

## The Impact of Song Lyrics on Improving Sudanese EFL Students Speaking Fluency (Case study: UPP Students of Ahfad University for Women)

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to measure the impact of using song lyrics in improving the Students' Oral skills. The study is conducted for the University Preparatory Programme UPP students at Ahfad University for women, Sudan.

For the purpose of this study the researcher utilized a discussion focus group which is a qualitative method. A number of (30) UPP students from Ahfad University represent the research population as a discussion group and a well selected (20) song lyrics are integrated in the ELF teaching materials and taught by the researcher. The researcher prepared a checklist to evaluate the progress made with the students' oral skills after the song lyrics are integrated and used with the teaching materials they study. The study has come out with the result that the use of song lyrics improves the students' oral skills communicatively and significantly.

**Key words:** EFL Students, Fluency, Song Lyrics, UPP Students.

### المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى قياس مدى تأثير استخدام كلمات الأغاني في تحسين المهارات الشفهية للطلاب، العينة التي تمثل مجتمع البحث هي طالبات برنامج الإعداد الجامعي بجامعة الأحفاد للبنات بالسودان، ولتحقيق أغراض هذه الدراسة، قام الباحث باستخدام مجموعة النقاش المركزة و التي تعتبر من أساليب البحث النوعية، بينما يمثل 30 دارسا من طالبات جامعة الأحفاد مجتمع البحتة ومجموعة المناقشة، كما تم انتقاء عدد (20) من كلمات الأغاني المختارة وتم دمجها في مقررات اللغة الانجليزية، حيث قام الباحث نفسه بتدريسها. كما قام الباحث باعداد قائمة مرجعية لرصد و تقييم التقدم المحرز في المهارات الشفهية للطلاب بعد دمج كلمات الأغنية واستخدامها مع المواد التعليمية التي يدرسونها. توصلت الدراسة إلى نتائج مفادها أن استخدام كلمات الأغاني يحسن المهارات الشفهية للطلاب من حيث التواصل بشكل جيد وملحوظ.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** طلاب اللغة الانجليزية، الطلاقة، كلمات الأغاني، طلاب الإعداد الجامعي.

### 1.0 Introduction

It is assumed that so many learners of English language have problems with their English-speaking skill and struggle to become fluent. Moreover, it is difficult for them to understand rapid speech of native speakers' pronunciation. Sudanese learners encounter this problem when they speak

English is taught as a foreign language in Sudan where the students encounter the

English and specifically when they converse with native to the extent that they seem not to be fluent or cannot speak English naturally at all. This is definitely due to some psychological problems and the phobia Sudanese learners have towards speaking like native.

language mainly in the classrooms. Therefore, the learners need to demonstrate

a real practice of the language they study in the classes; especially the oral practice.

There are a lot of EFL teachers who believe that songs are something they neglect or at least, they only use to give their students a break. However, this research suggests creative ways; they can use to work with songs in the classroom. As for the students, the results of this research are hoped to spark their imagination, engage them actively in the learning process and change their minds about the way they look to song lyrics. When students themselves identify, analyze and use data from their learning, they become active agents in their own growth (Simpson 2000).

The study will adopt using song lyrics-based lessons to engage the students more actively in the learning process and to participate in solving the above- mentioned problems. Furthermore, many students like the variety and change of pace, thus the repetitive nature of songs makes music a valuable educational tool for language teachers (Murphy1992). In addition to that the researcher believes that the use of song lyrics exposes the students to daily authentic language input.

This study is expected to be useful for both EFL learners and teachers. It also embodies theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the result of this study will add a new pedagogical role to song lyrics; that is, the students are not just listening to music, but are actively engaged in the task and actually doing something with what they hear. The findings of the study are expected to be used as evidence that the use of song lyrics in EFL class room is effective tool in improving the student's aural oral skills.

Researchers can investigate the effect of song lyrics in teaching grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, motivation, recognizing phonetically reduced forms, assimilation and other cultural aspects. The study does not claim to be exhaustive but it will be limited to consideration of only the following aspects;

The problems of aural oral skills encountered by the UPP students at Ahfad University for Woman batch of 2016/2017, the adoption of 20 carefully selected Song Lyrics.

## 2.0 Methodology of the Study

This study is experimental; thus, it uses students' focus group to assess, evaluate and give the required feed- back and results to verify the effective benefits of using song lyrics for improving students 'aural oral skills.

Twenty carefully, selected Song Lyrics will be used as supplementary material to teach (30) [UPP] Course students from Ahfad University for the academic year 2016/2017.

