

## **PRACTICE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF USING SONGS TO LEARN ENGLISH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

English songs are believed to be a helpful tool in teaching and learning English. Literature shows that the use of this vigorous tool not only facilitates students' language development, but also enlarges their knowledge and motivation to learn. While applying songs in teaching has been widely studied, little is known about what learners think of this practice. The present study was therefore conducted to address this question. The study had a participation of 49 students majoring in English at Can Tho University, Vietnam. Using a questionnaire to survey learners' opinion, the study found that Vietnamese university students have a positive attitude and high motivation towards listening to English songs in their study outside the classroom. Students' preference regarding trendy songs and favorite singers and listening challenges were also identified and discussed. The study suggests a number of implications that add to the current literature on songs and their application in education.

Keywords: English Songs, Independent Learning, Learners' Perception

### **INTRODUCTION**

English plays an important role in today's world, especially in the era of globalization. English proficiency is then believed to be an essential qualification for any academic or professional pursuits. In teaching and learning English, a diversity of methods and techniques have been developed and employed and they yielded certain degrees of success. Among these techniques, using songs has been found to be effective in increasing learners' motivation, language development, learning skills, and world knowledge. By choosing trendy English songs to listen to in independent learning, many students are said to considerably improve their vocabulary as well as listening and speaking skills. English songs also improve students' pronunciation (Vo Thuy Linh, 2016). Other studies find that songs' lyrics are helpful in enriching students' knowledge of grammar and culture. It is also noteworthy that English lyrics are authentic language and their repetitive nature helps students learn words easily and remember them longer.

Given the pervasive benefits of English songs for students' learning, however, little is known about how students perceive and experience this learning method, especially in the Vietnamese contexts of English teaching and learning. Therefore, this study aims to explore the topic in the higher education setting at a university in the south of Vietnam. Specifically, the study will attempt to review the substantial theoretical and research related literature on the role of music and songs in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. It also conducts a survey with a group of students majoring in English language to gain better understanding of learners' perception and motivation in adopting this powerful pedagogical tool.

In the following section of the paper, we summarize the theoretical literature and related studies on the role of music in language learning. According to researchers, language learning can benefit from music in several aspects including affective, linguistic, and cognitive (Schoepp, 2001; Lieb, 2005).

### ***Affective dimension: Songs as a motivating way to learn a language***

Music and songs by their nature as artistic pieces are obviously attractive. The beauty of music can be appreciated in terms of melody and rhythm. With songs, there is an important dimension added: the lyrics. It is the words found in songs that are most of the time poetic and romantic that are sources for motivational and linguistic benefits that both teachers and students could take advantage of.

Kuśnierek (2016) explained other reasons why young people are motivated to listen to songs. They find the content of popular songs close and connected to their life. In other words, themes and topics in songs fit well with their interests and everyday experiences. In fact, a majority of pop songs concentrate on love, friendship, dream, sorrow, and similar feelings and emotions.

In the classroom, songs can help to create a fun and relaxing atmosphere, whereas for independent learning, listening to songs is just as enjoyable. With music and songs, learners can have a positive attitude towards the learning process, which is most of the time seen as laborious, arduous and tedious connected to tasks, exams, frustration, and corrections Murphey (1992).

In addition to providing inspiration, music is also found to lower students' anxiety (Sevik, 2011). In this regard, the use of music is aligned with the method known as Suggestopedia advocated by Lozanow, in which learning occurs in musical backgrounds. What is important with the method is that learners learn in a subconscious, effortless, and relaxing way.

### ***Linguistic dimension: Songs as a technique to enrich linguistic knowledge and enhance language skills***

A great number of studies have an emphasis on the importance of vocabulary acquisition through listening to songs (e.g. Lestari & Anti, 2005; Kuśnierek, 2016; Shehadeh & Farrah, 2016; Al-efshat & Baniabdelrahman, 2020; Isnaini & Aminatun, 2021). It is reasonable enough because lexical competence is essential for other skills

particularly listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Regarding developing learners' vocabulary, Lieb (2005) argues that songs have vigorous strengths. The author related this learning to Krashen's Input Hypothesis that maintains "new and unfamiliar vocabulary is best learned when learners see it as significant and meaningful" (p. 91).

