

# Using English Songs In The Classroom Motivates Young Learners To Learn English

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## **Abstract**

*Vietnamese people are famous for music lovers – Le (1999) The Role of Music in Second Language Learning - and music is an important feature of Vietnamese school culture. There is a lack of literature on the use of music in second language instruction within schools. This project on using English songs in the classroom to motivate students to learn English was carried out at Thai Hoa foreign language center to see the effectiveness of music to teach English to young learners. The project was done in an attempt to find the answer to the question: “How does use of English songs motivate young learners to learn English?”*

*The participants in the project were the English teachers and students from eight to twelve year olds at Thai Hoa foreign language center. The findings of the project showed that English songs were an effective tool in young learners’ learning process. With the time from about eight to ten minutes listening to the songs, the class observation indicated that students not only had fun and relaxation but they also practiced pronunciation, intonation, grammar, etc. as well. When they listened to the songs, they were motivated to learn for the rest of the lesson. I found that young learners were happy and excited during the activities involving songs and a high percentage of young learners took part in the activities of the lessons in the classroom with English songs. The project was well-received by young learners, which confirmed the teacher’s belief in the usefulness of English songs in language classes.*

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## **I. Introduction**

### **The EFL situation in Vietnam.**

Vietnamese learners obviously differ in their purposes for learning. Most lessons are focused on four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Nevertheless, all they need is a sufficient good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the target language to pass the national grammar-based and standard examinations. The educational system is influenced by examination-oriented instruction, and students are aware that they have to perform well if they want to succeed in their studies. Therefore, young learners should have a good standard of knowledge from the beginning of learning English.

### **Student motivation.**

Good material conditions do not ensure successful learning and poor material conditions do not necessarily prevent it. What is more important for successful language teaching and learning are the example of others. For example, there should be a number of activities for young learners to participate in classes and the atmosphere in which they feel motivate them to learn. The motivation coming from teachers’ oral speeches is not enough, so the research on using English songs in the language classroom aimed at giving motivation to the young learners in the study besides oral motivation.

Some young learners seem naturally enthusiastic about language learning, but many of them need or expect their teachers to inspire, demand, stimulate and encourage them: “*Language is unlike any other subjects taught in a classroom in which they involve the acquisition of skills and behavior patterns which are characteristic of another country.*” (Gardner 1985). In order to teach students effectively, teachers need effective teaching methodologies: “*Effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher’s ability to maintain the interest that brings students to the course in the first place*” (Erickson, 1978). Activities used by teachers in the language classroom to promote learning English are often presumed to enhance students’ motivation.

### **The implementation of using English songs in the classroom.**

Children are motivated by the music, the variety of rhythms, the musical instruments, the different voices and by the themes. Songs sung in English are listened to around the world and young learners can often

feel real progress in their level of English. Therefore, teaching English songs to young students has become a trend nowadays. The use of English songs done in the research was to aim at motivating students' interest in learning English and there are many other ways to explore from songs such as teaching speaking, listening, intonation, vocabulary, grammar, etc.

Griffiee (1992) indicated that children practice saying the words in the same way they sing the song. Since Monreal (1982) put emphasis on the importance of using songs in teaching sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, adjectives, adverbs....., there has been a shift in emphasis towards making use of songs to teach a variety of language items.

The teachers in Turkey (from ESL resources) said that children had a natural musical taste and that played the only activity that they took seriously. They have been using English songs to help young learners improve their English through enjoyable activities and songs are fantastic materials for the language teachers to use, especially, with young learners. Songs have a variety of uses:

- provide a relaxing time.
- make students feel fun to learn.
- stimulate discussions of attitudes and feelings.
- provide a certain amount of vocabulary.
- create and use imaginary.
- practice a grammar point, words, etc.

Music in the classroom doesn't always mean listening to a song and using the lyrics in some way. Music can be used in the classroom in a number of ways such as increasing vocabulary, teaching structures, building self-confidence, drawing interest, etc. (Richards and Rodger 2001).

Songs used in the language classes have been recognized as one of the most effective ways in learning and teaching English for some years. The Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that teachers should provide students with a positive atmosphere so that they are motivated to learn English. Listening to English songs in the language classes is very important in language acquisition because they provide language input as stressed by Krashen (1982).

In addition, Saricoban and Metin (2000) have also found out listening to English songs can not only play an important role to teach four language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking but they can be considered as precious sources to change routine activities in the classroom where sentence patterns, vocabulary, intonation are taught as well.

