The Effects of Developing English Listening Ability of Middle School Students through English Pop Songs

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Abstract

This study aims to develop English listening ability of middle school students in below-average level through English pop songs and investigate the effectiveness by before and after surveys, national English listening tests and national English achievement tests after 10 months. Learning English includes motivation, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most of all, motivation and listening skills have been proved the most fundamental and important two factors. For teaching and learning English listening skills, English pop songs can be used as an effective way and useful pattern practices related to the songs can be very helpful. English pop songs can help students feel more confident and enjoy English to learn more at home as well as in the classroom. The results of this study are English pop songs increased their interest and motivation for learning English, which were turned out to help the students get about three times more scores. Therefore it is desirable that more English teachers have to try use English pop songs to improve students’ listening ability.

Keywords: motivation, learning English, listening ability, pop songs, below-average

1. Introduction

1.1 Importance of this study

Many linguists and language teachers say that learning a foreign language requires four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most of them insist that among the four, the most fundamental and important factor is listening because it is a key role to open the first door of a foreign language and students can acquire those four skills first by listening to some interesting songs.

According to Krashen’s input hypothesis (1983) [1], there should be enough input before one utilizes a target language. Therefore, language teachers must not force students to speak anything until they have enough input and feel ready to take the next step. During this process, teachers must make students feel comfortable.

Across the world, it is common that young students love listening to music and especially American and
British pop songs, which also have very useful words and expressions with basic structures used in everyday routines. Even students who have trouble following normal English lessons in the classroom will be able to improve their listening skills by listening to many authentic and natural pronunciation in English pop songs on the Internet or cell-phones.

1.2 The Purpose

This study aims to develop English listening ability of middle school students in below-average level through English pop songs and investigate the effectiveness by before and after surveys, national English listening tests and national English achievement tests after 10 months.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Importance of Motivation in English Education

Behind one’s action, there should always be a reason called ‘motivation’. Motivation is ‘commonly thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one to a particular action’ (Brown, 1994) [2]. Students should be motivated to improve their English by strong desires called ‘self-reward’ (Bruner, 1996) [3]. This self-reward facilities the desire to achieve something and motivates students to act out. Then they have better chance to reach the goal with such strong and steady motivation. Therefore motivation should be considered one of the most effective elements to help them improve their English skills.

2.2 The Concept of Listening

Many students tend to confuse the difference between ‘hearing’, a biological activity to simply receive sounds, and ‘listening’, a conscious attention, reception, perception, the assignment of meaning and response by the listener to the message that is pretended (Berko & Wolvin, 1989) [4]. That is the point that students should train their listening skills.

2.3 The Importance of Listening

Even though most of linguists and language teachers had pointed out that one must develop listening skills first to obtain true proficiency in foreign language, listening had been treated comparatively lightly in the past until James Asher (1977) [5] and his theory in the late 1970s. Asher emphasized the role of listening skills as learners are usually given great quantities of language to listen before they were encouraged to respond orally.
He noted that children, in learning their first language, appear to do a lot of listening before they speak.

Postovksy (1981) [6] and many of other comprehension approach methodologists suggested that listening comprehension should be the focal methodology in foreign/second language instruction. He emphasized that listening skills should be trained prior to speaking and language learning should be based on understanding rather than uttering.

Rivers (1981) [7], also, emphasized the importance of listening by comparing the amounts of listening and speaking. She said that listening amounts to twice that of speaking, four times of that of reading, and five times of that writing.

Therefore, developing listening skills is the most fundamental and important factor in language learning to improve other three language skills.

2.4 Values of Pop Songs for English Education

Pop songs are usually narrations by the singers and their lyrics are made to deliver the feelings, emotions and thoughts. When closely analyzed, many songs have situational discourse like the use of first and second person pronouns, present and past tense, and simple situation in the song just like saying things in our normal life.

Murphey (1981) [8] reported that there were some concrete evidences. For example, 85 percent of the songs contain unspecified you-referents. When you hear ‘you’ in a song, we may subconsciously take it as if the message is really for ‘us’. Over 90 percent of the songs had unspecified forst person referents. It makes the listener feel that the songs say what he/she wants to say.

Also he said that pop songs are really composed of 300 to 500 words, which are just enough for the reading level of English native-speaking children after 5 years of school education or level of basic EFL readers.

2.5 Pop Songs as Authentic Materials

Authentic materials are good for increasing language skills. According to Rodgers and Medley (1988) [9], ‘authentic’ in the sense of language means samples that reflect a natural form accompanied by appropriate cultural and situation context as if used by native speakers.

Allen, Bernhardt, Berry and Marjorie (1988) [10], however, tested 1,500 high school students respectively at the beginning, intermediate and the advanced course for foreign language. They discovered that regardless of the level, all the students could extract some meaning from all of the authentic materials. Rubin (1990) [11] proved that authentic and scripted video materials contributed to improving listening comprehension skills.

