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USING SONGS IN EFL CLASSROOM
– A case study –

Abstract

The topic of this paper, using songs in EFL classroom, is something that teachers come across on a daily basis in their EFL classrooms. However, not much attention was devoted to the proper use of songs in foreign language classroom. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to present the result of a research done in a primary school "Kaćuni" in central part of Bosnia regarding the proper use and effect of songs on acquisition of English language. Subjects in the research were students of different age groups from grade 3 to grade 8. The types of songs and poems used in the research from range from made-for-EFL to popular songs. The research results suggest that songs as a tool for language learning and teaching are a powerful tool which is underappreciated and unused sufficiently in EFL classroom.

Key words*: EFL classroom, using songs and poems, teaching English, primary school*

Introduction

Keeping up with modern language learners requires continuous alertness on the educators' behalf. New trends, crazes, or viral events, in most cases created in English speaking communities, offer a lucrative field for exploring language in an interesting and alluring manner for the contemporary language learner. Therefore, language learning resting on a universal, yet flexible, entity which can withstand the test of time may be the best way to create a language learning approach appealing to different generations and in touch with all the new fashions and trends that come with each new generation. Being universal and perhaps one of the most favorite leisure activities, music offers many aspects that enable the educator to create English lessons in harmony with trends and mindsets popular at a given period. Language learning authorities and creative individuals have experimented with music, songs and song-like material ever since the 1970's (Livingstone, 1973; Harrison 1979; Geller (1986) Jolly (1976). However, a fully operational language learning approach centered around songs is something that is dramatically missing in the English language learning community (Bujak, Mujicic, 2018). This issue has been broadly discussed in terms of theory (Wermke and Mende, 2015; Mora, 2010; Stansell, 2005; Chen-Hatfeck, 1997; Gardner, 1993). However, little has been done to fully contextualize and utilize songs as language learning resources other than as extra activities or vocal tract exercises. Hence, this work aims at exploring the benefits and the pitfalls that occur when using songs as a 'serious' language learning material with the regular EFL primary school students in a school in Central Bosnia. The students learn English as a part of their regular school curriculum.

Research design

The participants in the research are 131 elementary school students of age 8 to 15. The distinction among the students was made according to the level of their knowledge and the music they usually listen to or are exposed to. All students learn English as a foreign language during two or three classes per week, depending on their grade. The overall average grade of all students is 3,1 (on a scale from 1 to 5) classifying them as a moderate language learning group. Different methods, techniques and programs were used to obtain different parameters and data. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were used throughout the research. Depending on the context, descriptive analysis, t-tests, one-way ANOVA tests and correlation indicators were all used accordingly. The following research hypotheses were tested:

1. Music evokes positive emotions and students are intrinsically motivated to explore, analyze and learn trough music.
2. Music has a positive effect on memory and language retention.
3. Students have difficulties transferring memorized language items into different scenarios.
4. The complexity of both nursery rhymes and pop songs prevents students from incorporating acquired knowledge into real life scenarios.

Attitude towards songs

A group of 86 younger students (third, fourth and fifth grade) was surveyed to determine their favorite part during an English language class. The students were divided into two groups according to their age; into younger (pre-teen) and older (teen) students. All students have had English classes for one, two or three years and have had a considerable amount of experience with songs. Six most common classroom activities were chosen and the students expressed their attitude towards each activity by means of a survey based on Liker scale. Due to the student's proficiency level, grade and age, the survey was given in the students' native language. The survey results include:

- Descriptive statistics of the survey based on the Liker scale
- Graph representing the data
- Discussion based on the results

After analyzing the data, the following results were obtained:

