

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF ENGLISH SONGS

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Abstract

This study explores connections between the exposure to English pop songs and ELL learner's attitude toward English learning. The study was conducted with a Vietnamese tenth grader of English over two academic semesters. The student was guided to listen to English songs and provided with relevant background information of the songs. The study showed that there was a positive change in the subject's attitude to learning English. The results suggest that songs can serve as a source of motivation in boosting English learning. If songs with significant background information are carefully selected and used, they could be a useful catalyst in second language learning.

Key words: English song, attitude, second language, ELL (English Language Learner), motivation.

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“The reading of a book, it is true, has sometimes changed a person’s entire life.”
(Rosenblatt, 1995, p.188)

I interpret “a book” in the above quote as a written or spoken discourse (a speech, a telegram); or a literary work (a novel, a poem, a narrative, etc.); or a work of art (a painting, a piece of music). Human history has proved that there have been a number of cases in which such “a book” or “an event” fundamentally changes its reader’s life. Mozart, a genius composer, dropped a piece of music written by his father into the river. And to avoid being blamed for his carelessness, Mozart made a new symphonic piece to replace the old one. As a result, Mozart’s talent was unleashed. If it had not been for the explosion of the lab due to some experiments conducted by Edison, no such inventions as the phonograph or electric light would have taken shape.

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These are just a few examples from the lives of such masterminds who are thought to have a high IQ. You may think that this could never happen to ordinary people like you and me. However, what I am going to tell you below is a true story. The main character of my story is a student of mine. He is as normal as hundreds of other students of his age. His teachers even judged him as “infamous, low- achiever” at his senior high school due to his weak performance in most of the subjects. His reticent manner, inactive

participation in class activities, and even misbehavior result from his boredom. He often slept during many of the classes. The subject that tortured him the most was English. He could not say a phrase or a sentence in English. He could not even recall the meaning of a single English word.

He failed most of the end-of-course exams and final tests. The only purpose of going to school every day for him was to satisfy his parents who love him more than anyone else on earth, as he

was the only son in the family. The only thing he did at school was

I stood beside, as a guide, and was ready to provide more support along his exploration of songs and English learning. I believe that I moved from “teaching by telling” to “teaching by modeling and scaffolding,” and finally, to “teaching from behind,”

to team with other low-achieving students, hanging around, playing tricks on his classmates, quitting classes, playing computer games, or even sometimes fighting with gangs from other schools.

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You may come to the conclusion that my student would be “incapable” of learning, or “stupid,” or at least there must have been something socially or morally wrong with him. I suppose

there was not. He kept going to school every day to make his parents happy, not to bother them, and to fulfill a son’s responsibility in his family. Though he befriended disobedient kids, he never did anything legally wrong which would have brought him trouble with police of some sort. He was born into a middle-class family which could address his needs. He even showed his talent in such natural science subjects as mathematics and physics when he was at elementary school, as he twice won the first prize of the talented pupil’s mathematic contests. Most of the

teachers at his elementary school even claimed that he was one among their promising students who would be a great success in his later career.

I am a teacher of English and have been in contact with his parents for a long time before I happened to know his existing academic situation, including his slow progress in and resistance to English. And I also accidentally found the key to unlock the maze he was trapped in.

In one of my visits to his family, I led him to the topic of English by asking him to share with me English lessons in his school and encouraged him to listen to English songs in his free time. I was not ambitious to awake the inner man inside him, or to make his English better. I just tried to give him an example of how good one's feeling was when they listened to a piece of music they loved. I googled the song, "*My Valentine*," by Martina McBride. As his ears were tuned to the rhythm of the song, in an attentive and focused manner, I knew he was definitely captivated by this piece of music. Then I made another move (The dialogue was translated into English):

Teacher (T): What do you think about it?

Student (S): Oh I think I love it. It's pleasing to my ears. I don't know.

T: Do you know that the song was written in some really special occasion for sort of special person?

S: No. Are they lovers? I mean the woman falls in love with the man?