The study is expected to take 12 weeks, as the researcher is going to teach them Listening and Speaking.

The researcher tailored and prepared a checklist to evaluate the progress made with the students' oral skills after the song lyrics are integrated and used with the teaching materials they study.

## 2.1 The Methodology of Teaching Songs Lyrics

The objectives of the lesson are to help the students paraphrase the lyrics so that they improve their listening and speaking skills because they will be asked to discuss the social and cultural concepts they are embodied in the poem.

So, the learner can hold like a comparative and argumentative discussion to compare their culture and social factors with those of the song in different aspects.

It is important that the teacher should prepare his lessons effectively so that he can achieve the objectives of the lesson. Here is what the researcher was doing in his ELT classes:

First, he explained the new vocabulary items for the students. It is worth mentioning that the teacher him/herself should shadow the song many times so that he/she adopts the native speaker pronunciations. This will help them to pronounce the words nearly like the singer of the song. (Native speaker)

Then he made sure that the students understood the words and they could use them in real situation in their daily life at least. E.g. in the song (smile) the composer of the Lyrics are John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons.

The students in this song encounter these words: (ache – even though – to get by)

Students also should notice the following rhymes such as (aching and breaking) (sky and by)

Smile, though your heart is aching  
Smile, even though it's breaking  
When there are clouds in the sky  
you'll get by

The above words and rhymes are in the first stanza. So, the teacher should let the students listen to the first part (first stanza) of the song and then ask them the following questions: How one can smile though his/her heart is aching, how hearts ache, as well as what indicator the clouds give in order to get by. What is meant by getting by?

By asking the above questions the researcher was trying to pave the way for

the students to understand the irony and the metaphorical features of the song. The students should have some ideas about using the aesthetic devices such as simile, imagery, metaphors and ironies that English writers and poets use to convey their themes in the English literature. The students can compare them to those of their mother tongue to help them interpret the thematic meaning of the song and then they will enjoy listening to it comprehensively.

After that, the same step can be repeated in part two (second stanza) and he/she can ask the following questions: How can one smile through his/her fear and sorrow and how challenging this situation is, does it need special qualities to do so. Ask the student s to explain the bright picture of the future if they overcome the life challenges. What are the imagery and the metaphors the writer involves in the poem to convey his/her ideas and thoughts.

If you smile through your fear and sorrow  
Smile and maybe tomorrow  
You'll see the sun come shining through  
for you

In Part three (the third stanza) of the song, the teacher should explain the following phrases (keep on trying, use of crying) referring to the using of gerund in grammar. As well as the following rhymed words (tear/near, trying /crying)

Light up your face with gladness  
Hide every trace of sadness  
Although a tear may be ever so near  
That's the time you must keep on trying  
Smile what's the use of crying  
You'll find that life is still worthwhile  
If you'll just  
Smile

## 2.2 The Song Lyrics Activities

When teaching the songs teachers should prepare some relevant and related activities to help the learners understand the songs and at the same time use the language of it communicatively.

### 2.2.1 Listen to the Song

First prepare the students to listen to the song by giving them a back ground and introduction about it .Ask them questions about the title and the singer. For example in teaching the song (It Must be Love) by Madness band

The teacher should consider the age of the students as most of them are teenagers and the song is about love and how important it is in our life. Most of the vocabulary is about the expressions that are used between lovers and the respect they should hold in their relationship. So a good discussion can be held to build the gap which is created by the contradiction between the different social back ground of the song and of the students so some questions will break the ice such as: what do you think of the relationship between people and how love in different context help in empowering such relationships.

### 2.2.2 Ask Questions about the Title.

Such questions tend to work really well as conversation starters. So group three or four students together and then get feedback from each group. Give them some words and ask them to listen out for the words that rhyme with them. You could try possible rhymes before listening. Brain storm the title of the song with the students (It Must Be Love) so that love is just like asolution for every single problems or obstacle we have. Then ask the students to discuss and elaborate that concept.

Explain some expression for the students and ask them their opinion or how they

understand them from the context of the song and compare it to their real one. Here you provide good discussion and argument for them.

Examples:

I never thought I'd miss you, half of as much as I do.

And I never thought I'd feel this way, the way I feel about you

As soon as I wake uo any night any day

I know that its you I need to take the blues away

It must be love, love, love

It must be love, love, love

### 2.2.3 Listen to the song with lyrics.

In this case learners are given time to read the lyrics of the song. At this point the teacher can do one of the following activities:

- Learners can just read the lyrics which they listen to and highlight the new words for later discussion.

- The teacher can make a lyric word sheet as a gap filling; learners fill the gab while listening.

