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EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SONG-BASED CLASSES INTEGRATED INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE PREPARATORY PROGRAM

Instrumental Case Study

Emine Güzel  (0000-0002-6793-8437)
Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, Turkey
emine.karadeniz@erdogan.edu.tr

İsmail Fırat Altay  (0000-0003-0567-1818)
Hacettepe University, Turkey
ifaltay@hacettepe.edu.tr

Biodata(s):

Emine Güzel works as an EFL instructor at Recep Tayyip Erdogan University. She holds a PhD at the Department of English Language Teaching from Hacettepe University. Research interests; use of authentic materials in language teaching, learner autonomy, and teacher training.

İsmail Fırat Altay is an Assistant Professor at Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language Teaching. His interest fields include ELT methodology, academic writing, pronunciation teaching, culture and language teaching, foreign language testing and non-verbal communication in language teaching.

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Emine Güzel

emine.karadeniz@erdogan.edu.tr

İsmail Fırat Altay

ifaltay@hacettepe.edu.tr

Abstract

This qualitative research study investigated the perceptions of young adult EFL learners' language learning experiences with song-based classes integrated into an English language preparatory program at a state university in Turkey. The study utilized an instrumental case study design, employing semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 20 EFL learners volunteered for joining song-based English language classes for 16 hours during an eight-week period. The song-based classes centered on songs from various genres were integrated into the participants' regular schedule as a part of an experimental research study. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed manually using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns related to the participants' experiences and perceptions of the song-based classes. The analysis revealed five themes, including (1) motivation and engagement, (2) authenticity of the materials and exposure to English, (3) use of various song genres, (4) culture and autonomy, (5) gains of language. The participants reported that the song-based classes offered a positive learning experience by providing commitment to their English language learning process. The results suggest that song-based classes can contribute to increased motivation and learner engagement. Related implications for teaching and learning English to adult EFL learners through songs are presented.

Keywords: Song-based classes; ELT; EFL learners; perceptions

1. Introduction

Throughout human history, music and songs have played a significant role in various aspects of people's lives, including as a means of creative expression for emotions, for important ceremonies, and as a source of recreation and healing. In particular, songs combining poetic expression power of lyrics and melodies are universal elements of all cultures. Songs can be defined as a mixture of the natural bond of music, language, and the human brain (Patel, 2003). As music can cause the brain to release dopamine, help the brain remember memories, and songs can activate the right hemisphere of the brain with melodies and the left hemisphere with the lyrics, it can be said that songs have a significant effect on the human brain (Ayata, 2020; Rentfrow et al., 2011; Salimpoor et al., 2011; Warren, 1999). Utilizing this influential power in a positive manner with effective techniques while teaching and learning foreign languages has the potential to greatly benefit language learners.

Considering English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, the fact that English songs are the most important elements of the global music industry could increase the value of songs as

an authentic aid in language education. In addition, as prominent elements of global and popular culture, English songs can be utilized as motivational language learning materials (Failoni; 1993; Lems, 2018; Sarıçoban & Metin, 2000). Besides, songs in English include colloquial language use, idioms and rich cultural expressions and can be used as texts for language learning and teaching purposes (Marone, 2018 and Schoepp, 2001). Songs in English can ease language acquisition by increasing exposure to authentic language for EFL learners, by making the structure, lexis, and phonological features of the language memorable through melodies (Hişmanoğlu, 2006; Maess & Koelsch, 2001; McCarthy, 1985; Mora, 2000; Murphey, 1990 and Trollinger, 2010).

