

Songs to improve pronunciation: In the case of intermediate English learners in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: *Some English sounds do not exist in Uzbek language and this makes problems for Uzbek students to make English sounds. The observation results showed that songs are useful tools to improve pronunciation. This paper attempts to find out the importance of English songs in incorporating into English classrooms to improve pronunciation skills. The previous theories in the field were analyzed. Questionnaire and focus group interviews were taken from English learners and teachers at the IT Park, Bilim Orzu and The Oxford educational centres, in Samarkand city. The research results will be used to create an online social network for teaching English pronunciation interactively.*

Keywords: teaching English language, song lyrics, improving pronunciation skills, boosting the motivation.

1. Introduction.

English language is one of the most prominent global languages in the world. High level of proficiency in this language is substantially important to keep up with the pace of this advanced era. As nearly all information can be found in English language. Online courses, high-quality textbooks, YouTube videos etc are widely available in English language to learn any kind of discipline whereas those are less likely to be available in such scope in other languages. All around the world employees are recruiting the employers with high level of English proficiency. People who know English can find job in any place, even without getting out of home, such as online freelancing, online teaching.

English language is one of the ways which can take Uzbek youth, scientists, students and employers to an international stage. Many initiatives were taken place in Uzbekistan for widening the scope of teaching and learning process of English language since decades. Recent years, learning English has been starting from the early ages of children, in other words, English language is implemented to kindergarten programs. What is more, this learning procedure lasts during the whole educational system and it is considered as one of the core disciplines at school, college and university curriculums. Reflecting to these initiatives, vast majority of private language centres have been launching in any areas ranging from downtown cities to remote rural areas. Almost anyone who wants to learn English have an access to learn English. Additionally there are many online materials who has limited budget that cannot access for language schools.

In Uzbekistan, majority of learners are either English teachers or students who want to study abroad or the potential scientists who wants to delve deeper on their topic who use language as a tool of getting more information for their research works. Therefore, it is obvious they will measure their English language skills through either CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) scale or IELTS (International English Language Test System). Hence, to meet the requirements of these tests all learners are required to attain four main skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening in high level of proficiency. Teachers are vastly using Cambridge and Oxford University textbooks to teach their students. Complex programs, which involve audio materials, CDs, authentic materials, textbooks, are being used to teach students by English instructors.

However, English learners are facing challenges to improve their communication skills even hardworking ones. Firstly, the syntax of English and Uzbek languages varies substantially. Word formation, sentence structure and pronunciation of these languages do not strike any resemblance. Another reason why students are struggling to communicate in English because they never met any native speaker in their life and their knowledge is only confined to textbooks and meaningless practices in classrooms. The other reason why they feel like a bad communicators is the lack of pronunciation skills in English language. Most students overwhelmed with English pronunciation rules which, seemingly, never end. In Uzbek language, the word is pronounced as how it is written while in English language, there are more sounds than letters and any word can be pronounced in an unexpected way. This is a mind-blowing phenomenon for the Uzbek learners. Learning the words' transcription one-by-one or either learning their pronunciation take hours and demands the large amount of dedication from the learners. On top of that, these very pronunciation rules can be forgotten in a short period. Of course, there are vast amount of textbooks, online and audio materials or YouTube videos available to teach pronunciation. Nevertheless, most learners are being frustrated in a confusion state because of them without knowing what to learn.

As an English teacher, I cannot highlight more the importance of English songs' implementation in any English teaching curriculum to teach English pronunciation. Students can acquire the second language pronunciation in a fun atmosphere without getting lost in the large amount of dull pronunciation rules. English songs are precious free sources to master at English pronunciation. They give an opportunity to practice the pronunciation in a meaningful way. Students do not get bored nor get

frustrated by practicing English songs. Because properly selected songs encourage the learner to acquire the English language subconsciously.

The hypothesis of this research paper is to examine the importance of implementing English songs into English classroom as a media. This is tested by questionnaires and focus-group-interviews among English teachers and learners in Uzbekistan. Along the way, whether using songs to teach English affects the learners' motivation is also checked. The research outcomes are quite astonishing. The researcher analysed the previous researches done before on teaching pronunciation through songs and the results are provided in the literature review section. Questionnaire and interview results are given with illustrations in a methodology section. The research results and suggestions are given at the end of the paper in a conclusion section.

