

Everything in the universe has a rhythm, including learning and teaching

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Abstract

Today, most of the ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in Sri Lanka consider English language learning as anxiety packed, insipid and an unconquerable obstacle. If facilitators can integrate music into ELT (English Language Teaching), the ELT sessions can be converted into a stress free, learner friendly atmosphere. This study attempts to investigate whether music can be implemented in teaching English grammar and vocabulary. The sample of this study consists of 100 students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Kelaniya. A pre-test was given to test 50 students' prior knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, in a traditional classroom setting. The control group of another 50 students was exposed to a teaching session of grammar and vocabulary using music. Later on, their acquired knowledge was tested through a post-test. The results showcase that if used properly by the facilitator, English songs are an excellent means of cultivating interest and high motivation in language learning.

Keywords: ELT, Music, Pre-test, Post-test, Grammar, Vocabulary, Motivation

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine whether using music in ESL (English as a Second Language) sessions brings better learning outcomes. than the traditional approach The researchers attempt to identify the achievement level of the English language skills of the Sri Lankan University students with regard to the application of classroom instruction blended with music and no music in respective groups to suggest effective pedagogical interventions that can be utilized in an ESL setting.

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka has been functioning on a traditional teaching basis for quite a long time. According to Karunaratna (2003) in Sri Lanka, since the introduction of English to the school curriculum as a second language in the early 1950s, the direct method followed by the grammar-translation method was used to teach English. However, past experience shows that these methods have not been successful in improving English proficiency of Sri Lankan school students (Karunaratne, 1993). Especially when teaching grammatical structures and vocabulary, most of the facilitators have used the same old chalk and talk method to teach ESL. Moreover, the facilitators always try to overload the students with an excessive number of exercises followed by consecutive exams to evaluate their accomplishments. So, it is inevitable that ESL learners consider learning English; especially grammatical structures as boring, insipid and an unconquerable task.

In contrast, music acts as an effective tool to create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere in an ESL setting. However, Ayotte (2004: 10) observed that both music and language share the “same auditory, perceptive and cognitive mechanisms that impose a structure on auditory information received by the senses.” Music can be incorporated in diverse ways to teach English. Songs and lyrics, which are an integral part of music, are of great importance to ESL learners in enhancing English skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening. The multi faceted qualities possessed by songs and lyrics; their richness in theme and culture provide therapeutic functions, placement of the grammatical words, idiomatic expressions and different types of vocabulary acquisition. All this helps to create a rich and a genuine source of teaching material for ESL learners. Georgi Lozanov (as cited by Larsen-Freeman, 1991) incorporates music in his teaching method; “suggestopedia” as music is instrumental in creating a relaxing and comfortable environment, which can propel language learning. The current study gains significance since there is a dearth of research pertaining to the use of music as an effective tool across the ESL curriculum in Sri Lanka. This study attempts to unfold the importance of incorporating English songs in ELT, especially with regard to English vocabulary and grammar, and suggests specific teaching activities that can be implemented in an ESL setting.

Literature Review

There are a plethora of past surveys that describe the use of English songs and lyrics in ELT. Huy Le (2007), a Vietnamese ESL teacher, observed that music is highly valued by both students of English and ESL teachers in the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Other reports by teachers from the United States (Baez, 1993), Taiwan (Katchen, 1988), Canada (Magahay-Johnson, 1984), Japan (Moriya, 1988), Mexico (Domoney and Harris, 1993), and South Africa (Puhl, 1989) support the importance and usefulness of music and music activities in the teaching of ESL learners. However, this proved enthusiasm for using music as an effective tool in an ESL classroom emanates from the first hand experiences of the facilitator. So, it is very important to carefully examine some empirical research that showcases the success of the combination of music and language. Brand (2007) concluded that there is theoretical and physiological support for the inclusion of music in the teaching of spoken English. Not only are language and musical processing located in the same area of the brain, but neurologists (Maess & Koelsh, 2001) have discovered that both musical and linguistic syntax are similarly processed. Furthermore, Brand (2007) explained how song lyrics are used in sensitizing Chinese ESL learners to the importance of effective intercultural communication. On the other hand, Ayotte (2004) conducted music related research involving adult learners regarding the acquisition of verb forms in teaching French as a second language. The results of the study demonstrated that the subjects who listened to songs performed with more grammatical accuracy on the immediate post-tests in three verb forms –present, future, and conditional. Statistical significance was only seen for the present and conditional forms in the delayed post-tests. Nevertheless, the other experiment, showed no statistical significance between language taught with music and language taught with no music. Apart from this study, Hazel-Obarow (2004), in a study involving young learners of English, examined both the short-term and long-term effects of music on vocabulary acquisition using a pre-test, a post-test and a delayed post-test on an experimental design. The final outcomes of the study revealed that techniques that included music appeared to be more motivating for students and engaged them deeper in learning of vocabulary. According to Brand (2007) ESL classrooms in Asia are often associated with crowded classes, monotonous testing and assessment regimes, and an over-emphasis on the teaching of rigid grammatical rules—all at the expense of a more vibrant and naturalistic everyday English speaking communication approach. These research studies pave the way to carefully examine the relative effectiveness of songs and lyrics in the teaching of English language; subsequently suggesting more appropriate, interesting, and authentic English teaching material.