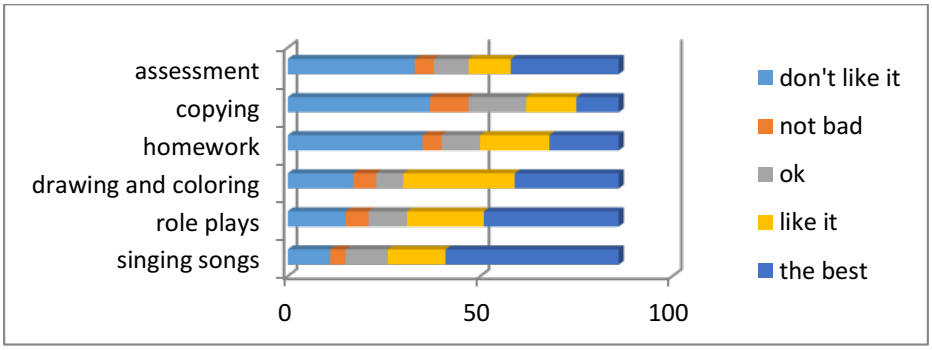

Chart 1: Young learners' attitude towards common techniques and activities used in the classroom

It is clear that the students listed songs, song based activities and song-like material as their favorite part of the English class. A total of 60 students or around 70% said they either liked music or see it as the best part of the class. Expectedly, role playing also scored high with 64% of students choosing it as either to their liking or the best. Surprisingly, tests and assessment also turned out to be quite favorable with the students. As the results show, songs are motivating for the beginner students as they enjoy listening to music and doing song-related activities and tasks. Although the enthusiasm may fade as the students progress into higher grades, as it will become evident later in the paper, some of the enthusiasm will certainly remain ensuring a significant amount of motivation for evoking interest in a song based lesson. As seen from the chart, the students either like or do not like a particular aspect, with little emotions in between. Hence choosing the right way of teaching is vital for further interest and attitude towards English both as a language and as a school subject.

Word order

The fourth grade, as a representative of their age group, consisting of 31 students was tested in order to understand the effect of music on memory and the use of memorized knowledge in different situations. The students were introduced to the popular made-for-EFL song 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'. The song was played five times; the students had the lyrics and they sang and did the appropriate dance (touching the body parts referred to in the song). No additional exercises were given. Afterwards, each student was shown several pictures of body parts in the same way as they appear in the song (head, shoulders, knees, toes, eyes, ears, mouth and nose, respectively). The students had to name as many parts as they could. The same exercise was repeated later on, only this time students were presented with body parts randomly, i.e. different from the order in which they appear in the song. Slight pronunciation errors and slips were neglected. As each student was naming words, other students were engaged in different activities to avoid learning the words from their classmates' responses. The results include:

- Descriptive statistics of the data
- Unpaired t-test to compare the data sets
- Accompanying graphs and bars
- Discussion based on research results

First, the two test results were compared:

Unpaired t-test (compare two data means)	
Col A (order)	n=31
vs.	
Col B (random)	n=31
Statistic	
Mean ± sd of Col A (order)	5.161 ± 2.557
Mean ± sd of Col B (random)	3.710 ± 2.854
Difference of means	1.452

C.I. (95%) of mean difference	± 1.377
Lower Range	0.075
Upper Range	2.828
T	2.109
t, critical	2.000
p value	0.0391
Are the means different (p<0.05)?	Yes
One or two-tailed?	Two-tailed
Significance level at 95%	
Anderson-Darling Normality Test	
Col A (order)	
p value	0.1785
Pass normality test?	Yes
Col B (random)	
p value	0.3846
Pass normality test?	Yes

Table 1: t-test analysis of the two data sets

When the two test results are compared it is evident that the means (5.1 for the order testing and 3.7 for the test of random order) are different, the difference being 1.45. The *p* value of 0.0391 indicates that there is a significant difference in means between the two test results. As expected the standard deviation was lower with group A, although the standard deviations do not differ much, meaning that students who performed well on the first test, kept their level in the second test as well. Hence the results can be seen as a consequence of a systematic factor rather than other factors. Also the result ranges from maximum to minimum in both tests and both data sets follow normal distribution as displayed by the Anderson-Darling normality test.