2. Literature review.

2.1. Theories to teach English through songs.

Nuril Fitri states that affective filter of students influence on their ability to develop their pronunciation skills. Students who are in the state of confusion and fear to use their skills in English are less likely to improve their pronunciation skills. They tend to get bored because of learning dull pronunciation rules which seem to forget after a while. They feel discouraged to practice their English skills. In this case, songs are precious sources to practice English language in communicative purposes. Songs make the learning process much more exciting, and fascinating for them. The research concluded that English songs provide a great contribution in teaching and learning process on the enhancing due to students who learned English pronunciation showed much better results. (Fitri) Endang states that (Endang Kusri, S.Pd., M.Hum) songs are the best materials to use in order to enhance pronunciation skills as they provide memorable, enthusiastic and rhythmic language. After listening the songs repeatedly, students can get used to utter the English sounds naturally without getting lost and nervous. The popular songs are also great way of relaxation. Another research conducted by Khairi Ikhsan proves that songs are the essential materials to master at pronunciation. The writer argues that pronunciation should be taught in non-threatening atmosphere especially for those who have a great tension using English language through effective techniques. On top of that, songs propose an alteration in a conventional English classroom where students can feed up with the never ending rules of English language. Songs and their dictation seem more funny and engaging for them. Songs introduce the vast amount of features of supra-segmental (such as rhythm, stress and intonation in a second language) rules in subconscious way, quite naturally. Songs introduce the reduction of particular sounds in speech genuinely. They provide a firsthand atmosphere with the pronunciation of real native English speakers. They are clearly the best way to practice stress and intonation in English as when the song is played students love to sing along with the singer and practice the supra-segmental features unconsciously. According to most teachers' experiences, teachers can use the songs as a means of tool to fulfil their needs and desires in learning process. Songs improves all 4 required skills including with sub-skills pronunciation. (Ikhsan)

2.2. Websites to practice and improve English pronunciation through songs.

FluentU.com is a bizarre way of learning English as it provides a natural approach to teach English skills. It helps to the learners to be familiar with both language and its culture. They provide authentic learning materials such as songs and videos taken from the real life. Along with the authentic songs, they offer a wide variety of practicing exercises which are levelled according to the students' proficiency. (goyo) Esolcourses.com is another website which contains several effective songs which gives a hand to improve pronunciation. The website levels the songs into 3 main groups such as "easy songs", "medium difficulty" and "Christmas songs". The website has got an authentic content and a perfect structure. Each songs is taught with several tasks, such as multiple choice questions, listening activities, vocabulary review and other types of drilling and practicing activities. (Lyon-Jones) Another great website which specializes teaching English pronunciation through songs is busyteacher.com where the teacher can find any materials and worksheets to teach their students in any topic. This website also contains some songs and song-related activities levelled according to focused pronunciation topic or grammar. There teacher can find worksheets related to their grammar or pronunciation focus. natalialzam.wordpress.com is the website where the English learners find English songs which provide pronunciation topics (Aspiration /h/, /p/, /t/, /k/; Weak forms of grammatical words (to, of, for, from...); 'S'+ consonant at the beginning of words (in Spain) coalescence (want you, need you)) All the videos in this website contain lyrics and clear subtitles. All the activities are fun and quite engaging. Good examples of pronunciation are also given where students can imitate to the native speakers through songs. The website's authentic content highlights the practice of aspiration with several well-known songs (Pharrell Williams 'Happy', The Beatles 'Help', David Guetta ft Sia 'Titanium', Sia 'Chandelier', The Beatles 'Penny Lane', The Alphablocks (BBC)- 'Top'). (Natalialzam)

2.3. Selection of songs according to the focus pronunciation and the needs of students.

Getting access to the songs is no longer an overriding concern as teachers can find the vast amount of songs from social networks or websites. Therefore, right selection of songs is supposed to be a something which should be clearly taken into consideration. Nuria research paper states that selection of songs should be based on several factors. Age should be prioritized in choosing songs as adults never have an interest to listen to children's songs or vice versa. Students' English proficiency level, preferences, content, focused vocabulary and pronunciation rules, popularity, pace and artist are utmost important factors to consider while choosing (Ulate). Ahmad Idris et. al suggests that authenticity is the top important concern to choose a proper song. The reason why the

authenticity should be prioritized is that it has a driving power in terms of “language is viewed as an instantiation of culture and the process of learning as the negotiation of this relationship”. The authenticity contains three phases in it:

