



Perspectives upon Integrating Music into Freshman English Pronunciation Training Classroom

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of integrating music into English pronunciation practice. Ninety-five English major students from a technological university located in central Taiwan participated in this project. Six songs were selected and played by means of using YouTube. Students were given a list of vocabulary words selected from the lyrics and learned pertinent pronunciation rules that were augmented with phonetic symbols. They were asked to take quizzes that required memorizing the song's lyrics. The findings point out that almost all students enjoyed listening to songs and indicated that they had become more familiar with many English songs and the rules of pronunciation by practicing singing and memorizing the lyrics.

Keywords: English songs, YouTube, Pronunciation practice, Phonetic symbols, Lyrics memorization.

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1. Introduction

Music can bring a lot of fun for people in their daily life, as well as stimulate the restrained atmosphere in the fixed traditional classrooms. In this study, the teacher/researcher attempted to examine how students perceive the effects of reinforcing pronunciation skills by incorporating music retrieved from YouTube. Ninety-five English major freshman students from a technological university located in the center of Taiwan participated in this project. They were taking a course, titled English Music Appreciation while the study was conducted. The goal of this course aimed at enhancing students' English pronunciation skills. Based on the English lyrics, learners heightened their understanding of the basic pronunciation rules, which include recognizing the phonetic signs, learning the pronunciation practices applied by native English speakers, and distinguishing syllables and stress. In addition to merely listening to the melodious notes and the song's stories, learners were expected to become aware of the meanings in the songs that were involved and be able to recite English lyrics and sing various English songs by themselves.

Many different kinds of learning and teaching resources related to pronunciation instruction can be found in the bookstores and websites in Taiwan, such as the textbooks titled English Pronunciation Practice published by LTTC (the Language Training & Testing Center) and English Pronunciation Made Easy published by Cave Bookstore, and Introduction to Phonetics I, an open courseware offered by National Taiwan University. In addition, many music CDs/mp3 also focus on English learning, such as the materials titled 唱歌學英語：冠軍風雲特輯, 跟著西洋情歌學英文, and Let's Sing. However, few teaching materials specifically contain both text and music in one on pronunciation instructions. Therefore, based on the requirements of helping students obtain the pronunciation skills through music appreciation, the teacher/researcher applied e-materials downloaded from the Internet, which contained music and its relevant lyrics, especially music from YouTube, to conduct the class. For the purpose of assisting students to develop a better set of global contexts and using music to polish their pronunciation, the music selection inclined towards ageless music with slower tempos, for example songs such as Sound of Music and All Kinds of Everything. Six songs were selected in total. In addition to just listening to the beautiful music, students were asked to read the lyrics aloud at the beginning of the semester, and later on were asked to memorize the lyrics so that they could sing songs independently and refine their pronunciation skills. In order to help students realize the meaning of the lyrics and maintain enthusiasm for the music, movie viewing was also included in the syllabus. The film selected for this was titled Sound of Music.

Through the integration of music into pronunciation practice, the teacher/researcher attempted to explore what perspectives students initially had, to what extent they could then reinforce their pronunciation skills in both phonetics cognition and phonetic symbols recognition, and to understand what kinds of songs students preferred and how music helped the students to develop their English pronunciation ability. Most importantly, the music provided from the Internet helped to open a door of understanding for the EFL learners by encouraging them to better appreciate a variety of beautiful songs sung in English.

2. Literature Review

Some ESL teachers working with adult learners do not have training in teaching pronunciation. For example, [Macdonald \(2002\)](#) researched the perspectives of eight ESL teachers in language centers in Australia who reported that they were somewhat reluctant to teach pronunciation to ESL students. Several teachers commented that in comparison with other skill areas, pronunciation was a relatively neglected area. However, [Schaezel and Low \(2009\)](#) argued that although there are challenges to teaching and learning English pronunciation, it is an area vital to adult English language learners' communicative competence. They stated that teachers can help learners gain the skills they need for effective communication in English. However, how can teachers effectively help ESL/EFL students improve their pronunciation skills? Many researchers believe that the use of songs can contribute to the development of many language skills, from grammar to pronunciation. For instance, [Lems \(2001\)](#) offers strategies for using music in the adult ESL classroom which cover listening, oral, reading, writing, vocabulary building, and cultural knowledge instruction. Neurologists have found that musical and language processing occur in the same area of the brain, and there appear to be parallels in how musical and linguistic syntax are processed ([Lems, 2001](#); [Maess and Koelsch, 2001](#)).