By being attentive to the lyrics, students may familiarize themselves with syntactic, grammatical, and phonological aspects of the English language. Listening to songs is therefore found to improve students' pronunciation and verbal expressions (Shehadeh & Farrah, 2016; Bsharat et al. 2021). As an authentic linguistic input, songs contain plentiful idiomatic and colloquial expressions, which is believed to be useful for language learners (Schoepp, 2001). Having an exposure to English music with its unique rhythm, pitch, and intonation, learners can become more aware of these prosodic features, which is essential for foreign language acquisition (Lieb, 2005).

***Cognitive dimension: Songs as a method to develop learning skills and expand cultural knowledge***

Gottfried (2007) said that music connects students with new cultures and opens up a whole new world. It is hard to imagine an ever existence of a certain song which is free of spatial and temporal contexts. So, the cultural details paramount in songs on the one hand create a curiosity on the listener's part, on the other, they require further inquiries to fully understand the content. Just like religious knowledge helps explain famous Christmas carols, geographical knowledge facilitates understanding of pop songs tied to specific names of cities and regions (e.g. La Isla Bonita, Casablanca, Come Back to Sorrento, etc.). Historical understanding is argued to be necessary also for a full appreciation of such past pop songs as My Heart Will Go on, Happy New Year, and so on.

Many authors including Lieb (2005) posit that music adds right brain elements to the left-brain dominance of language learning. According to Gardner's (1993) model of multiple intelligences, verbal-linguistic activities are associated with the left hemisphere of the brain, while the right hemisphere governs creative and artistic expressions. Activating musical intelligence and combining the two hemispheres is therefore encouraged for a whole mental growth.

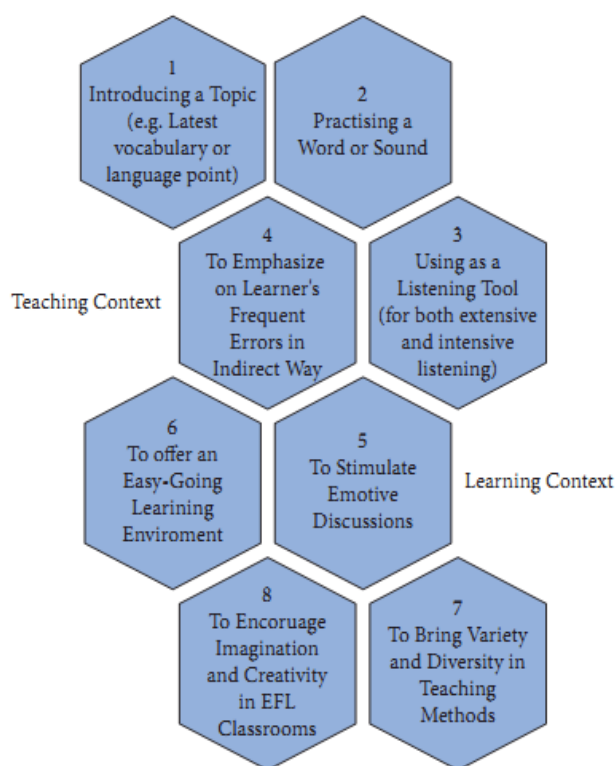


Figure 1. Eken's 8 motives of using songs (Kumar et al., 2022)

### ***Related Studies***

Viewed from pedagogical perspectives, music is a rich and helpful resource for teachers. Several studies focused on teachers' perception, techniques, and experimentation with songs in the classroom. Interestingly, Eken (1996) as cited in Kumar et al. (2022) provided a list of what he called 'motives' behind the use of songs in teaching and learning contexts (see Figure 1 above). In addition to the widely recognized benefits such as providing motivation and language practice, there are other reasons to use songs too. These include indirectly correcting learners' mistakes, encouraging imagination and creativity, and stimulating emotive discussions, all of which are believed to be critically important in students' personal growth.