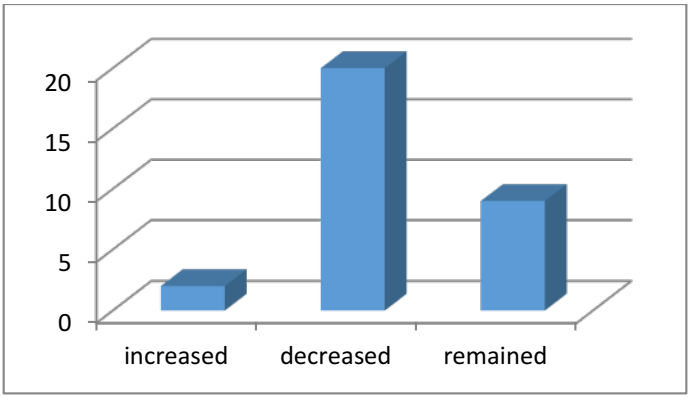

Chart 2: Different student performance of vocabulary recall of randomized words

The first thing to notice in Chart 2 is the decrease in the number of memorized words. When the words were presented randomly 20 students or 64% performed worse as compared to their performance with the same order as in the song. Only 2 students or 6,4% increased their performance, whereas 9 students or 29% performed the same in both tests. Three participants could not recall a single word in both tests.

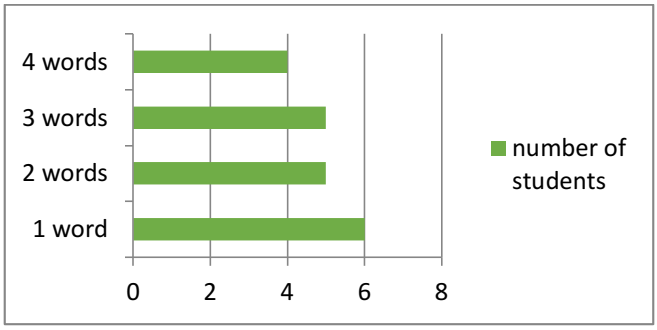

Chart 3: The numbers of words not recalled after the vocabulary was tested

Should we further analyze 20 students who scored lower on the test with random words, we can notice that six (19%) recalled one word less, 5 (26%) recalled two words less, 5 (26%) recalled three words less, whereas 4 (13%) recalled 4 words less, as it can be seen from Chart 3. Individual mnemonic capabilities of each student should be taken into account here. However, the overall average of recalling 2,5 words less per students when the order is changed indicates that songs are an excellent tool for memorization, but plenty of work needs to be done to utilize the memorized lexis in different contexts. In other words, the vocabulary acquired through songs remains bound almost exclusively to the designated song, without the ability to be used on different occasions, what will be elaborated on, further in the paper.

During the research, an interesting phenomenon occurred. Due to language differences, the students often have difficulties pronouncing words with silent letters such as the word *knee* in this case. Since such pronunciation is not common in the students' mother tongue, the word 'knee' is commonly pronounced as */'k'ni/ despite all the corrections and practice. However, after covering the song 'Head, Shoulder, Knees and Toes' something interesting occurred. The students changed the pronunciation of the word (and its spelling) to several forms including /n'izn/, /n'iz'en/, /niz'ənz/. The part of the song where 'knees' are mentioned is sung together with the adjacent part 'and toes' /niz 'ən 'toʊz/. The students recognized the assimilation of the part 'knees and toes' as a single word and adopted it, despite having the lyrics. Later on while assessing the students in a vocabulary test, 13 students or 46% wrote one of the aforementioned forms next to the picture of knees. Such an occurrence showcases both the power and the problems of ESL songs. On the one hand, they have such a powerful effect on memory and pronunciation as previously discussed. On the other hand, their linguistic complexity is often in contrast with the students' language level often leading to wrongly acquired items.*

Changing the context

A survey similar to the previous was conducted with the same subjects. The students were presented with the ESL song 'Mysterious Mike' which is a part of their textbook. The song deals with the verb *can* which is used with various action verbs. The song contains a short refrain and lists six actions with the verb *can*. It is followed by matching exercises and 'fill in the gap' activities included in the accompanying workbook. After listening, singing and miming the song several times, the students were supposed to learn the song by heart as their homework for next week. In the next class, 18 students completely memorized the song, 6 had minor mistakes with recall on pronunciation and 5 had major problems or failed to learn the song at all. Two students were absent. In the first part of the research the students were presented with flashcards (part of the course book teaching material) showcasing the main protagonist Mike performing actions from the song (the pictures are the same as in the course book). The students had to write down what Mike is doing in each picture. The pictures were shown as they appear in the song. All six actions were presented and minor spelling and sentence structure mistakes were neglected. In the second test everything remained the same, except this time the flashcards were presented randomly. In the third test, the students were presented with actions from the song, but performed by different people, i.e. without Mike. The results include:

