

The Effect of Listening to English Songs on Iranian EFL Pre-intermediate Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to find out whether listening to English songs can improve pre-intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension. To this end, a non-randomized pretest-posttest control group design as one of the quasi-experimental research designs was employed. The sample of the study consisted of 40 male and female English learners from two classes in an Institute in Marand, Iran. The two classes were randomly assigned into the experimental and control groups. Then, a PET test was used to check the homogeneity of both groups. The listening section of PET was also considered as the pretest of the study. Then, fifteen English songs were used in the experimental group during the treatment period. Each session, within 45 minutes, one song was played for and practiced with the learners. Meanwhile, the control group had their usual teacher -fronted class without listening to songs. At the end, both groups were post tested on their listening comprehension using the listening section of another version of PET. The collected data were analyzed using Independent-Samples and Paired-Samples t-tests. The results revealed a statistically significant improvement in the performance of the experimental group. It is implied that songs are not only an entertaining tool but they can also be used as a pedagogic material in improving learners' listening comprehension.

Keywords: Song, listening comprehension, EFL

Introduction

Listening well is an important part of communication for everyone. Students who possess good listening comprehension skills are able to participate more effectively in communicative situations and in class (Brown, 2001). The importance of listening is seen when it is said that forty five percent of the daily communication time is spent on listening, thirty percent on speaking, sixteen percent on reading, and just nine percent on writing (Feyten, 1991). Researchers claim that the development of listening is of prime concern to language teachers and emphasize its importance in second language acquisition process (Brett, 1997; Brown, 1986). Peterson (2010) points out that it is crucial to give our learners opportunity to enhance and reform their listening skills not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom. Although listening comprehension is now well recognized as an important facet of language learning (Holden, 2004; Vandergrift, 1999), a lot of works remains to be done. Unfortunately, according to Brown (1987), a significant number of published courses demonstrate that listening is still regarded as the least important skill in language teaching and classroom practices. Although the importance of listening for second and foreign language learners has been emphasized in the literature, the teaching of listening comprehension continues to be a poorly taught aspect of English (Vandergrift, 1997). The consequence would be that without having been taught how to listen, a student may be able to express him/herself orally, but he will not be able to communicate with speakers of English if he cannot understand what is said to him (Hubbard, Jones, Thornton, & Wheeler, 1983).

Listening, according to Peterson (2010), is often the most difficult task for learners of English language. For him, listening in the real world and listening to authentic texts is much more complicated than listening to non-authentic texts in the classroom environment. Rivers (1968) states that one of the main problems of learners is not the fact that they cannot make themselves understood but they cannot understand what is said to them. Then, teaching the comprehension of spoken language is of great importance because it is a complicated task to be achieved. For this, it is logical that listening should be taught along with speaking, and also, learners should be exposed to as many different types of listening as possible (Hubbard et al., 1983). Learners want to understand L2 speakers and they want to be able to access a rich variety of

aural and visual L2 texts available today with the help of video, podcasts, and blogs. Therefore, we should find appropriate ways of improving their listening comprehension skills and, in this case, some scholars have stressed the use of songs and music in the language classrooms (Claerr & Gargan, 1984; Lems, 2001; Mol, 2009; Ornerova, 2009) to enhance L2 learners' listening comprehension (Horn, 2007; Lynch, 2005; Oanh, 2011; Rafiee, Kassaian, & Dastjerdi, 2010).

Different scholars emphasize the integration of songs and music into ELT to enhance different modes of English learning such as rhythm, stress, intonation patterns as well as grammar, speaking, listening comprehension (Farmand & Pourgharib, 2013; Lynch, 2005; Orlova, 2003; Sarichoban & Metin, 2000; Shen, 2009; Tuan & Viet An, 2010; Wickham, 2011). Lems (2001) states that songs can be beneficial to adult learners in ESL classrooms to create a learning environment in which they can build listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Stansell (2005) posits that songs not only affect accent and memory, but they can also affect the grammar, mood and motivation in a positive way, and that pairing words and rhythm in songs help the mind and memory to recall them back.

