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The Effectiveness Of Songs In Teaching English To Young Learners: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Over recent decades, using songs in English language classrooms for young learners has attracted considerable interest from researchers in applied linguistics. This review brings together empirical and theoretical studies that look at how song-based teaching helps children aged 3-12 acquire language skills. The analysis covers phonological awareness, vocabulary learning, grammatical understanding, and emotional factors influenced by musical activities. Evidence shows that songs work as a multisensory teaching tool that improves memory retention, lowers anxiety, and offers authentic language input. Yet their success depends on how teachers use them, how often students hear them, and whether they work alongside other teaching methods. This review points out gaps in current methodology and suggests paths for future research.

Keywords: Songs in language teaching, young learners, English as a foreign language, music and language acquisition, phonological awareness, vocabulary retention, affective factors, pedagogical strategies.

Introduction: Using songs as a teaching tool in foreign language classes brings together ideas from cognitive linguistics, music cognition, and educational psychology. When teaching English to young learners, songs have become a popular method because researchers believe that musical elements help with language processing and strengthen memory (Schön et al., 2008). Teachers include songs in English language teaching (ELT) programs based on several theories. Krashen's Input Hypothesis says that understandable input given in a low-anxiety setting works best for language learning (Krashen, 1982). Meanwhile, multimodal learning theories stress the value of engaging multiple senses at once (Paivio, 1986).

In this review, young learners means children between three and twelve years old. This age group has unique cognitive, emotional, and developmental traits that make their language learning different from teenagers and adults. Children at this stage show greater brain flexibility, better ability to hear sound differences, and less awareness of language rules compared to older learners (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006). These qualities make young learners especially responsive to implicit learning approaches that focus on meaning rather than form, use language in context, and include emotionally engaging activities—all characteristics of song-based teaching.

Even though teachers around the world use songs in English classrooms, research findings about their effectiveness vary widely. Studies use different research methods, define effectiveness in different ways, and examine different aspects of language. Because of this, teachers and curriculum planners need a clear summary of existing research to make informed teaching choices. This literature review meets that need by examining the theoretical foundations, research findings, and practical applications of using songs to teach young English learners.

This review follows a logical structure. After this introduction, the main section looks at theories connecting music and language processing, research on how songs affect pronunciation and sound awareness, vocabulary learning and memory, grammar skills, emotions and motivation, cultural understanding, and practical teaching strategies. The results and discussion section pulls together key findings and talks about research methods, while the conclusion offers practical advice and ideas for future studies.

METHOD

Theoretical Frameworks Linking Music and Language Acquisition

Researchers in cognitive neuroscience and psycholinguistics have developed many theories about how music and language connect. Patel (2008) put forward the Shared Syntactic Integration Resource Hypothesis (SSIRH), arguing that music and language use different systems to represent information but share brain resources for processing syntax. This overlap in the brain means that musical training or exposure might improve how people process language syntax, which gives a neurological reason why songs help with language learning.

Moreno and Mayer (2007) explained Multimodal Learning Theory, which says learning works best when information comes through several senses simultaneously. Songs naturally combine multiple inputs: auditory elements like melody, rhythm, and lyrics; visual components when paired with gestures or pictures; and physical movement when students act things out. This combination of senses can lead to deeper thinking and better memory compared to presenting language through just one channel (Degé & Schwarzer, 2011).

Lenneberg (1967) first described the Critical Period Hypothesis, which many researchers have since developed further. This idea suggests that children have a biologically set timeframe when they are most sensitive to language input. During this period, implicit language learning works at peak efficiency. Songs typically present language as whole chunks in context rather than through explicit grammar rules, which matches how young learners naturally prefer to learn (Enever, 2011). Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) also explains how songs reduce anxiety and help language learning. This theory says that emotional factors like anxiety, confidence, and motivation act as a filter that can block or allow language input to get through. Songs, because they are fun and non-threatening, can lower this filter and create better conditions for learning (Schoepp, 2001).

