

# Music Matters for Text Recall: The Difference between a Song and a Poem for Teaching of a Foreign Language in the Classroom

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at investigating the effect of using lyrics in a foreign language classroom. Though there is a plethora of studies on this subject, there is a dearth of controlled experiments that measure the effect of using lyrics in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This experiment tested three groups of university students on lyrics written for this experiment. The findings indicate that student recall improved when they listened to a musical version of the lyrics before a spoken version. Conversely, their recall showed deterioration when they heard the spoken version first. These findings demonstrate the strong need for a remodeling of the conventional material that is designed and used for EFL classes in many parts of the world, that are resisting the use of songs and other digital means in foreign language teaching.*

**Keywords:** Music, song, lyrics, recall

## 1. Introduction

For a long time music has been valued highly as an educational tool in foreign language classes. Bartle (1962), Richards (1969), and Jolly (1975), and other scholars have been arguing for the use of music in the foreign language classroom ; (Bartle, 1962; Jolly, 1975; Richards, 1969). More importantly and since the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL), there has been a sudden demand for pedagogical material for the use of songs in language learning classrooms(Engh, 2013).

Though some scholars like Coe (1972) have found difficulties in justifying the use of music in foreign language classrooms, their research findings are no longer considered today as there have been a growing support and research which call strongly for the integration of music in foreign language classes(Coe, 1972). Salcedo (2010) emphasized through his research and experiments that we can't separate music and language as both are used for communication(Salcedo, 2010). When words are set into music, they are stored and retained in the brain's long-term memory.

Moreover, Music can be used across the curriculum to teach or reinforce basic facts and information and can be naturally integrated throughout all curricular areas to develop and extend vocabulary and comprehension skills(Paquette & Rieg, 2008).

Based on research using background music to aid verbal phrase recall, Mora (2000) asserts that songs have a positive outcome on the students' language acquisition and that lexical patterns stored in long-term musical memory can be retrieved with ease at a later date for mental rehearsal, memorization or during oral interaction(Mora, 2000). As we can see, modern research findings show the growing trend for using music as an aid to ease the ability of students to learn and recall information and store them in their brains.

In another occasion, it has been found that music is an excellent means for maximizing instructional time, deepening the conceptual complexity of the subject, and increasing students' retention and recall; it is an excellent way to expand the pedagogical repertoire(Kimball & O'Connor, 2010). The huge support we can see from scholars that push towards including lyrics in modern language classes doesn't necessarily mean that the previous methodologies have to be neglected.

In order to do more assessment in this area of research, I designed a lesson assessment procedure using descriptive statistics to illustrate the advantages of using lyrics in the English as a Foreign Language classroom. Through the teaching and assessment procedures the question I was asking as teacher/researcher was: Would presenting the same lyrical text with or without the accompaniment of music using influence comprehension and recall in my English language classes?

The overall procedures and assessment used a basic experimental type of design; lyrics were presented in two conditions, one condition with music and as lyrics to a song and the other conditions where the lyrics were presented without music, as a poem. This assessment procedure was used to demonstrate the influence of music on text recall. Thus, in this classroom research, I applied a lyrical song to emphasize that music in the classroom should not be considered simply as a source of entertainment, but rather as an important methodological tool in the foreign language classroom which may also increase motivation. The results reflect the need for an innovative change in the curricula which are used in foreign language classes and for the inclusion of songs in the teaching of a foreign language (English in this study), both at the world level as well as individually in all the educational institutions in Palestine. This proposal for the inclusion of songs in the new English curricula coincides with the new changes which the Ministry of Education intends to make next year where English will be taught in a more communicative way and the skill of

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listening is going to be more emphasized in the English classes due to the availability of computer labs and other related resources.

### **Rationale of the Study**

This teaching-research paper is an important contribution to the EFL field and the use of music in teaching because it is the first empirical study from Palestine concerning the use of lyrics in teaching English. In addition, this paper is intended to motivate language teachers around the world to use lyrics in their foreign language classes and to provide further insights into the topics by adding to the research knowledge. The results of the study have showed positive indications that music can play a valuable role in teaching a foreign language such as English (in the case of this paper).

### **Research Questions**

This paper will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) Can lyrics influence students' recall of vocabulary in foreign language classes?
- 2) Is there a difference between using spoken lyrics without music and lyrics with music to recall vocabulary in foreign language classes?