According to Shen (2009), "song, a combination of music and lyrics, possesses many intrinsic merits, such as a kaleidoscope of culture, expressiveness, recitability and therapeutic functions, which render it an invaluable source for language teaching" (p. 88). Chastain (1988) expresses that undeveloped listening skills have a negative effect on second language learning. So, to communicate with native speakers, students must first learn to understand enough in real language situation to comprehend what native speakers are saying. Past experiences reveal that many students who go abroad are much less able to comprehend than they are to create a message (Brown, 1977; Chastain, 1988; Nunan, 2001; Rivers, 1968). According to Richards and Burns (2012), in teaching listening, teachers need to take into account an explicit focus on this skill. They also express that it is important that students have opportunity to increase their listening ability over time to process natural rates of speech, and to listen to authentic samples that reflect the features of different types of spoken English. For Harmer (2009, pp.319) music is "a powerful stimulus" for language learning. He classifies songs as one of the

tools for teaching listening and indicates that songs are versatile techniques, as they equip the teacher to present the words graphically (printed song lyrics), verbally (listening to the song) and contextually (song lyrics) at the same time. The song not only can change the learners' mood but it can positively influence their motivation for learning (Chen & Chen, 2009). Not only the lyrics of songs but also their music affect students' listening ability and improve it (Harmer, 2009). Music focuses the listener's mind on the sound being perceived and boosts learning through an interactive process (Wickham, 2011). Thus, music and songs are helpful in increasing auditory and discrimination skills in a funny and relaxing manner (Woodall & Ziembski, 2002).

Cullen (1999) discusses two processes that are involved in listening which are put to use when singing a song in the language classroom. To develop listening comprehension, both bottom-up and top-down processes need to be involved. In bottom-up processing, the listener builds up the sounds into sentences, words and meaning. In the other one, the listener uses his background knowledge in order to understand the meaning of a message. In this regard, Claerr and Gargan (1984) state that songs contain unique advantages for the practice of listening comprehension for their meaningful context, appealing package, and interesting topics. Purcell (1992) says that students can easily become bored by repeatedly listening to a narration or dialog as they try to understand the meaning of new words and phrases in context. But, listening to a song for several times can be less monotonous because of the rhythm and melody.

Songs can not only engage and motivate the learners but also have the power of making a language lesson a memorable and enjoyable event (Wilson, 2008). There are many similarities connecting music and language (Griffie, 1990). Griffie (1990) states that songs and speech are vocally produced and linguistically meaningful and they have melody. Rhythms, melodies, and tempos are all part of music and characteristics also found in oral language (Abbott, 2002). Lyrics in songs are repeated regularly and this repetition may help English language learners by exposing them to forms, syntax, lexical items, segmentals, and suprasegmentals that appear in English (Abbott, 2002; Lems, 2001; Wallace, 1994). This repeated exposure to a language feature can foster language acquisition (Richards, 1975).

Songs are also able to stimulate and increase the learners' interest and motivation to learn, enjoy and engage in the learning process (Orlova, 2003; Setia, Abdul Rahimi, Sekharan, Mohd, Husin, & Sabapathy, 2012). In addition, learning English through songs provides a non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom, which helps in reducing the affective filter and promoting language learning (Lo & Li, 1998). Murphey (1992b) found that songs can be a source of language for presenting and practicing grammar and syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, reading, speaking, writing, and translation. Even the development of musical intelligence can benefit the curriculum by the application of songs (Villalobos, 2007).

Selecting suitable songs for including them into the curriculum is the biggest task for teachers. Murphey (1992a) believes that any song can be useful and motivating but to some degrees. For Murphey, songs that students already listen to and want to hear, which are mostly popular songs, will have the greatest impact on them. Teachers must choose songs that are suitable for the students' level, interest and social context of the society and contain useful language and teaching points (Wickham, 2011). Since some songs may be offensive or inappropriate, teachers should always be cautious when choosing the songs (Lems, 2001; Lynch, 2005; Mol, 2009; Ornerova, 2009). Songs with meaningful lyrics but difficult to understand can also be used when teachers add some extra support to aid comprehension (Abbott, 2002).

