

## **Using songs to improve students' pronunciation**

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**Abstract:** In Indonesia, English as a Foreign Language is difficult for secondary school students not only in terms of grammatical systems but also in terms of phonetic systems. That is, students find it difficult to pronounce most of the English words. Things get even worse because in English there is no regular systems of how to pronounce the English words. For Indonesians, to pronounce the English words intelligibly they must refer to a standard dictionary which also means they have to understand how to use and read the dictionary systematically. To understand and improve the production of the various sounds and the supra-segmental features of English as a foreign language, teachers are suggested to use English songs. This research is discussed descriptive-qualitatively based on the author's personal experience as a foreign language learner and teacher. It is discussed how using songs in the English classroom can help students improve their English pronunciation. Supported with a simple questionnaire given to secondary school students, it is also found that most students have a strong interest in listening and understanding popular English songs. It is recommended, therefore, that English teachers take into account of using English songs to improve the students' pronunciation.

Keywords: songs, pronunciation, connected speech

### **Introduction**

Among EFL teachers who have taught English as a foreign language for many years, it is found that songs are very valuable tool for improving pronunciation. As a matter of fact, songs provide the learners with prosodic signals such as pronunciation, stress, and intonation called extra linguistic context (for details of the term extra linguistic context, see: Kumaravadivelu, 2003:207). It is also found that even people who are not really interested in learning English, many of them can sing English popular songs with relatively close to being understandable pronunciation. It is further noticed that there are many barriers that Indonesian learners face when producing certain English sounds and their supra-segmental features. On the basis on the above views, the aim of this paper is to provide English instructors with a various activities of using songs for high school students. By focusing on the pronunciation, students will understand how to distinguish sounds in minimal pairs, both vowels and consonants (for further details about minimal pair, see: Carr, 2008:135; Crystal, 2008:256). At the same time, they will become more familiar with connected speech.

This will lead to a better understanding of native speakers and the mastery of a native-like accent.

By all means, songs are not only powerful to young people but also affect their feelings and energy levels. Without even thinking about songs, people use songs and other musical sounds to create desired moods to make themselves happy. Songs—often referred to music—are something to enjoy in movement and dance, to energize, to bring back powerful memories, to help people relax and even to focus. Throughout history, people have used sounds for different purposes, and this has certainly enhanced their learning and living in many different ways. Many people consider songs to be a very important part of their lives. However it is not used as often at work and in school (see: Millington, 2011:134-135).

The process of teaching-learning using songs can become a very stimulating experience because songs can provide an appropriate atmosphere for both the teacher and the students. In addition, songs have the power to create an interesting and fun activities that everyone will enjoy. There is no denial that songs have become an integral part of people's language experience.

It can be concluded, therefore, that songs are very useful media in the foreign language classroom. They provide an excellent way to improve language skills as well. The importance of songs for practice in foreign languages has been recognized for over six centuries.

Songs expose learners to a rich content, language, culture, and even a tendency to relax. With songs the students are exposed to a comfortable atmosphere in which these areas can be absorbed. There are numerous advantages of using songs: establishing a positive learning situation, energizing learning activities, increasing the students' attention, improving memory, releasing tensions or stresses, enhancing imagination, developing inspiration and motivation, and adding some elements of fun. Songs tend to have simplified, colloquial language, use natural rhythm, stress, intonation, contractions, slang, expressions, idioms, authentic material, and even communicative repetition. All of these can help students build vocabulary and other language structures in a way where students are stress-free.

Language classes can sometimes become boring, and a good solution to make them more interesting is by listening to good songs. Songs offer a change from the routine procedures in the classroom. They are invaluable tools to develop students' language abilities in: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Songs can be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythms, adjectives, adverbs and so on.

This paper is being discussed descriptively-qualitatively based on the author's own personal and other authors' experiences as a foreign language learner and teacher. This paper is intended to discuss how to select the appropriate songs as the media in teaching pronunciation. How using songs in the English classroom can help students improve their English pronunciation is also discussed. A simple questionnaire is given to secondary school students. It is found that most students have a strong interest in listening and understanding popular English songs.