Young learners whom I am teaching at Thai Hoa center have to follow the textbooks which are published by the Ministry of Education. English begins to be considered as the officially compulsory subject. Then, teachers should try to find out the ways to make students motivated to learn English from the beginning and to make them realize that English is an interesting and important subject. A few years ago, the teachers used grammar translation to teach students, but since the Ministry of Education have changed the curriculum in which four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are taught, teachers have used audio-lingual and communicative methods. Teachers in all schools have to follow closely to the textbooks that are designed by the Ministry of Education. Although the methods of using a course-book are still effective, some students still keep silent in the classroom. They are unwilling to join pair work or group work. They seem very shy and bored. They even do not pay attention to what the teacher says in the classroom. To overcome these obstacles, I tried to find out if using English songs in the English classroom is one of the useful ways to draw young learners' interest and promote young learners to learn English in the English classes.

## **II. The Purpose Of The Study**

This study grew out of a concern to investigate teaching behaviors and practices in a classroom where students felt bored and the ways the teachers made use of English songs in the classroom. The questions of this study were made as follow:

1. How important are English songs in the English classroom?
2. Will English songs motivate young learners' interest in learning in English?

## **III. Methodology**

### **1. Participants**

The students who participated in this research were from eight to twelve years old at Thai Hoa foreign language center. For these students, English language study is a compulsory subject, for which they are tested during their final high-school exit examination. Therefore, motivation young learners to learn English is of importance.

Ward and Renandya (2003) discussed that when the participants know they are the subjects of the research they may behave differently so the results will be effected. Therefore, I advised these students to give their true opinion so that there would be a better way for them to learn English.

## **2. Instruments**

### **a. Questionnaire to students.**

As the questionnaire is a popular instrument to collect data from a lot of people, I chose it for my research. After I taught my students for four weeks, I gave the questionnaire (Appendix 1) to the students in my class. The questionnaire was used to aim at discovering young learners' interests towards learning English through songs.

To ensure that research data collection was as objective as possible, I translated the questionnaire into Vietnamese and after handing it to the students, I left the classroom so that they could write their responses without being observed by the researcher. The questionnaires were also anonymous; young learners were not asked to report their names or any other identifying information.

### **b. Classroom observation.**

Classroom observation was needed in this research as it let me see the language-teaching situation in the real class. In order to see the activities, my colleagues and I observed other teachers used songs in their English classrooms, too. We chose the songs that were related to a grammar point or vocabulary, etc. For instance:

- To teach *colors* to the students, I introduced the lesson by letting the students listen to the song "The black cat song".

#### **THE BLACK CAT SONG**

Songs and Chants by Carolyn Graham (1996)

Green grass (green grass),

Blue skies (blue skies),

Black cats (black cats), Yellow eyes.

Red birds (red birds),

Blue skies (blue skies),

Black cats, Yellow eyes

White clouds (white clouds)

Blue skies (blue skies)

Black cats, Yellow eyes

Black cats (black cats), Blue skies (blue skies), Yellow, yellow eyes.

First, we showed the song on the screen and asked the students to listen to the song once. Then students listened to the song again but this time the words that described the colors were changed accordingly to its colors. When the song stopped, we asked students to guess the lesson they would learn and the meanings of the colors. When all the meanings were clear, students sang together with the music (2 times: one with music and the other without music).

To teach other colors like brown, purple, pink, we showed the pictures with the colors and asked students to create the lyrics.

At the end of the lesson, we showed the song on the screen again with the words about the colors left in the blanks and asked the students to fill in the blanks so that they could remember the vocabulary they had learnt.

#### **Or**

- The song "Can he climb an apple tree?" was used to teach the students intonation with Yes/No questions. At the same time we introduced the model verb "Can" to the students.

#### **CAN HE CLIMB AN APPLE TREE?**

Can he climb an apple tree?

Yes, he can, yes, he can.

Can he climb an apple tree?

Yes, he can, yes, he can.

Can he climb an apple tree?

Can he count from one to three?

Can he read from A to Z?

Yes, he can.

## **IV. Data Analysis**

Powney and Watts (1987) say, "Data analysis is not a simple description of the data but a process by which the researcher can bring interpretation into the data". In this study the descriptive method was used to investigate the current situation of teaching English through songs for young learners.

