USING MUSIC IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR
YOUNG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Approved: _____________________________ Date: ____________
7 May 2016

Suggested content descriptor keywords:

Using music
English teaching
Young English Language Learners
USING MUSIC IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

A Seminar Paper
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Science in Education
English Education

By
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2016
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks go to my advisor, Regina R Pauly, who has led me into the field of education studies by her systematic and effective expert guidance and has been extremely supportive throughout this paper. Her lectures have broadened my horizon in this realm, her profound learning has strengthened my interest in education studies and her enlightening advice and help have been so important in rendering the present study possible as well as worthy of conducting. Most important of all, her patience and constant encouragement helped me drag through the numerous difficulties I have been confronted with in writing and revising this paper.

Secondly, I am greatly indebted to the other faculty members of University of Wisconsin Platteville, who have taught me and enlightened me during the two years of master degree program. I am also obliged to my friends, classmates and roommates especially, who have been accompanying me and providing me with much help which will be remembered in my whole life. I am also grateful to all those who have devoted much of their precious time to reading this thesis and offered me much beneficial advice.

Last but not the least, my sincere gratitude for my parents’ love, support and companionship in my life, extends beyond words.
Abstract

USING MUSIC IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Andele Wang

Under the Supervision of Regina R Pauly

Music is a universal language; Gardner (1993) noted that musical intelligence is the first intelligence to emerge in young learners. Young children appear to naturally sing a tune so it is beneficial to build their musical interests and enhance their literacy development. As an English teacher, I wondered if music can be used in teaching, and how do we use music to teach young English language learners. Therefore, a review of literature on the studies of the importance of music in language acquisition and choosing music in language acquisition was conducted. Through this paper, we can see there are many benefits of teaching English through music. The author also gives recommendations of using music in teaching English, hoping that will be helpful for English as second language teachers.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

People from all over the world have to learn English to adapt to globalization, so nowadays, English is more and more important. To Asian people, like we Chinese, learning English is difficult for most of us. How can we make this learning process more interesting and efficient? In my opinion, music may be a good way for students to learn English better. From my experience, music can make people relax, and stimulate one’s creativity. I have learned piano for many years since I was 5 years old; I also have many friends who learned piano at an early age, they performed very well both in playing the piano and studying. Therefore, I wondered if there is a relationship between music and language acquisition.

Gardner (1993) noted that musical intelligence is the first intelligence to emerge in young learners. Many young children appear to be naturally inclined to hum or to sing a tune so it is beneficial to build their musical interests and enhance their literacy development simultaneously.

Many language teachers have used English songs and music in the foreign language classroom. They found that English songs and music in general are good supplementary materials in teaching English. A lot of teachers and scholars have used English songs for research in classroom. (Keskin (2011); Smith, David, De Vries Jr., & Roberts (2011)). Many of them have been amazed with how quickly students are at learning songs. From my experience, it’s very easy to forget the language I have learned before, but it is quite easy to remember a foreign language song. From a previous study (Hijazi & Al-Natour...
(2012), we find using music in teaching English is an effective way for students to learn English better. Dima Hijazi and Amal Al-Natour (2012) investigated the impact of using music on teaching English poetry in Jordanian universities on students’ performance. It was found that students were more involved in learning when they were given an opportunity to listen to music which was accompanied by poems.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research is to research the connection between language and music and to provide some efficient and appropriate teaching strategies for using music in teaching English for young English language learners (ELLs).

Statement of the Problem

1. Why should English teachers use music to teach English?

2. How should we use music to teach English for ELLs in China?

Definition of Terms

Music: The science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity. (Merriam-Webster, 2016).

Learning: The act of acquiring new, or modifying and reinforcing, existing knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, or preferences and may involve synthesizing different types of information. (Wikipedia, 2016)

Teaching: The imparting of knowledge by a teacher or other knowledgeable person. (Wikipedia, 2016)

ELLs: Abbreviation for the term English Language Learners, an English language
learner is a person who is learning the English language in addition to his or her native language. (Wikipedia, 2016)

**Significance of the Study**

At present, there are a lot of problems in the pronunciation of English learners, even some English majors after graduation, still speak non-standard English. This is not their language so there are inappropriate expressions, pronunciations are not accurate, and more important is the tone and the rhythm processing is not good (Shen Qi, 2001).

“From high school to college and graduate school, students have learned English for 10 years, but they still cannot hear, cannot communicate to foreigners fluently”, that is called “dumb English” or “deaf English”, which has become a popular problem in Chinese students’ English learning (p.33). This demonstrates an important aspect of the English Language Learners (ELLs). In order to enhance students’ listening and speaking ability effectively, it is necessary to strengthen the students’ English pronunciation ability. Therefore, the introduction of European and American College English pronunciation using music is a useful attempt in the current teaching situation.