Many studies have investigated the effects of employing music in the ESL/EFL and foreign language classroom ([Domoney and Harris, 1993](#); [Fitzgerald, 1994](#); [Smith, 2003](#); [Sarıçobana and Kuc, 2010](#); [Keskin, 2011](#); [Laramie, 2012](#)). For example, in their study, [Domoney and Harris \(1993\)](#) described a teacher training workshop in which, through a series of linked tasks, teachers explore how pop music can be integrated into their English programs. This method was viewed as an important success in the reorganization of curriculum. When using various songs and games to improve pronunciation of Turkish young learners, [Sarıçobana and Kuc \(2010\)](#) claimed that it is an effective way of teaching pronunciation to young learners. In the study of using songs as audio materials in teaching Turkish as foreign language, the researcher also pointed out that "melodies, rhythms and rhymes in a song facilitate language learning improve students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills ([Keskin, 2011](#))."
[Laramie \(2012\)](#) investigated whether or not the integration of music into a beginner German course in higher education affected students' proficiency levels when considering only the choice of song. One of the tools the researcher employed was to provide students access to the song lyrics through a YouTube video. Test results indicated slightly higher vocabulary scores and slightly lower grammar scores during music instruction. In the study, it suggests that youtube.com might be used effectively during and outside of class to increase exposure to foreign language practices. Likewise, with the help of YouTube, [Chou \(2013\)](#) investigated the effects of YouTube-based English song teaching on elementary school students' listening comprehension and learning motivation. She indicated that YouTube-based English song instruction not only could reinforce students' listening comprehension, it also helped them learn new words in a more efficient way.

Many researchers have investigated the effects of employing English music to language learning in Taiwan (Fang, 2001; Chiang, 2003; Lin, 2005; Huang, 2007; Wen, 2009; Kuo, 2010; Lin, 2010; Chen, 2013). In their findings, they all agreed with the positive effects of integrating English music into English learning. However, the participants involved in their studies were either from the elementary or junior high schools. Will the different educational levels influence the English learning performance through exposing music? In this study, the teacher/researcher employed YouTube as a supplementary tool in pronunciation practice performed by a group of EFL college students. By means of using music as audio and visual materials, the researcher proposed two research questions that were designed to explore the EFL learners' perspectives on integrating the English songs into the pronunciation practice.

2.1. Research Questions Exploration

1. What extent did the students enjoy the music appreciation class?
2. How did they perceive the pedagogy of integrating music into pronunciation practice?

3. Methodology

The research site was located in a technological university situated in the center of Taiwan. The data sources included three survey questionnaires, four quizzes, a mid-term exam, and a final exam.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 95 freshman students from the English program. They enrolled in the required course, titled English Music Appreciation, instructed by the teacher/researcher during their very first semester. It was a two-hour class and was conducted in a traditional classroom equipped with Internet access.

3.2. Instructional Materials

As mentioned earlier, there were no appropriate textbooks for the class; therefore, all teaching materials, such as the music and the lyrics, were retrieved from the Internet. The e-texts contained the music with the lyrics, the lists of vocabulary words, and phonetic symbols displayed as power point slides. The students were informed of the titles of the six selected songs in the first class meeting so that they were able to use YouTube to listen to the music according to their personal schedules. They were also asked to download the list of lyrics with specific highlighted vocabulary words uploaded by the teacher to the e-platform beforehand. They had to check those vocabulary words phonetic symbols and Chinese meaning and then upload completed assignments to the designated files in the e-platform. In addition, the teacher prepared a series of phonetic symbols with relevant vocabulary words and demonstrated them in the form of power point slides. Hence, it was not necessary for students to bring traditional textbooks to class. Instead, assisted by the facility equipped with computers and Internet access, the students could watch, listen, and read the specific parts of the lesson as they were projected on the screen.

3.3. Time Frame

The study lasted one semester with two weekly contact hours in the traditional classroom. In addition to the weeks for the mid-term and final exams, students were required to attend the class once a week. They also had to have access to the Internet to do assignments after class.

