

A Literature Review On The Use Of Songs In Teaching English To Young Learners: Benefits And Difficulties

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Abstract

This paper contains a comprehensive literature review on the use of songs in teaching English to young learners. This paper reviews the concept of teaching English to young learners, and then discusses the benefits and difficulties in using songs and how songs should be implemented in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A number of previous studies from 2008 to 2015 investigating the use of songs in teaching English have been analysed. Most of the studies used in this research are empirical studies. It is found that the benefits of songs to teach English can be classified into four categories: (1) affective; (2) cognitive; (3) linguistic; and (4) culture. This review presents a better understanding on the benefits and difficulties of using songs to teach English to young learners. It can be argued that teaching English songs to young learners is prominent. At the end, the author outlines several recommendations regarding on how to overcome the difficulties in teaching songs so the use of songs in teaching can be maximised.

Keyword : young learners, songs, teaching English

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to non-native speakers is considered challenging due to its unfamiliarity (Pinter, 2006 & Paul, 2003, as cited in Chou, 2014). The learners feel unfamiliar with English because this language is not spoken in their daily life. Therefore, many non-English speaking countries around the world has started to introduce English since the early years of the learners. Besides, the role of English as a global language has increased the demand to learn English. In most of English as a foreign language (EFL) countries like Indonesia and China, primary school students have been learning English subject at school.

As a matter of fact, learning cannot be separated with the factor of motivation. It has been agreed that motivation is significant in determining the process of learning a new language. Li (1998) as cited in Copland, Garton and Burns (2014) state that children are still lacking in motivation to learn English since they are not yet aware with the urgency of learning English as a foreign language. Although learning English is regarded prominent for the future, children still have zero understanding about this. It is believed that there is no other way to survive with the global competition ahead unless one can communicate in English. However, children simply love learning by playing. If they are exposed by boring and less interesting way of learning, their desire to learn English will be decreased. Thus, it is important to trigger learners' interest in learning a new language since their early ages by applying enjoyable classroom activities.

Various fun activities done in the classroom will make learners regard English as an interesting subject. Once they show positive attitude in learning English, their motivation to learn will be long lasting. In order to maintain the motivation, it is necessary for the teachers to employ enjoyable learning activities and communicative materials. Communicative materials are usually more motivated for learners. A study was conducted by Rao (2002) to analyse the communicative and non-communicative activities in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in China. The findings show that authentic language materials which expose the real language used in the target language are not frequently used during classroom activities. Although learners are lacking in the use of authentic sources, there is one most-common authentic materials which is used for language learning, that is song.

a. Teaching English to young learners

Ersoz (2007) as cited in Sevik (2011) defines young learners as learners who are in the age of six (first year of formal school) to twelve years old. These children have attended the primary school and started learning variety of subjects including language. Based on Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) as cited in Ara (2009), the more learners spend their time with the language, they will become more proficient in that language. Therefore, English is introduced since the early years. As a foreign language, teaching English to children is regarded as a challenging task. It is due to the fact that children are mostly reluctant and need comfortable environment in learning. Learning a new language for them can be frustrating and boring. For example, when the children are required to memorise English vocabulary, they will tend to feel under pressured, anxious, bored and demotivated. Consequently, Ara (2009) concerns about the role of teachers. Regarding to the factor of young learners, she states that teachers need to give special treatment in teaching foreign language to children. The way teachers interact and teach them will determine their attitude and participation in the classroom.

Furthermore, we can see the fact that since the issue of teaching English for young learners has been a global issue where non-native English countries concern with, the demand to use more communicative method of teaching is getting higher. Children are not expected to learn grammar or other language features since it is too difficult and complex. This idea is supported by Copland et al. (2014) who suggests that since English has been used to communicate globally in recent years, the focus on teaching English is emphasizing more on the communicative competence. The goal of learning English is not merely to learn the knowledge of the language but instead, it is to make learners to be able to communicate in English in their real life.

b. Teaching songs

Regarding to this matter, there are certain considerations which need to be taken into account if the teachers teach the children. Sharpe (2001) as cited in Sevik (2011) argues that curriculum in teaching young learners should emphasise more on oral and aural ability of the learners. It is true because doing oral and aural activities will keep learners become active learners and have more willingness to participate in classroom. One of the activities which can be done is using songs in learning English. Songs are highly demanded in EFL teaching for children (Claer & Gargan, 1984; Chou, 2014; Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek, 2006, as cited in Tse, 2015; Sharpe, 2001, as cited in Sevik, 2011).

