

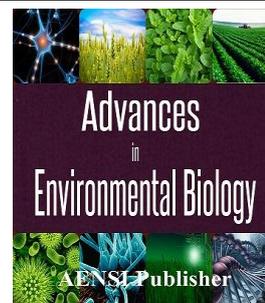


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The Role of Music in Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Background: Though music has been an important aspect of school culture, its role in language learning has not received great attention in educational research. The research on the role of music in second language learning is still at an embryonic stage. The general assumption is that music enhances a learning environment due to its affective power. A qualitative study was conducted in Iran to examine how music was perceived by Iranian second language educators and students. The focus was on its role in second language learning. The study reveals interesting insights about the permeation of music in various extra curriculum activities and learning experiences of tertiary students of English. Pedagogically, English music was highly valued by teachers and students of English in teaching speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is argued that music, particularly songs, is an encoding of cultural values and ideology which need to be viewed critically if foreign music is used in teaching a second language in Iran.

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INTRODUCTION

Music is an essential part of human existence. Different kinds of birds have different cries, songs and melodies to communicate about their world. Similarly music is used by human beings to express their thoughts and feelings about their inner world as well as their social world. It is hard to imagine a culture without music. Thus, music can be seen as the soul of human culture. In the context of education, music has become a popular subject in primary and secondary education and it is an established academic subject in tertiary education. However, research on the role of music in second language learning is surprisingly still in its embryonic stage while its popularity is strong and its impact on society is readily recognized. This paper will examine the importance of music in education, particularly in relation to second language learning. It will then present a qualitative study on the role of music in second language learning in the Iranian context.

2. The Role of Music In Learning:

Halpern [7] states that "of the many factors that influence learning, few are as far-reaching - or little understood - as sound and music". When one thinks of music, the first thing in mind is enjoyment. Its entertaining function is widespread in many human activities, individually and collectively. The sound of music brings into the world its magic power to activate the mind when it is dormant, to soothe the soul when it is in turmoil, and to heal the body when it is hurt. Its magic power is the reason why children love to play with songs and rhymes even at an early age in life. Babies, even inside their mothers, show some appreciation to music when exposed to it. The sound of singing among villagers across a rice field in Asian countries turns a hard-working day into a festive one. An image of a mother singing her baby to sleep has a lasting impact on many individuals who have experienced such tender human interaction. It is unthinkable to see human existence without music. According to Neuenfeldt [10], Aboriginal musicians in Australia use music in school curricula in a unique way. Over the past decade, they have been introducing Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into schools at all levels by performing and teaching with the Aboriginal musical instrument 'didjeridu'. The music incorporates an empowering social context in an entertainment format to convey indigenous interpretation of Australian life.

Harwood [5] argues that context affects both the musical content children learn (choice of repertoire, stylistic conventions) and how they attempt to learn it (problem solving skills and strategies). Through exposure

to multiple contexts where music learning occurs, (formal and informal, school, home, church, playground) children acquire different understandings about what it means to be a music maker and learner. Smith [12] carried out a study on trialing the intercultural communication of Indigenous Australian music and dance, through a specified series of teaching and learning strategies, to urban west-centric primary school settings. Campbell [3] studied children's engagement in music beyond school, including the manner by which the various folkways, technologies, and institutional settings help them to perpetuate and preserve particular musical expressions and experiences. According to Campbell, discussion of music in children's play, the use and function of music in their lives, and the means by which they are musically enculturated will lead to a consideration of music's place in their schooling.

Music generally manifests in tune, melody, rhyme, and lyrics. The role of music can be divided into two aspects: participant-orientated and performance-orientated. The former refers to the joy that music brings to each individual as an active music experiencer. They are actually involved in the performing act such as singing a song, whistling a tune, or playing a musical instrument. The latter focuses on the product such as a performance on stage, a record or cassette of songs normally performed by well-known artists. The dichotomy of participant-orientated process and performance-orientated process is also seen in sport activities in which participants are either performers or viewers. This distinction will be taken into account in discussing a Iran-based study on the role of music in second language learning to be dealt with later in this paper.

Researchers have shown that personality factors play an important part in second language learning [2,6]. Some studies revealed that self-esteem appears to be an important variable in second language learning [4,1,13]. Personality, emotion and self-esteem are powerful affective factors in human learning.

Human beings are emotional creatures. At the heart of all thought and meaning and action is emotion. As "intellectual" as we would like to think we are, we are influenced by our emotions. It is only logical, then, to look at the affective (emotional) domain for some of the most answers to the problems of contrasting the differences between first and second language acquisition.

Suggestopedia was introduced by Lozano [9] which stresses the significance of mental calmness in learning. Suggestopedia is a method of second language teaching that capitalizes on relaxed states of mind for maximum retention of material. Music plays a vital part in this teaching method. For example, Baroque music, with its 60 beats per minutes and its specific rhythm creates a kind of "relaxed concentration" for active learning [11].

The role of music in learning can be described in terms of enhancement of social harmony, motivation force, and tool for learning.