- One way ANOVA test
- Descriptive statistics
- Graphic representations
- Discussion based on the results

The three test results were compared by means of a one way ANOVA test:

One-way ANOVA			
Statistic			
F	3.665		
F, critical	3.105		
Number of groups (e.g. columns)	3		
p value	0.0298		
Column means significantly different (p<0.05 ?	Yes		
Significance level: 95%			
ANOVA Table	SS	df	MS
Source of variations			
Between groups (e.g. between columns)	34.506	2	17.253
Within groups (Error)	395.448	84	4.708
Total	429.954	86	
Bartlett Test			
Statistic			
Df	2		
Chi square value	0.155		
Critical value	5.991		

p value	0.9252		
Pass test on equal variance (p>0.05)?	Yes		
Significance level: 95%			

Table 2: One way ANOVA test comparing the three data sets

The *p* value of 0.0298 indicates that the three means differ significantly. Bartlett's test shows that that there is an equal variance within the three tests, i.e. the student kept their performance throughout the three tests; p: 0.9252; (p>0.05). This is confirmed by conducting basic statistics test on the three groups where the standard deviation is similar in all three groups:

Data size (n)	29	29	29
Mean	3.655	3.138	2.138
Error	0.385	0.411	0.411
Standard deviation	2.075	2.216	2.216
C.I. (95%) of mean	± 0.789	± 0.843	± 0.843
Lower range	2.866	2.295	1.295
Upper range	4.444	3.981	2.981
Minimum	0.000	0.000	0.000
Maximum	6.000	6.000	6.000

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the three data sets

In all three tests the students achieved both minimum and maximum scores. When the three means are compared, the results are self-evident. As the students are removed from the song context, their recall and performance are lowered. Due to additional activities and memorizing the song, the difference between ordered and random image presentation is not quite significant; the means being 3.6 for ordered and 3.1 for random presentation. However, when presented with material different from one in the song, but with the same meaning, the results plummeted down. These results highlight the importance of a missing element that can enable the student to use acquired language chunks in different settings. As Johnson and Memmott (2005) noted: 'Even though many studies have reported that vocabulary recall or grammar can be learned through music, no studies showed that new vocabulary or grammar could be used productively in speech and composition'. An enormous gap needs to be filled to bridge memorization and recall with practical use. The reduction in performance is evident from Chart 4 which presents the students' scores as the language material displayed in songs is placed in different contexts:

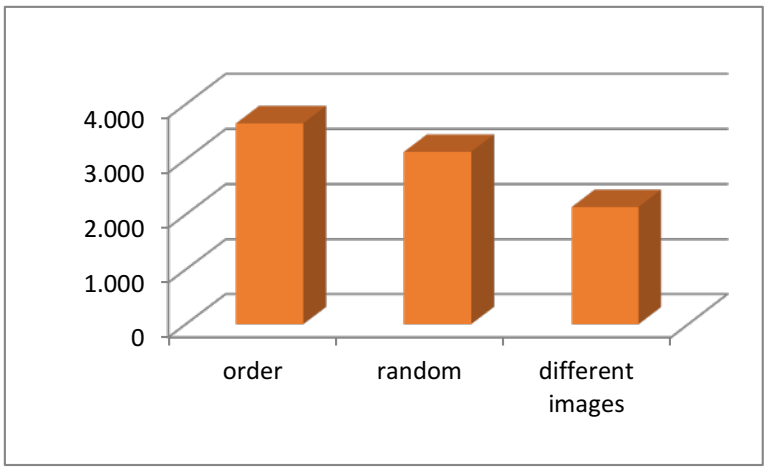

Chart 4: The difference in means among the three data sets

Although such research is hard to put in numbers, teaching experience usually shows that young learners are eager to participate in a lesson based on a song. They enjoy singing, dancing or miming the actions or words presented in songs. Songs are an element that gives English a status of something more than just a subject taught on a particular day. Catchy rhythm coupled with the repetition of linguistic elements creates opportunities for easy memorization. Remembering his English lessons as a pupil, Abbot (2002) stated that it is 'not uncommon to forget everything from EFL lessons except the few songs that have been taught.' However, easy memorization does not yield practical results. Students do sing the song outside the classroom, but fail to use the memorized material when needed. Despite their age and immaturity to think outside the given parameters, young learners are more than capable of transferring simple concepts to different scenarios as presented in the previous sections of this work. Hence, more research needs to be done to create a universal way of presenting songs in classroom to provide students with the ability to acquire new material in a similar way as they did with their respective mother tongue.