The study of using music in teaching English for young English Language Learners (ELLs) make some contributions to the practice of English teaching in China. This paper will make an impact on the use of music in teaching English and should be of importance to others seeking information related to best practices. By placing this paper in the context, we will see how music impacts language acquisition.
Methodology

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville using the University of Wisconsin system search tool beginning February through April, 2016. A brief review of the literature on the studies of the importance of using music in teaching ELLs was conducted. A second review of the literature relating factors, including the concerns and strategies of teachers in using music to teach ELLs, was conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will be made according to the above.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature has two parts, the importance of music in language acquisition and choosing music in language acquisition. And each part has been divided into two perspectives, related research in foreign countries and in China.

The Importance of Music in Language Acquisition

Related Researches in Foreign Countries

It is found that using music in teaching English poetry is an effective way for students to understand the poetry better, especially the students who are studying English as a second language, because it is not easy to comprehend and analyze poetry if you are not native speakers.

In the paper “The impact of using music on teaching English poetry in Jordanians universities”, Dima Hijazi and Amal Al-Natour (2012) constructed a pre/post test to investigate the impact of using music on teaching English poetry to Jordanian students. The participants were divided into two groups, an experimental group and control group. The students in the experimental group were taught poetry accompanied with music while those in the control group were taught in a traditional way (taught poetry without music). The research result found that there were statistically significant differences in post-test between control and the experimental groups, especially in experimental group. These improvements showed that students were more engaged in learning when they were given a chance to listen to music accompanied with poems, so it seems that using music may help students to comprehend the poetry better.
Kristin Lems (2005) drew on the work of Lowe (1998) which showed “students in a French immersion program in Canada who learned music concepts and patterns daily along with their language study did significantly better in both foreign language study and music study than their peers who did not study music” (p.14).

Keskin Funda (2011) drew on the work of Lo and Li (1998) which showed “songs are able to change the monotonous mood in the class and with the smoothing effect of music”, and they provide a comfortable class environment so that students can develop their lingual skills more easily.

Dima Hijazi & Amal Al-Natour (2012) stated that “the use of music for instruction in poetry is very important to focus on, that is, it takes little preparation to utilize songs for active class involvement, phrase and vocabulary acquisition, cultural appreciation, and pronunciation” (p. 301). Using music in teaching English is an effective way for students to learn English better. The two scholars investigated the impact of using music on teaching English poetry in Jordanian universities on students’ performance. It is found that students were more involved in learning when they were given an opportunity to listen to music accompanied with poems. They also indicated that “using music may help students to comprehend poetry and enjoy analyzing it” (p. 301).

Smith, Vries Jr., and Roberts (2011) pointed out that while music and music video can have value simply for their combination of language exposure, culture, information, and multisensory appeal, at least some mainstream music videos offer rich potential for exploring spiritual and moral concerns, especially when the intersections between words, sounds, and images are explored. Doing so through the medium of well-made music videos may make the process both more effectively engaging and, to the extent that the
songs are listened to further outside of class, more lasting.  

Kelli R. Paquette (2008) stated that music can transform classrooms to pleasant and positive learning environments, it’s a good way for early childhood learners to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Songs can be used in teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing. Paquette made a presentation on teaching ELLs in an elementary school, while she was a graduate student. There she taught the Spanish version of the song Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes (Cabeza, Hombros, Piernas, Pies). The other students in the class all learned the words quickly. When asked how they learned and remembered the words so quickly, one person replied, “Easy, put anything to music and I can remember it.”

One theory which is very famous and accepted is Howard Gardner’s educational theory of “multiple intelligence” which connected language acquisition to music. According to the theory, it was said that the people had inherent musical intelligence would use songs to memorize information (Gardner, 1993). Failoni (1993) noted that the theory of multiple intelligence revealed that people’s sense of musical intelligence can be used to enhance the foreign language. Failoni (1993) also explored that music was powerful motivator in language learning environment; it was helpful to improve the students’ communication skills and culture awareness.

Miller (2008) stated that music can be used in English education, not only because of its usefulness in the classroom, but also it has own qualities. Swanwick (1999) said “Music is a way of thinking, a way of knowing. As a symbolic form, it creates a space where new insights become possible. “In this respect, each English learner and teacher has their own special idea about music, which can stimulate their interest in learning
English. This is one of many ways in which music can be a tool in the English language classroom.