Regarding the role of songs and music to teach English in the classroom, there are studies that indicate the significant impact of using songs on making the learning experience more effective and enjoyable. For example, Caicedo and Lojano (2013) found that the use of songs stimulates the students' interest to learn and encourages them to engage more in the learning process because these motivating activities increase the students' confidence, learning abilities and skills. Their study revealed an enhancement on the students' pronunciation and even vocabulary learning.

Oanh's (2011) study investigated the use of English songs as an extra-curricular activity in teaching listening skill to EFL learners of Vietnam. The study used qualitative and quantitative method through survey questionnaires, interview, and observation. The collected data helped the researcher to find the teachers and students' attitudes towards using songs in teaching listening skill.

The results of descriptive statistics indicated that both students and teachers considered listening as a difficult skill before using songs. But after applying an experimental lesson, they had positive opinions about listening and felt they liked listening much more than before.

Chen and Chen's (2009) study tried to explore whether the use of English popular songs can enhance elementary school EFL students' motivation for learning English and to investigate the relationships between learning motivation and learning performance. The researchers used the descriptive and experimental approach. The sample of the study consisted of sixth grade students from five classes in an elementary school in Taiwan. The instruments were a questionnaire and a pre- post-test. The results showed that the majority of students were interested in learning English popular songs and their learning motivation also increased after engaging in this creative teaching activity. As for learning performance, students felt that their English abilities, especially listening ability, were improved after learning the songs. There was also a high correlation between learning motivation and learning performance.

Ornerova (2009) analyzed the use of pop songs from a teacher's point of view and students' attitudes to a pop song based experiment among EFL learners of Czech Republic. In addition, the inclusion of pop songs in lower secondary and upper secondary school text books has been analyzed. The research findings indicated that learning English through pop songs was very popular among teenagers and that teachers use songs regularly within the curriculum.

In a study, Kuswoyo (2013) aimed to explore how students majoring in English Literature improve their listening using the song technique in a laboratory class in Teknokran College, Indonesia. Kuswoyo used Lyric song and pre/during/post listening activities based on the songs to teach the listening skills. It was found that the use of song technique increased the students' interest and motivation, which contributed to the improvement of students' listening comprehension skills.

A few studies were conducted in the EFL context of Iran regarding the use of songs in educational settings. For example, Rafiee, Kassian and Vahid Dastjerdi's (2010) study examined the effect of humorous songs on listening comprehension and on immediate and delayed recall by a group of EFL learners in Iran. The researchers used the experimental approach in the study.

The sample of the study consisted of 30 female students who were studying at Iranian institutes. The instruments in this study were a pre-test and a posttest. The result revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the listening comprehension test, but humorous songs' effect did not make much difference between the immediate and delayed recall test scores. Ghanbari and Hashemian(2014) carried out a quasi-experimental study among 60 Iranian male and female 8 to 11 year-old young learners selected from two language schools in Isfahan. Their aim was to find out the effect of using songs, compared to the traditional method, on the young learners' listening comprehension and pronunciation. Moreover, they attempted to find whether gender make a significant difference in the young learners' pronunciation and listening comprehension. The results of two-way ANOVA revealed significant effect of using songs in the young learners' listening comprehension and pronunciation, but no significant effect of gender on these variables were found. In this vein, Haghverdi and Abdpur (2013) examined the impact of songs and movies on 60 high school male and female students aged between 15 and 17 in a small town of Dehdasht in the South West of Iran. The treatment was manipulated in two sessions each week, 16 sessions altogether within the period of two months. The results of the Paired and Independent-Samples t-test indicated a significant language achievement in the students' listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar.

Although some research have been conducted in the scope of listening and the impact of songs on listening comprehension, literature still needs more evidence to rectify the listening comprehension problem of language learners by using songs in the traditional classes. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to highlight the significant role of songs in improving the listening comprehension of EFL learners.

