



## Effects of Using Songs on Adult EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning

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### Abstract

This study investigates the effect of music on the acquisition of English vocabulary in two groups of male adult Persian learners of English at intermediate level. Through simple random sampling 60 participants have been selected and 30 of them have been assigned to experimental group which are exposed to song for vocabulary learning and the other 30 ones have been assigned to control group which receive prose version of the song as listening. As a result of performing independent T-test, the null hypothesis was rejected. Consequently it supports the claim that tapping into song promotes vocabulary learning of adults language learners. However, further investigation is needed in order to determine whether there is any difference between male and female and between different proficiency levels in this regard.

**Keywords:** vocabulary learning, song, second language, EFL learner

### INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the effectiveness of using English songs to enhance English vocabulary learning. In fact, its main focus is on adult male Persian language learners at intermediate level. Songs play a significant role in motivating students to learn English. They can maintain the development of learners' ability in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as provide opportunities for learning pronunciation, rhythm, grammar and vocabulary (Lo & Li, 1998). More specifically, the role of songs in learning vocabulary has been extensively discussed (e.g. Orlova 1997, Murphy 1992). Vocabularies are by and large learned explicitly, but according to Schmitt (2000), they also need to be learned incidentally without paying direct attention to them and while performing other tasks. Besides, songs allow learners to repeat and to memorize chunks of language. This contributes to vocabulary learning too; repetition is needed to help learners recall words (Nation, 1990) and many of the lexical items learners need to know are multi-word items rather than single words. Therefore, songs can be effective methods of aiding children learn lexical patterns that will be stored in their minds and can be naturally remembered during oral communication (Murphey, 1992). In other words, songs can contribute to the development of automaticity - the ability to use language naturally and without conscious effort (Al-Mamary, n.d.).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Importance of vocabulary and music in language learning

Vocabulary considered being at the heart of language learning and teaching. As the essential components of the four language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) vocabulary has to be mastered by learners (Ilham, 2009). It is one of the key elements in learning a foreign language which if not adequately learned will cause difficulty to learn English (Siskova, 2008). And as David Wilkins puts it: "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (2002:13).

Music is a topic of every day communication which can be very beneficial for teaching vocabulary, especially when utilizing lyrics. It can assist teachers with providing an amicable atmosphere in class and break the affective filter which impedes students tapping into their maximum potential for learning. According to Siskova, "[reviewing] the history of music proves that music and language have always been connected, which implies that teaching the vocabulary of a foreign language through songs could be effective" (2008: 11).

### Reasons for using songs in vocabulary learning

#### *General reasons*

Music can be utilized in the adult ESL classroom to create a learning environment. "songs are especially good for introducing vocabulary because songs provide a meaningful context for the vocabulary " (Griffie, 1992). The method of using songs to teach vocabulary consists of aspects of two modern successful approaches called Lexical Approach and Suggestopedia which provide a strong theoretical support for it (Siskova, 2008). Shtakser (2001) states that "even just playing music without words [as in suggestopedia] creates a relaxed atmosphere that enhances learning" (qtd. From Siskoava, 2008). Medina (2000) mentions that "In several studies, a rhythmic presentation benefitted memorization when the items were both meaningful and meaningless (i.e., nonsense syllables). Yet, the impact of rhythm was greatest when the verbal information was more meaningful (Shepard and Ascher, 1971; Weener, 1971; Glazner, 1976)". Medina's research also proved that the combination of music and illustration consistently led to the highest average amount of vocabulary gain (2000).

Murphey (1992) carried out an analysis of the lyrics of a large corpus of pop songs and found that they have several features that help second language learners. They include common, short words and many personal pronouns (94% of the songs had a first person, I, referent and are written at roughly a fifth-grade level); the language is conversational (imperatives and questions consisted of 25% of the sentences in the corpus); time and place are generally imprecise (except for some folk ballads); the lyrics are frequently sung at a slower rate than words are spoken with more pauses between utterances; and there is repetition of vocabulary and structures. These factors let learners to understand and relate to the songs (Murphey, 1992).