2. Review of the Literature

All of these potential of music and songs in language teaching has been discussed and investigated since the 1940s Cunningham (2014). Music, which is the main element in Lozanov's (1978) Suggestopedia, also finds a place in Gardner's (2011) theory of multiple intelligences. The fact that the use of songs in language education can activate linguistic and musical intelligence can be counted as one of the potential benefits of bringing songs to the educational environment. Moreover, ELT practitioners are reported to value music and songs as teaching materials both worldwide (Tegge, 2018) and in Turkey (Seis & Merç, 2023). However, in practice; the use of music appears to be degraded by being regarded only as extra-curricular or fill-in activities, the inclusion of which mostly depends on personal preferences of teachers. This exclusion of music and songs from curriculums could be due to limited studies on the use of music and songs (Engh, 2013; Seis & Merç, 2023; Tegge, 2018). Additionally, songs in ELT tend to be associated with young learners most of the time (Engh, 2013), it is also worth investigating to what extent and how songs are effective in learning different language areas for adult learners. Research studies on university students' learning English in different contexts through songs have mostly reported positive effects of the songs (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi, 2015; Chen, 2016; Li & Brand, 2009; Rockell, 2015; Serçe, 2005; Shaffer & David, 2004; Shakerian, et al., 2016; Şahin, 2008; and Xiaomei & Quansheng, 2018). Considering the fact that most of the studies conducted are quantitative and the limited number of research in the Turkish context; it is notable to investigate tertiary adult EFL learners' experiences of learning English with songs. Furthermore, to the researchers' best knowledge, there is no study specifically examining tertiary level learners' perceptions on the use of authentic songs integrated into their regular English language program. This research gap highlights the significance of conducting a study to explore the potential benefits and challenges faced by tertiary learners when utilizing authentic songs as part of their English language instruction.

In order to find the perspectives of the participants, who are the subjects of language learning processes, in this qualitative study; the experiences of 20 young adult university students who voluntarily attended song-based English classes integrated as part of their curriculum within an experimental study were investigated. To the researchers' best knowledge, in the related literature, there is a lack of research on the tertiary adult EFL learners' perceptions of the inclusion of songs in language programs. This study attempts to fill in this literature gap by exploring experiences of the adult EFL tertiary learners by seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the Turkish adult English language learners' perceptions of song-based classes?
2. What can be done to design effective song-based classes for English preparatory programs?

3. Method

In this qualitative study, an instrumental case study research design was adapted to provide insights into participant adult tertiary EFL learners' experiences of song-based classes and to draw implications for the inclusion of song-based classes in curricula of English preparatory programs at universities in Turkey. In an instrumental case study, the focus lies on comprehending something that is broader in scope than the specific instance being examined (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Therefore, it was chosen as the appropriate way of inquiry considering the focus of this study.

3.1. Participants and Context

The 20 participants of this study are adult Turkish EFL learners who experienced song-based classes integrated into the English preparatory program of a public university as part of experimental research. Participants aged between 18 and 25 voluntarily participated in song-based classes and interviews. Of the participants 9 were female and 11 were male. The purposive sampling method was used to determine the participants to be interviewed. Among the participants who volunteered for the interviews, interviews were held with 20 participants who met the criteria of having attended all of the song-based classes.

The classes were scheduled as 2 lessons per week and lasted for 8 weeks. A total of 16 lessons centered on 8 songs from different genres, pop, jazz, rock, folk, country, and hip-hop. The songs used in each lesson materials were respectively; What a Wonderful World (1967), Counting Stars (2013), Wagon Wheel (2013), Rock'abye (2016), My Lighthouse (2014), Living in the Moment (2012), Let Her Go (2012), Gangsters' Paradise (1995). Music videos of the songs were utilized along with different activities to work on listening, speaking, reading, writing skills and vocabulary with an integrative approach by using present- practice-production (PPP) method.

All of the participants were with A2 level English proficiency and had not experienced song-based English classes before. They were all native Turkish speakers and had similar English learning experiences for 5-10 years in public primary, secondary, and high schools. The participants' English learning experiences before university were mostly traditional in which English is seen only as a lesson and not as a communication tool or language. The focus of the lessons was on the structure of the language and teachers were following the textbooks. Activities for improving productive language skills were extremely limited in their English language class experiences.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

For data collection, semi-constructed one-to-one interviews were used. In-depth explanations of the findings and an expansion of the investigation was achieved through the use of semi-structured one-on-one interviews, which gave the researcher the chance to learn the respondents' perspectives and ideas (Raworth et al., 2012). Before the data collection process, an ethical approval for the study was obtained. Within the ethical consideration of the study, an information meeting was held in which the necessary information was given to the participant and their permission was taken through consent forms.

Two pilot interviews were initially conducted and the questions were revised accordingly. The interviews with the 20 participants from the experimental groups were then scheduled right after the eight weeks of song-based classes finished. The face to face one-to-one interviews took place in the researcher's office at the School of Foreign Languages.



The interviews were recorded with a voice recording application on a mobile phone and lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and for the analysis of data a content analysis was performed manually through coding to identify themes, patterns, and connections between ideas based on word and phrase repetitions of the participants.