Campbell (2000) stated that music was popular in young children’s lives, and was also popular throughout their daily activities. Campbell (2000) also stated that the children of native speakers, practiced their rhythm, pronunciation, intonation, stress of their native language by traditional English songs and rhymes, which can offer a useful model for ELLs. Magne (2006) argued that scientific research has shown children who were regularly involved in musical training are better in both music and language than those who are not. Because of this, it was obvious that music made great impact on language learning. Hodges (1985) stated that the melodic contour, timbre variations, and rhythms of music were also important for speech production.

Lems (1996) stated that it was important to list some principles for choosing appropriate music in English language classroom. The lyrics should be easy to hear and understand, and it should be a lot of repetition for younger learners in oral practice, and it is also good if the songs are very popular or classic, so the students can easy acquire after the class. In general, people can easily forget everything they have learned in the other language but songs they might have got in their minds deeply (Murphey, 1996). A lot of students showed that they can memorize the vocabulary and sentence structure very clearly with their pop and classical music. Murphey also stated that some of the music can arouse their common sense to the foreign language culture, so that they would like to listen to the music outside of the classroom, thus learning English via music is helpful to English language learners automatically.

Kaemmer (1993) stated that music and language interacted with each other, that the
specific qualities of a language often influenced each other, the sound of language linked
sounds of music closely, these links were one of the reasons that it was hard to make
corresponding translation and interpretation of songs and operas. Using music to teach
English can help students to develop their creativity and understand the nature of culture,
it can help students to become sensitive listeners and can have a positive influence on
students’ academic achievement.

**Related Researches in China**

In Chinese research, researchers also find that music can help English learners to
learn English better. Jian (1988) made a study of English and music suggestive teaching
method. Jian found that studying while listening to music can improve one’s memory and
learning efficiency, he believes that play music in English class will play a positive role
in English teaching. Before the class, Jian played music like *Hope, Swan, Six Moment
Musicaux Di Spagna Sono la Bella*. These are soothing music pieces, that can make
students relax. *Capriccio, Memory, Traumerei, and Serenade are called “memory
music”*, so that if a teacher wants to take dictation, using these memory music was very
good. Another kind of music is for reading, such as *Humoresque, Minuet, Magnificat,
and Blue Tango*, as these musical pieces are exciting, and they can help students to
remember new words and sentences and activate their brain. Teaching new lessons,
teacher should use dulcet music like *Animal Music, Clarinet Polka, Travel Music,
Moonlight, and The Clock Store*. Jianjing Wang suggested that music emotion should be
in harmony and unity with the content of lessons. It is better not to use the pop music and
electronic music as it may cause a distraction.

Zheng’s “An empirical study of relevance of music intelligence and English
listening and speaking ability” used quantitative analysis in the paper. The subject of her study was 114 English major students from four universities in Nanjing. After administrating a questionnaire, she found that there is a significant difference between music and English ability—students who have higher music intelligence will make a better performance in English ability, and will get higher marks. The three reasons she raised are as follows: firstly, music training can make the sense of hearing more sensitive, so students can easily find the nuances in pronunciation and intonation. Secondly, music and English have a strong sense of rhythm, if students always play music, or listen to music, they will get the sense of rhythm and language. Thirdly, singing English songs can help English learners’ pronunciation a lot, because songs strengthen the stress, rhythm, and tone. By learning English songs, they can recite lyric and words efficiently. They can also learn culture and ways of thinking, that’s a good way to learn pure English in a short time.

In 2013, Zheng and Yan worked on another empirical study, “An empirical study of musical aptitude on English phonological skills”. They found there are significant differences in English phonological skills between students’ high music aptitude and those of low music aptitude, the study concludes that “music aptitude is not only an extra-linguistic variable but also a possible individual differences factor affecting L2 phonological acquisition” (p. 36).

Choosing Music in Language Acquisition

Related Researches in Foreign Countries

The writer considered that using music in teaching English for young English language learners, the music should be related with the teaching content closely. For
example, when we teach and reinforced the consonant sounds. According to Brown (2006) songs for English pronunciation included Mary Had a little Lamb to practice the “l” sound or Row, Row, Your Boat to practice the “r” sound. Brown (2006) also stated that the songs can be chosen to compare how words may not look the same but are still homophonic. For example, the lyrics to Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star can help students see how words may rhyme, i.e., are and star, or high and sky. Saricoban and Metin (2000) pointed that the best song for children should have international nature, such as Old MacDonald had a Farm and BINGO. These songs also can be used for teaching spelling words or individual letters. Teachers can add some motions to the songs to make them more meaningful and enjoyable for the children. Brown (2006) stated that children’s song and nursery rhyme are the good way to learn English, they are good materials because they are easy to sing and understand. Teachers should play music materials properly to different levels of students.