Griffie (1992) [12] insisted that pop songs narrated in a natural form by native speakers should be
considered authentic, because they are very similar to everyday dialogue of the other country and matches in various cultural contexts. Such proofs are in redundancy, cultural input, and the use of colloquial speech.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Subject of the Study

This study was conducted on 124 middle school students in the below-average level. The majority of them were not able to understand 500 basic words in listening and reading. Their progress in listening ability was evaluated by the comparison between before/after surveys, national listening tests and national English achievement tests.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Before and After Surveys for Interest

The survey with 20 questions was conducted for investigating students’ interest in English and taken twice, before and after the experiment. The questions were closed-ended and asked in the manner of a Likert scale, ranging from item 1 (Definitely Yes) to item 5 (Definitely No).

3.2.1 National English Listening Tests

The students’ progress in listening skills could be evaluated by the scores of two nation-wide listening comprehension tests, which are composed of general understanding of dialogues between native speakers. The first one was conducted on March 17th and the second one on December 12th.

Their advance in listening skills are shown by the comparison between the two results of each test.

3.2.3 National English Achievement Tests

Also, the students’ progress could be estimated by the scores of two national achievement tests consisted of average level of four language skills. The first one was held on March 21st and the second one on December 18th. Same with the listening tests mentioned above, their progress could be analyzed by the comparison between the two scores of each test.

3.2.4 Hunminglish Pronunciation Practice

Hunminglish Pronunciation Practice is the book of words and expressions most widely used in life and in pop songs based on many years of study. Even vocational high school students who are unaware of the pronunciation symbols or do not know how to pronounce English words can understand the basic
pronunciation rules and long syllables of the English language through various examples. In my class, the students enjoyed repeating after me in clear voices and having confidence in their English pronunciation (Kim, 2014) [13].

3.2.5 Sing Along!

Once the students complete the basic pronunciation and listening practice, it is now time for the English teachers to demonstrate their talents, literature skills, and English skills. It is not the boring pop song classes where they simply play the songs for interpretation, but the teachers should perform each verse of songs as stage performers for the students to be engrossed. Through this process, the students should be lead to explore the endless sea of English with the grammatical rules, the vocabulary, the idioms, the experience, and the foreign culture.

After listening to the songs several times and singing along, sing along points should be given by singing the difficult songs line by line and the easy songs paragraph by paragraph. The students are not required to sing well or speak English fluently.

The students with lower English grades should have the privilege to sing first. What I have learned for the last 15 years is that many problem students who are bad with English engage in the activities more actively and passionately. The students enjoyed and waited for the English classes and no student dozed off or failed to pay attention to the classes when they learned to sing the songs (Kim, 2013) [14].

3.2.6 Watching Music Videos

When the students are familiarized with the lyrics and melody, the music videos (MV) should be displayed as the final weapon to motivate the students. The students should focus on the mouths and gestures of the singers and sing along if they can. It would be more helpful if the teacher can provide explanations of the tourist attractions or subject matters in the music videos.

MV can be shown with the introduction for motivation, but it is particularly effective when the students have memorized the lyrics so they can sing without looking at the handout. It is because they can sing along and sympathize with the songs. Personally, I believe that this experience is very effective for the students to familiarize themselves with English. Many MVs can be found on YouTube, Daum Pod, Pop Song English Cafes and Blogs, and various websites. If you search your favorite pop songs with ‘karaoke’ or ‘lyrics’, you can view thousands and thousands of interesting pop song videos uploaded by pop song fans around the world and find their lyrics to sing along.
4. Outcomes

4.1 Before and After Surveys of Interest

[Fig. 1] Comparison with the Results of Before/After Survey of Interest

4.2 National English Listening Tests

[Fig. 2] The Improvements in the Average Scores of Each Class
4.3 National English Achievement Tests

![Graph showing comparison between March and December results for National English Achievement Tests.]

[Fig. 3] The Comparison with Two Results of National English Achievement Tests

4.4 Overall Outcomes of the Three Before and After Results

![Graph showing overall outcomes of three before and after results for interest, L/C, and achievement.]

[Fig. 4] Overall Outcomes of the Three Before and After Results

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to improve English listening ability of middle school students through English pop songs for 10 months, and investigate the effectiveness by before and after surveys, national English listening tests and national English achievement tests.
This study was conducted on 124 middle school students in below-average level. The majority of them were not able to understand 500 basic words in listening and reading. Their progress in listening ability was evaluated by the comparison between before and after surveys, national English listening tests and national English achievement tests.

With the meaningful improvements in the overall outcomes above, it can be concluded that using English pop songs for middle school students in below-average level is a very effective way of teaching and learning English by motivating them to pay more attention to the songs and the lyrics, which led to higher scores in the national English listening test and national English achievement test after 10 months.

References