1. *The aim of authenticity in choosing songs;*
2. *The authenticity of response and task;*
3. *The authenticity of learning conditions.*

Andianto research paper (Andianto) claims that not all sorts of songs are appropriate to incorporate into the English classroom. Despite of the challenges and biases teachers should incorporate the songs which are widely popular among the students’ peers. On contrast, songs can reduce the engagement rate of students. In addition to that comprehensibility of songs is also crucial facto to include. As long as the song’ lyrics is straightforward and does not make any obstacles to understand easily, there is no trouble to use that songs in English classroom. Finally, negativity should be avoided in selecting the right songs. Positive, exciting, upbeat, comic songs are not a great challenge to find. (Ahmad Idris Asmaradhani1 and Ruslan Abdul Gani4 IKIP Mataram1) However, there is no particular requirement to choose an exact song nevertheless above mentioned criteria should be taken into consideration seriously.

3. Research methodology

Qualitative and *quantitave* methods were used to collect the required data. The objective of proposed research was that identifying the importance and the necessity of incorporating songs into English language. The population of the research was elementary; basically intermediate, and advanced levelled English learners at The Oxford, Bilim Orzu and IT park educational centres and the English language teachers the whole around the Uzbekistan. The research was conducted at the two stages.

At the first stage, to get qualitative data, the researcher created **focus group interviews** among different levels of students (about 50). The interview questions were in Uzbek language with intermediate students and the conversation was in English language with advanced English learners. The answers were written down by the researcher or recorded during the interviews. Interview results were used to create questionnaire questions and multiple choices to cover wider scope of respondents. (Table 1)

Table 1: Focus group interview questions and general answers on average.

| No | Interview questions | Mean answers |
|----|--|--|
| 1 | Do you like listening to English songs? | 40 students say yes and only 2 say no while the rest of 8 students have no idea. |
| 2 | Which English skills can be improved with songs? | None of the students said writing and reading can be improved while majority of students said songs are good assets to improve listening skills among intermediate students. On the other hand, advanced students claimed speaking can be improved through songs or the songs are rich sources for learning English phrases, idioms and words. |
| 3 | Do you face any challenges while listening to English songs? | Almost all students admit they never understand the meaning of the song before reading and translating its lyrics. The pace of songs is way too fast to catch the meaning. Contractions used in songs are incomprehensible. Students say there are incorrect grammar structures which make the learners confused. Only 2 students say the words used in songs are quite advanced or rare in textbooks or real communication. |
| 4 | Why do you listen to English songs? | 70% percent of the cases students listen to English songs for entertainment; Only 13 students say they listen to English songs to learn English words and pronunciation. A girl says she improved her pronunciation and speaking skills with listening to Billie Eilish songs over |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | repeatedly. Some students listen to English songs just for its music or relaxing. Inspiration is another reason why students listen to English songs. |
| 5 | When do you listen to English songs? | Shower or before bedtime are the most common times for listening to English songs. Walking, jogging or being on the journey encourage some students listen to English songs as they feel they are learning English language even in that time. |
| 6 | Does your teacher inspire you to listen to English songs? | Respondents' answers show that teachers use the songs mostly for beginners and elementary students. On contrast, not any English classrooms contain English songs aside from using them as filler to the class activities. Teachers incorporate the songs into classroom as a means of entertainment such as during the board or group activities as a time limit. Some respondents say the teachers share their favourite songs with them. Sometimes, the teachers use the song for only its motivational music. |
| 7 | What kind of songs do you listen to? | Around 30 students say that they listen to well-known modern songs. Whereas small amount of respondents claim that they listen to retro English songs such as Beatles or Madonna. Some students listen to any type of songs which seem interesting to them. Around 5 or 6 students declare that they are fond of folk songs. |

At the second stage, the data was collected through **questionnaires**. This survey attempted to examine the importance of songs to improve English learners' pronunciation skills. It contained 2 sections which included the total number of 14 questions. This questionnaire was completely anonymous. The first section of questionnaire involved 5 questions which help to identify the respondents' position at the educational institution and level of English language.

Table 2. The main activity of the respondents.