## **Theoretical views**

### **Songs and their advantages**

In Krashen's view (1982:20-22), comprehensible input and a low affective filter are necessary for the acquisition of language to take place. Krashen further defines that comprehensible input is "that bit of language that is heard and read and that is slightly ahead of a learner's current state of grammatical knowledge". Krashen concludes that if the affective filter is high, input "is prevented from passing through if the filter is low, the input will reach the acquisition device and acquisition will take place". Considering Krashen's Input Hypothesis, in which he states that human acquire language instead of learning it, songs become a great opportunity for students to acquire the new language. EFL teachers should consider changing the traditional learning-based activities, and use the acquisition-based comprehensible input more, considering new developments in second language acquisition theory.

Songs can be very helpful as comprehensible input for students because it enables them to understand the language better and acquire new rules, as well as motivating learners and making them feel more relaxed. By creating a low affective filter and an interest in what is to be learned, songs become a useful tool for teachers when dealing with language. Besides, songs offer a kind of motivation to learn the language of the songs. Motivation is as much a matter of concern for the teacher as it is for the learner. Of course, it depends as much on the attitudes of the teacher as on the attitudes of the students. Since motivation is an essential factor in a foreign language classroom, students need to feel encouraged to learn and use the target language in the real-life situations.

As an EFL teacher, one can make a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The former is caused by any number of outside factors such as personal needs or goals; the methodology used in the second language classroom also influences the degree to which the students feel motivated towards the learning. Differently, intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual and so a student feels motivated to learn if he or she finds enjoyment in the learning process itself. Therefore, it is the

teacher's responsibility to help learners discover this self-motivation, and provide activities in class so that extrinsic motivation will take place. Any person who is learning a foreign language knows how challenging this process is therefore having interesting and enjoyable activities such as listening to popular songs can become a key to success.

It has been a very common view that music can increase the level of reception to learning. The effects of music (including all kinds of songs) on the emotions are commonly known, but the effects of music on the brain and thinking have also been explored. Research has shown that an electroencephalogram—known as EEG—found in music can change the brain waves and make the brain more receptive to learning. Music connects the functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain so that they can work together and makes learning quicker and easier (see: Kellaris; Cox; Cox, 1993:114-116).

The simultaneous action of the left and right brain can maximize learning and retention of information. The information being studied activates the left brain while the music or songs activate the right brain. In addition, there are other activities that engage both sides of the brain at the same time, such as playing an instrument or singing which causes the brain to be more capable of processing information.

Dr. George Lozanov, a famous Hungarian psychologist, designed a way to teach foreign languages in a fraction of the normal learning time using a system involving certain classical music pieces from the baroque period. His experimentation has shown that foreign languages can be learned with 85-100% efficiency in only thirty days by using these pieces due to the effect that ornamental music has on brain waves (see: Dabul, 2017:1-3).

It is also commonly known that music can also develop Multiple Intelligence of the young people. In 1983, Howard Gardner, a psychology professor at Harvard University, presented his Multiple Intelligence theory based on many years of research. Gardner has claimed that there is not just one intelligence, but different forms of it (see: Lucas, 2015:2-5). Multiple Intelligence teaching methods recognize eight forms of intelligence: visual-spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal,

intrapersonal, musical, and most recently naturalist. This has influenced the way that teaching and learning are approached. Teachers are now more aware of the need to offer a variety of activities in the classroom to fulfill students' needs. Development of musical intelligence can be greatly aided by the use of songs throughout the curriculum. In addition to learning about musical elements and how to create music, the musical intelligence involves developing an ability to respond to musical sound and the ability to use music effectively in one's life.

Most interestingly, music and songs is very closely related to the students' Learning Styles. Students take in and process information in different ways. Some students learn by seeing while some others by hearing and doing (see: Lucas, 2015:2-5). Consequently, this also cause the teaching methods to vary. When mismatches exist between the learning styles of many students in a class and the instructor's teaching style, the students can get bored and get discouraged about the course. In this situation, listening to songs takes advantage of the different learning styles students have and by carrying out activities with songs, students can practice the language the way they prefer.