Phonological Awareness and Pronunciation Development

Many researchers have studied how songs affect phonological awareness and pronunciation accuracy in young English learners. Phonological awareness means being able to recognize and work with sound structures in language, which is crucial for learning to read and pronounce words correctly (Goswami & Bryant, 1990). Millington (2011) ran a study comparing two groups of young Spanish students learning English. One group used songs and chants in their lessons, while the other followed a regular textbook approach. The results showed that the group using songs did much better at recognizing rhymes and breaking words into syllables. This suggests that the rhythm and repetition in songs help develop sound processing skills.

Coyle and Gómez Gracia (2014) found similar results. When young learners regularly heard English songs with clear pronunciation and repeated sound patterns, they got better at telling apart similar sounds, especially ones that don't exist in their native language. Several things seem to affect how well songs work for pronunciation. These include how clearly the singer pronounces words, how complex the sounds in the lyrics are, and how much repetition and practice students get (Tegge, 2015). Murphey (1990) pointed out that songs with naturally paced, clear pronunciation help more than songs with fast singing or casual speech, particularly for beginners.

Songs might also help learners pick up suprasegmental features like stress patterns, intonation, and rhythm. English is a stress-timed language, meaning it has specific rhythmic patterns quite different from syllable-timed languages like Spanish or French. Fonseca-Mora (2000) argued that songs provide authentic examples of English rhythm and stress, potentially helping learners internalize these patterns through repeated listening and imitation. However, we still need more controlled experimental research to confirm this claim.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention

Learning vocabulary is another area where song-based teaching has shown clear benefits. Several studies have recorded better vocabulary retention when target words appear in songs compared to other teaching formats (Ludke, 2010; Salcedo, 2010). Researchers have linked improved vocabulary learning through songs to different mental processes. First, the melody in songs provides an extra memory cue that helps recall. Tulving and Thomson's (1973) Encoding Specificity Principle states that memory recall works best when the cues at recall time match those at learning time. When students learn vocabulary within a melody, that melody becomes a powerful cue that helps them remember words more easily (Wallace, 1994).

Second, most children's songs have a repetitive structure, which means students hear target vocabulary many times in a single listening or singing session. Vocabulary research consistently shows that how often learners encounter a word is critical for both remembering it and eventually using it (Nation, 2001). Ludke et al. (2014) ran a controlled experiment comparing vocabulary learning in three ways: spoken presentation, rhythmic presentation (speech with

rhythm but no melody), and sung presentation (speech with rhythm and melody). The results showed that singing led to better immediate recall and stronger retention after one week, especially for people with musical training or sensitivity. These findings tell us that both rhythm and melody help vocabulary learning, with melody adding extra memory benefits.

Still, we need to think about what kind of vocabulary appears in songs. Mora (2000) warned that while songs work well for teaching common vocabulary and fixed expressions, they can be challenging when introducing rare or abstract words that are hard to put in context within typical song lyrics. Also, some songs include non-standard grammar or vocabulary used mainly for rhyme or meter, which might introduce language forms that differ from standard usage (Domoney & Harris, 1993).

Grammar Acquisition and Formulaic Language

Compared to phonology and vocabulary, fewer researchers have looked at how songs help young learners develop grammar skills. But existing studies suggest possible benefits, particularly for formulaic sequences and structural patterns. Jolly (1975) noticed that songs help students learn grammatical structures when those structures appear in repeated, contextualized patterns. Songs with repeated question-answer patterns (like "Where is Thumbkin?") or conditional structures (like "If you're happy and you know it") give students many chances to hear specific sentence frames in meaningful contexts. This matches usage-based theories of language learning, which say that grammatical knowledge grows from recognizing patterns in the language we hear (Tomasello, 2003).

Medina (1990) found that young learners who regularly sang English songs showed better accuracy when using verb forms and subject-verb agreement, particularly for common irregular verbs often found in children's songs (like "go-went" and "see-saw"). He attributed this improvement to the combined effects of repetition, context, and the memory support that melody provides. Songs also serve as collections of formulaic language—phrases made up of several words that we store and retrieve as whole units rather than building them word by word. Ellis (2008) stressed how important formulaic language is in second language development, noting that native-like fluency relies heavily on mastering these ready-made phrases. Songs, especially those for children, are full of formulaic expressions ("How are you?", "Let's go!", "Thank you very much"), giving young learners chunks of language they can use in appropriate situations.