3.3. Trustworthiness

This study tried to establish its credibility, accuracy, and integrity by utilizing member checking, peer review, and external audit. These approaches aimed to improve the credibility, accuracy, and integrity of the research findings, hence boosting confidence in the study's outcomes. First, a member verification procedure was carried out, during which the participants were informed of the preliminary findings. With the help of this process, participation and confirmation of the participants were gathered to ensure the representations of their viewpoints and interpretations were accurate. In order to confirm the findings, follow-up one-to-one interviews were scheduled and the participants reviewed transcripts of their interviews. In addition, for the purpose of improving credibility of the findings, peer review and external audit methods were used. Two external validations from auditors with expertise in the field of ELT were taken. The external audit procedure helped the researchers identify any potential biases in the study. Peer review done by the researchers also increased the reliability of the results.

3.4. Ethical Procedures

Before starting the study, the researchers requested approval from ... University's Ethics Committee. The research's goals were explained to the participants, who were also made aware that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time. They received guarantees that the data they provided would be kept private and utilized only for the research study. The research was conducted in accordance with the decision 35853172-300, issued by the Hacettepe University Ethics Committee on 18/06/2018.

4. Findings

The participants' overall feedback about the inclusion of song-based classes into their syllabus was mostly positive. All of the participants stated that they had benefited from the song-based classes and that their experiences with these classes could contribute to their English learning processes in various ways. The participants found it effective to have a new song to do with different activities in their class each week and this allowed them to learn and have fun at the same time. As indicated by the statements of the participants, they focused on several positive aspects of their experience of learning through songs. As a result of the content analysis and with the guidance of interview questions, five themes were identified within the data obtained from the participants; (a) motivation and engagement, (b) authenticity of the materials and exposure to English, (c) use of various song genres, (d) culture and autonomy, (e) gains of language.



Figure 1. Identified themes regarding song-based lessons

4.1. Motivation and Engagement

In regards to motivation and engagement, while the participants were describing their experiences with the song-based classes, they repeated the statements that the lessons aroused an interest and motivation towards English lessons and, more strikingly, to learning English in general. This interest seemed to cause the participants to make efforts to do some research about the singers and groups from different music genres presented in the song-based classes. Beyond the classroom in their free time, they tried to understand the lyrics, and listen to the songs in English:

In one of the lessons there was a song by a singer I hadn't listened to before. When I went to the dormitory, I realized that the song was on my tongue and I discovered many songs by the same singer and added them to my list. (P3)

Similarly, as a sign of motivation and engagement, with the inspiration by the song-based classes some of the participants decided to discover new songs by choosing a genre, a singer, a band or a decade. Song-based classes appear to help the participants have a clear goal in mind and give them something to work towards.

“I saw Louis Armstrong in a music video in one of the classes and then I listened to all of his songs. I also listened to the covers of his songs” (P10).

The participants reported seeing the language they were learning in song-based classes was used in real English. This seemed to keep them more motivated and engaged when they saw the relevance of what they were learning. They were more likely to be motivated to continue learning:

“It was good to learn idiomatic meanings at this level as that gives us motivation and confidence” (P9).

The use of a variety of materials such as the different music videos for a single song (karaoke videos, cover videos by other singers, lyrics videos, and lyrics of the songs in different forms

of worksheet) were also emphasized by the participants. They reported this variety of materials also helped ensure that they were engaged:

“I could relate vocabulary items with the story of the song and music video so I could remember the words easily” (P6).

The positive effects of songs on creating a supportive learning environment were also mentioned frequently by the participants. With the soothing effect of melodies, they described the learning environment where they could feel comfortable which could be regarded as critical for keeping the participants engaged and motivated.

“I felt more comfortable with the effect of music when songs are played in the classroom. Normally, I feel nervous when I listen to a dialogue from the book” (P1).

“Songs created a good classroom atmosphere because most of the students in the class were engaged” (P2).

4.2. Authenticity of the Materials and Exposure to English

The authenticity of the materials refers to the degree to which the language used in the learning materials (lyrics, audios and music videos of the songs) reflects how the language is used in real-life contexts. The language used in the lyrics was authentic and from the participants' perspectives, it contributed to their language learning:

“Songs brought us different things to talk about and different language from the course book and that was cool” (P16).