Considering the important role of listening comprehension in language learning and the lack of sufficient studies with regard to the implementation of songs in language classes, this study aimed to investigate the impact of using English songs on the improvement of pre-intermediate learners' listening comprehension in the EFL context of Iran. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

RQ: Does Listening to English songs have any significant effect on enhancing pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Method

Participants

Forty pre-intermediate male and female learners, in two intact classes, aged between 18 and 28 from a language institute in Marand, Iran, were recruited as the participants of the study. These learners came from a bilingual background (i.e., Turkish and Persian). They were 20 learners in each class, who had already been placed in the classes based on a placement test. These two classes were randomly assigned into the experimental and control groups. However, a preliminary English Test (PET) was administered to check the homogeneity of the participants at the beginning of the study.

Instruments and Materials

The preliminary English Test (PET)

A Preliminary English Test was conducted to check the homogeneity of the learners at the beginning of the study. It consists of four parts related to the four language skills, but due to the practicality issues and the requisite of reading for understanding and answering the listening questions in the study, the researchers considered only the reading and listening parts of the PET test for checking the homogeneity of the participants. The listening section consisted of 25 questions divided into four parts and the reading part included 35 questions, divided into five parts.

The Listening Comprehension Pre-test and Post-test

Listening section of PET was separately used as the listening test. This means that the scores of the listening section were considered as the pretest scores. At the end of the treatment, another version of the listening section of the PET test, similar to the one used in the pretest, was used as the posttest. Using different versions of PET with equivalent items reduced the probability of pretest effect on the posttest.

The English Songs

The researchers searched the net to access suitable songs at the language proficiency level of the participants. These songs and their lyrics were collected from the sites in which they were freely available to everyone. The songs were also considered from the cultural and religious points of view in order not to have offensive words or sexual expressions. The researchers submitted the songs to five teachers, who had more than ten years of teaching experience in the language institutes and language labs of the universities, to check their content validity regarding their difficulty level. Based on the teachers'

recommendations, the songs which had high tempo or heavy beats were omitted and finally 15 songs were considered suitable for the study.

Procedure

After ensuring the homogeneity of the learners through the PET test in two classes and assigning them randomly into the experimental and control groups, one of the researchers as the teacher of both groups started the treatment. Both groups were taught based on the same textbook of the institute, yet, the only difference was the use of English songs in the experimental group. The treatment for the experimental group lasted for 15 sessions with two sessions each week. In each session, at the beginning, 45 minutes out of 90 minutes of the total class time were devoted to practicing one English song.

The songs were played in the class following three phases of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. First, some questions were posed about the songs and written on the board. Hubbard et al. (1983) state that it is important to give students a reason for listening and this is possible by giving pre-listening questions. Next, the whole song was played. As a while-listening activity, sometimes the teacher stopped the song and asked the students to retell the last verses of the song. Often the teacher had to play a certain part of the song several times to the learners in order to help the students comprehend and retell. After the song was repeated for at least three times, the students answered the questions and at the end summarized the whole song as a post-listening activity. Because the songs were freely downloadable and accessible to anyone in the net, at the end of each session, an audio copy of each song was given to the learners, and they practiced singing the song at home. Then, in the next session, the class altogether sang the song aloud. Each session, the teacher observed the students while they were singing the song and found a friendly atmosphere among them. She even noticed that even the shy students in the class participated in the singing activity. The students themselves expressed their interests and likes to the teacher and all were willing to have songs in all sessions.

While the experimental group was instructed through English songs, the control group had their normal course activities without any instruction on songs. At the end of the treatment, to avoid the recall or practice effect, an alternate form of the pretest was used as the post-test in both groups.

Design

This study investigated the effect of English songs on listening comprehension of EFL learners; therefore, a quasi-experimental design was

employed. The independent variable of the study was listening to songs and the dependent variable was listening comprehension. Listening comprehension was measured by the pre-test and post-test using listening section of PET test.