Nevertheless, the grammar input from songs may be limited. Lo and Li (1998) noted that children's songs typically use simple present tense, commands, and basic sentence structures, which might not provide enough exposure to more complex grammar like subordinate clauses, passive voice, or advanced tense combinations. This limitation means songs should be part of a balanced curriculum rather than the only teaching method.

Affective Variables and Motivation

Beyond cognitive and linguistic aspects, songs have a strong influence on emotional factors that affect language learning success. Many studies have shown that activities involving songs reduce anxiety, boost motivation, and create positive attitudes toward the target language and culture (Failoni, 1993; Mora, 2000). Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of language learning highlights motivation and attitudes as key determinants of achievement in second language learning. Songs, particularly when chosen to match learners' musical tastes and cultural backgrounds, can increase integrative motivation—the desire to learn a language based on positive feelings toward the target language community and culture.

Moreover, songs create a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere. Horwitz et al. (1986) described language learning anxiety as including fear of speaking, test anxiety, and worry about negative judgment. Traditional language teaching often triggers these anxieties through direct error correction and individual performance demands. By contrast, group singing reduces individual performance pressure and builds a supportive, collective learning environment (Lems, 2001). Purcell (1992) studied the connection between song-based teaching and young learners' willingness to speak English. He found that students who regularly took part in singing activities showed much greater willingness to start spontaneous English conversations compared to students in the control group.

However, individual differences in musical ability and preferences create variation in how students respond emotionally to song-based teaching. Engh (2013) documented that while most young learners react positively to songs, some show indifference or negative reactions, particularly when they see songs as childish or culturally unfamiliar. These findings highlight the importance of careful song selection and differentiated instruction to accommodate diverse learner preferences and developmental stages.

Cultural Awareness and Authenticity

Songs are authentic cultural materials that offer insights into the values, traditions, and social practices of target language communities. Lems (2001) argued that songs expose learners to idiomatic expressions, informal language, and cultural references that rarely

show up in textbooks but appear frequently in everyday native speaker conversations. This exposure can improve sociolinguistic competence—the ability to use language appropriately in different social situations. Traditional English children's songs carry cultural knowledge about holidays, historical events, and social customs. Songs like "London Bridge is Falling Down" or "Yankee Doodle" convey historical and cultural information while simultaneously providing language practice. This dual purpose aligns with content-based instruction approaches that combine language learning with subject matter (Met, 1999).

Still, teachers need to carefully examine the cultural content of songs. Domoney and Harris (1993) cautioned that some traditional songs contain outdated language, culturally specific references that might puzzle learners from different backgrounds, or old-fashioned social attitudes. Teachers must therefore engage in thoughtful selection and, when needed, provide context or adaptations to ensure cultural accessibility and appropriateness. Additionally, the availability of contemporary popular music offers opportunities to expose learners to current language trends and informal registers. However, the linguistic complexity and content of popular music may exceed young learners' proficiency levels and developmental appropriateness, requiring careful selection and possible modification (Murphey, 1992).

Implementation Strategies and Pedagogical Considerations

Integrating songs effectively into young learner curricula requires systematic planning and purposeful implementation. Orlova (2003) proposed a three-phase teaching sequence for song-based lessons: pre-listening activities (setting context, teaching essential vocabulary beforehand, activating prior knowledge), while-listening activities (multiple listening passes with increasingly focused tasks), and post-listening activities (follow-up tasks targeting production, creative extension, or linguistic analysis). Millington (2011) stressed the importance of active participation rather than passive listening. Teaching strategies that promote engagement include gap-fill exercises, sequencing activities, gestures or movement to accompany songs, and creative composition of new verses. These activities turn songs from mere listening experiences into interactive learning opportunities that engage multiple cognitive processes.