The study by Shehadeh and Farrah (2016) explored the effects of song employment on elementary graders' vocabulary and pronunciation. One hundred and twenty three Arabic grade four students were studied, with songs treated for the experimental group, and regular instruction applied for the control group. The study found that learners learning with songs outperformed the other students in terms of their pronunciation and vocabulary development.

Lestari and Hardiyanti (2005) studied the case of four Indonesian students using songs to learn vocabulary. Via detailed interviews, the authors found that songs were

meaningful and helpful in lexical acquisition. Songs substantially contributed to motivating students and increasing vocabulary retention. This was found to be due to the fact that words used in songs were highly authentic and contextualized. And in this way of learning, the lexicons were acquired incidentally, so songs were believed to facilitate vocabulary learning autonomy.

In Vietnam, Lai Ngoc Ly and Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh (2020) conducted an experimental study in which they used songs to teach biological vocabulary to grade 10 students. The study showed that studying with songs increased the students' motivation. Particularly, songs made students more attentive to the lessons, while the class atmosphere was fun and interesting. Besides, their comparisons between the experimental group and the control group revealed that in learning with songs, acquisition and retention of subject-specific vocabulary were better.

In the context of English teaching and learning at a private language center, Lam Thi Ngoc Dieu and Nguyen Duy Khang (2022) investigated the perception of 55 teachers about using songs to teach listening skill. Among the findings was teachers' positive attitude towards the benefits of this pedagogical technique, seeing it as a helpful and appropriate method to teach listening, especially to young learners. In a similar context, Tien Cam Nguyen and Huan Buu Nguyen (2020) focused on teachers' perception of using songs to teach vocabulary. This study involved a participation of 75 teachers. Through questionnaires and interviews, the study found that generally teachers held a positive perception about employing songs, and songs were viewed as a powerful and rich resource for their practice.

As it can be seen in the literature review, most studies focused on the importance of songs and their application in the classroom perceived by the teachers. In addition, most research has been done in regard to using songs to teach young learners. Little is known about the usefulness of songs in independent learning viewed from the perspective of adult learners themselves. The current study is, therefore, aimed to address this gap. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following two questions.

1. What are the perceptions of university students towards using songs to study English?
2. What preferences and challenges do they have in applying this learning technique?

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

This study was conducted with a participation of 49 English majors at Can Tho University. The students' level of English proficiency was estimated to be equivalent to the CEFR B2 and above. Some students were in their third year and some in the last year of the four year program at university. All of the students were reported to have experiences with listening to English songs to learn. This was the only criterion to select informants for the survey, and other demographic information was not collected.

## Instruments

In this study, based on the literature, we constructed a questionnaire to ask the students about their perceptions of employing songs in studying English. The questionnaire consisted of 28 items, many of which were adapted from the teacher's perception questionnaire by Shehadeh and Farrah (2016). In particular, the first 24 items were opinion statements against which the students gave their agreement or disagreement by choosing an appropriate option. In other words, we applied the Likert 5-point scale, with 1-5 signifying strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The last four items were open-ended questions, to which the students provided their short answers. The four questions mainly asked about students' favorite songs, singers, their difficulties and suggestions regarding using English songs to learn. To ensure the instrument's validity, the items in the questionnaire were checked by two teachers of English for clarity and appropriateness of the content. The reliability was checked with SPSS which gave a Cronbach alpha of .916.