Siskova (2008), quoting from blodget (2000), points the effectiveness of using music to teach language through its positive impact on learners' intelligence:

Blodgett stresses that, “all of the (Howard Gardner’s) seven multiple intelligences are addressed when teaching language through music with the appropriate accompanying exercises:

- kinesthetic (dance, clapping, stomping, body movement, percussion)
- musical (listening, singing, playing, distinguishing)
- linguistic (interpreting lyrics while listening or through exercises)
- logical/mathematical (music is math)
- social (choral, dance, cooperative learning with the exercises)
- visual (illustrations, dramatizations, video)
- individual (the fallback for all of the written exercises, as well as with individual projects and culminating activities)” (2008:23)

Songs are also excellent instances of colloquial English. Hence, they get students ready for the authentic language they will be faced with. This can be considered as a linguistic reason for using songs in the classroom (Schoepp, 2001).

### ***Psycholinguistic Reasons***

#### *First language acquisition evidence*

Investigation of first language acquisition may shed some light on the significant role of using songs for second language learning. According to Siskova (2008), discourse intonation which can be seen as the melody of language is the first thing learned in acquiring first language. Through its mother's body, womb, and amniotic fluid, a fetus is not cable of hearing consonants; it merely hears the musical vowel sounds (Stansell, 2005). Lake (2003) suggests that children learn to sing before they speak. An infant's language is a series of coos that communicate hunger, fatigue, alarm or pleasure. Moreover, a child's mother can recognize the child's need based on pitch. Fonseca-Mora (2000) quoted by Stansell (2005) adds that “later on, it is through interaction that a child picks up not only the musicality of each language, but also the necessary communication skills.” Furthermore, improving acquisition of their mother tongue, children are taught nursery rhymes, poems, but also songs which might also be applicable to second language vocabulary learning.

#### *Memory & brain evidence*

Since memory plays an important role in learning vocabulary and a foreign language in general, its role as well as the brain function in this respect is discussed.

Recent studies confirmed that the short term memory capacity can be increased by a process of chunking (Siskova, 2008). In one study, university students demonstrated improved short-term spatial reasoning ability after listening to Mozart. This was named the “Mozart effect” in the popular press (Rauscher et al., 1993). On the other hand, the words used in lyrics linger in the active store as long as students listen to the particular song and given that they listen to songs, especially their favorite songs, for long, this activation period lasts for long too. So, the words used in songs are might be remembered alongside the melody of the song, throughout a life time (Siskova, 2008).

Neurologists have found that musical and language processing occur in the same part of the brain, and there appear to be parallels in how musical and linguistic syntax are processed (Maess et al., 2001).

This is a recognized fact that the best memorizing of any object happens when: the perception of the object for memorizing activates all possible areas of a human nervous system. This object has a distinct structure.

Songs have the structure in compliance with the rules of the coding. People can perceive a song through hearing and vision. The process of listening to a song brings the functioning of both hemispheres of a human brain together, and sooner or later a person begins to empathize with a song. This emotional process contributes to retaining in a person's memory an indelible trace. Comparing the memorizing via songs with other techniques of memorizing, you can conclude that a song uses more parts of human nervous system than any other technique of memorizing. Memorization of a text via songs is faster, easier and, as a result, a song makes a long-lasting memory. At present, the more effective way of memorizing is not known. The understanding of the fact, that a song is a means for verbal coding of human speech, can assist us with achieving life-long memorizing of foreign words and expressions (Alipatov, n.d.).

### *Comprehension theory evidence*

There is also some evidence to do with comprehension theory in favor of the effectiveness of using songs for vocabulary learning.

In lyrics, words typically appear in context, the sound of new words is easily remembered along with the melody of the song through lifetime. In addition, due to repetitive and regular nature of songs, they present opportunities for developing automaticity which is the main cognitive reason for using songs in classroom (Schoepp, 2001). Furthermore, the fact that song lyrics cover vast themes and topics indicates that the vocabulary that students are exposed to is immense and by listening to the song, students are exposed to the new words many times (Siskova, 2008).