3.4. Data Collection

3.4.1. Feedback Sheets: Three Kinds of Survey Questionnaires

The pre survey was conducted in the first class meeting. It mainly focused on students' knowledge about pronunciation rules and their phonetic symbol conceptions. It also included perspectives on incorporating pronunciation practice with music. Halfway through the semester, an on-going survey was conducted. Students gave feedback about their preferences of music, familiarity with the pronunciation rules and their perception of the effects of integrating music for pronunciation improvement. For the post survey, the above questions were asked once again in order to better pinpoint their views on the use of music appreciation upon the improvement of pronunciation skills throughout the semester. Students also indicated what instructional style they preferred and were asked to reflect upon what they had learned in the class.

3.4.2. Four Quizzes

During the semester, students were given four quizzes, which covered six designated songs, as well as sections covering writing lyrics from memory, and phonetic symbols familiarity. At the end of the semester, the students were asked to indicate which song they liked the most. The outcomes of students' preferences are illustrated in Table 1.

Table-1. The preference on selected songs

Titles of songs	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th
Words of lyrics	134	232	51	151	310	277
Rank of preference	5	1	2	4	6	3
Ratio of correction	45	87	81	81	77	--

Note: 1st: All Kinds of Everything ('70); 2nd: Colors of the Wind ('90); 3rd: Do Rei Me ('60); 4th: Edelweiss; 5th: Sound of Music; 6th: You've Got a Friend ('70). Rank of preference: 1: the most; 6: the least. "Ratio of correction" refers to the ratio of correct answers that the students supplied to questions they were asked in specific quizzes pertaining to the memorization of a given song's lyrics. For example, in a quiz of ten questions in which six were answered correctly; the ratio of correction would be 60.

The participants were given quizzes on writing lyrics from memory of five songs but the sixth song, You've Got a Friend, was skipped; thus, the section of the ratio of correction indicated in the table above also does not include

this song. The table shows that the fifth song, Sound of Music, possesses the largest number of lyrics, but was the least preferred and demonstrated the second to lowest number of the ratio of correction figures. The most preferred song, Colors of the Wind, earned the highest ratio of correction score with the second largest number of lyrics. In addition, the song, All Kinds of Everything, was second to last in preference and had the lowest ratio of correction. It seems that the preference of songs and the ratio of correction are relatively in direct proportion and that the number of lyrics in a given song might not influence the preference for it or the number of corrections that were required.

3.4.3. Mid-Term and Final Exams

Students were asked to write specific song lyrics from memory in the mid-term and final exams. The lyrics were presented in the form of a cloze test. The teacher would sing the song for the students to give them a reminder and students would listen and put the correct spelling words in the right blanks. The purpose for these exams was to test students' listening comprehension on the pronunciation of specific words and their spelling. In addition, students indicated that they preferred the teacher's singing to the recorded singers during the exam because the teacher would sing slower than the recorded singers.

3.4.4. Procedures of Pronunciation Instruction

Before the class, the teacher/researcher downloaded the lyrics of specific song from the website and confirmed its lyrics with the subtitles illustrated on its music video showed in the YouTube. Then highlighting twenty to thirty vocabulary words on each lyric, she then uploaded the lyrics to the e-platform set by the university so that the participants could download them. Students were asked to give the highlighted words phonetic symbols, sort vowel sounds, and their Chinese meaning, and upload their accomplished assignment using Microsoft Office Excel worksheet. Simultaneously, the teacher/researcher would also prepare a series of phonetic symbols and relevant vocabulary word examples in the form of power point slides (PPT slides). In the class, by means of projecting PPT slides with phonetic symbols and a list of vocabulary words on the classroom screen, students focused on pronunciation practice and refining their understanding of pronunciation rules. In between times, they would listen to the music retrieved from YouTube. After they had learned three relevant songs, Do Rei Me, Edelweiss, and Sound of Music, one specific film, The Sound of Music, was selected for students to watch so as to gain their interest and to help them to enjoy the class,

4. Findings: Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Based on the survey questionnaires collected, the author will illustrate how the participants enjoyed the music and what awareness of phonetic symbols they learned. Students' perspectives on integrating music into pronunciation practice will also be explored.

- **What Extent did the Students Enjoy the Music Appreciation Class?**

The preference on music and experiences of karaoke bar attendance are illustrated in [Table 2](#).