## RESULTS

### *Students' Perception of Using Song to Learn English*

Displayed in Table 1 were the results of students' view of English songs as a motivating tool for learning. Students thought that listening to music made them feel calm (item 1, M=4.14). Music was believed to increase motivation (item 22, M=4.12), lower anxiety (item 23, M=3.88), and so encourage more learning (item 4, M=3.88). Learning with music was also considered as a refreshing change away from routine experience (item 3, M=4.00). Outstanding high means of M=4.27 and M=4.31 for items 21 and 24 respectively showed that the students had a strong agreement that songs could increase learners' enjoyment and engage them in helpful discussions. The minimum values (Min=3) in these two items, moreover, confirmed this strong congruence.

Table 1. Songs as a Motivator

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
1/ Songs make listeners feel calm.	49	1	5	4.14	.842
3/ Songs refresh the class environment.	49	2	5	4.00	.842
4/ Using songs increases my desire to learn more.	49	1	5	3.88	.881
21/ Songs increase students' enjoyment of learning English.	49	3	5	4.27	.700
22/ Songs improve students' motivation.	49	2	5	4.12	.781
23/ Songs lower students' anxiety toward learning English.	49	2	5	3.88	.807
24/ Discussing songs with friends can be interesting.	49	3	5	4.31	.713

Songs were seen to facilitate language development generally, with all items in this group having rather high mean scores (see Table 2). Vocabulary and listening skills had the highest rates with mean values for items 8 and 19 both equal to 4.18. Perception of music role in attaining learners to syntactical knowledge was mildly high, with means of item 14 (language chunks) and item 18 (sentence structures) being 3.78 and 3.45 respectively. As for pronunciation, prosodic features, and speaking skill, the ratings were fairly positive. The mean scores for items 13, 16, and 20 were 3.71, 3.76, and 3.96 respectively.

Table 2. Songs for Linguistic Development

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
8/ Songs enrich my vocabulary.	49	2	5	4.18	.667
13/ Songs help learners become familiar with word stress, intonation and rhythm.	49	2	5	3.71	.816
14/ Songs enable learners to remember chunks of language.	49	1	5	3.78	.771
16/ Songs help improve students' speaking skills.	49	3	5	3.76	.778
18/ Songs are useful in the learning of sentence structures.	49	2	5	3.45	.937
19/ Songs help learners improve their listening skills.	49	3	5	4.18	.667
20/ Songs help learners improve their pronunciation skills.	49	2	5	3.96	.735

In Table 3, we present the results related to students' perception of the role of English songs and music in developing learners' knowledge and learning skills. Students exhibited an agreement that this learning method could be used for self-learning, specifically songs could be flexibly listened while doing the housework (item 2, M=4.02). In comparison with other traditional strategies, listening to songs was found to be more useful (items 5 & 10, M=4.14 & 3.55) and to help learners enrich knowledge (item 6, M=3.90). In the classroom, songs could be used to illustrate themes and topics (item 12, M=3.88) and they were a valuable teaching tool for foreign language instruction (item 11, M=3.65). In addition, music was perceived as contributing to better communication (item 9, M=3.45) while also increasing mental skills (item 7, M=3.98).

Table 3. Songs to Increase Knowledge and Learning Skills

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
2/ Songs can be listened to while studying / doing housework.	49	1	5	4.02	.878
5/ Learning English with songs is useful.	49	1	5	4.14	.866
6/ Songs enrich my knowledge.	49	1	5	3.90	.895
7/ Songs increase my mental skills.	49	2	5	3.98	.854

9/ Learning with songs enables me to communicate better.	49	1	5	3.45	.818
10/ Songs are better than traditional strategies to learn.	49	1	5	3.55	.959
11/ Songs are considered a valuable pedagogical tool in learning English.	49	1	5	3.65	.779
12/ Songs can be used to illustrate themes or topics.	49	2	5	3.88	.666

### Students' Preference of Songs and Singers

With exception of three students saying they did not have any favorite songs in particular, the rest of the students supplied a long list of songs they preferred to listen to. These songs were the trendy contemporary ones such as Safe and Sound, Attention. More historic classics and everlasting hits were also favored, for example, Hello, Love Story, Baby Once More Time, etc.