**The questionnaire (for thirty-five young learners of two classes)**

1. Are you interested in learning English? Circle the appropriate number.(1: not at all; 4: very much)	1 (%)		2 (%)		3 (%)		4 (%)	
	No answer	6	17.2	4	11.4	25	71.4	

As shown 71.4% of the students replied that they were interested in learning English. So, it can be seen that students are aware of learning English now. On the other hand, 6 students out of the 35 answered that they did not like learning English very much (17.2%). No one answered “Not at all”. With these findings, it can be suggested that there are still 11.4 % of the students who don’t like learning English very much.

How do you like to learn English in the classroom? You can choose more than one option.	Percentage	
Listening to English songs.	28	80%
Playing games.	22	62.8%
Doing a lot of grammar exercises.	15	42.9%
Writing English as much as possible.	10	28.6%
Speaking English with friends.	17	48.6%
Listening to English tapes.	14	40.0%

With question 1, 80% of the students showed their willingness to learn English through songs. This finding suggests (in combination with other findings discussed below) that students appreciate activities that include English songs. However, many young learners answered that they would like to learn English through games or speaking with friends.....

What kind of music do you like? You can choose more than one option.	Percentage	
Soft music.	15	42.9%
Pop music.	23	65.7%
Classical music.	8	22.9%
Rock music.	25	71.4%
Jazz.	10	28.6%

It is obvious that, in general, young learners love music and songs as part of classroom activities. The results for this question suggests that they have different tastes of music so the teachers have to choose different kinds of music for them to listen to in the language classroom, but soft music and rock music are favorable.

Are you interested in listening to English songs?	Yes		No	
	28	80%	7	20%

For question 4, the students were asked to express whether they were interested in listening to English songs. 80% of the students answered “yes” because they felt comfortable and songs helped them remember the lessons longer. It means that the teachers can use songs to motivate students to learn in the English language classroom. On the other hand, 20% of the students replied that they didn’t like listening to English songs because they found English kind of difficult to learn; Therefore, they sometimes did not understand the meanings of the songs although they could enjoy the music and felt relaxed, which needs to be investigated further.

How do English songs make you feel in the language classroom? Circle the appropriate number. (1: uninterested; 4: very interested)	1 (%)		2 (%)		3 (%)		4 (%)	
	No answer	No answer	6	17.2	29	82.8		

According to the results of the question 7, 82.8% of the students answered that English songs made them feel interested. It is possible that the use of songs reduces student stress and/or increases comfort level. To find out more precisely the ways in which students are “interested” , this question will need to be studied further.

What language skills do you think are most useful for learning English through songs? You can choose more than one option.	Listening		Speaking		Reading		Writing	
		28	80%	16	45.7%	13	37.1%	14

Between 80% and 45.7% of the students pointed out that songs in English could be useful for listening and speaking skills. What is more, between 37.1 % and 40 % of the students responded to this question saying “Reading” and “Writing”.

When students listen to songs sung by a native speaker, they can improve their pronunciation first and then they can sing the song together. Students can write down the lyrics of the song and have a discussion about them. Besides, there are many exercises to practice listening skill from songs such as gap filling, true or false, word correction.

When do you want your teacher to let you listen to English songs in the classroom? You can choose more than one option.	Percentage	
At the beginning of the lesson.	16	45.7%
At the end of the lesson.	15	42.9%
In the middle of the lesson.	10	28.6%

As shown, songs can be used at the beginning of the lesson, in the middle of the lesson or at the end of the lesson. A song given at the beginning can not only wake students up early in the morning or in the afternoon when they may feel sleepy but it can also be used to introduce the new lesson or help students relax after the lesson.

How do you expect English songs to be? You can choose more than one option.	Percentage	
Short.	28	80%
Long.	No answer	0
Easy.	32	91.4%
Amusing.	29	82.8%
Others	1	2.8%

Since most young learners enjoy easy, short and amusing songs, children songs will be useful because it does not take much time and the students can remember the lyrics. Furthermore, choosing lively action songs through which they can dance or act while singing also promotes a lively atmosphere as one student said.

Of course, the majority of EFL students will encounter only informal usage of English. Using songs can prepare students for the kind of language they will actually be faced with in English-based interactions. The results show that music is often the major source of English in the classroom. The more students are able to listen to the songs that they enjoy, the more learning is likely to occur.