Older learners - Favorite music

This part of the research deals with modern songs of different genres. It can be divided into two parts. The first one deals with a survey conducted in two classes: 7th and 8th with a total of 60 students. All the students are members of primary school '*Kacuni*' aged 13 to 15.

In the first part of the research the goal was to consider the students' attitude towards foreign music. Primarily, the students were asked if they listened to music in English. The results show that the majority does.

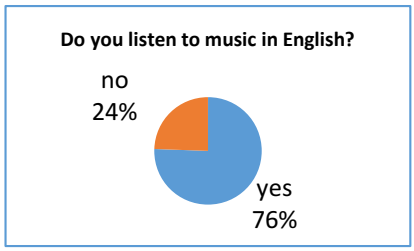

Chart 5: Student's answers concerning exposure to L2 music

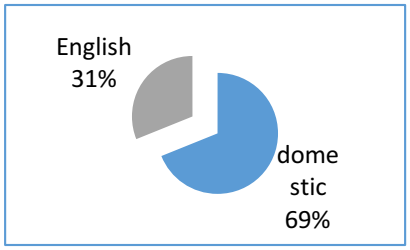

Chart 6: Student's selection of music

In the second part of the survey the students were asked to state which music they favor: domestic (and all music in L1) or English. The results went in favor of the former (Chart 6).
Given the fact that the students attend a local school and have much more access and exposure to domestic music, Chart 6 indicates that English music rates quite well.

Lyrics recognition and word recall

The 7th and 8th grade students who favored English music were chosen as participants of the second group. Their first task was to list the title and author of their favorite song. All the students completed the task and even six of them brought the accompanying lyrics. The first point to be tested was the memorization and recognition of words in each participant's favorite song. This activity resembles the one conducted with younger learners. The students were enthusiastic and eager to get started. The lyrics of each song were used in the exercise and 8 words were deleted to create a simple gap-fill exercise. Each student got their lyrics to complete the task. In the second part of the research the students were given the same exercises, except that this time they were given the opportunity to listen to the music (without words) of the song. The idea was to test both the memorization of the song they selected for themselves and to check whether the melody, tone and rhythm of the song would affect the recall process. This part of the research includes:

- Descriptive statistics
- T-test comparing the two data sets
- Graph representation
- Discussion based on the results

In the first phase the students performed quite poorly. Nobody completed all eight words, and the overall average was 3.53 words per student. Despite the fact that they were always prompted by their educators to investigate language and learn outside the classroom, but in terms of research results, all their listening to their favorite song has not given significant results.