Table-2. The preference on music

Music Preference (N=95)						
Singing	yes	73	(77%)	no	22	(23%)
Listening	yes	93	(98%)	no	2	(2%)
Singing + Listening	yes	73	(77%)	no	2	(2%)
Karaoke Bar Attendance (N=95)						
	yes	80	(84%)	no	15	(16%)
Familiarity with the Pronunciation Rules						
Mid term Exam (N=95)						
	yes	90	(95%)	no	5	(5%)
Final Exam (N=92)						
	yes	89	(97%)	no	3	(3%)

It shows that 77 percent of the students were fond of singing and 98 percent preferred to listen; thus, almost all students were interested in listening to music. Eighty-four percent of the students had been to karaoke bars with their family or friends. In Taiwan, songs are usually provided in five different languages at the bar, i.e. Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, English and Cantonese. The number of students who sang songs in each language was: Mandarin Chinese 71; Taiwanese 40; Japanese 3; English 22; Cantonese 0. This indicates that students mostly sang Mandarin Chinese songs and no one sang in Cantonese. In addition, the students preferred Taiwanese to English songs. The question about the concepts on the familiarity with the pronunciation rules was asked twice. In the mid-term exam, 95 percent of students agreed that they had made progress and in the final 97 percent of students agreed to having done so.

Table-3. Preference of the type of class conducted

Preference of the Class Conducted	
Teacher oriented	71%
Student oriented	23%
Both	6%
Preference of Dealing with Music	
Writing the lyrics from memory	49%
Singing in public	19%
Giving presentation about specific songs	32%

Table 3 illustrates how students preferred the way the class was conducted and their preferred way to deal with the music appreciation classes in subsequent semesters. Seventy-one percent of the students indicated that they preferred a teacher oriented class, twenty-three percent preferred a student oriented class, and six percent liked both. At the end of the semester, students were asked how they would prefer the music appreciation classes to be structured in subsequent semesters. Three choices were provided: (1) writing the lyrics from memory; (2) singing in public; (3) giving a presentation about specific songs. It seems that writing lyrics from memory was the preferred method of learning.

- **How Did They Perceive the Pedagogy of Integrating Music into Pronunciation Practice?**

In the post survey questionnaire, by means of reviewing the overall learning stages so as to examine what extent students benefitted from pronunciation practice, the question: "What have you learned this semester?", was asked. In addition, in the music oriented pronunciation learning model, students were also asked to list as many vowel sounds as they could. Overall, student responses can be grouped into three categories:

4.1.1. Singing English Songs Became More Fun

Many students indicated that as they became more familiar with English songs they began to enjoy listening to and singing them more and more. They found, as a matter of fact, it is not so difficult to learn English songs. One student uttered, "I did not know the song the Sound of Music before, but I am really enjoying listening to it. The more I listen, the more I love." Another student stated that "I used to listen to noisy music, such as rock and roll and rap, but I have found many good music through participating in the class". Many of them reflected that they obtained better performance in this class than other classes they were taking, such as those involving rote grammar lessons, listening comprehension training, and general English practice.

4.1.2. Being Aware of Pronunciation Rules Assisted with the Phonetic Symbols

In the quiz, approximately 20 percent of the students were not able to list vowel sounds correctly, eighty percent mixed up the alphabet letters and phonetic symbols, and a full twenty percent had no comprehension whatsoever about the symbols. Most students, however, grew more familiar with the pronunciation rules and the assisting tool, the phonetic symbols. They indicated that they knew how to autonomously pronounce specific vocabulary words assisted with the phonetic symbols via the dictionary. Some students indicated that they could more easily and accurately pronounce vocabulary words if they could recognize the phonetic symbols.

4.1.3. Vocabulary Word Banks Increased

Students were given several quizzes on writing lyrics from memory. From this, they indicated that they not only learned many words they did not know before, they also memorized spelling more effectively since they knew the pronunciation rules. Most importantly, by memorizing the lyrics, they were able to pronounce unfamiliar words more easily.

4.2. Discussion

It is feasible to integrate music into pronunciation practice. It indicated that the preference and familiarity of specific songs could be significant factors to affect learning outcomes. Although it was easy for the teacher/researcher to retrieve specific songs and lyrics from the Internet as teaching materials; before demonstrating them to students, all materials needed to be organized according to pronunciation training purpose in advance.

4.2.1. Music Preference Strengthening Learning Outcomes

More than 90 percent of students agreed that they grew more familiar with the pronunciation rules through this class. The teacher/researcher gave pronunciation instruction including both identifying phonetic symbols and practicing pronunciation forms used by native English speakers. In addition, students had to keep listening and singing specific songs covered in their quizzes. Through this, many of them eventually learned the pronunciation skills.