- Enhancement of social harmony: One of the most important factors for achieving teaching and learning effectiveness is social harmony among learners. In a classroom, children often sing together to celebrate birthday, to play games together, to appreciate the feeling of togetherness.
- Motivation force: Music is used to soothe the mind, to relax the mind and body. Music enables learners to be free from pressure and stress.
- Tool for learning: Music is deliberately used to teach language, society and culture. Songs encode cultural meanings, inspiration, and worldviews. In other words, songs tell thousands of human stories.

3. A Iran-Based Study:

3.1 Aim and objectives:

A study was qualitatively conducted in Iran to investigate the views of English-as-a- Foreign-Language (EFL) students and teachers about the role of music in teaching and learning a second language, with a focus on English as a foreign language. The following research questions were raised in the study:

- a. What are the views held by Iranians I FL university students about the significance of music in education?
- b. What are their views about the significance of music in an EFL curriculum?
- c. What are their views about the significance of music in extra-curriculum activities?
- d. What are their views about the negative aspect of the use of Western music in education?

3.2. Background and Rationale:

Learning English has mushroomed in Iran since 1986 when the Iran

Government started to implement the policy of Doi Moi (new change) which promoted interaction with the outside world, particularly with the West, after many years of isolation due to the effect of war. English has become one of the most popular subjects in secondary education. Private English classes have provided eager learners with an alternative place for learning English apart from traditional public schools. The great demand of English in Iran has created a huge shortage of EFL teachers. In response to the Iranian government's requests, English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, USA, Canada, and Singapore have provided scholarships and training courses for current and prospective Iranian teachers of English. However, the interest in English has brought along great interest in Western cultures, particularly music. English music has

become very popular. Except in some traditional musical performance, most of musical shows include many English songs. Universities and colleges are often the place where English songs are performed. They promote an educational discourse in which English language teaching and English music play an important part.

Iranian students are well known as music lovers. Virtually, all their social activities, formally and informally, include singing and playing guitars. Some students sing English songs perfectly as if they were native speakers of English. This evidence supports the view that some students learn English with the help of music. The case of an American singer who could sing Iranian songs flawlessly without knowing an Iranian word is well known among Iranian EFL students. In order to pursue this view further, a study was conducted in Iran to examine the relationship between music and EFL.

3.3 Methodology:

The main aim was to investigate the role that music played in EFL from an Iranian perspective. As a qualitative study, it attempted to gain some insights from EFL students and teachers about their views on the importance of music in teaching and learning English in Iran.

The tasks undertaken by the researcher in this study included interview, observing, participating in social and musical activities. The researcher conducted informal and unstructured interviews with three EFL teachers, six students in various situational contexts. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. The interviews were conducted in English as the interviewees were fluent in English. A Sony Business-corder mini-cassette was used to record the interviews with the awareness of the interviewees. In addition, a number of musical and cultural activities in different social settings were attended by the researcher such as New Year musical performance by students at an Iranian university, professional musical shows, students' social gatherings, musical Cafes where most students met socially, English classes and Iranian homes. It was important for the researcher to participate in those social activities in order to be able to engage in talks with local students and teachers and meaningfully relate the interviewees' discussion to their contexts.

3.4 Results and Interpretations:

The data from the interviews, observation notes, and reflection notes revealed the following insights from Iranians EFL teachers and students in relation to the research questions mentioned above.

3.4.1 The significance of music in education:

- *Music is international:*

Music is a powerful international communication which could be shared, and enjoyed by people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Western music was seen as a modern trend for EFL students. It is an indication of 'social achievement' among young urban people.

I like Western music. Sometimes I don't understand exactly what a song is about, but somehow I could feel the message. (Sample 1)

Music brings people together. I enjoy listening to classical music. I don't need to go to Paris or New York. I just sit at this cafe and the music can bring me somewhere in the world. (Sample 2)

- *Music enables learners to relax in a learning atmosphere:*

Music helps to create a soothing and enjoyable environment for learning. It reduces pressure and tension in the class. Students do not feel threatened.

- *Music bridges the gap between teachers and students:*

In a Confucian society, teachers are perceived as superior, occupying the rank above students' parents. Teacher is the source of wisdom, which cannot be challenged by students. The relationship between teachers and students is hierarchical. However, music helps to bring teachers and students closer together. They share the same interest, which is music. They participate in various academic and social activities together to pursue and promote music. Teachers who can sing and like to sing with students are normally very popular.

Mr. X can play a guitar and he has a good voice. He is not like other teachers who are very serious and make us feel uncomfortable. Mr. X is different. He sings so well. I think he sings like a native singer of English. We all like to be in his class. (Sample 3)

The magic of music is that it can bring people together. We get on so well together. When we get together to rehearse a performance, we drink coffee, listening to music, and talk about college life. This is what I'll miss when we leave here. (Sample 4).

- *Music makes language learning interesting:*

Iranians children are taught to sing together from early grades in primary education. Songs are normally about games, description of daily activities, and moral teaching. Therefore, Iranian students in tertiary

education are comfortable with singing in class, individually and in groups. They enjoy songs in English classes.