Authentic materials could provide the participants with examples of real-world language use, helping them to develop their understanding of natural language patterns and structures. This could include things like authentic texts as in lyrics of songs:

“I have noticed that as in Turkish songs, in English songs there are lots of multiword with idiomatic meanings” (P7).

The exposure to English, on the other hand, refers to the amount of time and opportunity the participants had to encounter the English language in their environment. In their experience, the participants listened to one song at least three times in a song-based class. This exposure was limited due to presenting songs as lesson materials and timing issues of the lessons, however most of them stated that they continued listening to the same songs or similar songs that they discovered outside the classroom:

“After we studied in one of the classes, I listened to the song Counting Stars 30 times a day for a while” (P11).

“This study added many new songs to my playlist and I continue listening with my headphones anytime and anywhere” (P20).

As it provided the participants with opportunities to practice and reinforce their language skills, they referred to listening to English language music as a way of exposure to English which can be described as crucial for language development particularly in EFL contexts.

4.3. Use of Various Song Genres

The participants' statements confirmed the promoting effect of the use of various song genres that were utilized in the song-based classes on improving their language skills in different ways. Regarding different genres, they indicated distinctive aspects of improving their language skills.

Pop songs were found catchy which made them effective for improving pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm which could contribute to their speaking skills as well as their vocabulary and grammar. The lyrics also helped them to learn or notice grammar structures, idioms, and phrasal verbs:

“It was good to learn new words and how to pronounce them automatically with the melodies while I sing along” (P13).

“In one of the songs the lyrics let her go were repeated and it helped me learn the structure as let someone do something” (P17).

For the rap song, *Gangster’s Paradise* (1995), the participants focused on the informal language and use of slang in terms of vocabulary such as “gotta”, “ain’t”, and “fool”. Their ideas were positive about learning the colloquial language since it was different from the text book English and close to real-life English to which they are exposed from the movies and videos they watch in English. Nevertheless, some of the participants described the lesson with the rap song as challenging due to the fast-paced rhythm and making it difficult to comprehend the lyrics.

“The lyrics are said so fast that I could only hear some of the repeated words” (P14).

The participants' ideas about the country song, *Wagon Wheel*, were noteworthy. As the most distant genre to the participants among the songs used in the lessons, by participants the lyrics were not found challenging to hear and the general idea of the story was found easy to understand with the help of the music video. However, cultural references seemed to create a challenge for some of the participants:

“Names of many places were a bit confusing for me in that song” (P8).

The jazz song, *What a Wonderful World*, was one of the songs that many participants mentioned while talking about the songs and that was memorable. They explained the reason for this because the melody of the song was generally familiar, the singer's voice and interpretation were impressive, and the singing attitudes they saw in the video were very interesting. The participant, who made a deduction for learning English, stated that since jazz songs' tempo is not very fast, the lyrics are more lucid and comprehensible, and that this contributes to his understanding of the songs.

“I have discovered that jazz songs are easy to understand and I really liked some of the songs' melodies” (P4).

4.4. Culture and Autonomy

The fact that music is a powerful tool that can shape and influence culture was revealed in the participants' statements. Most of them emphasized the words “general culture” to be able to explain the contribution of learning about different music genres, bands and singers, and understanding different messages and stories of the songs to their knowledge of culture. In addition, the participants found it important to be able to know about global songs in English:

“It is cool to be able to sing along to an English song and understand it while you're sitting in a cafe with your friends” (P12).

The songs also offered a window into the culture of the language being learned and could help the participants to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the language and the people who speak it. They could better understand the language in its cultural context:

“Good for learning about different cultures. For example, rap music can tell us a lot about different groups of people and their lives” (P18).



The participants mentioned that they could see a model of self-studying English with songs. This could be related to autonomy in language learning which might indicate that incorporating songs could also give the participants more control over their learning process. Since the participants could choose songs based on their interests and preferences, their motivation and engagement could increase by taking control of their own learning materials:

“These lessons showed an enjoyable way of learning English that I will definitely continue to do myself” (P5).

They could also work on developing their own listening and learning strategies, such as using lyrics to identify new vocabulary or practicing shadowing (repeating what they hear in the song in real-time):

“Lyrics videos on YouTube are great to sing along with and I can learn better when I read the lyrics while I’m singing or listening to a song” (P19).