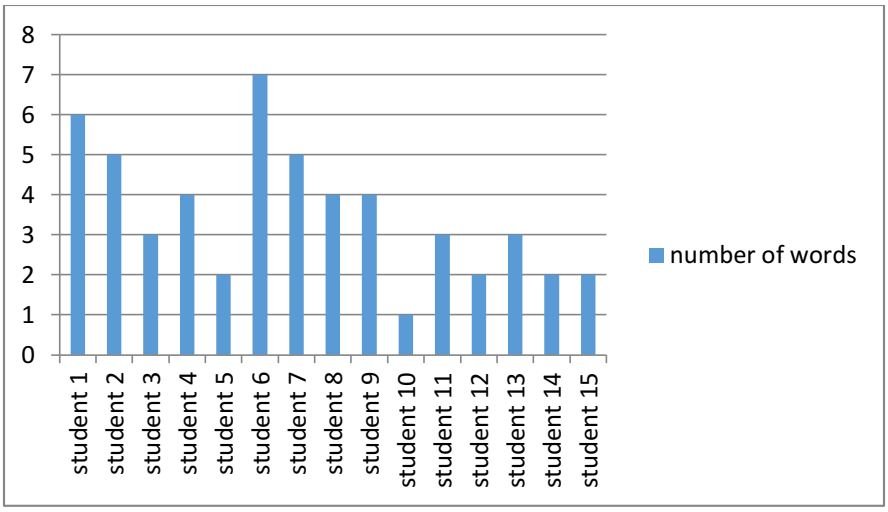

Chart 7: Lyrics recall without melody

As previously stated, in the second phase the students performed the same task, only this time each student listened to the karaoke version of the song, i.e. without lyrics. The two end results were compared by means of an unimpaired t-test:

Unpaired t-test (compare two data means)	
Col A (without melody)	n=15
vs.	
Col B (with melody)	n=15
Statistic	
Mean ± sd of Col A (without melody)	3.533 ± 1.685
Mean ± sd of Col B (with melody)	4.133 ± 2.100
Difference of means	-0.600
C.I. (95%) of mean difference	± 1.424
Lower Range	-2.024
Upper Range	0.824
t	0.863
t, critical	2.048
p value	0.3954
Are the means different (p<0.05)?	No
One or two-tailed?	Two-tailed
Significance level at 95%	

Table 4: T-test comparing the two data sets

The *p* value of 0.3954 from Table 4 indicates that the small difference in the two means (0.6) is not statistically significant. Although the melody was stimulating for some students and it did not cause anyone to lose focus, none of the students performed worse with the music. All in all, it can be said that listening to foreign music enables students to memorize the pitch, the melody

and the rhythm of a song, but recalling individual words and phrases is a major issue. Even when the melody is included, the process of recall did not significantly increase.

Although the chart visually shows a significant difference between the two results, the difference of 0.6 words per student cannot be taken to be statistically important. Infrequent use of songs in the classroom does not allow students to develop cognitive mechanisms that will enable them to utilize the vocabulary locked inside their heads.

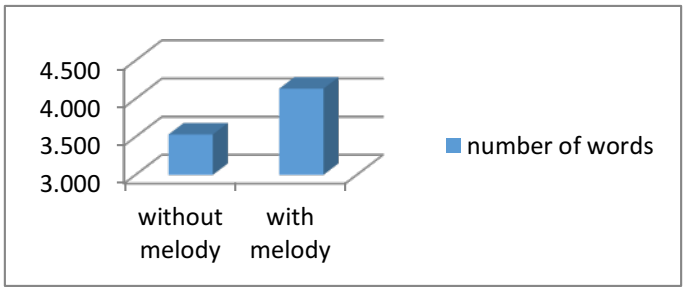

Chart 8: Number of recalled words with and without the melody of the song

Song comprehension

The next aspect in the research was the comprehension of the song. Each song was used as a material for creating comprehension questions and exercises. This part of the research includes:

- Descriptive statistics
- Unimpaired t-tests
- Graphical representation of the results
- Discussion based on the results

To form a baseline, the students were given a domestic song titled *Skoljka*, performed by a popular domestic author Dino Merlin. The song was presented with lyrics followed by comprehension questions. The students had no difficulties with such an exercise, achieving almost a perfect score. Simple comprehension questions on a domestic song did not pose a problem for the group since a total of 87% either answered all questions correctly or made one mistake.

However, when the group was presented with the same task but with their favorite English songs, the results were completely different. Each student was also presented with the L1 translation of the questions, to avoid any ambiguities or misunderstandings.

Only 5 students (33%) answered all four questions correctly or made one mistake. The majority of the group answered either two or one question.

