classroom? and (3) What are the limitations or research gaps in previous studies related to the implementation of songs in language learning?

To collect relevant literature, the researcher conducted an in-depth search through various academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, ERIC, and Taylor & Francis. The keywords used in the search included combinations such as “songs in English language teaching”, “music in ESL classrooms”, “second language acquisition through songs”, and “theoretical framework of ESL music”. The inclusion criteria in this study were: English articles, focused on ELT or ESL/EFL contexts, and contained theoretical discussions or empirical findings on the role of music in language learning. Irrelevant articles such as general

music education without language learning aspects or opinion pieces without scientific methodological support were excluded.

The sources were drawn from journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic theses. The next stage was data extraction and thematic coding, where key information from each source was categorized based on common themes such as linguistic input (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation), memory and cognition, emotional engagement, classroom practice, and theoretical foundations. This process followed the qualitative content analysis model developed by (Mayring, 2001), which enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and conceptual similarities between studies.

Data analysis was conducted using the narrative synthesis technique as described by (Popay et al., 2006), which is particularly appropriate for qualitative studies where results are not presented in the form of statistical data but rather through thematic explanations. In this method, the reviewed literature was grouped by dominant themes and analyzed in the context of how song use contributes to language acquisition. Each source is not only summarized for its results, but also critically evaluated in terms of its methodology and theoretical contribution. The analysis is descriptive and interpretive: descriptive analysis is used to explain how songs have been applied in learning, while interpretive analysis is used to explore how these practices relate to learning theories such as Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, or Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.

To ensure data validity, the study used source triangulation and theory cross-checking. Claims regarding the effectiveness of songs were substantiated with established educational theory and relevant empirical evidence. Studies that lacked a clear methodology, were not theory-based, or were not published in reputable scientific journals were excluded from the final analysis. In addition, data interpretation was carefully conducted and re-verified to maintain consistency and reliability of the thematic classification.

The entire research procedure can be described as an algorithm: formulating research questions, searching literature with appropriate keywords, screening and selecting sources, extracting and coding data, analyzing thematic patterns, and drawing conclusions based on narrative synthesis. This systematic process ensures transparency, replicability and a strong scientific basis in reviewing the current state of research on the use of songs in English language learning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of a systematic literature review on the use of songs in English language learning and an in-depth discussion based on the themes found in the literature. The discussion is divided into sub-chapters outlining the linguistic, cognitive, affective benefits, as well as the implementation challenges and theoretical basis of the song-based learning approach.

a. Songs as a Means of Improving Linguistic Skills

The literature review shows that songs are very effective in improving students' linguistic skills, especially in terms of vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and grammatical structure. (Murphey, 2013) mentions that pop songs contain many high-frequency words and the use of first and second person pronouns such as "I" and "you", which create personal closeness and facilitate the process of language internalization. In the context of pronunciation, (Lems, 2018) asserts that songs help students recognize rhythm, intonation, and word stress

that reflect the natural phonological structure of English. Meanwhile, a study by (Hadi, 2019) conducted at the junior high school level showed a marked improvement in students' speaking and pronunciation skills after the implementation of learning with songs. The average student score increased from 60 to 80 after two cycles of song-based learning, proving that songs can have a significant impact on practical language acquisition in the classroom.

b. Songs as Cognitive and Affective Tools in Learning

Apart from being a linguistic tool, songs also play an important role in the cognitive and affective aspects of language learning. (Lems, 2018) explains that the brain processes music and language through the same areas, such as Broca's area, which means that songs directly support memory and focus functions. On the other hand, from an affective point of view, (Krashen, 1982) through the Affective Filter theory states that students' mood greatly affects the language acquisition process. Songs help create a pleasant learning environment, reduce anxiety, and encourage intrinsic motivation. (Hadi, 2019) research also supports this, where students show more active and enthusiastic participation when learning using songs than conventional methods.

c. Obstacles to Song Implementation in Language Teaching

Although the benefits of songs are enormous, some studies have also revealed obstacles to their implementation in the classroom. (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021) in their study of English teachers in Malaysia from primary to tertiary levels, found that most teachers have a positive view of songs as a learning tool. However, they also face various challenges, such as time constraints, a crowded curriculum, lack of professional training, and difficulties in selecting songs that are appropriate to the students' level and context. Songs that are too complex or contain inappropriate vocabulary can make it difficult for students to understand the content of the song and even potentially confusing. Therefore, it is important for educators to consider age, language ability, and educational value when choosing songs to use in the classroom.

d. Theoretical Foundations of Using Songs in Language Learning

From a theoretical perspective, the use of songs in English language learning is supported by various theories of education and language acquisition. (Gardner, 2011), through the theory of Multiple Intelligences, recognizes that musical intelligence is one form of human intelligence that can be utilized in education. In this context, songs not only activate musical intelligence, but also linguistic intelligence, thus supporting learning in a more comprehensive manner. (Krashen, 1982), in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, explains that songs play a role in creating a learning environment that is free from pressure, so that language input can be received and processed optimally by students. In addition, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory can also be linked to the use of songs as a form of scaffolding that supports students' language development in a structured, fun and interactive way. Songs are also able to bridge students' various learning styles, whether visual, auditory or kinesthetic, making it an inclusive and flexible medium.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the literature review, it can be concluded that the use of songs in learning English has enormous potential in increasing the effectiveness of the learning process, both from the linguistic, cognitive and affective aspects. Songs are proven to enrich vocabulary acquisition, practice pronunciation and intonation, and strengthen grammar understanding. Moreover, songs also support long-term memory function, improve

concentration, and create a fun and pressure-free learning atmosphere, which in turn increases students' motivation to learn. Theoretically, the song-based learning approach has a strong basis in various language learning theories such as the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 2011), and Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). They provide scientific justification for the role of music as a holistic and comprehensive learning tool.

However, some obstacles still arise in its implementation, such as time constraints, lack of teacher training in selecting and utilizing songs effectively, and difficulties in adjusting song materials to the level and context of learning. Therefore, teacher professional development as well as the development of structured and context-appropriate song-based teaching materials are important opportunities for future research and development. In the future, the results of this study open prospects for the development of more systematic song-based learning media, both in the form of modules, digital applications, and integration in the English curriculum at various levels of education. Further research can also be directed at experimental studies across different cultural backgrounds and educational levels to measure the impact of using songs on certain skills such as speaking, listening, or grammar more specifically.

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