It is worth mentioning that the song, Colors of the Wind, was the most popular with students because many of them indicated that they had seen the movie and listened to the song when they were in elementary or junior high schools. In addition, for those students who lived in the dormitory, the lyrics of You've Got a Friend were particularly meaningful. It made them better realize the importance of friendship when they were far away from home and thus resonated with them strongly. However, the other songs, such as All Kinds of Everything and Sound of Music, were not as popular. Thus, the familiarity of the songs and the contents of the lyrics may both influence learning outcomes. For example, the song, Sound of Music, issued in the 50's, was the least preferred and this resulted in unsatisfactory performances on the written quiz. Students simply were not familiar with the song and this affected learning negatively. In addition, the number of words in the lyrics of this song, which is close to 300, also seemed to contribute to its unpopularity. This, in turn, was reflected in poor quiz performances.

4.2.2. The Effects of Writing the Lyrics from Memory through Youtube Assisted

Stemming from both the unfamiliarity with English songs and the traditional learning style, the students sang Mandarin Chinese songs much more than English songs at the Karaoke bars. They also preferred the teacher oriented mode. That is, they preferred it when the teacher led them step by step when learning to sing the songs. However, the goal of the class aimed at reinforcing pronunciation skills instead of singing skills instruction. In this, a very helpful supplementary tool, YouTube, provided immediate assistance. Students could gain access to the Internet to download the music and listen to it repeatedly. Not only could they autonomously learn the songs, they also increased their vocabulary word banks by memorizing the song lyrics. The technical tool, YouTube, indeed, thus could be used effectively in a music appreciation class.

4.2.3. The Perspectives of Incorporating Music into Pronunciation Skill Development

In the feedback, one student commented, “In this class, I have learned many phonetics symbols and the pronunciation skills. I also have listened to more good songs than before. In addition, I can practice the pronunciation autonomously by means of listening to the music.” This pointed out that the student not only enjoyed listening to the music, he/she also learned specific vocabulary words found in the lyrics. Combining the lyrics resulted in its being easier for students to learn to sing and develop their pronunciation skills. Thus, music indeed helps students to learn pronunciation skills. In the process of attempting to familiarize themselves with the lyrics, the students needed to listen to the music constantly and mimic singing the songs. Gradually, students may thus enhance their pronunciation skills. Even so, a small portion of students did not agree with the practice of using music to augment pronunciation practice. Some of them were simply not interested in singing; therefore, they had less opportunity to practice the unfamiliar words listed in the lyrics. Others got used to separating spelling and pronunciation and focused on memorizing the spelling of the word without attempting to read it. Thus, music and pronunciation were in two different worlds to them. On the other hand, most students were contextually fond of listening to music, which can stimulate students’ interests and motivate them to pay attention to the pleasant and melodic sounds. In this, it will lead them to more time on task and therefore improve outcomes, pronunciation skill development.

5. Conclusion

In this study, by listening to music retrieved from the Internet, students not only enjoyed the beautiful melodies, most importantly, many of them also achieved the main goal of developing pronunciation skills. Based on the lyrics, the teacher/researcher selected vocabulary words with different vowel sounds and instructed students with the pronunciation rules associated with identifying phonetic symbols. Furthermore, by means of learning to sing selected songs, students were required to know how to read the specific vocabulary words that appeared in the lyrics. Gradually, they became familiar with the pronunciation rules and could read vocabulary words aloud without hesitation. In addition, most of them gained awareness of recognizing phonetic symbols. At the beginning, some of the students did not know what vowel sounds were and could not complete the assignments the teacher requested. Afterwards, many students claimed that they could pronounce unknown words accurately on their own via the phonetic symbols illustrated in the dictionary. Overall, many students made progress when their pronunciation skills were assisted with the music displayed on YouTube. However, which specific songs are selected should be considered carefully. It seems that students had better performance on the songs issued in the 90s than those released earlier. While teachers cannot find appropriate textbooks for the class, it is worth employing e-resources as instructional materials. To do so, of course, it is imperative that classrooms be equipped with access to the Internet.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

With access to the Internet, the instructional materials applied in a music appreciation class can provide EFL learners more learning avenues. Using the preferred songs and lyrics presented on the web, most students achieved more satisfactory performances by means of writing the lyrics from memory. This approach unquestionably benefits students on both pronunciation skill reinforcement and vocabulary word development.

Instructors can also encourage their students to upload their satisfactory works to YouTube to share with others. As such, students may become more autonomous, creative, motivated, responsible, and serious in their study.

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