### **Methodology:**

#### **Problems of pronunciation and the proposal in this paper**

In Indonesia, secondary students who learn English as a foreign language almost always have some difficulties in pronouncing some certain sounds. This is because there are some sounds in English that are absent in Indonesian language. In other words, some sounds in the target language are absent in the learners' language. Indonesian speakers, for example, find it hard to distinguish between the vowel sounds /i:/ and /ɪ/, and they mostly consider there is no difference between 'seat' and 'sit'. Consequently, Indonesian speakers will also have difficulty in pronouncing 'feet' and 'fit'. This means there are some differences between Indonesian vowels and English vowels.

Almost similarly, pronouncing consonant /dj/ in the final position (as in 'change') is very difficult and needs some time to produce the correct pronunciation. This means that there are

also some differences between Indonesian consonants and the English consonants. Moreover, Indonesian native speakers usually monophthongize the diphthong /aɪ/ (as in 'capai') into /e/ (as in 'cape'), while in English this is unacceptable as it can produce different meaning. On the whole, the three groups of phonemes—vowels, consonants, and diphthongs—in the learners' language and in the target language (English) are different. In short, the three phonetic systems represent the biggest challenge for the learners.

On the bases on the above existing problems, it is proposed that by listening to songs Indonesian learners can easily learn more to identify all of those sounds and perceive the differences among them. In addition to vowels, consonants, and diphthongs, they can understand connected speech by analyzing the assimilation, linkages and reductions, and other aspects such as -ed endings and -s endings. That is because song lyrics and the singers—who are native in the target language—provide numerous models and examples. Selection of song lyrics can now be easily found on the internet, so language teachers have the access to an enormous variety of music and songs to bring to class.

Many English teachers use songs for different purposes. Some songs are used as grammar practice, listening comprehension, vocabulary enhancement, and even for giving the students inspiration before writing exercises. These two kinds of activities have very often been practiced by many English teachers in Indonesia. In this paper, however, the point is that music or songs are seldom used to help students improve their pronunciation in English. In learning English as a foreign language, it is essential to have good pronunciation for clear communication. Secondary students at all grades should work on their pronunciation skills to ensure success in the target language. Very often, however, pronunciation are considered less important than other skills and is therefore given less attention in a teacher's lesson planning. As Miyake has pointed out, pronunciation has been called the Cinderella of ELT (being locked away and out of sight). One of the criticisms of pronunciation teaching is that it is thought to be boring (see: Plaza, 2015:13).

It is suspected that such situation is due to the dominant image of audio-lingual methods where

students are often drilled with minimal pairs. Since speaking is such a necessary skill in a second or foreign language, pronunciation is essential to be understood. Pronunciation plays a very important role in language learning because even when grammar and vocabulary are used correctly, if vowel and consonant sounds and aspects such as intonation, linking, rhythm and stress are not produced accurately, the intended message cannot be delivered comprehensibly. This will lead to misunderstanding and failure to communicate, and in turn learner's frustration.

Song lyrics are different from other kinds of texts because they are closely linked with rhythm. This makes them useful for teaching different pronunciation aspects naturally. All the features of connected speech, including reductions can be identified easily and practiced using songs. Furthermore, some long-term investigations about language learning demands in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language have shown that pronunciation is one of the highest-ranking aspects of the students' interest in many different countries. Through surveys and teaching experience, it is clear that students frequently mention a desire to understand the speech of native speakers, and to sound like native speakers themselves. All of these are available in songs.

### **Choosing the right songs**

There are some crucial things to note in teaching pronunciation using songs. That is, while it is easy to understand that using songs will offer a lot of advantages for both the teacher and the students, the biggest question is how songs should be chosen. It is suggested that teacher consider the students' detailed identifications. They include the students' level, their age, and the kind of music/songs they like. Besides, it is also essential to evaluate the song itself. Teachers need to find out if the rhythm is comprehensible, the singers' voices are clear enough, the speed of the song, and the complexity of the structures and the vocabulary (for further suggestions, see: Simpson, 2015:1-5).