## **2. Literature Review**

The use of music as an aid to language learning is not new. Research on the subject started as early as 1950s and 1960s. Throughout history, lyrics and music have been used to facilitate the teaching and learning of a second or supplementary language as well as in first language acquisition. Other reports by teachers from the United States (Baez, 1993), Taiwan (Katchen, 1988), Canada (Magahay-Johnson, 1984), Japan (Moriya, 1988), Mexico (Domoney & Harris, 1993), and South Africa (Puhl, 1988) support the importance and usefulness of lyrics and music activities in the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). Maley (1987) writes that songs offer many codes that strengthen student memory, such as choruses, rhymes and melodies (Maley, 1987). These codes increase the functionality of songs in language teaching. When a student listens to a song in the class, the lyrics become embedded in his or her long-term memory.

Beyond these practical applications, Brand (2007) concluded that there is theoretical and physiological support for the inclusion of music in the teaching of spoken English (Brand, 2007). Furthermore, Le (2007) observed that music was highly effective in the teaching of the four disciplines of language identified as reading, writing, listening and speaking (Le, 1999). Also, Ayotte (2004) observed, both music and language share the "same auditory, perceptive, and cognitive mechanisms that impose a structure on auditory information received by the senses" (p.10) (Ayotte, 2004).

There is a plethora of educational literature and web-based materials discussing the use of songs in the ESL classroom. Brand (2007) explained how song lyrics are used to teach Chinese ESL students the importance of effective intercultural communication (Brand, 2007). He noted that the goal of studying English is not limited to being able to speak the language but to communicate. Therefore, most second

language study should also assist the learner in successfully interacting with people from that cultural background.

Kennedy and Scott (2005) propose several reasons for utilizing music in ESL instruction, one of which is to improve language comprehension. Moreover, neurological research by Maess & his team (2001) have indicated that musical and lingual processes occur in the same section of the brain and that there are many similarities between musical and lingual syntax (Maess, Koelsch, Gunter, & Friederici, 2001). Their study presents a theory that has yet to be tested in a classroom setting.<sup>[p]</sup> Furthermore, when songs are written in the target language, they provide students with the opportunity to interact with authentic texts belonging to that language culture. According to Schoepp (2001), songs help students prepare for the language they will encounter in daily life (Schoepp, 2001).

Based on an assessment designed like a controlled experiment, I developed a process to improve and assess the integration of music into the language classroom, I felt that doing this research in Palestine would be especially appropriate, as the use of lyrics and music in English classes there is quite limited, there has been no experimentation carried out on this subject there. Despite very few initiatives taken by some cultural centers and some private schools to teach English with music and lyrics, very little research on using music in language classrooms has been done in Palestine. Moreover the assessment methods and general lessons using music are adaptable to a wide array of educational contexts. Perhaps my experiences, assessment procedures, and lesson materials, including a link to the song used, can motivate others and provide a basis for more complex quantitative and qualitative investigations.

## **3. Methods**

In order to avoid some confounding variables (such as differing familiarity with the stimulus material), a poem was written specifically for this lesson and assessment (see Appendix A.) The target vocabulary chosen before the music was selected to be words familiar to the students, political context and perhaps equally important, I chose a calm simple melody that has similarity with a political song they are familiar with since their childhood. Moreover, the main idea of the poem is highly related to our political daily context.

The poem was then set to music by a former student of mine, who then recorded both versions. The version without music will hereinafter be referred to as the poem, while the version set to music will be called the song. [The song can be found on YouTube at the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmurI2\\_KQyI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmurI2_KQyI)] This arrangement was chosen to preclude another possible confounding variable of preference for one particular voice.

### **3.1 The Assessment**

The two versions of the songs were recorded on a compact disc, which was played on a laptop computer during the experiment. Two response sheets (see Appendices B and C), each of ten questions, were prepared, one to follow the poem

and one to follow the song. Five questions in each paper were traditional gap-filling, memory based questions, and the other five were designed to test comprehension. It is important to note that I relied on the university's Media Centre and its IT trained staff to help in the recording of the song and putting it on a CD.