Palmer & Kelly (1992) believe that music can be a facilitation for language learning because "when songs and words match in stress and accent, the learner can experience gains in comprehension of word stress, attention span, anticipation of new text, and memory"(qtd. From Siskova, 2008)

Blodget (2000) holds that there is no better way for storing information in long-term memory than through music. Because of the unique imposing nature of melodic music, students will retain grammatical structures and vocabulary for the rest of their lives. Lake (2003) argues that "the main factor to storing material in a person's long-term memory is rehearsal. Adding rhythm and melody to chunks of language brings rehearsal and transfers words into the long-term memory". He also states that "there must be images for the mental representation of a word in order to retain and use it". Therefore, since the lyrics of the songs are going to be analyzed, students should always connect the words used in the song with the melody, and consequently associating it with a mental image (Siskova, 2008).

Regarding the Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, a weak affective filter, which is necessary for optimal learning, denotes that a positive attitude towards learning is present. Since songs supply enjoyment and non-threatening classroom atmosphere, they are one method for achieving a weak affective filter and promoting language learning (Schoepp, 2001). Medina states that in a relaxed atmosphere provided by "freeing influence of music" (Stansell, 2005), students "are more attentive than usual, and therefore, more receptive to learning...." (Medina, 2000)

Moreover, in line with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, new and unfamiliar vocabularies acquired when it is of importance to the learner; and providing extralinguistic support, enhance understanding through comprehensible input. As a result, songs because of including familiar vocabulary and syntax provide meaning to less familiar vocabulary (Medina, 2000).

The last point worth mentioning is to do with Top- down and Bottom-up processing. Both these two processes which are involved in listening and essential in listening comprehension can be drawn on when songs are used in the classroom. The activity chosen for a specific song will determine which of these processes is active (Alipatov, n.d.).

### **EFL song activities**

There are many activities which can be tapped into while using song to teach a foreign language. They have not to be utilized in chorus, but can be selected by teachers to best satisfy the needs of students and the purpose of the course. Considering the sociocultural features of the students as well as their communities are imperative in song activity selection. In any event, the joy and delight of the song must not be spoiled by overloading arduous tasks.

Since this study focuses on vocabulary learning, introducing some of the most helpful related techniques seems fitting. Accordingly, Blodget (2000) introduced some beneficial song activities. He mentioned that students can:

- "create booklets illustrating the lyrics
- karaoke, sing-along, or lip-sync video performances
- dramatic interpretations/mime/acting out performances
- dance and choreography \_ moving hands, head, feet, and body to the music in creative ways
- re-write the song either altogether in an original and creative lyric (for those who can), or by substituting all the nouns, or adjective, or other parts of speech so as to make a new song lyric, and much more." (qtd. From Siskova, 2008)

In addition, Siskova states that "For teaching vocabulary, the most appropriate activities are probably writing dialogues using the words of a song, dictating a song, using a song for gap-fill, cloze, or for correction, integrating songs into project work, practicing pronunciation, intonation, and stress."(2008: 22)

## THE STUDY

This study aims at answering the following question:

How is the effectiveness of using English songs in vocabulary learning for intermediate male adult language learners in Iran?

This question is formulated as two research hypothesis:

1. Hypothesis 0: Using English songs is not effective to improve vocabulary learning for Iranian intermediate male adult language learners.
2. Hypothesis1: Using English songs is effective to improve vocabulary learning for Iranian intermediate male adult language learners.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Sixty male adult EFL learners have participated in this study (n=60). All participants are at intermediate levels and have been chosen through simple random sampling out of all intermediate adult student of a language institute where Top Notch is not the students' course books and they have randomly been assigned to either experimental or control group. Thirty students have been assigned to two classes as experimental group and thirty other students to two other classes as control group. The participants in the control group have been selected from an institute where Top Notch is not the students' course book in order to avoid the effect of maturation resulting from having access to the songs. On the other hand the participants in the experimental group have also been selected from the same institute in order to have a fair comparison between the experimental and the control group, considering the fact that Top Notch Pop Songs would be more effective if they were accompanied by Top Notch Course Books since they are matched well with the course book lessons and this would reinforce learning. All participants are Persian with their ages range from 17 to 38 and the average of 24. They have been attended in this program for one term as a part of their regular courses.