When we were in primary schools, we sang many songs in class. Most songs were about our duties to the family, friends and to our country. There were also songs about the war. But I really enjoy love songs. It is good that we allow ourselves to enjoy music in many activities, at college or outside the college. (Sample 5)

3.4.2. Music in an EFL curriculum:

There is no formal approach to introducing music to the EFL curriculum in private and public English language teaching institutions. It is up to individual teachers to include music in their teaching programs. EFL teaching in Iran.

Is heavily grammar-translation orientated. Assessment, particularly testing, is taken seriously by teachers and students. Teachers and students in the interviews agreed that music was helpful to learning English but due to a great emphasis on formal teaching and learning, the role of music in the EFL curriculum did not receive great attention.

The following ideas were given by the interviewees on how music should be used to enhance English teaching and learning.

- *Songs for teaching speaking and listening:*

Songs sung by native English speakers are of great value to the teaching of speaking and listening. Students should listen to the singing first to have a feeling for the songs. After two or three times of listening to a song, students work in small groups to write down the lyrics of the song. Finally the song is written on the board with the help the teacher and students. In regard to speaking, students sing the song together while the Cassette-recorded singing is played. For beginning English classes, singing helps students to 'tune in' with the target language so that initial stage of language and cultural shock can be avoided.

I think songs can be used to teach English. I normally let my students listen to a song first. Then I show them the words. Then they listen to the song again at the same time looking at the words. Finally we all sing together. They seem to like it. (Sample 6)

- *Projects on English music:*

Several projects on the use of English songs for learning were suggested by the interviewees. For instance, students should collect songs according to themes such as songs about rivers and mountains, student life, travelling, places, seasons of the year, war etc..For a writing-project, students can translate English songs into Iran and vice versa. This provides students opportunities to discuss different EFL issues such as cultural consideration in translation, linguistic genres in music lyrics, and linguistic errors.

- *Linguistic awareness:*

Students can discuss differences between spoken and written language on the basis of lyrics and singing. Attention can be drawn to different varieties of English such as dialects and sociolects. Folk songs from different English speaking countries such as America, Canada, Australia, Ireland can be a great resource for teaching linguistic and cultural awareness.

When I listen to Western country music, I could feel the country accent. We often discuss cultural features in songs from different countries. It is more interesting than just reading from a book. (Sample 8)

3.4.3 Music as an extra curriculum experience:

Extra curriculum musically-based activities are essential in the lives of EFL students in particular and tertiary students in general. These activities include singing in classes, musical performances on campus and off-campus, frequent home-singing gatherings, cafe music gatherings, personal and group celebrations such as birthday, music video entertainment, and farewell parties.

Participant-oriented process is a strong feature in students' extracurriculum activities. Almost everyone takes part in music activities.

The English song 'Yesterday' is still on the top chart of students' list of popular foreign songs sung in various student gatherings.

It is normally seen in commercially-motivated performances, which are often frequented by EFL students, particularly those from well-to-do families. In a performance-orientated process, the distinction between performers and audience is clearly marked. Performers are normally professional artists who earn their living by performing in public entertainment. EFL students tend to use public entertainment cafes as peer gatherings.

Poetry is powerful in promoting EFL learning to Iran students. In Iran, poems are not read as in Western countries.

Singing a poem is a very popular musical activity among young and old people. Singing a poem was originally the singing of folk poems performed by villagers in rural activities such as harvesting, draining water into rice fields, and singing babies to sleep by mothers or older sisters. Now Singing a poem has become a

special artistic activity among literacy enthusiasts and intellectuals. Poetry occupies a prestigious position in the Iran culture. Poetry lovers are not confined to language students. Poetry appreciation spreads across academic subjects and campuses. As songs are considered a form of poetry, Iranian EFL students treat them as a great inspiration for English learning.

3.4.4. Music import and its potential problems:

Numerous observations made in this study in addition to the data gathered in the interviews clearly indicate that Iran traditional music is giving way to Western music.

Some songs were created in a Western context and their meanings, particularly hidden meanings are tied to the context. Some Iranian students sang the songs without fully understanding the contextual meanings of those songs. American pop songs are so enthusiastically accepted by young people while the meanings of their messages are at odd or in great conflict with the Iran cultural context, which treasures serenity of the mind, love, care, and share. The themes stressing individual freedom, sexual liberation, and social hostility contradict with Iran traditional songs, which stress togetherness, respect, responsibility, and social harmony. Visual images portrayed in Western musical videos appear quite contrastive to the peaceful images normally seen in the Vietnamese social context.

Some American songs are easy to understand, some are very hard. Sometimes I feel rather funny to sing songs about wanting to make love..We dare not sing them so openly. (Sample 9)

4. Conclusion:

It appears that music and language learning are two different domains with little or no connection. This is somehow true if one examines the attention (or lack of attention) given to this connection in research in the past decade, particularly on the role of music in second language learning. The researcher of this study embarked on a lonely journey. However, the reward from this research journey was invaluable. EFL students in Iran hold a special place for 'the sound of music' in their culture. The study has supported the researcher's view that there is a place for music in second language learning, not only because music can be used pedagogically to enhance teaching and learning a second language, but also there are many insights to be gained from an intercultural research perspective.

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