The design of the assessment was to eliminate individual differences - all participants undertook both conditions. I also balanced for order effect by having half complete condition A before condition B and the other half undertook condition B before condition A. Had I not designed the assessment this way a criticism could have been that any differences were due to chance (in the first instance) or practice in the second. Participants were as near to random allocation as was possible in the circumstance. The scoring criterion was one point for a correct response and no score for either no answer or a wrong answer.

A pilot study was conducted with 4 participants and no obvious problems with the assessment design became apparent and thus there was no need for changes.

### 3.2 Participants

My sample comprised of 128 undergraduate students from a Palestinian university, taken from three separate classes. Students were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. The learners were all taking an additional English course as part of their Bachelor's degree program in various disciplines. At this university, three general English courses are compulsory for all of its students. This is done in order to prepare them for their work life as English language skills are highly-valued by Arab employers. Moreover, all the learners have a first language of Arabic and had completed twelve years of English as a foreign language at school before they started their university education. The student ages ranged between 18 and 21 years, and consisted of equal amounts of male and female students.

The university has a population of more than twenty-thousand students. Every semester the university's Language Centre offers three general English courses for all of its students to prepare them for the global world of work. There is also a fourth English course which is only accessible by the students of medicine, engineering and science, and it is considered a community – based course. Also, there is a Language Resource Centre (LRC) which uses volunteers from different parts of the world to help students learn English and other languages, such as French, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian. Moreover, there is the American Corner, with its big library and modern digital resources, which is considered a great help to students in teaching English in a non- conventional way. Recently, some of the courses, including the general English courses, have been taught on Moodle, which is a learning management system (LMS) where the students have taken computerized exams with more focus on listening. Moodle has been used for five years now in the university. Audio-visual aids such as LCDs and speakers are also abundant.

### 3.3 Procedure

The two different types of question were meant to check memory and comprehension I used two types of questions, multiple choice questions and inferential questions. The song (Appendix A) was written to be an original piece to prevent another confounding variable; had it not been original some students might have some previous knowledge of the words.

The students who agreed to take part were given a random number and which they were asked to write on their response sheets. After the students were given an opportunity to withdraw, if they wished to do so, participants were invited to draw numbered tallies from a bag. I told them that each student should keep his number for the second half of the experiment so that I can compare the results of each student under the effect of music. As randomization charts were not available, this was considered a good second-best option to bring about a haphazard distribution to groups and cause accepted and acceptable distribution of individual differences. Individual differences can account for differences in results, thus it is considered necessary to allocate participants randomly to imitate experimental conditions when conducting quasi-scientific assessments such as this one.

Those with lower numbers formed the first group and those with higher ones the second. Members of group two left the room whilst members of group one undertook both conditions (you need to remind the reader what the different lesson conditions were, which you do below; perhaps move what you have below merged into this so the descriptions of the different conditions are up front) and then the groups changed places, whilst under supervision to prevent information being passed on whether deliberately or not, and the procedure repeated but with condition two preceding condition one - this was to prevent any order effect, i.e., participants getting a higher score in the second test due to prior experience. This is standard procedure and is known as balancing for order effects.

Participants in Condition A were given response sheets (face-down) and then presented audibly, twice, the poem. After that, they turned over the response sheets and completed what they could. Once those response sheets had been collected, the procedure was repeated for Condition B. On completion of the second part of the experiment, participants were invited to ask questions or make observations; they then left the room and were replaced by the other half of the group and the procedure was repeated – with Condition B preceding Condition A, to account for order effects. In the first group there were 38 participants, in the second group there were 40 participants, while in the third group there were 50 participants. The total number of students was 128 in Condition A and 64 in Condition B.

The whole procedure was repeated for each group. As the groups were unknown to each other, there was almost no possibility of information being passed between groups as the experiment was carried out in different buildings in two different campuses.