The research was undertaken mostly among university students and teachers (36, 4%) while the only 1, 8% of respondents study at specialized schools.(Table 2) As the table 2 further shows, the majority of respondents were students while less than 31% of respondents were English teachers.

| 1. Where do you study/teach? | 110 responses |
|---|----------------------|
| Secondary school | 10,9 % |
| Academic lyceum/technicum/vocational college/professional school | 21,8% |
| Language center | 10,9% |
| Institute | 7,3% |
| University | 36,4% |
| Self-study | 10,9% |
| Specialized school | 1,8% |
| 1. Which one of the following best describes your position at an educational institution | 110 responses |

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Teacher | 30,9 % |
| Student | 69,1% |

Table 3. The proficiency level of respondents in terms of English skills.

The majority of respondents have been learning English language for more than 6 years with 34, 5%. The group who learned over 6 years are mostly linked to the teachers while the others all were students. (Table 3)

| | A1- A2 | B1-B2 | C1-C2 | Less than A1 |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| Listening | 14 | 29 | 11 | 1 |
| Speaking | 17 | 31 | 5 | 4 |
| Writing | 14 | 34 | 7 | 1 |
| Reading | 10 | 36 | 9 | 2 |
| Vocabulary | 14 | 30 | 12 | 1 |

Table 4. The confidence rate of respondents pronouncing English sounds.

Over 30 % respondents do not feel confident enough about their pronunciation even if they feel confident enough about their other skills. Only 21% of respondents are confident with their pronunciation skills. Less than 2 % students always think of their mistakes while speaking. (Table 4)

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| 5(Highest) | 21,8% |
| 4 | 32,7% |
| 3 | 30,9% |
| 2 | 5,5% |
| 1 | 5,5% |
| I always think of my mistakes | 1,8% |
| Completely awkward | 1,8% |

Table 5. The way the respondents learn English language.

The main of this question was to check whether using songs is the main method of learning language for any English learners. Only 8,5% of respondents use the songs as a main tool to learn English language whereas the majority of students still use textbooks or e-materials such as videos, movies, podcasts, 27,6% and 27,6% respectively . Articles are the least common type of tools to acquire language.

| | |
|------------------------|-------|
| Textbooks | 27,6% |
| Audio materials | 10,3% |
| Online courses | 13% |
| Articles | 3,4% |
| Songs | 8,5% |
| Videos/movies/podcasts | 27,6% |
| Teacher | 5,2% |

The second section of the questionnaire is called ‘Personal preferences to learn the language’ and there we attempted to find out their own choice of tools to acquire the second language.

Table 6. Songs to improve English skills.

Listening and pronunciation skills are mostly prone to be improved through songs (72 and 78 responses respectively) while writing and reading skills have the most amount of ticks in terms of not helping at all (14 and 18 respectively). 50 respondents think speaking exactly can be improved with songs while 46 and less than respondents think it is a bit likely.

108 responses

| | High probability | Moderate probability | Less likely | Do not help at all |
|---------------|------------------|----------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Listening | 72 | 30 | 2 | 4 |
| Speaking | 50 | 46 | 10 | 2 |
| Reading | 14 | 46 | 34 | 14 |
| Writing | 12 | 32 | 46 | 18 |
| Vocabulary | 38 | 42 | 20 | 8 |
| Pronunciation | 78 | 24 | 2 | 4 |

Table 7. The reason of listening to English songs.

It is obvious from the research results that over 21% of the learners listen to English songs just for entertaining. Strikingly, over 35% of them use English songs for learning purposes such as learning vocabulary or to improve communication skills. Only 3% listens to English songs to concentrate on their tasks. No one listens to English songs subconsciously. Over 16% students have the habit of listening to English songs as their hobby.

| | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| For entertaining | 24,1% |
| Just for music | 9,3% |
| My hobby | 16,7% |
| For learning purposes | 35,2% |
| Subconsciously | 0% |
| For concentration | 3,7% |
| For motivation | 5,6% |

Table 8. The frequency of listening to English songs.

Not surprisingly, around 30% of the respondents frequently and over under 40% of them always listens to English songs. Over 16% of them listen to English songs only their free times. Thankfully, there is no one who never listens to English songs. Furthermore, over 81% of the students love listening to English songs whereas the only about 5% of them say no in questionnaire.

