

Effects of music use on English language learning: the case of two Moroccan high school science classes

Benaissi Abdelkrim

Department of English Ibn Tofail University Morocco

Abstract: - *The use of songs and many other musical activities are usually perceived as useless in different teaching settings. Still, as studies showed, the strong effect and multifaceted changes music creates on both the learner and the learning process cannot be denied and hence provides a rationale for integrating them in EFL classrooms. This paper is part of an action research conducted in a Moroccan private high-school. Two science groups of 30 students took part in the study. The study aimed to check if any positive outcome occur due to music use. The findings concluded that, after being exposed to music activities sporadically, the two groups showed a change in attitudes and motivation to the English class.*

Keywords: - *action research, songs in English teaching, attitude, motivation*

Introduction

Teaching in a foreign language context is frequently surrounded by umpteen obstacles and challenges. An example of these latter is one that I encountered in my early teaching career when I was assigned two science groups in a Moroccan private school. My students grew reluctant to engage actively with classroom tasks and assignments. Reflection about this uncomfortable situation made me think of inserting a tool that can entertain my students and serve my pedagogical goals at the same time.

Integrating music, as a way to fix this problem, came after three months of teaching students strictly and mechanically. During this period, the main target was to make students accurate when handling grammatical structures and vocabulary items; to apply specific strategies to decode meaning from listening and reading texts, and to write well organized and meaningful compositions. Such goals were taken with the belief that these students had to be ready for continuous assessment (one exam at the end of each term) and, more importantly, to get them prepared for a national exam the following year.

Towards the end of the first semester, which lasted almost three months, students, in the two groups, started to lack the zeal for learning. Apart from a few highly motivated members in the two groups, the

Majority showed annoying indifference to the teacher's explanations. These facts provided a strong impetus to take action. Hence, since research recommends its use in such situations, music was resorted to in order to bring about the learning outcomes I was looking for.

Theoretical background

Introduction

Many studies and empirical research have recommended the implementation of music in ESL and EFL classrooms. These works agreed on the point that songs have far-reaching outcomes in the learner and prove to be an effective tool to facilitate learning. In this respect, this part of the review is meant to answer two main questions: "What is the pedagogical basis for using music in foreign and second language classes?" and "What are the major roles this tool can play in the process of learning?"

Music in the classroom

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), the history of teaching pedagogy reveals that this element in language teaching was first introduced by suggestopedia, a teaching method created by Lozanov. This new vision of teaching made music use a major component in the lesson structure. Its

advocates believe that the meticulous exploitation of music in the classroom enhances a positive atmosphere that is necessary for further learning to take place. According to them, certain psychological obstacles act as barriers to learning and it is the role of the teacher to help learners avoid or de-suggest them (Lozanov, 1978 as cited in Larsson-Freeman, 2000).

This method, despite its limitations, offered a very substantial framework for subsequent schools of learning to probe into the utility of music in language classes. It also suggested a theoretical ground for many practitioners to think of ways to adapt the notion of using music in various contexts and in different manners, not necessarily in the way displayed in suggestopedia.

Music as a tool to boost learning

Language Learning is not a matter of mastering linguistic skills alone. Being ready to experiment with language rules and tasks requires a stable stage in the affective side of the learner. Scholars like Stevick (1980) noticed that progress in language learning relies “less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (p. 4). This argument has subsequently been in the foreground namely in psychological theory and language acquisition studies. Research in these areas showed that a set of factors, both internal and external, might become a hurdle to language learning. Krashen (1982) for example, with his idea of the affective filter, argues that learning is highly determined by the emotional state of learners. He defends the point that the more learners are equipped with techniques to reduce their anxiety and discomfort the higher their chances become to process and interact with the input. Similarly, Gardner & Lambert (1972) postulates that catering for the affective side is highly important during language learning since it influences the way cognitive abilities work.

To this end, the use of music has been recommended as an effective tool to promote an adequate learning environment in the classroom. In a study about the role of songs, Mora (2000) finds out that students feel

safe, comfortable, and creative when they listen to music. Similarly, the findings of Metaxas’ (2013) research prove that feelings of anxiety and uneasiness are reduced when teachers introduce vocabulary items and concepts using songs.