## 4. Results

After the experiment was completed, the two questions sheets were marked. This research indicated that for Condition A, when the poem was heard first, 25 out of the 64 students scored correctly before they listened to the song, while 24 out of 64 improved on their scores after listening to the song. 15 out of 64 students had no change in their test scores when listening to the poem and then the song. Meanwhile for Condition B, when the song was heard first, only 5 out of 64 students scored better before listening to the

poem, while 39 out of 64 students scored better after listening to the song and then the poem. 20 out of 64 students had no change in their test scores when listening to the song and then the poem. For students who listened to the poem first, there was little improvement in their recall. Conversely, students who listened to the song first and then the poem showed improvement in their results, as one can see from the following chart: (in the chart, please change experiment results to assessment results)

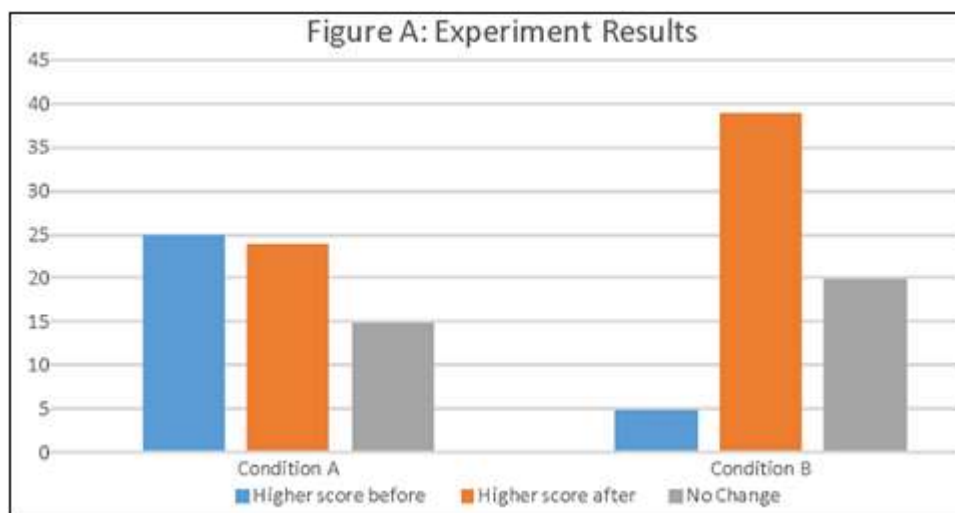


Figure A indicates that listening first to the song provided a base for learning for 61% of students who were able to improve their scores the more times they heard the text. Meanwhile, when the poem was heard first, only 37.5% improved their scores. Just as importantly, when the poem was heard first, students actually scored lower as more time passed (how much time passed?) with 39% of students failing to improve. Meanwhile when the song came first, retention improved and only 8% of the students scored lower after listening to the text another two times.

These results are positive for comprehension and memory recall. These results align with the conclusions of other scholars including the findings of Medina (1999), Mora (2000), Wilcox (1995), and Wray & Perkins (2000), who have also demonstrated that the use of music and song in the context of language instruction is beneficial, particularly when teaching a foreign language (Medina, 1990; Mora, 2000; Wilcox, 1995; Wray & Perkins, 2000). Greatly similar to my study is the experiment by Wallace (1994). The result of his study indicated that recall was significantly greater with music than for the spoken condition (Wallace, 1994). Maley (1987) wrote that songs offer many codes that strengthen student memory, such as choruses, rhymes and melodies (Maley, 1987). These codes increase the functionality of songs in language teaching. When a student listens to a song in the class, the lyrics become imbedded in his or her long-term memory. These results indicate a value of using music in foreign language teaching. One of the interesting things is that the student who turned the poem into music did a very emotional performance in a special event called English Got Talent prepared by the researcher who is the head of the social committee in the same

university to promote using English in a way that can serve students in their professional life. Because using music in language lessons is new and unique in our local context, I have been asked to prepare a workshop on my findings to spread the concept of using lyrics (Rivers, 1987).

## 5. Discussion

The students' reaction to the lesson and assessment was more important than simply the testing scores. Many students came to me at the conclusion of the experiment and requested copies of the song on CD as well as the link of the song on YouTube so they could continue to learn and listen. A request for additional learning materials, while not unheard of, is certainly not the normal request from students. Moreover, in the weeks after the lessons and assessment I found students would sing the song as they came and left class, and this often corresponded with more attentive students who were more engaged and hardworking for the remainder of the course. Though not the primary focus of this research, the results suggest there may be a need to re-examine other parts of the conventional methodologies for classroom learning that engage or otherwise immerse the students in the learning material.

### Avenues for Further Research

The findings show a strong need for additional research of similar nature to examine teachers' attitudes and practices with a larger sample size for students in foreign language classes at different developmental periods. Also, there is a need for further research to compare the effect of using lyrical songs versus conventional methods. Furthermore,



there is a need to measure the effect of music on other language skills such as writing, listening and speaking.