Data Analysis

The collected data were entered into the SPSS 20 for further analysis. In order to check the homogeneity of the participants at the beginning of the study, an Independent-Samples t-test was run on the data obtained from the PET. To test the normality assumption, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was employed and to find the answer to the research question, Independent-Samples and Paired-Samples t-tests were conducted. The alpha level for significance testing was set at .05 for all inferential statistics.

Results

Results of PET

The collected data through the PET was examined for their normality through Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test and the results revealed a normal distribution ($p = .200 > \alpha = .05$) for both groups. Then an Independent-Samples t-test was run on these data to determine the homogeneity of the groups at the beginning of the study. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Results of Kolmogorove-Smirnov (K-S) for Normality Check and Independent-Samples t-test for the Listening and Reading Scores of PET for Homogeneity Test

Source	N	M (SD)	Levene's test F (p)	t	df	p	95% CI LL/UL	K-S df (p)	
Group									
Experimental	20	32.65 (6.61)						20 (.200)	
Control	20	33.45 (6.24)						20 (.200)	
								40 (.073)	
Equal variances assumed				.281	(.599)	.393	38	.696	-3.32/4.92

* $p < .05$

As Table 1 shows, there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups, $t(38) = .393$, $p = .696$, when the groups' variances were assumed equal ($F = .281$, $p = .599 < \alpha = .05$). Thus, the participants in both groups were considered homogenous regarding their proficiency level at the beginning of the study.

Results of Data Analysis for the Research Question

In order to find out whether listening to English songs significantly affect learners' listening comprehension, different statistical tests were run, the results of which are shown in Table 2. The data in parts (1) and (2) of the table are related to the results of the Independent-Samples t-test for comparing the experimental and control groups' pretest and posttest mean scores in listening respectively. Part (3) shows the results of Paired-Samples t-test for determining any significant change from the pretest to the posttest in the mean scores of the experimental and control groups separately. The results of the normality check were also shown in the K-S column of the table.

Table 2.
Results of Independent-Samples t-test and Paired-Samples t-test for the Pretest and Posttest of Listening Comprehension in the Experimental and Control Groups and Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) Test for Normality Check

Source	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Levene's test</i> <i>F (p)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>95% CI</i> <i>LL/UL</i>	<i>K-S</i> <i>df (p)</i>
(1) Pre-listening (comparing two groups' pretests)								
Experimental	20	10.85 (2.32)						20 (.200)
Control	20	12.15 (3.56)						20 (.061)
Equal variances			8.357 (.006)			1.368	32.709 .181	-.63/3.23
Not assumed								
(2) Post-listening (comparing two groups' posttests)								
Experimental	20	18.70 (3.43)						20 (.200)
Control	20	14.50 (3.38)						20 (.200)
								40 (.200)
Equal variances			.036 (.850)			3.898	38 .000	-6.38/-2.02
assumed								
(3) Paired Differences (comparing each groups' posttest with the pretest)								
Experimental	20	7.85(4.87)				7.209	19 .000	5.57/10.13
Control	20	2.35(4.76)				2.108	19 .058	-.12/4.58

* $p < .05$

As Table 2 indicates, all the p -values in K-S column are more than the set alpha level (.05), which shows the normality of the experimental and control groups' scores in the pretest and posttest of listening. This, in turn,