## V. Findings

### 1. Using songs in the classroom

One of the most important contributions of using songs is to make teachers realize that there is a need for a change. Many English teachers just stick to the textbooks which sometimes make young learners feel bored and tired instead of having them listen to some English songs in some periods.

Music not only plays a really important part in the language classroom it also changes the atmosphere in the English language classroom within seconds.

Teacher can create an ideal atmosphere by giving English songs which fits students’ levels so that successful and enthusiastic learning can be provided.

*“I use songs in my class very often. It is usually at the end of my classes when students/learners are quite tired or after revisions for tests or practicing certain grammar points. I try to find songs I think they might like or even know some of the lyrics already. And of course the aim is also to practice certain grammar structures with them.”* ( Nell-A teacher from ESL resources).

### 2. Helping motivate students’ interest

They provide an achievable challenge for all levels of learners, especially young learners, in mixed ability classes, by letting some students just show their understanding, by doing the activities while others can sing along or even improvise their own words. They also encourage students to be more positive, active, and creative. Students are, therefore motivated for the rest of the lesson and future lessons.

### 3. Suggestions for improvement of ESL teaching in Secondary School Classrooms:

- It is the starting point for teachers to draw the students’ interest so choosing the correct materials is important. Songs selected for classes need to be both reasonably comprehensible and interesting for young learner.

- Songs are one of the language resources that almost all students love, and teachers may find that there are many advantages of using songs in the classroom. If selected properly and adopted carefully, a teacher should benefit from songs to teach grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, etc.
- While selecting a song, the teacher should take the ages, interests of the learners and the language being used in the song into consideration. It also depends on the creativity of the teacher.
- After deciding the song and the techniques to be used, the teacher should prepare an effective plan. Since songs are also considered as listening activities, it is advisable to present them as a listening lesson. To make their using songs successful, teachers need to make sure that:  
The meaning and the words of the song can be made clear.  
The songs are easy enough to sing and to remember.  
The songs should convey the meaning and the structures.  
The song is suitable for the students in terms of age, speed, content, embarrassing factor.  
Using songs at different stages of the lesson.
- Techniques can be incorporated into English language teaching with songs used. There are many activities that the teachers can apply to develop their teaching process: blank-filling, organizing the verses, correcting the mistakes, games...
- Children songs would be useful because it does not take much time and the students can remember the vocabulary, structures, lyrics.... Furthermore, choosing lively action songs through which they can dance or act while singing also promotes a lively atmosphere.
- There should be workshops for English teachers so that they can keep up with the latest approaches.

Songs provide a valuable source of authentic language and there are hundreds of ways to explore them in the classroom. The internet has made it easy to find the lyrics of songs.

Many of the songs have on line or printed related activities so checking this website regularly <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-songs.htm>. There is also an online game that students can play related to the song which help them practice the lexical set of classroom object <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-songs-quiet-please.htm>. All of the songs, lyrics and accompany activities have been written by young learner specialists and are aimed at specifically at children learning English as a second language.

## VI. Closing Remarks

Doing research must be counted as responsibility of teachers along with their daily teaching. This will enable teachers to refresh their ideas about what is best for their students to learn and what ways are best for them in their teaching. However, in conducting the research, some limitations were encountered:

- For those teachers who have not used songs before, they may not know how songs should be used or how to modify use of a song to make a song work with the tasks and topics of the class.
- To make their using songs successful, teachers need to make sure that:  
The songs should convey both clear meaning and clear structure.  
The words and meaning of the song can be comprehended in a quick and easy way.  
The song is suitable for the students in terms of age, speed, content and embarrassing factors.

The teachers will think that it takes time and thought to use songs effectively in the classroom, but the internet simplifies the process of getting access to music, reducing the time needed to prepare a lesson.

In conclusion, English music has become very popular, and some students sing English songs perfectly as though they were native speakers. This shows that young learners may learn English better with the help of music. This aims at promoting an environment of learning English, bringing in useful elements and fun for the teachers and students in teaching and learning English. As a teacher who has been teaching young learners for many years, I found out that the lessons are rather short and sometimes teachers do not know what to do for the rest of the time in the classroom but let students play freely. Therefore, I had a look at some ways to motivate and help my students to learn English from the beginning. Songs provide a valuable source of authentic language and there are hundreds of ways to explore them in the classroom. The internet has made it easy to find the lyrics of songs. So why don't we include music and songs in the language classes.

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