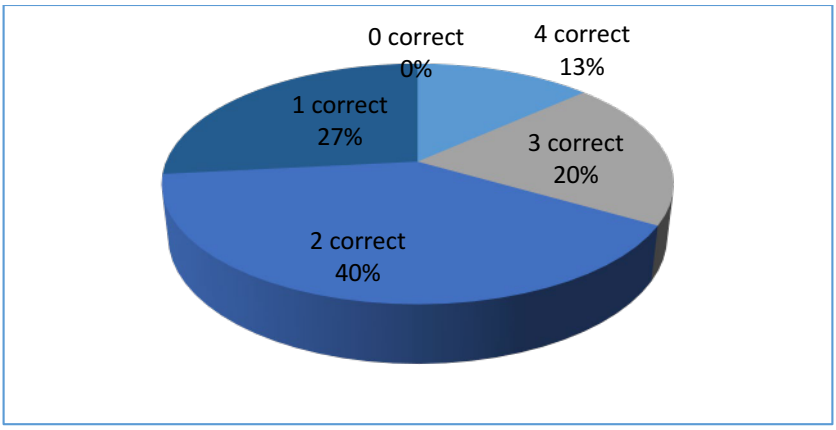

Chart 9: Comprehension of the students' favorite L2 song

Obviously, comparing test results of an exercise conducted in the students' L1 with an exercise conducted in L2 cannot yield conclusive results. However, the results about L1 songs indicate that students are fully capable of understanding the basic language structure of a song in their native language. The fact that elements such as analysis or synthesis were omitted suggests that the students should have been able to understand the same language structure in an L2 song they were previously acquainted with. However, the lack of a systematic approach to working with songs deprived the students of such a possibility.

Vocabulary acquisition

This part of the research deals with vocabulary. The students were tested to see how well they knew words appearing in the lyrics. Once more, each student was given a sheet containing 5 words from his/her favorite song alongside with 10 explanations and translations. Five explanations matched the five words, whereas the other five were used as distracters to avoid lucky guesses. Both word explanations and L1 equivalents were given to make sure that the students of all proficiency levels and learning styles fully understand their task. This part of the research includes:

- Unimpaired t-tests
- Graphical representation of results
- Discussion based on the results

In terms of vocabulary recognition, the students performed as follows:

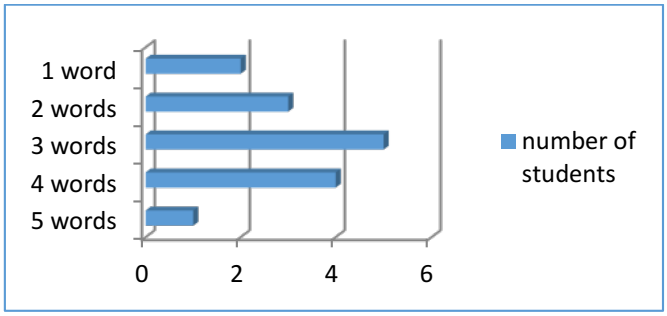

Chart 10: the number of words form the lyrics correctly matched

Averaging at 2,93 words per student, the results indicate a considerable understanding of individual words in the song. But did the students really learn new words, or were they already familiar with words that happened to appear in the song? It was fairly easy to test this issue. The students were simply given the same test, but ~~only~~ this time not with the words from their favorite songs, but from a different song chosen by their classmates. The two data sets were then compared:

Unpaired t-test (compare two data means)	
Col A (their song)	
vs.	
Col B (other song)	
Statistic	
Mean ± sd of Col A (their song)	2.933 ± 1.163
Mean ± sd of Col B (other song)	3.067 ± 1.223
Difference of means	-0.133
C.I. (95%) of mean difference	± 0.893
Lower Range	-1.026
Upper Range	0.759
T	0.306
t, critical	2.048
p value	0.7619
Are the means different (p<0.05)?	No
One or two-tailed?	Two-tailed
Significance level at 95%	
Anderson-Darling Normality Test	
Col A (their song)	
p value	0.6726
Pass normality test?	Yes
Col B (other song)	
p value	0.5695
Pass normality test?	Yes

Table 5: Vocabulary retention from student's favorite song compared to a random song

Both the *p* value of 0.7619 and the *t* value of 0.306 indicate that there is no significant difference between the two means. What's more, the difference in means is 0.133 in favor of vocabulary recognition of a random song. Hence, the students kept their performance and some even performed better with words taken from new lyrics. Such performance suggests that the results from the previous tests are a consequence of previous knowledge, not exposure to a particular song. The students simply fail to acquire new vocabulary through sole listening to songs.