legitimized the use of parametric tests in the study. Because there were one categorical independent variable (group with two levels) and one continuous dependent variable (pretest for part 1 and posttest for part 2), an Independent-Samples t-test was used. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental ($M=10.85$, $SD=2.32$) and control ($M=12.15$, $SD=3.56$) groups, $t(32.71) = 1.368$, $p = .181$, in the pretest of listening (part 1). In contrast, a significant difference was found between the mean scores of the experimental ($M=18.70$, $SD=3.43$) and control ($M=14.50$, $SD=3.38$) groups, $t(38) = 3.898$, $p = .000$, in the posttest of listening (part 2). In addition to the between-group comparisons, which indicated the significant effect of using songs in the experimental group compared to the control group, Paired-Samples t-test was carried out for within-group comparisons. As shown in Table 2 part (3), there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group from the pretest to the posttest, $t(19) = 7.209$, $p = .000$. The mean difference was 7.85 with the 95% confidence interval ranging from 5.57 to 10.13. On the contrary, no significant difference was found between the pretest and posttest scores of the control group, $t(19) = 2.108$, $p = .058$, with the mean difference of 2.35 and 95% confidence interval ranging from -.12 to 4.58. Therefore, both the between-groups and within-group comparisons indicated the outperformance of the experimental group in the listening comprehension.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that although there was no significant difference in the listening comprehension of the experimental and control groups in the pretest, there was a significant difference between both groups' mean scores at the end of the study in the posttest, implying a better performance of the experimental group in which the songs were used to boost their listening comprehension. The results also indicated a significant increase in the mean score of the experimental group from the pretest to the posttest.

In this study, during 15 sessions of playing songs in the experimental group, the learners showed enthusiasm in taking part in classes and seemed they were more interested in listening than before. The students also stated that they were more satisfied with this new way of learning, which included singing songs together, and that it caused shy students to be more self-confident as they expressed to the teacher. It seems that we can attribute these changes to the fun feature of song and the power of music, which had changed in the atmosphere of the class. As Claerr and Gargan (1984) state,

songs can change the tedious atmosphere of a class to an exciting one. In addition, the lessons with songs are said to be interesting, instructive, positive, relaxing and enjoyable for the students (Ornerova, 2009).

The findings of the study are in line with the results of the studies that indicated the significant effect of songs on reducing the learners' tension and pressure during the lesson, decreasing learners' affective filter and as a result improving their listening comprehension (Chen & Chen, 2009; Jimbo Caicedo & Lojano Lojano, 2013; Oanh, 2011; Rafiee et al., 2010). In this regard, the results of this study verify the view that songs are effective in educational settings (Shen, 2009).

To the knowledge of the researchers as teachers, since a majority of schools in Iran are conducting traditional ways of teaching and in most cases are teacher fronted, using songs can add fun and interest to foster the process of learning and teaching. Therefore, using songs in English classes can be beneficial to the teachers and students. Teachers can benefit from using songs as teaching materials to enhance their students' listening skill and they will no longer worry about the participation of shy students and finding a way of encouraging them to have an active role in the class activities. The use of songs would also be useful to the students in that they will be motivated to learn language. As Shen (2009) expresses, "listening to English songs will prepare EFL learners to the genuine English language they are to be faced with" (p. 91). The syllabus designers and materials writers can also consider songs in designing listening tasks or listening lessons. In this way, curriculum designers can enrich the curriculum and school books with different kinds of songs that can also expose the learners to the varieties of English such as British and American English (El-Nahhal, 2011).

This study investigated the effectiveness of songs on listening comprehension of EFL learners at the pre-intermediate level; further studies can be conducted on different proficiency levels to compare their results with the results of this study. In addition, mediating the role of gender and age in similar studies can give extra information. Further studies are also required on different styles of songs like rap, jazz and pop to compare their effects on EFL students' learning. Moreover, the effect of songs on EFL and ESL students' listening comprehension skills has not been compared in the literature and it can be a new topic of interest for research.

This study verified the particular impact of using songs in improving listening comprehension ability of the EFL learners. The results revealed that using songs can be effective in the blended teaching-learning situations

where teachers integrate both the traditional and modern ways of teaching listening through, for example, podcasts, blogs, etc. The integration of songs in the classroom settings can provide a variety to the might- be boring atmosphere of the traditional classes, so, it can motivate the students and increase their interest in learning. Because song lyrics are mostly connected to the emotional aspect of human beings and reduce their stress level, they can be considered as entertaining tools as well as pedagogic materials, which bring novelty and fun into the classrooms and enhance listening skill of language learners in a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere.

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