Table 4 below presents the full list of songs and singers reported by the students. It is noteworthy that Taylor Swift, Adele, Fiona Fung, Charlie among many other names were repeatedly mentioned as their favorites.

Table 4. Students' Preferred Songs and Singers

<i>Favorite Songs</i>	<i>Favorite Singers</i>
<i>Safe and Sound (x2), Stuck On The Puzzle, Something Good, Chamber of Reflection, Attention (x3), In The End, Fancy, My heart will go on, At my Worst, déjà vu, One Last Time, Million Years Ago, Just say hello, memories, Proud of you (x2), Diamond, Comethru, Hello, It's you, Baby, Enchanted (x2), What Are Words, Exile, Speechless, Yes to heaven, What makes you beautiful, 22, Thinking out loud, When you believe, Easy on me, Come back home, Cage of Desire, Somewhere only we know, Dynamite, 7 years, What are words, skyfall, WAP, Lemon tree, Love story (x3), Speak Now, Flashlight, The day you went away, Black Space, Ignite, Nothing on me, See you again, Cheri cheri lady, love yourself, what are words, Without Me, Mockingbird, Superman, Real Slim Shady, The hills, Call out my name, Careless Whispers, Smooth, Operator, Baby one more time, Love you like a love song, The heart wants what it wants, so far away, I'll be there, numb, monster, walking on the sun, bang bang bang, We don't talk anymore, Walk thru fire</i>	Taylor Swift, Charlie Puth, Adele, BTS, Alan Walker, Alex Turner, Feng Suave, Alt-J, Mac DeMarco, Chester Bennington, Taylor Swift, Iggy Azalea, Olivia Rodrigo, Ariana Grande, Adele, Taylor Swift, Melo D, Fiona Fung, Adele, Taylor Swift, Michael Jackson, Justin Bieber, BLACKPINK, Chris Medina, Taylor Swift, Adele, Lana Del Rey, Taylor Swift, Nicki Minaj, Mariah Carey, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, MIIA, Cardi B, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, Fiona Fung, Jessi J, Taylor Swift, Charlie Puth, Justin Bieber, Julie Bergan, Seungri, Challier Puth, Eminem, The Weekend, Ariana Grande, Charlie puth, Vicetone

## ***Students' Perceived Challenges and Suggestions in Learning with Songs***

Most of the students associated the challenges they had with the songs' lyrics. The biggest difficulty mentioned by 12 students (more than 20%) had to do with the words. They said that lyrics contained a lot of new, strange, and colloquial language. As a result of this, comprehension of the content and message was hindered (mentioned by 10 students). Understanding was challenged also due to fast tempo (mentioned by 8), unclear pronunciation (mentioned by 8), and sound linkage (mentioned by 2). One student even described some lyrics as 'gibberish'. Another student confessed that he just focused on the melody and ignored the lyrics. Four students mentioned lyrics as complicated and ungrammatical. Three students said that they had to read the lyrics along with listening to be able to understand the songs.

For the last question that asked for any further opinions, many students confirmed the usefulness and inspiration of English songs in their study. They expressed a strong desire to use this technique more for practice, especially with listening and thinking skill (Songs can enhance the ability of brain when making decision). They also suggested that teachers should apply songs in the classroom (I think that Songs should be applied into the study). Once again, a few students mentioned the challenges in understanding lyrics. They also showed concerns about effective selection for appropriate practice. Their concerns were revealed in the following selective responses.

*Would modern music distract students from learning the "true" English?  
What kind of song is useful for learners to practice?  
Teachers should choose song belong to listening level of students.  
I think we need to choose the songs carefully if we want to learn grammar in these because I found some mistakes in the melody. For example, in the song "Love yourself", there is a mistake of grammar "mama don't like you".*

## **DISCUSSION**

As a whole, the results gained from the survey showed that Vietnamese university majors of English had a positive and justified perception about the use of music in their language learning. The students conceived the role of English songs to facilitate learning in three major dimensions related to language development: the affective, linguistic, and cognitive dimensions. In the affective domain, English songs were found to be a great source of motivation and learning inspiration, which was repeatedly highlighted in the literature and previous studies (Kuśnierek, 2016; Murphey, 1992; Sevik, 2011). Interestingly, in the current study, the surveyed students indicated a high agreement to the idea that music might ignite discussions among listeners. This suggests that an establishment of some sorts of music clubs, or listening groups should be encouraged, where discussions of shared interests, concerns, learning tips could be feasibly performed.