Most children love songs. They will start singing and dancing once they listen to music. Additionally, according to Chou (2014), psychology, cognitive development, and the factor of mother tongue language should be considered before teaching the young learners. Learners will feel unfamiliar with the new language and it requires much effort from the teacher. Therefore, Chou adds that teaching English syllabus for young learners should include these following elements: (1) topic of interest of the children; (2) stories; (3) games and fun activities; (4) songs, chants, and rhymes; (5) pair-work or group-work task. These five elements will help the young learners to enjoy the classroom activities and will result in a better learning process. In line with Chou's idea, Edelenbos et al. (2006) as cited in Tse (2015) point out that teaching English syllabus for young learners focus on three aspects: (1) the communicative competence; (2) listening and speaking skills; and (3) the use of songs.

Claer and Gargan (1984) argue that song is one of the most frequently used teaching materials in teaching language. This idea is relevant because most young learners teachers in EFL countries such as Indonesia, Taiwan and China use songs in English language classroom. In other words, song has been used globally for teaching purposes. This is simply because songs are appealing, motivating and fun for the learners. Teachers usually use songs to start the lesson. The songs are played to attract learners' attention and prepare learners to start the lesson. During the learning, if the learners' concentration is distracted and they start to get bored, teachers will play the songs again. Some examples of English songs are Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, Humpty Dumpty, and Six Little Ducks.

METHOD

This research was conducted by reviewing a number of studies which analysed the use of songs in teaching English to young learners. Studies conducted around 2008 to 2015 were chosen. All of those studies involved empirical research and all written in English and most of the studies took place in various countries which teach English as a foreign language. Content analysis was conducted to analyse and categorise the data from those literatures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the literatures used in this research, there are several benefits of using songs in teaching English to young learners. These benefits can be categorized into four categories which include affective, cognitive, linguistic and culture. Several challenges in teaching songs are also found and some solutions are proposed to deal with the challenges.

a. Benefits of using songs

According to Shen (2009), songs are efficient tools in teaching language. They are resources which combine music and language to reflect culture, various themes, expressions. Songs consist of music and lyrics. Generally, according to Paquette and Rieg (2008), music create positive atmosphere and provoke creativity which can develop young learners in their academic, psychology and social side. Meanwhile, Shen (2009) defines lyrics as authentic teaching materials for EFL learners. The language presented in the songs are genuine because they are made for real life to express emotions or messages and not made for teaching purposes. These genuineness enables learners learn language more effectively.

A study was conducted in Malaysia by Tse in 2015 to discover teachers' perspective toward the use of songs in teaching English. The participants are 60 teachers of primary schools in Malaysia. The result shows that teachers find using songs beneficial as it is considered as pleasant materials which support learners' listening skills and they agree that songs should be included in curriculum. Chou in 2014 also conducted a study involving 72 children of primary school in Taiwan to investigate the impact of songs, games, and stories in English language classroom. According to the study, learners' participation during the classroom was increased when teachers use those three activities. Most of them find singing songs interesting, help them to enrich their vocabulary and comprehend the learning materials. Hence, this paper classifies the

advantages of using songs into four categories: affective, cognitive, linguistic (Schoepp, 2001, as cited in Sevik, 2011) and culture (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008).

1. Affective

Songs are valuable medium to create enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom. Songs create a non-threatening environment which can reduce learners anxiety in learning language (Lo & Fai Li, 1998, as cited in Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008). Millington (2011) adds that children mostly love songs and songs can make learners feel the pleasure of learning the language. He then notes that songs are beneficial not only because they are fun, but also because they help learners to achieve the target better as they can keep learners feel motivated during classroom routine. Moreover, the pleasant atmosphere will appear as the learners consider songs as an entertainment instead of a learning material. Generally, with the positive environment, young learners will be motivated in learning (Lo & Fai Li, 1998, as cited in Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Millington, 2011; Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Furthermore, Shen (2009) argues that motivation of learners can be stimulated either intrinsically through interest and desire, or extrinsically through peer learning. Shen adds that once the learners have high interest in learning, they will learn faster and gain more confidence. As a result, they will keep making progress. Therefore, Thus, it can be argued that songs can trigger intrinsic motivation and provoke participation of learners since songs are appealing and learners will pay more interest if songs are delivered during classroom activity songs.