### Instruments

"Pop songs are written to be easily understood and enjoyed... they tend to use high Frequency lyrics that have emotional content. It makes them strong candidates for word study ...." (Lems, 2001)

Top Notch Pop Songs from Top Notch 3 (Intermediate) Course books (Saslow and Asher, 2006) have been selected for this experiment. There are five songs available for this level. Top Notch Pop Songs are selected due to five reasons:

1. The song lyrics are clear and loud, not submerged in the instrumental music.
2. The contents are not explicit. So they are appropriate for class practice, especially in Iran regarding cultural and religious beliefs.
3. The lyrics correspond well with the students' proficiency level since they are particularly prepared by Pearson Longman's experts for each level.

4. They benefit corresponding exercises which are included in Top Notch Teachers' Resource Disk.
5. They are accompanied by the karaoke versions which allow for further contribution of the students.

Therefore, the materials for this research are as follows:

1. Top Notch Pop songs plus Karaoke versions, included in Top Notch TV Video Program DVD.
2. Written texts prepared by the author of this paper, compatible with the lyrics in respect of having the same topic and key vocabularies and at the same level of difficulty.

Then a native English speaker reading the text, have been recorded. These audio recordings are available for the students of control group called Control Group's Listening (CGL).

3. Corresponding Song's activities, included in Top Notch Teacher's Disk

The same activities are used as corresponding CGL's activities. These activities provide listening comprehension practice, classification of vocabulary and cloze activities

4. Vocabulary tests which are included in Top Notch Exam View® Software, but has been selected and compiled by the teacher for this study

5. DVD player

6. TV

Since the utilization of this method is integrated into regular class activities, it goes without saying that regular course books and materials along using songs must be applied too.

## Procedure

Besides teaching the course book, the following procedures should be applied to the experimental and control groups:

First, the song is played for the experimental group while the students only listen to it without engaging in any formal task. This is done in order for the students to just enjoy the song that weaken the affective filter as well as giving them the overall impression of the song. Next, the students are provided with the exercises and given 3 to 5 minutes to go through them. There are different kinds of activities available for each song. There are yes/no or information questions; true/false questions; fill in the blank questions, cloze of the lyric; vocabulary classification tasks; and description tasks in which students are asked to write description about a person, event, place, etc. in the song. Concise explanation for each task is also provided. Then, the song is played for the second time – with twenty-second pauses at every four lines and the students are asked to do parts of the first exercise which corresponds with the played stanza. Having accomplished this activity, the students will listen to the song for the third time to check their answers. Then the students are asked to give their answers one by one and if necessary the answers can be discussed by class. Needless to say that at this stage the teacher confirms or rejects the

answers as well as providing appropriate explanations. Having checked the first exercise, the student can have to reply other activities. The song can also be played one more time for each activity if it proves necessary. Finally, the song will be played for the last time while the teacher provides the due explanations and clarifies the ambiguities if there is any. The students are also asked to memorize the song to sing it along the karaoke individually in front of class for the four sessions later (next song session).

The control group will be treated in the same way utilizing the prose text listening (CGL). However, there is a difference in the procedure in that the students do not have to memorize the CGL. Needless to say that for further practice at home the students will be provided with the listening DVDs. Eventually, a vocabulary test (see instrument section) will be administered at the end of the term (at the final exam session) just before the final exam.

### ***Time schedule***

This experiment was conducted in 5 sessions out of total 20 sessions (including the exam session) of a typical term and will be lasted for about 35 minutes in each of those five sessions. To be well distributed among whole term's sessions they are conducted in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> sessions.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Data organization**

The interval data which is collected for this experiment is student's scores obtained through the vocabulary test (as introduced in the instrument section) that is administered at the end of the term. Then the mean score for each of the experimental and control groups will be calculated.