Moreover, the participants stated that they could use songs as a way to self-assess their progress. They could listen to the same song at different points in their language learning journey and track their understanding and improvement over time:

“From the lessons I discovered Jason Mraz and I listened to most of his songs and in time I started to understand most of the lyrics” (P15).

4.5. Gains of Language

Within the statements of the participants while they were explaining the ways that songs could help them improve their language learning specifically with examples the following language areas were mostly focused in terms of language gains: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, listening comprehension, and retention of the language. Based on their reports, listening to and singing songs could help improve the participants’ language skills in a number of ways:

- Increasing vocabulary with new words and expressions, particularly multi-word expressions such as lose money, lose sleep, shed a tear, dream about, take it easy.
- Improving pronunciation: Songs could help them improve their pronunciation, as they listened to and repeated the lyrics.
- Improving grammar skills: By listening to and analyzing the lyrics in the lessons, they could gain a better understanding of sentence structure and verb tenses.
- Improving comprehension: By listening to songs in English they could train their ears to understand the language more easily as well as improving their ability to understand spoken language at a natural pace.
- Retention: Songs could help the participants remember new vocabulary and grammar structures more easily, as they were often set to catchy melodies and rhythms.

5. Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

Findings of this study are in line with the literature about the benefits and effects of music and songs in ELT (Failoni,1993; Lems,2018; Maess & Koelsch, 2001; Marone, 2018; McCarthy:1985, Mora:2000, Murphey: 1990, Sariçoban & Metin, 2000; Schoepp, 2001; Trollinger, 2010) and also with the research studies reported empirical positive effects of using songs as teaching tools (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi, 2015; Chen, 2016; Li & Brand, 2009; Serçe,

2005; Shaffer & David, 2004; Shakerian, et al., 2016; Şahin, 2008; Rockell, 2015 and Xiaomei & Quansheng, 2018).

Based on the findings it can be concluded that the song-based lessons offered a positive learning experience for the participants in terms of learning English. The participants' statements also inferred that they were able to enjoy themselves while learning through songs and music videos that were accompanied by activities focused on vocabulary learning. As a result of the analysis of the participants' statements about their experience with song-based classes the following themes were identified; (a) motivation and engagement, (b) authenticity of the materials and exposure to English, (c) use of various song genres, (d) culture and autonomy, (e) gains of language. Among these themes, autonomy and motivation are noteworthy as they are listed by Svalberg (2009, p. 149) as the "affective elements" of engagement.

Although music and songs are mostly an issue of individual tastes and the findings reflect experiences of a limited number of learners within a specific context, the participants' experience and feedback could be guidance for us to draw implications for teaching English through songs. Considering and utilizing songs as curricular or extracurricular authentic elements, the following implications could be instrumental for similar EFL contexts where English is taught intensively as a preparation for the undergraduate studies at universities.

5.1. Implications for Teaching English through Songs

With song-based classes, young adult learners can acquire knowledge about English language music culture, which can be useful outside of the classroom. This can increase their motivation, give them a sense of achievement, and demonstrate to their peers that they have some knowledge of English language music. All of these factors can help engage learners and increase their inner motivation, which is crucial for learning. Furthermore, it is indispensable to offer English language music lessons to Generation Z, who are considered the most globally interconnected generation (Rothman, 2016). Songs can both strengthen their connection to global popular culture and contribute to their overall cultural awareness of the target culture.

By being aware of the educational value of songs in learning English, learners can foster their independence and motivation by exploring new songs in English. In this way they might be encouraged to seek out their own learning materials and become more autonomous. Encouraging learners to add a number of English songs into their playlists can provide them much more exposure to the language beyond the classroom instruction. Moreover, song-listening portfolios and song journals could be utilized and learners should be encouraged to share and enrich their playlists.

Songs accompanied with music videos are authentic materials that can also provide learners with opportunities to analyze the meaning behind the lyrics and this might enhance learners' intercultural awareness. By utilizing targeted exercises, learners can be encouraged to recognize cultural, religious, and geographical references within the lyrics. Moreover, they could be prompted to identify similarities and differences between songs in their own culture and English-language songs when expressing universal emotions such as happiness and sadness.

To create a positive classroom environment and uplift the mood, songs might be incorporated into classroom activities regularly. This can be achieved by selecting a "song of the week" and designing lessons around themes such as jazz classics, and popular songs from the 1990s, or focusing on a specific artist or band. Highlighting underrated songs from an artist or band can also be engaging for young adults.