2. Cognitive

Schoepp (2001) as cited in Sevik (2011) considers that songs can stimulate automaticity in employing the language in real situation. Songs consist of repetitive words which help learners getting familiar with the English words and learners will naturally start to speak in English (Sevik, 2011). Similarly, Saricoban and Metin (2000) as cited in Paquette and Rieg (2008) discuss that the repetitive words contain in the songs make them comprehensible and easier to follow. Once the learners get attracted into certain songs, they will keep singing the songs and start to remember the lyrics. In order to enhance this, an empirical study was conducted by Lee (2009) to analyse the impact of using music to teach English on children. The participants of the study are six children from the age of three to four in Taiwan. The findings indicate that songs can effectively teach the children simple English language and trigger them to employ the language more spontaneous and natural. Moreover, Shen (2009) also states that songs can improve learners' language awareness. She argues that by learning and singing the songs, learners will be given an opportunity to notice and compare their language ability with how the language spoken by the native speakers.

3. Linguistic

Songs are able to expose authentic words and language features of English. Through English songs, learners can learn vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and others. This idea is also supported by Ajibade and Ndububa (2008) who state that songs are valuable resources to improve children's listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and teach various language items. Sevik (2011) shares commonality with this idea by noting that songs can trigger natural memorisation. As the learners are paying interest on the songs, learners will tend to keep singing and repeating the song which make them unconsciously memorise the English words presented in the lyrics. Moreover, as the children start to feel familiar and keep singing the songs, they will come to the point where they feel the need to understand the meaning of the lyrics (Shen, 2009). Thus, it can be argued that their curiosity will help them in acquiring language and the learning can be meaningful. A study was conducted by Milton (2008) which aimed to analyse the effect of informal learning tasks towards learners vocabulary. Although the language learnt is not English, but it can be used as a supporting evidence since the case is still on foreign language. It is found that the more learner listen to the songs, the more new vocabulary is acquired. It is because repetition which appear in the songs' lyric helps learner getting familiar with the words and enrich the learner's vocabulary. For example, when learners love certain English songs, they will ask the meaning of the words in the song to the teacher and ask teacher the way to pronounce them. Then, they will keep singing and playing the songs over and over. This simple analogy shows us that the learning process take place as the learners show their desire to learn the language because they want to understand the songs.

4. Culture

Besides the three reasons classified by Schoepp (2001) as cited in Sevik (2011) above, songs also have cultural benefits. As stated by Ajibade and Ndububa (2008), songs are effective means in exposing the culture of the target language. Likewise, Claer and Gargan (1984) note that songs represent the image of the target language community. They add that cultural content can be exposed through variety of songs. As we know, each song has particular theme. Many of songs reflect the culture and the context of their language community such as Thanksgiving, Halloween, and Christmas. It enables young learners to get closer into the target language and build cultural awareness upon that. Using songs is not limited to only deliver the songs as part of entertainment. More than that, teachers can discuss the meaning, context, and the cultural content behind every particular song, making learning more meaningful.

Based on the benefits as explained above, it can be inferred that although most children consider songs as part of entertainment, the benefit they earn is more beyond that. With such pleasant way, they are able to acquire the language.

b. Difficulties

Even though songs benefit young learners, their implementation in school is still challenging. There are number of difficulties appear during the implementation of songs in teaching English. It was discussed by Milington (2011); Richard

(1969); and Sevik (2001). The challenges are mostly faced by the teachers. It has been agreed that children love songs, but on the other side, teachers are struggling with the implementation of songs. In order to analyse this, a study was conducted by Sevik in 2011 related to the use of songs in classroom. The study was aimed to analyse teachers perspective on using songs on teaching English. The participants of the study are 52 English teachers from several primary schools in Turkey. Although the findings indicate that mostly teachers agree on the implementation of songs, they actually encounter some problems in applying songs as follow:

1. Choosing appropriate songs

It is found that most teachers have difficulty in selecting the songs. Since songs are vary into different themes and genre, finding appropriate songs for children is somehow challenging. For example, not all children songs suit the cultural context of young learners. In other words, not all Western songs are appropriate for classroom context although they might be popular in society and moreover, not all English words in songs are understandable for children. This idea is supported by Richard (1969) who states that many lyrics in English songs do not represent the ordinary words of English language and how the language spoken by the native speakers. They sometimes contain slang, dialect or less common words. In addition, many of songs are also ineffective to teach the language items. For example, nursery rhyme like *Jack Be Nimble* cannot appropriately teach verb to children (Millington, 2011). This is supported by a study conducted by Tse (2015) who analysed teachers point of view about songs. Although teachers find songs as favourable materials, the findings indicate that they find it difficult to find songs which suit every topic in the curriculum.