- The teacher can make a cut out strips of selected missing words and again make a lyric work sheet as a gap fill; this time learners match the word strips to the gap as they listen.

- Focus on a particular verb tense or aspect of grammar.

Virtually every song centers on a particular verb tense. Teachers should not ignore the fact that the grammar of the songs does not follow the conventional grammatical patterns. This may create a misleading for the students, but if the teacher is aware and he should be, he/she will show the students the difference so the students can compare it to the conventional grammar they study.

For example in the song (How Am I Supposed to Live Without You by Michael Bolton)

Starting by asking these questions:

How many times can you find on the past tense in the lyrics?

Why did the writer use past simple tense?

This acts like springboard for discussing the function of a specific tense as well as examining its form. Furthermore, it often tends to raise the awareness of the grammatical flexibility and the poetic license in the construction of the song lyrics. Students expect songs to obey the grammatical rules that have been drummed into them. Inspiringly large number of cases can lead to the fact that sometimes grammatical rules are broken for the necessity of the poetic context.

### **2.3 Focus on vocabulary idioms and expressions.**

Noticeably, songs bend the conventional rules of grammar and it is also useful to focus on creative and the artistic use of vocabulary we encounter in lyrics start with questions like:

What does....mean?

Go with the meaning illustrating with other examples. Songs often serve as really good context for phrases and idioms, but it is good to make sure that they are clear.

### **2.4 Round things off with some creativity.**

Creativity is an important part of maintain motivation but it should not be limited to teaching approaches. Depending on the factors highlighted in the first part such as Language level, age, and cultural aspects.

Teacher might try to finish things with some activities which stimulate creative thoughts. For example:

Write another verse of lyrics maintain the same mood and style as the original.

Several groups can work on this to come up with completely new set of lyrics for the whole song.

Songs tend to give the perspective of the singer. Work together with the students and paraphrase the song lyrics subjectively and then give the students chance to engage their own perspective about the song.

Write a diary entry of the main character or the characters in the song.

### **3.0 Literature review**

#### **3.1 Songs as authentic material**

According to Brand & Li (2009), there are several reasons that songs, particularly, might be helpful for second-language learners. Besides that, Wray & Perkins (2000) have suggested that most speech in song is the repetition and variation of memorized formulas and that these formulaic lexical phrases are flexible and therefore allow for many repetitions. Distinctive intonation, rhythmic and stress patterns that found in songs, making it easier for the learner to remember and apply.

According to Millington (2011) songs can be used for a number of purposes and there are many reasons why songs can be considered a valuable pedagogical tool.

A song is a piece of music with words that is sung. Song is also a great language package that bundles culture, vocabulary, listening, grammar and a host of other language skills in just a few rhymes. Songs can also provide a relaxed lesson because they can also form the basis for many lessons (Futonge, 2005).

Ross (2006) says that the English lessons and teaching materials can motivate the students and, consequently, develop listening comprehension skills, students need. This is best accomplished by determining the suitable of the listening material such as the use of song as authentic material. The use of song stimulates and motivates students to comprehend the content of materials.

Orlova (2003) states that it is possible to suggest that among the methodological purposes with songs used in class, it is possible to rank the following: Practicing the rhythm, stress and the intonation patterns of the English language. It also consolidates and enhances teaching vocabulary and grammar, as well as, developing listening comprehension, writing skills, and speaking.

### 3.2 Criteria for Choosing Songs in ELT

One of the big problems we face whether teaching English to children or to adults is maintaining learners' interest throughout the lessons. Consequently, we often have to be very careful in the technique we use. What makes music such a great teaching tool is its universal appeal, connecting all cultures and languages. This makes it one and most motivating resources in the class room regardless of the age or background of the learners.

In order to select a song to teach for your class numbers of factors have to be considered:

Why do you want to teach the song? Does it focus on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation or a particular topic?

Adam (2015), in this regard, elaborates that it depends on whether this is going to be a lesson focusing on vocabulary,

grammar, pronunciation or a particular topic. For example, when the researcher taught the song” in the air by Carly Simon the focus was grammar (consolidating the use of present perfect)

The second thing to think about is the language level of students because it determines not only which songs you can use, but also what other activities such as games or written exercise you will use to develop the lesson. Lower level students will become extremely frustrated with fast delivered lyrics, for instance, while simple repetitive lyrics might not be interesting for more advanced students. Luckily the level of the students of Ahfad university is thought to be suitable for the students to understand and evaluate the songs lyrics ideally as they are tertiary level therefore, they have the considerable cultural knowledge that enable them to interpret and interact socially and linguistically with the songs.