Research Questions

- RQ 01- Is teaching English language through music effective with Sri Lankan ESL learners in teaching English grammar and vocabulary?

Rationale

Nowadays, most of the Sri Lankan ESL classrooms function in a traditional teaching setting which evokes less interest among Sri Lankan ESL learners. Owing to this fact, most of the ESL learners display a low enthusiasm in engaging in ESL classroom activities and there's a remarkable decrease in terms of the participation of ESL learners at lectures. So the significance of this study lies in the sample that the researchers have selected for the study. Moreover, little research has been conducted in using music across the ESL curriculum. This study is an attempt to fill that void by incorporating music in a learning environment and demonstrates its effectiveness as a learning tool which helps to design several specific teaching activities as serious attempts to add life to ESL classrooms.

Methodology

The sample of our study consists of 100 students from the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences who are following the English for Humanities and Social Sciences course (ELTU 13012). These students were exposed to a pre-test in measuring their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. After that, the selected 100 subjects were divided into two groups of English with music and English with no music, with 50 subjects in each group. These two groups were randomly assigned to the two groups. The music group was taught the second conditional of English grammar and selected vocabulary items using songs. The no music group was taught the same, without songs. The post-test was immediately administered, after the teaching session. Later on, the mean values of the pre test and post test were calculated to analyze the data.

Test Instrument

Both pre-test and post-test versions were designed to assess the subjects' knowledge and understanding of the selected vocabulary items and the second conditional of English grammar. These pre-tests and post-tests encompassed about 20 test items. The first ten questions were designed based on vocabulary picked out from the famous song 'Hotel California' by the Eagles. The students were asked to match the correct definition of the given words. The second ten questions were based on the second conditional of English grammar where the students got to fill in the blanks with the correct verb form.

Data Analysis and Results

Figure 1: Mean Values of the Pre-Test & Post-Test

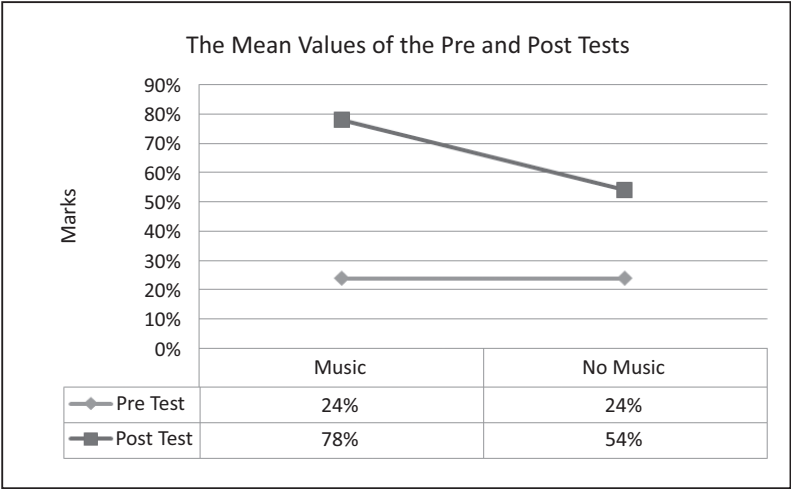


Figure 1 demonstrates the mean values of the pre and post tests. As seen on the graph, the mean value of the pre test is 24%. And the mean value of the post test taught without music was 54%. Moreover, the mean value of the post test taught with music was 78%. So, it is evident that the classroom instruction coupled with music has brought better learning outcomes. It was evident from the pre-test that the students had no knowledge of the words ‘colitas, alibis, feast, sweat and chambers.’ Only 5% got more than five answers correct in the vocabulary question and only 3% got more than 5 answers correct in the grammar question.

The results of this study show that the degree of the use of songs in ESL classrooms produces different levels in English Language achievement scores. The subjects who were exposed to music and classroom instruction achieved the highest score in post tests.

Conclusion

Teaching English language through music is effective with Sri Lankan ESL learners in teaching English grammar and vocabulary, amongst other possibilities.

Pedagogical Interventions

English songs can be utilized to enhance English vocabulary, to teach grammar, practice pronunciation and to teach idiomatic expressions as discussed below:

- ✓ The lyrics of the songs can be given with gaps. After listening to the song the students can fill in the blanks and the answers can be discussed with the definitions.
- ✓ Grammar can also be explained as most of the songs are based on stories related to past, present and future tenses, wishes (first conditional), hypothetical situations (second conditional) and regrets (third conditional).
- ✓ The difference between speech sounds can be clearly explained through songs. For Instance the difference between /s/ and /z/, /p/ and /f/.
- ✓ When idiomatic expressions are taught in a contextual environment using music, the students tend to remember them better than when the idiomatic expressions are taught in isolation.

Above all, the inclusion of music makes the ESL class more attractive and meaningful to tertiary level students and teachers because of the diversity it represents.

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