### Recommendations

I strongly encourage teachers and course designers to use lyrics in English classes because students will take this exceptional tool outside the classroom and will keep performing them repeatedly for the purpose of pleasure. Lyrics are something students like and in this way we can supply them with external motivation to learn and use English.

Also I recommend to use lyrics that are specifically written for the purpose of teaching English in a way that is related to their real life situations so as to avoid any cultural gap for any unwanted consequences. By these recommendations I don't suggest replacing other methods with music but to have a sort of integration between using songs and other language teaching methodologies

From my experience as a teacher of English for 20 years I noticed that teaching vocabulary was not an easy task for the teacher to achieve successfully. However, when music was used, learning vocabulary became a fun and it became no longer a boring and unwanted activity. Therefore and based on my findings, I strongly recommend using songs because songs can relieve some language performance anxiety and help students remember new Vocabulary in their natural context.

### 6. Conclusion

This lessons and assessments suggest that recall shows an improvement when music is used to introduce material. Unlike the conventional methodologies, using lyrics can empower student recall and retention of information. The lessons and assessments also suggests that lyrics act as a motivational factor that can increase student interest in learning a foreign language. These findings indicate the strong need for a reconstitution of the conventional material that is designed and used in EFL classes that does not take advantage of songs in the teaching of a foreign language. Overall, I call for the inclusion of lyrical songs in teaching a foreign language under conditions decided by course designers and language instructors. Moreover, I realized a huge interest from students to use new, stimulating material in the classroom through which they can learn English communicatively and in a more relaxing and stimulating atmosphere than conventional methods.

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#### Appendix A

##### The Song

There is a land  
Where the sun shines bright  
And in that land  
It only rains at night.

All the fields are green,  
All the roads are clean.  
People smile all day  
And everything's OK.

There is no war,  
Guns are no more.  
No-one needs to fight,  
Right wins over might.

Brothers, sisters all  
Will you heed the call  
And walk hand in hand  
To the promised land?

AK forty-sevens  
Will be piled high.  
A ladder of Uzis  
Will reach to the sky.

We can climb that ladder  
We can climb it now  
If we go together  
And don't question how.

Lions and lambs  
Lay side by side  
There were tears of joy  
'Cos nobody died.

Once we had climbed  
The barrier to peace  
Our strength alone  
Caused war to cease.

We brought it to an end  
My foe became my friend  
And such a happy state  
Is where it should end.

But we must stay alert  
Must stay on our guard  
To defend our dream

From those who wish us harm.

#### Appendix B

##### Response Sheet A

- 1) When does it rain?
- 2) What do people do?
- 3) What are no more?
- 4) Who will walk hand in hand?
- 5) What will reach the sky?
- 6) We can claim that - -----
- 7) There were ----- of joy.
- 8) Our .....alone.
- 9) My foe ----- my friend
- 10) Must ----- on our guard.

#### Answer sheet A

- 1) When does it rain?  
At night
- 2) What do people do?  
Smile all day
- 3) What are no more?  
Guns
- 4) Who will walk hand in hand?  
Brothers and sisters
- 5) What will reach the sky?  
A ladder of Uzis
- 6) We can climb that - -ladder-----
- 7) There were --tears----- of joy.
- 8) Our .Strength .....alone.
- 9) My foe ----became----- my friend
- 10) Must -----stay on our----- on our guard.

#### Appendix C

##### Response Sheet B

- 1) Where the .....shines bright
- 2) All the .....are clean.
- 3) Right .....over might
- 4) Will you .....the call?
- 5) Will .....to the sky
- 6) When can we do it?
- 7) Why were the tears of joy?
- 8) What caused war to cease?
- 9) Where should it end?
- 10) How must we defend our dream?

#### Answer Sheet B

- 1) Where the sun.....shines bright
- 2) All the ...roads.....are clean.
- 3) Right .wins.....over might
- 4) Will you heed.....the call
- 5) Will .reach.....to the sky

- 6) When can we do it ?  
If we go together/ or any possible answer
- 7) Why were the tears of joy?  
Because nobody died
- 8) What caused war to cease?  
Our strength alone
- 9) Where should it end?  
A happy state
- 10) How must we defend our dream?  
Stay on guard.