2. Accessing the songs

It is argued that not all teachers have the opportunity to access the songs. Many teachers do not know where to get the songs as some of them living in areas with lack of internet access or simply, they do not know where to purchase the songs. In line with this, Copland et al. (2014) consider that teachers who are in rural areas or poor schools are struggling to access the songs. The availability of the songs is also an issue. Due to the teachers who are lacking in variety of songs, they may play the same songs over and over again. As a result, Millington (2011) notes that playing the same songs for multiple times can be boring for the students as the children's interest may fade away.

3. Assessing learners' academic performance

It is argued that teachers are unable to measure the young learners academic performance through songs. Particular test or assessment is necessary to measure how far the learners can achieve and acquire the language after learning English songs. Moreover, the relevance of using songs in teaching the foreign language with the learners language proficiency is still unclear. Furthermore, Murphey (1992) as cited in Millington (2011) claims that beside the fact that songs are fun and can create positive learning atmosphere, songs will never be able to teach learners on how to communicate in the target language. He argues that words in the lyrics cannot be transformed into communication purposes.

c. Dealing with the difficulties

Regarding to the difficulties, there is the urgency to encounter them so that the role of songs as pedagogical tools can be maintained. Thus, teachers are required to pay attention on the way of preparing and delivering songs. Firstly, teachers effort in selecting suitable songs is highly demanded if we want to avoid inappropriate songs being exposed toward the children (Millington, 2011). Hence, teachers training is highly essential (Copland et al., 2014). Teachers need to be assisted in relation to how to find adequate and appropriate songs and how to deliver the songs well. This is because the process of choosing the songs need to consider the learners' age, interest, and the language that is used in the lyrics (Sevik, 2011). Every time teachers find a song, they need to adjust it with those factors. Furthermore, Millington (2011) also reminds that teachers need to have as many songs as possible. This should be done in order to maintain learners' motivation. This may add the workload of teachers and the process of choosing the songs will require more time, but this careful process is prominent. Additionally, Ajibade and Ndububa (2008) emphasises that involving the children to choose the songs is a good consideration. Getting them participate during this process will trigger their engagement for the classroom practice. They also believe that this process can make the classroom practice become more students-centred as the learners take part since the beginning of learning process. This idea is interesting since teachers can also acknowledge learners' choice and make learners show better participation.

Secondly, teachers who work in rural areas and poor school should not be neglected. Any teaching materials should be relevant and applicable in any context. Copland et al. (2014) recommend that those teachers need to be given more attention and better access for teaching materials, including but not limited to songs. Teachers training will also be helpful. In that way, school and teaching practitioners will keep progressing in order to make teaching materials more accessible and adequate.

Lastly, as songs are claimed unable to teach young learners to communicate in English, we should not be pessimistic about this. As a matter of fact, songs can be effective means for language teaching if the potentiality of songs can be maximised. Moreover, a study by Lee (2009) indicates that children are able to learn simple English language and speak English more naturally after the teachers use songs in English language classroom. Songs should not only play role as an entertainment (Millington, 2011). In other words, songs should be developed well. They cannot stand alone as a supporting media. Songs can be potentially used for learning activities. If the activity and tasks following the songs can be executed well, the role of songs as pedagogical tool will be achieved and it can develop learners communicative competence. In relation to this, Ajibade and Ndububa (2008) also state that if the songs are chosen carefully and well-



adapted into classroom use, songs can be useful in every teaching and learning language phase. Songs can be executed during pre-teaching, whilst-teaching, and post-teaching. Furthermore, they indicate that songs can be executed during both presentation to start the learning and during the learning practice. One of the ways to execute songs is that songs can be played to gather children attention when starting the class and then teachers can also transform the songs into several meaningful practices. Activity like 'missing words' task can improve their vocabulary and listening skills. Moreover, words in songs should also be explained to the learners beforehand. It is to avoid confusion once learners listen to the songs and help them learning new vocabulary. Now, it is clear that songs can be used not only to start the lesson, but also in every phase of classroom practice with various methods. Therefore, the teachers' anxiety which think that songs cannot be a tangible means to improve young learners communicative competence can be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The use of songs has been common for teaching practitioners. Both teachers and the young learners show positive attitude toward the use of them since it is beneficial in terms of affective, cognitive, linguistic, and culture aspects. Beside their benefits, the difficulties that teachers face in using songs are undeniable. These difficulties need to be overcome in order to maximise the use of songs in the classroom. Better access to get the songs, careful process in choosing and better way in delivering the songs are essential. Teachers' effort is required so that the role of songs as pedagogical means can be maximised. If the problems are solved, the use of songs for teaching English for young learners can be more effective for both teachers and learners.

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