Miller (2008) mentioned that it is very important to choose an appropriate music in teaching ELLs, for example, the song should be with appropriate grammar, values and theme, teachers should choose the related topic and theme for classroom use. Popular or classic music will be better for students to listen outside of the class. Miller (2008) also stated that the lyrics of the song should be easy to understand, have a lot of repetition, which will provide benefits for students’ oral English.

Many songs are like a poem or story, it’s a good way to learn lyrics as literature or reading comprehension content. Lems (1996) mentioned that comparison methods can be used between song lyrics and related readings. Song lyrics also can be used in teaching English grammar to ELLs, as Lems (1996) mentioned, grammatically features of the song
can be analyzed for their relationship to the song’s meaning (e.g. “Why do you think the song writer used past tense in this section?”). Therefore, teachers should pick songs that contain target grammatical features they are going to teach in class, and which can make the boring grammar class more interesting.

Murphey (1996) mentioned that music can also be used as background music, using different types of background music in different activities, for example, lively music or jazz music may create a competitive atmosphere while students are doing pair work. From my experience, jazz music can make classroom loud, so the students are more likely to speak English louder.

**Related Researches in China**

Lin Liu is an English teacher in junior high school, and in her study “The application of music in Junior English class”, she tries to use music in English class. She let students do listening exercises by filling the lyric blanks. For example, an empty street, an ______ house, a hole ______ my heart. Let students listened to the song and fill in the blank, and then she corrects every word with students together. She found all students were listening to it carefully. They tried to use English songs to practice oral English, let students imitate singer’s pronunciation, and sing the song over and over. Liu (2011) proposed that “language and music often affect each other. Gardner’s theory justifies using music in the ESL classroom. People who have the musical intelligence will use songs to memorize information. There are various benefits of teaching English through music. Children are the easiest students to use music and song with” (p. 15). She also used English songs as reading materials, teaching students grammar by using lyrics, and letting them imitate the sentence structure to write new sentences. Before English class,
teacher can let students do some warm-up and exercises, such as sing the song “If You’re Happy and You Know It” (Groove Kid Nation), students will use hands, feet to act out the song, so it will make students exited.

Shaofeng Hua (2008) stated that music can let students relax and get rid of the blue mood. So the songs and music chosen should not be related to violence. The music should be able to change the atmosphere in English as a second language classroom. Hua pointed that mood music is very popular lately, dentist use mood music to sooth patient during the surgery, even heart surgeons use music to relax doctors during long and stressful operations. So it is the same with the music application in teaching foreign language in the classroom. Hua (2008) also pointed that music can also be used as background music while students are writing, reading or pair work. Slow music may stimulate thinking while composing, lively music may stimulate students speak louder and thinking faster while pair work. When students are doing topic based activity, teachers should play music which relate to the teaching material. For example, if students are learning The Great Gatsby, the teacher can play Jazz music at that time. If they are discussing the blacks in America, black music might be suitable for them. Hua also mentioned that it will be a good idea to ask students whether the music bothers, pleases them or not. So then teachers will know the feedback from students about using background music in class.
CHAPTER III
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a review of the literature, it is clear that most research conducted on the relationship between music and language acquisition; demonstrate many benefits to teaching English through music. Language and music often effect each other. Music can motivate young children to learn language. While words in the songs cannot help students to communicate, teachers need to exploit the musical materials usefully and develop suitable exercises and activities for young ELLs. Teachers can let students listen to English songs and fill words in the blank, or read the music lyrics as reading materials. Students can learn culture and ways of thinking from English songs, and they may cultivate their interests and good habits to learn English autonomously.

Songs can be used to improve listening comprehension, reading guessing and composition skills. It also can help students to have fun to practice and improve their pronunciation and intonation at the same time. I was teaching in a vocational school for one semester as my internship, but the students are unwilling to remember vocabulary, so I used English songs to let them practice listening skills. And then, in the process of learning English songs, I found that those who usually don’t like memorizing words would remember the lyrics in English songs. Besides, in order to sing well, the students even looked up the pronunciation and meaning of certain words.

On the other hand, instructors should choose appropriate songs and music to ELLs. The music and songs should relate to the teaching content, it should have the potential to change the atmosphere in the classroom, teachers should give energy to the students and
make them relax. For example, at Christmas, a teacher could let students listen to a Christmas song, it is a good way to build a festival atmosphere, and then teacher can let students think about and talk about the difference between Spring Festival and Christmas. In such a relax and happy atmosphere, students will be happy to talk and their thinking will be more creative. The use of music and songs in the classroom can stimulate very positive associations to the study of language, which otherwise might only be seen as a difficult task, necessary exams, frustration, and corrections.

In the study of music teaching practice, the writer found that using music in teaching English is a very popular and efficient way for ELLs. As teachers, we will try our best to build the students’ confidence to learn English via English songs.
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