One thing to consider about the songs is the "authenticity" of the songs as the source. One concern for language teachers teaching from an intercultural perspective is the authenticity of resources for language learning. Authenticity is

particularly important when language is viewed as an instantiation of culture and the process of learning as the negotiation of this relationship. Many resources developed especially for language learning have tended to edit out or modify aspects of context that are important to understanding the relationship between language and other aspects (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013:93-95). Quoting Alptekin (2000), Liddicoat and Scarino further argue that some unknown aspects inherent in the native-speaker view of authenticity may even inhibit the students learning process. As such, Liddicoat and Scarino suggest the teaching-learning situation and the original communicative purpose of the resources being used. Several types of authenticity include:

- The authenticity of purpose: the resource needs to be of intrinsic interest to engage learners. Thus it is necessary to select the songs that represent the “real world” purpose external to the classroom or an intellectual engagement with the resources to promote new insights and knowledge.
- The authenticity of response or task: learners need to respond to the resource in an authentic way. Thus, what students are asked to do with a resource is at least as important as the learners’ identities as learners and users of the language.
- The authenticity of conditions: the conditions for language use need to be reflective of the conditions for use of the resource in the “real world.” This real world needs to be understood as the world of the language learners and users.

Similarly, Ebong and Sabbadini viewed that there are no ‘standard’ songs for teaching pronunciation (2017:1-3). They further state that any song can be an example of different pronunciation aspects. However, as suggested above, teachers should try to choose songs that are clear (use quality recordings where possible), not too fast, memorable, likely to appeal to our learners (possibly songs they already know) and easy to create activities for, depending on the area of pronunciation that they are focusing on (for some choices, see: Zazulak, 2015:1-5).

In any of the intended purpose, songs should be written or printed in “sight words” on the whiteboard or displayed in power point for

easier reference. This will be more helpful for both teacher and the students; for the teacher the intended sounds can be put in different colors and for the students this will make them easier to identify the intended sounds. With power point slides containing songs, teacher can manipulate the activities more variably. In this paper, instead of choosing a song by focusing on the vowels, consonants, and diphthongs, this paper will look at some aspects of pronunciation that can be focused on through selected songs. Hence songs to focus on sounds, songs to focus on words, or songs to focus on connected speech.

As Bolton (2011:54) suggests, when it is decided to learn a piece of music or song, one should look it over, and read (play) through it in order to get a general idea of how one wants to go about practicing it. This is similar to when one first listen somewhat more closely to a foreign language one would like to learn, and perhaps have a look at some text in that language, too. Upon starting with the phrases, one should break the song down into smaller parts, phrases, or somewhat larger parts. Then, one can begin “playing” that section quite slowly, doing one’s best to make every note sound as it should be in order to be clearly distinguishable, and also to fit naturally into the phrase (Bolton, 2011:54).

In selecting songs to teach particular consonant, vowel, and diphthongs sounds some criteria must be considered. As languages differ in their range of sounds, students have to learn to ‘physically’ produce certain sounds previously unknown to them. However, incorrectly pronounced sounds strain can change the meaning. Here is the point where songs can help because songs are authentic and easy to access as examples of spoken English. The rhymes in songs provide listeners with repetition of similar sounds. Students often choose to listen to songs a few times and again, indirectly exposing them to these sounds. A teacher can focus learners on particular sounds and can create activities based on songs’ rhymes. He or she can replace some of the rhymes in the song, with a gap. Students listen and fill the gaps, using the song to guide them. More analytically minded students can then categorize the words according to sounds.

In selecting songs to teach particular word combinations of sounds, there are some things to consider. When words are combined with another, one is usually stressed while the other is

not. This causes difficulties. Things may get worse as each English word has its own stress pattern, with very complex 'rules' to guide learners. In this regard, words in songs fit the music, helping learners associate the number of syllables / stress in these words, with memorable rhythms. The relaxed atmosphere of songs can expose students to this difficulty without realizing it. Songs contain endless examples of weak syllables, helping to convince learners of the way English is pronounced. Hence, songs can raise learners' awareness of the number of syllables or word stress.

