

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH SONGS
(Practice in Muğla/TURKEY)

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ABSTRACT

This study illustrates the current situation of teaching English through songs in primary schools of Muğla / Turkey. The study is based on a questionnaire which was administered to English teachers and 4th and 5th grade students of primary schools in Muğla in order to find answers to such questions as ‘‘In teaching English to what extent are songs used ?’’, ‘‘What are the problems involved regarding the content of syllabus’’ and ‘‘What are the suggestions and views put forward by the teachers and students as to teaching English through songs’’ The participants are 16 English teachers and 393 4th and 5th grade students from 11 primary schools in Muğla. Insights gained by the teachers and students are included and evaluated in the study. While assessing the data collected, descriptive method is used.

Key Words: English, English Teaching, Songs, Primary Schools, Muğla.

Şarkılarla İngilizce Öğretimi (Muğla Örneği)

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Muğla merkezde bulunan 11 İlköğretim okulunda şarkılarla İngilizce öğretiminin durumunu araştırmayı hedeflemektedir. Veri toplamak için İlköğretim 4. ve 5. sınıf öğrenci ve öğretmenlerine anket uygulanmıştır. Anketle İngilizce öğretiminde şarkıların ne dereceye kadar kullanıldığı; kullanılıyorsa müfredatla ilgili olarak ne tür sorunların yaşandığı sorularına yanıtlar aranmıştır. Ayrıca, çalışmaya öğretmen ve öğrencilerin görüşleri ve önerileri yansıtılmıştır. Çalışmaya 16 İngilizce öğretmeni ve 393 ilköğretim 4. ve 5. sınıf öğrencisi katılmıştır. Araştırma betimleyici bir çalışma olup, elde edilen bulgular SPSS programıyla analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce, İngilizce Öğretimi, Müzik, İlköğretim, Muğla.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a phenomenon which starts by birth, goes through different phases and develops until death. Language skills are acquired in an environment where an individual lives and grows up. On the other hand, the acquisition of a second language requires a set of skills that must be acquired in the early stages of an individual’s life (Littlewood 1987: 4). When considered from different aspects of a second or foreign language teaching, meaningful and interesting activities can contribute greatly to the acquisition process. With this approach in mind, Brown (2000) states that ‘‘learning a second language is a long and complex undertaking. Your whole person is affected as you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting’’ (p.1). In this respect the

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learner has to overcome some obstacles in the process of learning a second or foreign language. In addition total involvement, total commitment, a total physical, intellectual, and emotional response are necessary to successfully send and receive messages in the target language. (Brown 2000: 1)

In the literature regarding the acquisition of a second language at an early age, it is suggested that children who had experience of learning a second language develop an awareness of meta-language and cognitive flexibility and better cognitive processing ability and linguistic perception. It is also argued that they have more talented reception, self-confidence and personal development. In addition, they have higher concentration, synthesizing and abstracting competence and they can read better, resulting in more literate people than those who have spoken only one language (cited in Alptekin 2002: 61-68).

Neuroscientists 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 is processed (Maess and Koelsch 2001: 540-545). Neurobiologist Jude Tramo suggests that while music represents the biological side of human life, it also shows the aesthetic part (Jensen 2002: 1-3). At this point it can be suggested that music should play an important role in the education of every child. Classroom activities designed with songs can be employed as they can be interesting and motivating for children in primary education. In this context, Murphey analyzed the lyrics of pop songs and found that they were very effective in teaching a second language as they present a different teaching approach to second-language learners (Kristin 2001 : 1). In addition, Edden (1998: 139) has something to say about the relationship between language and music:

“Music and language sit comfortably together...Historically, we can think of storytelling and song being used as an exchange, as entertainment, even as a work aid... With younger people there are some largely unexplored and underestimated opportunities for teachers to develop language through musical activities”