Music and language development

Research in music has revealed that in parallel to their effectiveness to provide a nonthreatening learning environment, songs are useful means to teach various aspects of the target language. In their studies, Jäncke, (2012, p. 1) discovers that “speech functions can benefit from music functions and vice versa”. Besides, Slevc and Gebrian (2012, p. 1) argue that “musical hearing and ability is essential to language acquisition.” Moreover, Tegge (2015, p. 197) explains that such an overall focus on songs in classrooms “can benefit lexical learning, in particular, the consolidation of already familiar vocabulary and the acquisition of deep word knowledge beyond a first form-meaning connection”. Also, Griffiee (1992, pp. 5-6) suggests that songs have the power to “provide a natural context for the most common structures such as verb tenses and prepositions”. Furthermore, Arévalo’s (2010, p. 130) study has confirmed that “songs are the most suitable type of authentic material to develop listening comprehension”

At another level, music is found instrumental in boosting memory - a mandatory apparatus for learning. At this point, Areleo’s (2000) findings show that a strong link exists between memory and songs. In line with this, Calvert and Tart (1993, p. 246), maintain that “songs present content in a form that may be easily stored, rehearsed, and retrieved from memory”. Also, Sloboda (1989) notices that the form and structure of songs help organize the information included in lyrics and hence facilitate its retrieval. For Newham (1995), what urges the use of songs is their “mnemonic value” (p.10)

In relation to music value in foreign language learning, some studies focused on the role of music to enhance cultural awareness. Jones (2008), as a case in point, states that a song represents “a faithful reflection of the culture it derives from” (p. 11). In

another work, Shen (2009, p. 88) explains that “language and music are interwoven in songs to communicate cultural reality in a very unique way”. For Arévalo (2010, p.127), in addition to their ability to promote listening competence, songs are effective enough “to engage students in cultural knowledge”.

Music and learner’s attitude

In parallel to their value and effectiveness to help to learn substantial aspects of the language, songs set the ground for fostering a positive attitude to Learning. Within this regard, some studies have demonstrated the contribution of songs and their ability to trigger a change in attitude and motivation. In an analysis of the Malaysian educational context, Setia et al. (2012, p. 270) conclude that primary school learners’ attitudes and motivation changed positively thanks to songs. They point out that “the use of song not only helps the understanding, it also stimulates and increases the students’ interest to learn, enjoy and engage in the learning process”. They notice that learners grow more self-confident due to the use of songs. In another study, Džanić and Pejić (2016, p. 51) realize that “songs aid motivation and help learners develop a love for language learning. Students motivated in this way are imaginative, creative, and eager to learn and succeed”

In brief, various advantages are associated with the use of music in EFL classrooms. In addition to their ability to assist learning through helping students to process and understand aspects of the language, they also contribute to establishing a learning environment that is highly primordial for further learning to take place.

Methodology

The research questions

Generally, this study was done within the search for a tool to make my students in the two mentioned groups able to learn the interesting components covered in the textbook without losing the motivation necessary for learning. Within this framework, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Does the use of music change students’ behavior and attitude in an EFL class?
2. What effects do the use of music make in EFL learners?

The research setting and participants

As mentioned earlier, this study included two groups belonging to first year baccalaureate science (1) and first-year baccalaureate science (2) in a private school, in Khemisset-Morocco. English is scheduled for four hours per week (two hours for each group). They are science students and are aged between 15 and 17 years old. This school’s graduates usually carry on their higher education in medicine and engineering or abroad which makes the students’ need for the English language an unavoidable one. They use foreign textbook-New Opportunities-which includes rich content varying from comprehension readings to grammar tasks, listening, and writing activities.

The research design and procedures

The research design adopted in this action research is qualitative. It is mainly based on the use of qualitative observation as a research tool to collect data. After each class, notes were taken down based on the changes observed while music is on. The music activities were introduced at the end of the lesson. 20 minutes were devoted to this task.

In the pre-listening phase, students were generally given a few questions about the song title and its background as well as the singer. The aim was to allow them to be acquainted with the idea or issue contained in the song. In the while listening stage, students were given the lyrics to read while they were listening to the song, but with some missing words to find. After listening and finding these words, students were asked to follow the singer using the lyrics. When the students got acquainted with the song, more listening of the song was done with the purpose to make students able to sing by themselves (turning down the sound from time to time was used to achieve this). Sometimes, the song was replayed with only one half of the class singing it loudly while the others sing it silently. At other times, students

were asked to move to the board in pairs or a group of four to sing the song. In the post-listening phase, students were involved in brief discussions related to the song: They were asked sometimes to write their views, to express their agreement or disagreement orally about certain issues raised in the song, etc.