Song lyrics that are also in the forms of poems may be very encouraging and are appropriate for sharing in class. Students will see them as though they are a part of the learning process because they're the ones helping to shape the lessons. Depending on the students to teach, teachers may wish to collect and read the lyrics first, and then use them for a lesson later in the unit. As Roseboro suggests, if teachers have time, they can ask students to bring in ten-to fifteen-second musical samples of the choruses for their selected song lyrics and play a few of these as examples of poetic repetition (Roseboro, 2010:145).

The most difficult of them all—but can be most interesting—is to improve connected speech using some selected songs. Connected speech is the natural way English native speakers speak. They link words together and emphasize certain words, rather than each word stands alone. Contractions (two words forming one) are an extreme example of the way we connect speech, to the extent that the written form too is affected.

Why is it difficult for the students to mimic or copy the way the native English speak? Indonesia students normally learn words individually and, especially at lower levels, tend to pronounce each word separately. Indonesian High School students frequently misconceive contractions as being 'incorrect', only used in 'slang'. Not all words within a phrase carry the same weight. In this situation, how can English songs help them improve this particular feature of spoken English?

Songs, and especially the chorus, provide real and 'catchy' examples of how whole phrases are pronounced often to the extent that students find it difficult to pick out

individual words. The music further emphasizes the 'flow' of the words. Songs, like other spoken texts, are full of contractions that make students keen to reproduce this. At this point, teachers can select and use songs containing some contracted words to convince the students that 'contractions' in English are very natural. Songs containing word combinations such as 'I am'; 'I can't see'; and many others will be very helpful. As suggested by Vasquez; Angela; and Philip (2010:140-141), such contractions will encourage students to improve their skill in pronouncing short phrases by themselves.

### What the students say in the questionnaire

To obtain information about the importance of using songs to improve pronunciation, the following questionnaire-based survey is carried out. All of the 30 (thirty) students of SMA Hang Tuah 2 Surabaya are given the questions and they have to answer by choosing (giving cross [X]) the best choice. The questions for them to answer are as follows:

1. Do you enjoy listening to English songs?  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree
2. Do you consider pronunciation to be the most important language area?  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree
3. Listening to English pop songs helped you learn the pronunciation?  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree
4. Is English words spelling different from the pronunciation?  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree
5. Is learning pronunciation through songs more interesting?  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree
6. Learning pronunciation through English pop songs is interesting because we listen to the native English speakers.  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree
7. Learning pronunciation through songs is the most helpful so far.  
A. absolutely agree      B. agree  
C. neutral                  D. disagree

8. From now on I will learn English pronunciation by listening to English pop songs.

Out the above 8 (eight) questions, 28 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 1); 25 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 2); 30 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 3); 25 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 4); 26 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 5); 30 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 6); 26 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 7); 27 of the 30 students choose A (for question no 8). In short, all of the 8 (eight) questions are unanimously answered with 'absolutely agree' by at least 25 students. This means, the students themselves absolutely agree that using songs to improve the students' pronunciation is a suitable technique.

## Conclusions

The use of songs in the High School classroom can make learning more fascinating and interesting. At the same time, students acquire the target language (in the form of improved pronunciation) and feel comfortable in a relaxing atmosphere during the teaching learning process. This helps them lower their affective filter, and become more receptive to learning. In addition, songs help learners improve their understanding and production of important pronunciation features. Finally, it is recommended that teachers should choose the songs carefully, taking into account different aspects such as the students' levels, age and preferences, as well as the level of difficulty of the songs and their rhythm. Although the above paper is described based on activities that are carried out only in one time meeting in teaching pronunciation, similar practices could be used with advanced students or with those who take pronunciation courses, and therefore need to know the IPA symbols that are useful for practicing the symbols and improving their pronunciation.

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