How often and how consistently teachers use songs seems to influence their effectiveness. Coyle and Gómez Gracia (2014) found that daily exposure to songs produced better results than weekly sessions, suggesting that regular, sustained engagement maximizes learning benefits. However, relying too much on a small repertoire of songs may lead to boredom and diminishing returns, pointing to the need for variety and periodic introduction of new material. Technology integration has expanded possibilities for song-based teaching. Digital platforms give access to extensive song collections, video content, interactive lyrics displays, and recording features that let learners create their own performances (Burston, 2014). These technological tools increase engagement and provide opportunities for independent learning outside the classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research reviewed above reveals growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of songs in teaching English to young learners across multiple linguistic areas and emotional factors. However, the size of effects varies depending on specific outcomes measured, learner characteristics, and implementation quality. Research on phonological awareness and pronunciation consistently shows positive effects, with effect sizes ranging from moderate to large across studies (Coyle & Gómez Gracia, 2014; Millington, 2011). These findings suggest that songs are particularly valuable resources for developing sound skills, likely because of the built-in focus on sound patterns in musical structure.

Vocabulary learning research similarly indicates significant advantages for song-based teaching, particularly regarding initial learning and long-term memory (Ludke et al., 2014; Salcedo, 2010). The combination of repetition, melodic encoding, and context creates optimal conditions for vocabulary learning. Evidence about grammar development remains less clear, with studies reporting modest effects mainly limited to formulaic sequences and common structural patterns. The emotional benefits of songs emerge as one of the strongest findings across studies, with consistent reports of increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and positive attitudes (Failoni, 1993; Mora, 2000).

Several factors seem to moderate how well song-based teaching works. First, implementation quality significantly influences outcomes. Songs used without systematic connection to broader learning goals yield minimal benefits, whereas carefully planned, objective-driven song activities show substantial effectiveness (Orlova, 2003). Second, learner characteristics, including age, proficiency level, musical ability, and learning style preferences, introduce variation in how students respond to song-based teaching. Third, cultural and contextual factors, including educational system expectations, class size, and available

resources, limit implementation possibilities.

The research literature shows several methodological limitations that weaken confidence in findings. Many studies use small sample sizes, lack random assignment to conditions, rely on researcher-designed instruments of uncertain quality, and fail to control for potentially confusing variables such as teacher enthusiasm or overall teaching quality. Studies examining sustained effects over long periods are particularly scarce, limiting our understanding of whether observed benefits last or fade over time. Furthermore, comparative research examining songs against other teaching approaches remains limited, with few studies systematically comparing songs to other engaging, multimodal activities such as games, storytelling, or drama.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has brought together theoretical and empirical research examining how effective songs are for teaching English to young learners. The evidence, while showing methodological variation and limitations, points toward the conclusion that songs are a valuable teaching tool that improves multiple dimensions of language learning when used systematically and purposefully. Songs show particular strength in developing phonological awareness, helping vocabulary acquisition, providing exposure to formulaic language, and creating emotionally optimal learning environments.

For teachers, several practical implications emerge from this review. First, selecting songs should be guided by clear learning objectives, linguistic appropriateness, cultural relevance, and learner preferences. Second, implementation should emphasize active participation through varied activities that promote multiple exposures and meaningful processing of target language features. Third, songs should be integrated systematically into broader teaching sequences rather than used sporadically or just for entertainment. Fourth, teachers should pay attention to individual differences in musical ability and preferences, providing alternative activities for learners who respond less favorably to musical input.

Future research should address identified methodological limitations through rigorous experimental designs with adequate sample sizes, random assignment, validated assessment tools, and longitudinal follow-up. Comparative studies examining songs against other engaging teaching approaches would clarify the specific contributions of musical elements. Additionally, research should investigate optimal frequency, duration, and sequencing of song-based activities, as well as the relative effectiveness of different song types and genres. Brain imaging studies could provide insights into neural mechanisms underlying how songs help language learning. Finally, research should examine how songs contribute to developing pragmatic competence, discourse skills, and cross-cultural communicative competence—areas that have received little attention in existing research.

To conclude, while methodological limitations prevent us from making definitive claims about whether song-based teaching is superior to other approaches, the accumulated evidence supports including songs as a valuable, theoretically grounded, and empirically supported component of English instruction for young learners. The multiple benefits spanning cognitive, linguistic, and affective domains justify continued attention to optimizing how we select, implement, and integrate songs within young learner curricula.

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