Some students were discovered to be talented in playing guitar and others were gifted in singing. These students were invited, during the music activities, to play the songs introduced in the previous classes. Students liked so much to sing with the guitar and without lyrics.

Results of the study

This action research was carried out with the main aim to see if the use of music would bring about a change in learners' attitudes to the English class and to identify the aspects of those changes in learners.

Concerning the first research question, the use of songs has resulted in an obvious change in the attitude of the two groups towards their English class. This attitude took different forms. Students felt well-disposed toward their teacher (facial features and behavior in class showed satisfaction and joy) and to the English class (joining seats early, less misbehavior, emerging engagement with the lessons and tasks among the majority including low-achieving students and misbehaving ones). This positive attitude paved the way for other favorable learning outcomes to take place.

As far as the second research question, integrating the use of songs and music activities, in general, yielded several positive effects on my students. One main obvious effect was the learners' motivation to learn. The students were all ears and ready to work after the music classes. They appreciated the playful environment the music had created. It was observed that students responded very quickly to instructions and were interested to seize the time left for the lesson to do other tasks.

Besides, frequent exposure to songs improved some features of using English. Through time, singing in chorus allowed some students to show a fluent and native-like pronunciation. It also encouraged

students to activate already known learning techniques. When participants were asked to try to follow the song without lyrics, they showed fascinating abilities to recite. This offered an opportunity for those who learn using this technique to exploit this opportunity to participate and gain the appreciation of their teacher.

This increase in participation rate, which was another significant effect attributed to the use of songs in my class, emerged both qualitatively and quantitatively. The use of songs in my class made some students who are 'poor' in language abilities feel equal by singing with their peers without any inferiority-complex. This gave them a moment to experience some success too. During singing, these students' misbehavior was minimized. They also raised their voices and made their presence starkly apparent to me.

It was also noticed that the use of music boosted good student-teacher rapport. The use of songs encouraged my students to come to my desk very frequently to suggest songs for the coming classes or other activities. This change in this side didn't take place during the first term, where I was looked at as rigid and unsympathetic.

In this respect, the use of songs seemed to play a role in boosting students' speaking abilities as well as their critical thinking. I observed that the use of songs had a positive effect to encourage students to express their views, agreement, and disagreement about several issues (what is it to be poor? what makes a person happy? what makes a sustainable friendship? etc.).

Moreover, listening to songs seemed to wet my students' appetite for writing short responses. As a post-listening task, students, sometimes were asked to write about their views related to the themes revealed in songs. I observed that students, unlike before, were engaged in the task fully and enthusiastically.

In the long run, it was observed that in some activities of the course which required joined efforts, students started to respond quickly and positively to

work in pairs or groups. I noted down their cooperation with each other to do the tasks given. This responsiveness to orders and engagement with tasks seemed to be long-term effects of the use of music in my class. Change at this level took place toward the end of the second term.

More importantly, listening to music allowed my students to be alert and attentive when other listening tasks-nonmusical ones- were done. So listening to songs in this sense played a role to make students focus on other listening tasks that didn't involve music (short listening tasks preceding reading or speaking activities, for example).

Furthermore, the use of music was an opportunity to discover music intelligence among participants. Some students had beautiful voices and were asked to sing the song for the group. Their classmates already knew about them but it was an opportunity for me to highlight their talents and praise their performance.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study backed up what has been put forward in the literature about the importance of songs and using music in EFL classrooms. In relation to the present study, a set of favorable effects were produced by the use of songs and musical activities. This included mainly a change in attitude, motivation, participation, and engagement in classroom activities. As it was shown in this study, listening to songs was a springboard to foster the use of some learning techniques, develop language pronunciation, and improve listening ability in general. Within this respect, a set of implications can be drawn from the obtained results. The most important one is that, regarding these various benefits of songs, teachers are invited to find ways to integrate this entertaining and educational tool in EFL classes. In this respect, curriculum designers are supposed to include relevant and appropriate songs within textbooks. This can create a space for variety and delight in the teaching practice and the English class. More importantly, while the present study was done within a specific context of overcoming a teaching obstacle, it mainly implies that teachers'

interventions and reflections- on the way they teach and how learners react to what is presented to them- have to be a frequent and habitual practice during the teaching process

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