Although language coursebooks offer a variety of language activities many of them do not appeal to the needs and interests of children. After a while lessons turn out to be monotonous and the students begin to lose their interest in the subject to be taught. Although children exercise a good deal of both cognitive and affective effort to internalize both native and second language, teaching them a second language successfully requires specific skills and intuitions that differ from those appropriate for adult teaching (Brown, 2001 : 86). Since children (up to age of about eleven) are still in the intellectual stage of what Piaget (1972) called “concrete operations “we need to remember their limitations. At this point Brown (2001:87) suggests that rules and explanations

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and abstract talk with children should be approached with extreme caution. On the other hand, the attention span of children is very short, and they are focused on the immediate *here and now*, the activities used in the classroom should be designed to capture their immediate interest. For that reason a lesson needs a variety of activities which will keep interest and attention alive. At the same time in teaching practices children need to have all five senses stimulated with a broad range of in-class activities. As children are good at sensing language that is not authentic, it is likely that they can reject “canned” or stilted language (Brown, 2001: 90). Incorporating songs into language curriculum of primary schools can be suitable for the learners and your teaching objectives. It should be attractive as well as appropriate for the level of the class. While doing language work the song used should contain examples of structures, functions, or vocabulary the teacher wants to work on. In addition, the lyrics can help the students to do comprehension or discussion work at primary level. Sariçoban and Metin (2000) in their article state that songs can be one of the most enchanting and culturally rich resources that can be easily used in language classrooms and they add that the songs to be chosen can offer a change from routine classroom activities acting as precious resources to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, rhythm as well as their skills in four language skills. As cited in Sariçoban and Metin (2000), Lo and Fai Li (1998: 8) suggest that learning English through songs provides a relaxing atmosphere for students, who usually are anxious when speaking English in a formal classroom setting. Many activities which employ rhythm practice with songs can reinforce the recalling and retention process as they are highly memorable and motivating. Children’s world is dominated by songs at the early ages and teachers can meet their expectations and needs. Eken (1996) puts forward the following reasons for using songs in the English language classroom:

- to present a topic, a language point, lexis, etc.
- to practice a language point, lexis, etc.
- to focus on common learner errors in a more indirect way
- to encourage extensive and intensive listening
- to stimulate discussions of attitudes and feelings
- to encourage creativity and use of imagination
- to provide a relaxed classroom atmosphere
- to bring variety and fun to teaching and learning.

In this context the value of songs in motivating students to learn English and enhancing learner involvement is widely acknowledged by English teachers (Reeve & Williamson, 1987; Giudice, 1986). Both teachers and students find singing songs entertaining and relaxing. Music can help development of the skills required for learning that language. It can activate children’s prior knowledge in the target language, and hence it can give

positive inputs. Gaston (1968) defines three functions of music in therapy: to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of personal relations; to bring about increased self-esteem through increased self-satisfaction in musical performance; and to use the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order. The last function seems to be one that Lozanov calls upon in his use of music to relax learners to structure, pace and punctuate the presentation of linguistic materials (cited in Richards & Rodgers 2001:100). Suggestopedia developed by Lozanov is a set of learning recommendations and the most conspicuous feature of this language method holds the centrality of music and musical rhythm to learning (Richards & Rodgers 2001:100). At the same time while establishing a link between a selected subject to teach in the classroom and others, music accelerates the process of retrieving background knowledge and the process of feedback. Students get back their prior knowledge and relate it to their new knowledge in a permanent and enjoyable way when songs used in the classroom are integrated with their interests and skills.

Multiple Intelligences (MI) refers to a learner-based philosophy that characterizes human intelligence as having multiple dimensions that must be acknowledged and developed in education. (Rodgers & Richards, 2001,p.116). In this respect the findings in MI theory put forward by Gardner (1993) suggest that ‘traditional IQ tests measure only logic and language, yet the brain has equally important types of intelligences.’ Gardner claims that all humans have these intelligences, but people differ in the strengths and combinations of intelligences. He also believes that all of them can be enhanced through training and practice. With this idea in mind Multiple Intelligences Model (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.115) presents a variety of learning style models that can be applied in language teaching. Gardner’s model is culture-free and evades the conceptual narrowness of traditional models of intelligences. He proposes eight native intelligences that take roots in language learning. Among these eight intelligences using songs in the language classroom can cater musical intelligence of the students.