108 responses

| | | | |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Frequently | 29,6% | I love English songs | 81,5% |
| Always | 37% | I do not like English songs | 5,6% |
| Rarely | 14,8% | I have no idea | 13% |
| Never | 0% | | |
| Only in my free times | 16,7% | | |
| Several times a day | 1,9% | | |

Table 9. The importance of English songs to boost pronunciation and confidence.

Almost 49% of English learners, think that reading the songs' lyrics help them to improve their English skills. On contrast, 37% and under 43 of them, singing and repeating songs are helpful for learning the language whereas the rest of 35,2% of them, find singing is the way to improve English skills. Moreover, 70 out of 108 responses show songs are great tool to boost the learners' confidence while 10 out of total responses are negative.

108 responses

| | | | |
|---|------|--|----|
| Songs help to learn how to pronounce English words by singing | 3,7% | Songs boost my confidence to use your English skills | 70 |
|---|------|--|----|

| | | | |
|--|-------|---|----|
| Songs help to learn how to pronounce English words by repeating | 42,6% | Songs do not boost my confidence to use your English skills | 10 |
| Songs help to learn how to pronounce English words by reading their lyrics | 48,1% | I do not know | 28 |
| Songs help to learn how to pronounce English words by listening | 35,2% | | |

Table 10. Songs upgrade the pronunciation.

Hopefully, 82 out of 108 respondents agreed songs are precious for improving pronunciation while there were only 2 respondents disagreed. Surprisingly, 22 of respondents chose the neutral option.

108 responses

| | |
|----------|----|
| Agree | 82 |
| Disagree | 2 |
| Neutral | 22 |

Table 11. Learning English through songs is more interesting than using textbooks.

54 out of 108 responses show positive respond, in other words, they agreed songs are more fascinating than the dull textbooks. 34 respondents had no idea as they chose the neutral option contrarily 20 respondents disagreed. Overall, results are quite encouraging.

108 responses

| | |
|----------|----|
| Agree | 52 |
| Disagree | 20 |
| Neutral | 34 |

4. Research findings.

The research results suggest that songs are quite popular among English learners and even teachers. There is no one who never listens to English songs. Thus, incorporating English songs into English classroom would not make any learners reluctant to engage in activities. In fact, songs encourage the learners to study and learn English language more as they have a substantial power to boost the confidence of English learners. According to research results, the paper suggests the followings:

- using songs in English classrooms not just as time filler when there is no fun activity to do, rather making activities through songs keeping a particular focused pronunciation rules is much efficient. Creating such activities for songs is not a rocket science rather it depends on the creativity of a teacher;

For example,

Task. Listen and circle the word you hear.

Here I go, here I go
Feel/fell better now, **feel/fell** better now
 Here I go, here I go
 It's better now, **feel/fell** better now

I still **remember/December** when things were broken
 But put together, the **cracks/darks** will close in

Hurry up, hurry up
There's *no more waiting/no more way doing*
We're still *worth/was* saving

Feel the light
Shining in the *dark/crack* of night
Remember what we *forgot/target*
I know it's a long shot
But we're bringing it all *back/bag*, we're bringing it all back

- Selection of modern well-known inspiring songs. Students can feed up with the old-fashioned or retro songs whereas above mentioned prominent songs awoke their interests and they engage to the classroom activities more enthusiastically. Furthermore, a teacher should also keep in her mind that selected songs should be culturally appropriate as the most English songs contain offensive vocabulary. choosing them would reduce the teacher's reputation in front of students.
For example,
Lady Gaga, The Beatles, Alexandr Rybak's songs have got a good pronunciation and wide range of vocabulary.
- Research results can be used in creating an online social network and hard-copied book which contain songs and related activities to improve pronunciation.

5. Conclusion

Basically, students and learners learn English language in order to communicate in this language. However, most Uzbek speakers struggle to pronounce English sounds as such sounds do not exist in Uzbek language. Good news is songs are precious sources to incorporate into English classroom and improve the students' pronunciation skills. Once any learner learns the songs by heart, that learn is never going to forget this thanks to the rhythmic structure of songs' lyrics. Furthermore, songs make sure the learners' engagement in classroom activities. English songs tend to have a good background music which grabs the attention of students into activities. Students are less likely to be reluctant for doing the song related meaningful activities. English learners can benefit from the songs in many ways. Further research can be undertaking in using English songs to teach how to pronounce suprasegmental units of English language.

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