In the linguistic domain, similar findings were achieved that were quite in line with the past research on song application in language classroom (Lestari & Anti, 2005; Shehadeh & Farrah, 2016; Al-efeshat & Baniabdelrahman, 2020; Isnaini & Aminatun,

2021). Songs were shown to be a helpful learning tool to develop vocabulary, while they also had strong effects on more direct language skill and aspect, namely listening and pronunciation. It is worth noticing that linguistic benefits of songs (enriching lexical/prosodic acquisition) at the same time are the challenges. A great number of learners experienced problems with catching the sounds and understanding the words in songs' lyrics. Furthermore, albeit authentic, songs might contain non-academic and unfamiliar forms, which could be seen as 'ungrammatical' or 'incorrect' by some students. This implies that teachers' support is needed. The misconception and misinterpretation should be explained and students should be introduced and exposed more to various genres of songs and music.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the significance of music and song application in language learning. The results of the study are believed to contribute to the current literature by adding insights from the perspective of learners. In particular, the study found that while students hold positive attitudes, and frequently use songs to learn English, they still face a number of challenges, especially those problems connected to understanding cultural and linguistic aspects of song lyrics. Therefore, together with promoting this method for independent learning, teachers and students alike need to acknowledge and be aware of the difficulties involved. Also, music clubs or informal gatherings are encouraged, preferably with the participation of a teacher. In this way, students have opportunities to share ideas and opinions regarding the songs they choose for learning practice. They can raise the questions and problems they have and support each other in finding answers. A teacher is also needed for giving instructions and explanations with 'difficult' songs.

This study had certain limitations. The participants were few in number and they were students from one program only. These students were highly motivated learners of English. Future research is therefore suggested to include a wider range of participants, for example, non-English majors in various disciplines or in high schools, for a fuller and more sufficient picture of how English songs are used by Vietnamese students in their language learning.

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**Appendix. The Song Questionnaire**

What do you think about using English songs to learn English?

**Choose the appropriate answer that best describes what you think.**

**(1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)**

1/ Songs make listeners feel calm.

2/ Songs can be listened to while studying / doing housework.

3/ Songs refresh the class environment.

4/ Using songs increases my desire to learn more.

5/ Learning English with songs is useful.

6/ Songs enrich my knowledge.

7/ Songs increase my mental skills.

8/ Songs enrich my vocabulary.

9/ Learning with songs enables me to communicate better.

10/ Songs are better than traditional strategies to learn.

11/ Songs are considered a valuable pedagogical tool in learning English.

12/ Songs can be used to illustrate themes or topics.

13/ Songs help learners become familiar with word stress, intonation and rhythm.

14/ Songs enable learners to remember chunks of language.

15/ Songs provide students with the opportunity for great exposure to English.

16/ Songs help improve students' speaking skills.

17/ Songs help students to better understand the culture of the target language.

18/ Songs are useful in the learning of sentence structures.

19/ Songs help learners improve their listening skills.

20/ Songs help learners improve their pronunciation skills.

21/ Songs increase students' enjoyment of learning English.

22/ Songs improve student's motivation.

23/ Songs lower students' anxiety toward learning English.

24/ Discussing songs with friends can be interesting.

**Write your answer briefly in the boxes.**

25. What is/are your favorite English song(s)?

26. Who is/are your favorite singer(s)?

27. What problem(s) do you have when listening to English songs?

28. What further opinion(s) do you want to add?