Melody and lyrics, the most significant elements of music, can be used in developing speaking skills; sound patterns can be taught by keeping rhythm, while accompanying musical instruments can help vocabulary recall or teaching of new words associated with the melody of notes as children naturally seem to be wired into rhythm and sounds. In this context music can play a great role in the development of language and literacy (Woodall and Ziembroski 2002: 1). Music can help children to focus their mind on sounds by creating an interactive learning atmosphere. This process also contributes to children’s skills of learning. Discriminating between sounds makes them aware of certain sounds in the language. Listening skills, especially singing a song, can play a key role in the process of language learning and expressing oneself. At the same time these skills can positively affect the development of literacy.

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Use of songs can facilitate learning by reducing stress in the classroom. The degree of receptivity to comprehensible input depends on the state of the affective filter. This refers to the emotional state of the learner at the time of exposure to the language input. According to Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, learners raise this imaginary protective filter when they are stressed, frustrated, embarrassed, anxious or bored. Music can develop human senses with retrieving knowledge and reducing stress. Hence, motivation and interest in language can be increased. In ELT music can be an essential step for listening and learning (Wolf 1992: 47). In listening songs disperse the feeling of monotony created by the ritualistic process of typical lesson and offer variety in the classroom. They provide motivating subjects (social, political, sentimental, etc) which can feed plenty of speaking and writing activity. At the same time they capture and maintain the learner's interest in listening particularly if they are structured on the pre-, while, and post-listening framework (Kotadaki 2002). Students in generally love music and songs as part of classroom activities, silent or shy students can be encouraged to speak in front of their peers through music. The teacher can draw the attention of his/her students to certain discussion points by using music in his/her teaching experience.

METHOD

In this study the descriptive method was used to investigate the current situation of teaching English through songs in the primary schools in Muğla/Turkey. This study also aimed to find answers to the following questions:

- 1- In the process of teaching English to what extent are songs used in primary schools in Muğla
 - a) In reinforcement of the subjects taught?
 - b) In developing hearing/listening skills?
 - c) In increasing motivation in the subject taught?
 - d) In retention of the subject learnt?
 - e) In teaching vocabulary?
- 2- What are the problems encountered in terms of content?
- 3- What are the suggestions and views put forward by the teachers and students as to teaching English through songs?

Population and Sampling

The population of the study consists of 4th and 5th grade students and teachers at primary schools in Muğla. The sampling group includes 16 English teachers and 393 4th and 5th grade students from 11 primary schools in Muğla.

Instrumentation

15 questions developed by the researchers were asked as form A and B to the students and teachers. In each form one question is open-ended. This question was asked to see how teaching English through songs should be done from the point of teachers and students. 14 questions have the characteristics of 5-item likert scale.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed on the basis of frequency and percentage. On the other hand, data analysizing method was applied to the analysis of open-ended questions. Frequencies and percentages were taken to analyse the data.

Limits of the Research

The scope of the research was confined to the 2001-2002 academic years and to teachers and students of 11 primary schools in Muğla.

DISCUSSION

The answers given by teachers and students are scaled from 5 (strongly agree or quite often) to 1 (strongly disagree or almost never)

“To what extent is teaching English through songs needed?”

Questions of 1 st problem and findings	STUDENTS					TEACHERS				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %
To what extent do you learn English through songs?	43 10.9	135 34.4	66 16.8	104 26.5	45 11.5	-	9 56.3	4 25.0	3 18.8	-
To what extent do you want to learn a subject through songs?	24 6.1	17 4.3	33 8.4	148 37.7	166 42.2	2 12.5	5 31.3	6 37.5	3 18.8	-
To what extent does your teacher teach you songs from the materials in English?	91 24.9	98 24.9	104 26.5	66 16.3	34 8.7	1 6.3	5 31.3	8 50.0	2 12.5	-
To what extent do you want to sing a song so that you can say the words correctly and clearly?	19 4.8	27 6.9	69 17.6	171 43.5	106 27.0	-	2 12.5	2 12.5	10 62.5	2 12.5

49 % of the students in the sampling group stated that they never or almost never learnt English through songs. On the other hand 56 % of the teachers pointed out that they never or almost never used songs in their teaching practices. With these findings in mind it can be suggested that

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teaching English through songs was not sufficiently referred to in primary schools of Muğla.