### **Statistical procedures**

Since the means of the two groups are to be compared and all the assumptions underlying T-Test has been met, this test will run for the data analysis. If  $t_{obs}$  turns out greater than  $t_{crit}$  (at  $\alpha < 0.05$ ), null hypothesis will be rejected and it can be concluded that the method of teaching vocabulary through songs are significantly more effective than through listening to prose form of texts. In other words it can be claimed that with %95 probability students improvement in learning vocabulary are due to factors (i.e. songs) other than chance.

## **RESULTS**

In order to investigate the effectiveness of different treatment i.e. song listening or prose listening (CGL) the students have taken the vocabulary test (see instrument section) and tapping into their scores, the results have been analyze through conducting an independent t-test.



### Table 1. Group Statistics

Treatment		N	Mean	STd. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Vocab Score	Song Listening	30	92.03	7.841	1.432
	Prose Listening	30	85.83	6.379	1.165

As shown in Table 1 the average vocabulary test score of the group which has been exposed to song listening is 92.03 while it is 85.83 in the group with prose listening (CGL) exposure.

**Table 2.** Independent Sample Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Vocab Score	Equal variances assumed	.984	.325	3.360	58	.001	6.200	1.846	2.506	9.894
	Equal variances not assumed			3.360	56.695	.001	6.200	1.846	2.503	9.897

As shown in Table 2, both “Upper” and “Lower” have positive values which indicates a meaningful difference between the “Means”. Furthermore the t-test’s “Sig.” is less than .05 which indicates a significant difference between two groups. T value ( $t_{obs}$ ) is also proved to be greater than 2.33( $t_{crit}$ ) that it rejects the null hypothesis. On the other hand the “Sig.” in Leven’s test which is greater than .05 shows that there is no significant difference between the variance of the scores in the two groups which means the groups have been selected appropriately due to their homogeneity.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows that there is a significant difference between tapping into song listening and prose listening which indicates the effectiveness of using songs on adults vocabulary learning.

While most literature on language learning through songs focuses on children, this study aims at investigating the impact of this method on Adult EFL learners, especially for vocabulary learning. On the other hand, some of the research (e.g. Al-Mamary, n.d.) provides experimental group with songs and control group with the written form of the same song as reading exercise. There are two drawbacks with such research. First it compares vocabulary learning through two different language skills which doesn't seem

fair, considering the purpose of the study. Next, it only can claim about the effect of music not songs, because the control group can still benefit some of effective features of song such as rhyme.

There is also some research (e.g. Siskova, 2008) in which both control and experimental groups benefit the course book with the privilege of song practice for experimental group. This may not be a fair comparison either, since the control group lacks any corresponding practice and the learners' improvement in experimental group may only be due to reinforcing effect of songs resulting from more repetition chance.

However the idea of providing the control group with the prose texts listening, corresponding with the songs –called CGL in this study- (see instrument section) has overcome all above-mentioned pitfalls.

This study provides a frame work for investigation of the effectiveness of songs in teaching vocabulary. It also determines whether this method work for adult learners or not. Since in most adults' EFL course books songs serve as optional exercises, if there is any, this study may shed some light on teachers' knowledge of whether it is worthwhile to integrate songs as obligatory exercises in vocabulary teaching or just as optional ones.

It is worth mentioning that there are some limitations to this study. According to most recent research (e.g. Siskova 2008) language learning through songs is more effective if students practice their favorite songs. However due to some religious and political considerations in Iran which impedes teachers from tapping into almost all kinds of foreign songs, the teachers have no choice but to use bookish songs such as Top Notch Pop Songs which have been granted for class use by Iran Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In addition, due to the same reasons, women are prohibited from singing in this country therefore this investigation has only focused on male students. This study also lacks taking students' personality characteristics or social status into consideration which are determining factors in their reaction to songs. For instance, a student of introvert personality or with special job position may feel too shy to sing in front of others. However, according to my experience this problem will gradually fade away as the class goes on-usually after one term. Finally, despite the fact that the reinforcing effect of songs for vocabulary learning is boosted when course book and songs are well matched, having fair comparison between the control and experimental groups (see subjects section), a course book other than Top Notch has been selected for this study.

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