For learners with limited English proficiency, it is important to provide explicit instruction on specific language components to prevent them from solely enjoying the entertaining aspects of song-based classes. Therefore, to assess learners' knowledge and skills related to the target language component, a simple test or a task could be administered. This can help learners feel a sense of accomplishment and recognize that songs can be used for more than just entertainment or relaxation.

In order to foster an affective learning environment, it is important to include song feedback activities at the end of lessons where learners can share their thoughts on the song in pairs or small groups, creating lasting memories of specific lessons with songs. Furthermore, since songs are often viewed as an additional component to regular classroom practice, incorporating them can demonstrate to learners that the teacher cares about their learning experience. The effort put into planning lessons with songs may be valued by learners, leading to increased engagement in the classroom which in turn might increase teachers' motivation. As stated by Kahraman (2016, p. 8), Turkish learners of English regard songs as a way of experiencing the target culture, however "teachers rarely bring additional culture loaded materials to the classroom, however, students prefer much more than that." It can be said that the lack of flexibility in curriculum and material issues is the reason why teachers do not meet expectations in this regard, but it is seen that there is a need to give a little more awareness and information about how to use songs, which are the most global cultural elements of the target language, in teacher training programs. The development of 21st century skills and the inclusion of arts and cultural elements among the courses given to teacher candidates for this purpose can be a solution to meet the need for these courses to be more realistic and practical, as Ataberk & Mirici (2022) put forward.

5.2. Implications for Song Selection

In designing song-based classes, selecting appropriate songs can be regarded as a crucial step. To be able to create a surprise effect for learners, teachers may be responsible for selecting songs, though they can ask learners to provide a list of their favorite songs through a questionnaire. As a variation, teachers can share the criteria for selecting songs with their learners, then they can find appropriate songs and also based on samples provided by the teacher, learners themselves can create a range of activities and exercises beyond just fill-in-the-blank exercises.

When selecting songs for lessons, it is important to consider the tempo of the song, regardless of its genre, as it should not be too fast or slow. The ideal song should also have a good balance between instrumentation and vocals, and the accent of the singer should be easily understood by learners. Also taking the age of the learners into account could be an important criterion. Choosing old hit songs from their childhood years may be more engaging for them, as they are likely to be more familiar with those songs. Additionally, this familiarity could engage the Zeigarnik Effect, which suggests that the brain is more likely to remember unfinished tasks than finished tasks (MacLeod, 2020).

In line with Graham's (2006) English teaching approach that uses jazz chants for children, classic jazz songs with lyrics could be used in classes for adult learners who have a low level of English proficiency. Jazz songs are suitable because of their slow tempo, comprehensible and repetitive lyrics, and the powerful effect of their classical melodies. All these features point out the jazz genre appropriate for English language learning and teaching purposes.

For learners with a low level of English proficiency, country and hip-hop genres could be challenging. Since country music is not widely known in the Turkish context and mostly includes cultural references that require more preparation and background information for

learners to fully comprehend lyrics. Additionally, as hip-hop or rap songs are often too fast-paced, it can be difficult to find appropriate for teaching purposes.

As effective visual supports, selection of music videos of songs is also a criterion while choosing songs for learners to understand the meaning and cultural references in the lyrics. Performance, narrative, or conceptual music videos can all be suitable, but too visually appealing videos should be avoided prevent distraction. Moreover, using alternative music videos for a song including covers, performance videos, lyric videos, and karaoke versions can increase the chances of exposure to authentic language.

In order to promote positive psychological effects on young adult learners, it is recommended to choose songs with easily understandable and optimistic lyrics for song-based classes. This is supported by research that highlights the positive influence of songs on mood regulation among learners in this age group (Elver, 2016; Kokkidou & Tsakiridou, 2009).

Choosing songs with grammatically correct lyrics can be beneficial for learners, as it can provide learners with models to produce sentences in both written and spoken communication. Memorizing the lyrics word-for-word can help learners internalize these structures and use them in their own language production.

On a final note, song-based English lessons with related media use can be regarded as more memorable than regular English lessons that can be done with any other approach. The fact that all of the participants described the lessons by the name of the songs can alone be evidence to make this inference. Making room for songs in classrooms and curricula, and occasionally putting songs at the center, can be an effective approach that can contribute to adult English language learning processes and programs.



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