80 % of the students stated their willingness to learn English through songs with answers of “mostly” and “completely” to the question “to what extent do you want to learn English through songs”. The percentage for teachers is 55 %. Both teachers and students share the idea that current materials used in classroom place less emphasis on the songs in English classes. Only 12% of the teachers said that the materials they are using have a place for songs in English. At the same time 70 % of the teachers and students pointed out that songs in English could be useful in teaching vocabulary correctly.

With these findings, we can suggest that both students and teachers are eager to incorporate songs into their English classes, but they are not sufficiently used in practice. Crowded classrooms, lack of equipment and materials are among the reasons hindering the use of songs in English language teaching.

Findings and comments of the question “In the process of teaching English to what extent are songs used?”

Questions of 2nd problem and findings	STUDENTS					TEACHERS				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %
To what extent can you manage to sing a song in English in terms of music relation?	49 12.5	77 19.6	68 17.3	114 29.0	82 20.8	1 6.3	1 6.3	6 37.5	7 43.8	1 6.3
To what extent can you learn words and melodies in the songs you have learnt?	49 12.5	58 14.8	81 20.6	121 30.8	82 20.9	1 6.3	3 18.8	10 62.5	2 12.5	-
To what degree does English through songs effect your motivation in the lesson?	76 19.3	61 15.5	29 7.4	130 33.1	95 24.2	-	-	3 18.8	12 75.0	1 6.3
To what extent can you learn a subject in English through songs?	72 18.3	84 21.4	104 26.5	87 22.1	46 11.7	-	1 6.3	3 18.8	11 68.8	1 6.3
To what degree do you learn vocabulary through songs?	25 6.4	56 14.2	74 18.8	172 43.8	66 16.8	-	-	5 31.3	8 50.0	3 18.8
To what extent can you learn a song correctly during an English lesson?	49 12.5	84 21.4	84 21.4	81 20.6	90 22.9	-	1 6.3	4 25.0	9 56.3	2 12.5

About 50 % of both students and teachers are of an opinion that they didn't learn/sing a song in language class correctly in terms of word-music relation. 50 % of the students and 87 % of the teachers stated that they developed a below-average singing habit by listening to the melodies in a song taught.

On the other hand 57 % of the students and 81 % of the teachers believe that English through songs can increase motivation in the classroom. In this context, some problems which hinder the practice of teaching English through songs can be outlined as follows: crowded classrooms, the lack of enough number of English language teachers and music teachers and lack of interaction and collaboration between language and music teachers. In addition, there aren't enough materials produced for this purpose.

60 % of the students and 68 % of the teachers stated that English through songs could be useful for vocabulary teaching. What is more, 43 % of students and 68 % of teachers responded to the question "To what extent do you learn a song completely in a lesson" saying "mostly".

What are the problems encountered regarding the content of the syllabus?

Questions of 3rd problem and findings	STUDENTS					TEACHERS				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %	f %
To what extent should activities in the English lesson be used on certain days on weeks in your school?(e.g. health, week etc.)	56 14.2	35 8.9	74 18.8	158 40.2	68 17.3	10 62.5	6 37.5	-	-	-
How often do you use the songs in your culture while teaching English as a foreign language?	171 43.5	48 12.2	46 11.7	85 21.6	43 10.9	7 42.8	5 31.3	2 12.5	2 12.5	-

32 % of the students and 24 % of the teachers stated that songs of our culture were used. While 57 % of the students pointed out that they had activities with songs in English on certain days and weeks, 37 % of the teachers stated that they rarely gave place to these kinds of activities in their teaching experiences.

What are the suggestions and views put forward by the teachers and students as to teaching English through songs?