One of the most suitable criteria to choose the songs in the class room is that teachers should use the songs that are interesting to their students' age group.

According to Siskova (2008) language learning through songs is more effective if students practice their favorite songs. The teachers have no choice but to use songs which have been granted for learners' cultural and social back ground.

Moreover, teachers should consider any specific cultural issues when choosing and teaching a song. For example, what kinds of things are generally unacceptable in the culture in which you teach? Whatever you don't use music solely based on your own cultural norms. Consider the audience and their sensibility.

### 3.3 The Use of Song Lyrics in English Language Teaching:

One of the biggest problems learners encounter during their study whether teaching English to children or adults, is maintaining learners' interest throughout our lessons. Therefore, teachers have to be very creative in the techniques they use.

Many clues to language and communicative meaning do not come in written form. Music can often provide a context to better understand the language. Pitches and melodies, rhymes, beats and phrases can function as musical context. Music can be away of activating meanings and improving comprehensibility, similar to visual aids. What makes music such a great teaching tool is its universal appeal, connecting all cultures and languages. This makes it one of the best and most motivating resources in the class room regardless the age or back ground of the learners. As Meg Richard, (2016) states that teachers strive to teach students in a way that engage them and reach their minds and souls.

It could be argued that one of the main goals of English language learning is the development of communication skills, as well as maintaining interest and motivation for learning English. In order to accomplish these goals, it is necessary for the content to be closely related to learners' real life and materials need to be adjusted to different learning styles. This means that the lessons should abound in versatile activities.

Additionally, if songs are accompanied by their lyrics for example can help the students enjoy the song and at the same time improve their oral skills since they read the lyrics silently and then feel that they speak like native.

When students listen to the song's lyrics, they can improve their pronunciation as well

as the rest of the super segmental features such as the connected speech. Using lyrics to develop the students' oral skills teachers can create and develop some interesting and motivated activities which due to their nature, fun content, and relaxing features influence the development of language in the students. For young learners, songs, such as popular pop-rock songs, traditional and educational songs, rhymes and chants, present an excellent source of language. Students can not only learn and practice different segments of English through songs, but also satisfy the specific characteristics of their age. This is why the researcher selected a number of songs which are relevant to the students' interest and taste as it touches them and adds flavour to their music background as well as it enriches their vocabulary to help them understand concepts of many themes in their societies and their life.

According to Brown (2006), procedure of any listening activity can be done by activating prior knowledge, helping students organize their learning by thinking about their purposes for listening. This encourages the researcher to choose well selected songs to integrate them with in the English material he teaches for the students of Ahfad university in order to help them develop their oral skills and fluency.

It was not easy for the research to integrate the 20 songs he selected into the language materials the students study. So he did like an analytical study for the syllabus they study in order to decide how to integrate the song lyrics. So by the end of each units he taught the students one song lyrics which is selected according to some thematic ideas, language and oral skills practice to those of the unit.

The researcher did so bearing in mind that every single human being, regardless of age, gender, or cultural background has the ability to interact.

Fabio Caon (2014), states that using songs scientifically help the students create the best conditions for learning processes and increasing their motivation.

Another element which enhances the students' motivation is songs' property of variety. It is well known that any discipline requires a large range of options to choose from in order to achieve the expected outcomes; because Variety is especially important for younger students, who often have very little internal motivation for entering a language classroom. There is widespread interest in using songs among young learners. This is why the population of the study is the students of Ahfad University for woman where it provides a solid ground for the study.

Despite the fact that the reinforcing effect of songs for vocabulary learning is boosted when course book and songs are well matched, Songs are especially good for introducing vocabulary because songs provide a meaningful context for the vocabulary.

Siskova (2008) states that "even just playing music without words creates a relaxed atmosphere that enhances learning" Medina (2000) mentions that "In several studies, a rhythmic presentation benefitted memorization when the items were both meaningful and meaningless (i.e., nonsense syllables). It also proved that the combination of music and illustration consistently led to the highest average amount of vocabulary gain

Murphey ((2000) recommends that pop songs have several features that help

second language learners. They include common, short words and many personal pronouns; the language is conversational; the lyrics are frequently sung at a slower rate than words are spoken with more pauses between utterances; and there is repetition of vocabulary and structures. These factors let learners to understand and relate to the songs

Songs are also excellent instances of colloquial English. Hence, they get students ready for the authentic language they will be faced with. This can be considered as a linguistic reason for using songs in the classroom (Schoepp, 2001).

#### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1 Focus Group Discussion**

The results of the focus group discussion gave an insight into the personal opinions and feelings of four students and complemented results from all previous rounds of research, which relied heavily on the observations of the researcher. Students 1, 3, 8 and 10 were chosen to be interviewed. Interview questions revolved around the personal thoughts and feelings the students had after have been taught English with the help of songs.

Question one was asked to get a general idea of whether the students liked the use of songs in the lessons. According to the answers, all the students liked it with S1 even saying that they liked it very much and that it was fun and different S8 gave a similar answer by saying that it was very interesting, because they had not done anything like it in their English classes before. She also said that sometimes she has learned new words from songs independently as well S10.



She also added that she did not know that it was possible to learn English in such a manner. Moreover, she expressed an interest in learning other foreign languages in such a way as well. Furthermore, S3 said that they did not know that listening to songs in classes was allowed. All students also confirmed that they had never been taught any foreign language through songs before the answer to Q2.

When asked about whether they had noticed any changes in their fluency in class when a song was used, S3 and S8 both reported that they felt more relaxed and that the class atmosphere was friendlier than usual. Moreover, they both acknowledged that they wanted to be more active in class and that they enjoyed doing the exercises more than usual. They attributed these changes to the fact that listening to songs is a fun activity for them and that it instantly makes them feel

happier and more relaxed. S3 added that songs help to remember what has been learnt. S1 and S10 also felt that class atmosphere changed Remarkably, S10 also noticed that the quieter students became more active when songs were used in classes. All students agree and believe that the use of songs in their English classes break the psychological fears towards the language as well as it helps them improve their fluency noticeably.

#### 4.2 The interpretation of the speaking skill check list

While the researcher was listening to the group discussion he made the following checklist in order to see the progress the students made after they intensively listened to 20 songs with their lyrics as well as they did many activities to enhance the use of their language conversationally and communicatively.

Criteria	Excellent	Very good	Good	Poor/weak
Word selection	13	4	13	-
Grammar	11	2	17	-
Pronunciation	20	8	1	1
Accent	20	8	1	1
Fluency	20	8	1	1
Speed	23	6	1	-
Thoughts/critical thinking	26	3	-	1

As it is clear from the above checklist the students were very selective in their word choice as they adopt that technique from the discussion group of the activities they did after they had listened to the songs as this was obvious from the grammar they used when they were speaking. It was not conventional grammar. It was the grammar of the spoken language of the singers. This does not prevent the students from making

themselves clear when they speak. So the researcher reminded the students and referred them from time to time to the conventional grammatical rules so that the students can have an idea about them and compare them to the informal one they use. Additionally, the accent of the students seemed to be like native as they imitated the accents of the singers when they use the words.

Most of the students speak fluently and clearly as they got confident by intensive listening to the songs and as a result they break the psychological fears of using the language spontaneously. Students at this age are very good imitators and they love to show off what qualities they have. Accordingly, they compete to prove those qualities to each other and to those who are around.

The students speak at their normal speed as they understand what is meant by communication during the brainstorm activities they do after listening to each song, this builds up their confidence and they realize that language is for communication and not showing off.

Listening to those songs help the students to expose other different culture and compare those cultures to theirs in terms of different linguistic and social aspects. This does not only develop the students' critical thinking but also enhance the language proficiency as a whole and the oral skills in particular.

The study has come out with so many considerable findings. Firstly, the students are very enthusiastic towards using song lyrics and they break their psychological fears and shyness because it is just fun for them and then they can easily call the given language forms to memory simply and involuntarily in order to use the language spontaneously.

Another relevant finding is the fact that the students possess unique qualities which facilitate and enrich their learning since they make use of the mnemonic quality of songs: the way words are much more memorable in combination with rhythm and melody.

The study also proved that music and songs are an exemplary aid for linguistic education because they increase "the memorization of lexis and grammatical structures.

An additional finding is that using songs as aids for EFL lessons is for its versatility and authenticity. Besides, most of the times, students break their psychological fears towards audio clips, since they are worried about not understanding the accent.

This study also demonstrates that exposing students to authentic language results in better output, since an original piece of language sounds genuine and natural, providing a more realistic climate which boosts confidence.

Furthermore, songs serve as a good source of pronunciation, intonation, and accent practice, but also as a practice of listening skills and vocabulary development.

It worth mentioning that, songs provide not only pleasure, but they also enhance language practice and positively affect vocabulary acquisition and memorization.

Listening to song lyrics integrated in the ELT classes increases the Confidence and improves the students' speaking skills improve because songs expose learners to the native speakers' authentic language.

Additionally, songs should be purposefully and creatively used at any lesson stage (motivation- presentation- practice-production)

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