Conclusion

Both younger and older students are usually excited and enthusiastic when a song-based activity is introduced during a class. As the initial survey showed, the young learners see songs and song like material as their most favorable part of the class. The young learners tend to be quite open minded in terms of song selection; they may select a favorite song or a rhyme based on a trivial factor such as the song's visual representation in a book. Nevertheless, it appears to be quite difficult to utilize their enthusiasm. Despite their enthusiasm and readiness to eagerly participate in activities involving different children's songs, research results indicate that young learners fail to facilitate their love for music in terms of language enhancement. The results have shown that a simple change of word order causes learners to lose their performance and undermine all the benevolent effects of music. Hence, the memorization process triggered by song exposure is reduced to mere pastime activity with younger learners. Songs need to be an integral part of the curriculum backed up by sound methodological principle to transfer the young learner's love for music into something more tangible in terms of language learning, whereas we must be aware of some mis-pronunciation issue that may crop-up as a result of sound assimilation in songs, as well. Older learners, on the other hand, established themselves as a much more complex group to work with. Even though the majority of them listens to some sort of English music and a significant portion (31%) favors foreign music over domestic music, as seen in Charts 5 and 6, their diverse selection of favorite artists and songs makes the process of song selection more complex. Listening to English music promotes English culture and the overall affection for the English language. However, similar to their younger counterparts, the older learners fail to benefit from L2 exposure due to complex language and a lack of a systematic approach. Despite having similar music taste as their English speaking peers, the students do not have the needed cognitive mechanisms to transfer the memorized elements into actual language use. Older learners performed quite poorly in terms of song comprehension as seen in Chart 5 and even failed to acquire new vocabulary form their favorite songs as presented in Table 5. Without proper guidance and techniques, the students get lost in the discourse of pop songs filled with odd structures, exotic vocabulary and uncommon pronunciation. Due to the lack of a systematic approach to song processing, the older learners are deprived of the opportunity to make the most of their recreational song exposure.

Despite different obstacles, music has the potential to be developed as a fully operational and independent means of language learning. It is easy to use, diverse, motivating, culturally biased and apt for all ages and styles. A sound methodology needs to be devised to establish a musical approach and enable its universal utilization. Once created, such a method can be measured against existing ESL/EFL approaches and only then its true efficiency can be discussed. Research on the classroom use of songs needs to be more comprehensive, i.e. embody as many language aspects as possible.

Due to the nature of the topic, a broader way of research needs to be adopted to get more straightforward answers. Research simultaneously following the effect of music on different aspects of language such as reading, writing and speaking within the same group would certainly shed more light on the possibility of deploying music as a key ingredient of language learning.

Similarly, experimental studies using solely music to teach English would test the music's ability as an independent means of language learning.

It appears that a work on this topic opens up more questions than it gives answers. Dismissing the opportunity to incorporate the learners' interests into the classroom is in contrast with the majority of contemporary language learning approaches. Intrinsic motivation, autonomous learning, long term memorization and native like pronunciation are language learning features well worth investigating for.

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KORIŠTENJE PJESAMA U NASTAVI ENGLESKOG JEZIKA
- A Case Study -

Sažetak

Tema ovog rada, korištenje pjesama u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika je nešto sa čime se nastavnici engleskog jezika susreću svakodnevno. Međutim, nedovoljno pažnje se posvećuje odgovarajućoj upotrebi pjesama u nastavi stranog jezika. Samim time cilj ovog rada je da prezentira rezultate istraživanja obavljenog u Osnovnoj školi „Kaćuni" iz Kaćuna u centralnoj Bosni. Istraživanje je imalo za cilj da provjeri da li se pjesme na pravi način koriste u učionici te kakav je njihov efekat na usvajanje engleskog jezika. Ispitanici su bili učenici različitih dobnih grupa koji su pohađali od 3. do 8. razreda osnovne škole. U istraživanju su korištene ne samo pjesme koje su napisane za učenje engleskog jezika, već i popularne pjesme. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da su pjesme veoma moćan alat za usvajanje i podučavanje jezika, ali su veoma često podcijenjene te nedovoljno iskorištene u nastavi engleskog jezika.

***Ključne riječi**: nastava stranog jezika, upotreba pjesama, poučavanje engleskog jezika, osnovna škola*