COMMENTS BY THE STUDENTS	Frequency	Percent
The lesson should be amusing	29	11.15
It should be congruent with the subject	23	8.85
It should be given at the beginning or at the end of the subject	23	8.85
It should be easy	22	8.46
It should be given with the words congruent with the level	19	7.31
It should be instructing/educating	18	6.92
It should be used when teaching vocabulary	18	6.92
It should be in Turkish	17	6.53

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It should be short and precise	16	6.15
The meanings of the songs should be taught well	15	5.77
It should be done with cassettes	14	5.38
I want our teacher to sing the songs	14	5.38
There should be a song for every subject	5	1.92
Good songs should be chosen	4	1.53
It should be memory-vocabulary improving	4	1.53
Musical instruments should be used in teaching	3	1.15
There should be traditional music	3	1.15
It should be sequenced from easiest to the most difficult	2	0.77
A lab should be used in teaching	2	0.77
It should be used to consolidate the subject taught	2	0.77
Popular music should be used	2	0.77
It should be in a rhythm suitable for me	1	0.38
Melody and rhythms should be accented	1	0.38
It should be illustrated	1	0.38
The programme (the syllabus) shouldn't be changed	1	0.38
The teacher should be well-qualified	1	0.38
TOTAL	260	100

COMMENTS BY THE TEACHERS	Frequency	Percent
Lack of cassettes congruent with the subjects	8	27
Lack of Lab, cassette player, VCD or DVD	6	20
It takes time to teach Songs	4	13
The songs available are over the students' level	2	7
Others	10	30
TOTAL	30	100

According to Table 4 the biggest problem facing the teachers employed in Muğla is the lack of cassettes congruent with the subjects taught in the classroom. 20 % of the teachers who participated in this study report that they don't have enough materials for the classroom use, while 13 % of them suggest that teaching songs takes time, and 7 % state that the cassettes used are too hard for students to work with as they are above their level. Teachers are of the opinion that the poor sound quality of cassettes makes teaching pronunciation difficult and they also comment that they don't get enough support from the Ministry's Centre for Educational Materials and Equipment and some textbooks don't contain songs and most of the English teachers can't read musical notes, as well as being incapable of playing a musical instrument. In addition, some students think that using songs in their learning experience is not effective and they state that they have difficulty in keeping a song in mind. They also note that lack of music teachers at the school is another problem to be mentioned.

CONCLUSION

Both teachers and students agree that use of songs has hardly a place in teaching English in primary schools in Muğla. At the same time they emphasize that learning songs in English could play a significant role in vocabulary growth in the target language. They suggest that using songs in teaching practice could be a motivating factor for students in their learning experiences, but lack of materials in English and music courses and teachers' deficiencies in music education make using songs difficult in primary schools. Majority of the students and teachers who participated in this study stressed the importance of the contributions of music to vocabulary teaching. Although the students in the study are 4th and 5th graders, their ideas and comments on the current practices in ELT are meaningful and original. In addition, teachers emphasized that they had no facilities and devices such as VCD, DVD and printed materials in terms of using songs in teaching English.

The series of activities that can be developed from the songs can offer a great deal of advantages in promoting the learning of English by stimulating students' interest and enhancing students' involvement. It is also important that language teachers should be creative and innovative in their teaching practices. Using songs in the classroom they can deviate occasionally from the routines and do something refreshing and different in the classroom. This does not require too much effort to find a song. This means students' participation in the lesson. In addition, several techniques can be incorporated into English language teaching with the songs used. Songs can bring about communicative aspects of language teaching in our language classrooms. With songs successful and enthusiastic learning can be provided.

SUGGESTIONS

In relation to use of songs in ELT teacher training institutions should revise their teacher training programs and hold new courses which enable students to practice and develop their musical skills and activities in foreign language classes. Seminars and workshops should be organized for language teachers in primary schools so that they can keep up to date with the latest developments and approaches in ELT. As language teaching is a interdisciplinary field, music and language teachers can unite their efforts to develop language teaching materials. In doing so they can produce rich sources of language teaching materials integrated with music.

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