T: Kind of. How do you know that?

S: I guess. You say it's about the Valentine, don't you?

T: Why do lovers in the past and now often celebrate the Valentine's Day?

S: No idea. You know why?

T: How beautiful is the song you know?

S: No. How come? My English is terrible. You tell me?

T: I think the song is fabulous because there's a story behind it, a romance of a man named Valentine and his lover.

T: The origin and history of the Valentine's Day has been largely in mystery. I will tell you two versions from which the Valentine originates. You have to go back to around 270AD, the time of Emperor Claudius II to see the first version. The Emperor ordered that all men had to fight in battles to serve his war. Of course husband didn't want to go; and neither did young men. Why didn't they?

S: They hated wars and maybe were afraid of death?

- T: They didn't want to leave their families and sweethearts. The Emperor then forbade marriages and engagements to increase the number of soldiers. But the Priest Valentine secretly helped young men and women marry each other. The Emperor knew about his and the Priest was then jailed. The Priest died in prison on February 14th. To remember this day, and to remember what the Priest Valentine did for young couples, people often send their loved ones cards with the words: "To my Valentine," or "From your Valentine" on February 14th.
- S: Wow. I never knew that. What about the other myth of the Valentine?
- T: Hang on. I should show you a few lyrics of the song *My Valentine* and see how you could guess the second story.
- S: My English is horrible! I don't know any words. You have to translate it for me. Okay?
- T: Don't worry. I will help you with it. Let's turn on the song; I will pause and explain. Are you ready?
- If there were no words
No way to speak
I would still hear you
If there were no tears
No way to feel inside
I'd still feel for you*
- S: Sounds like a man is talking with his lover or she is talking with him!
- T: You bet. Why do you know?
- S: Easy. Such words as "*hear you, no tears, feel inside, feel for you*"
- T: Excellent! Go on
- And even if the sun refused to shine
Even if romance ran out of rhyme
You would still have my heart
Until the end of time
You're all I need
My love, my valentine*
- S: So strong. So romantic. I love that.
- T: See if you can figure out what *Valentine* means?
- S: Valentine is either a man or a woman, he or she I don't know. Or maybe she is his girlfriend. This girl is in love. Such a romance!
- T: You bet!
- S: Here, I think, are the best sentences of the song:
- You've opened my eyes
And showed me how to love unselfishly
I've dreamed of this a thousand times before
In my dreams I couldn't love you more
I will give you my heart
Until the end of time*
- T: You are a young man, aren't you? And you know the best words here are "*love unselfishly.*" And their romance seemed to last forever, "*until the end of time... even romance ran out of rhyme*" Right? Can you hear the rhyme: "*time- rhyme*"?

- S: Yes. I love this song. I think I should learn it. And your second version of the Valentine?
- T: I can't make sure the story is true. Anyway, here is what I got from a newspaper. It is believed that the story was about a romance between a young man named Valentine who fell in love with a young woman. I can't remember why Valentine was jailed and was then executed, but not because he was a bad man or did a wrong thing I'm sure. Before his death, it was alleged that he sent his sweetheart a letter or a card which he signed, "*From your Valentine.*" I can't assure you of the authenticity of the story. Yet I believe that what he did symbolizes romantic, sympathetic, and heroic feelings, which touch the hearts of the couples back then, as well as now."
- S: I love the stories, too. Thank you. Thanks for a great song. I love it.
- T: If your English is better, you can hear and feel English songs yourself. They are great fun, right?
- S: Can you teach me some English? I want to learn English now. But my English is worse than ever! I don't know what to do to get started and how. Can I really learn it?
- T: Absolutely you can. Give it a try. Nothing's easy, guy. Anyway, it's a bit late now. Gonna start tomorrow, okay?
- S: Sure.

He studied English with me for about three months before I went on my sabbatical. What struck me was that after that afternoon, I felt a 360 degree change in my student's attitudes toward the subject with which he once struggled and was his monster for many years. Before I left, he kept asking me how to improve his

"to sing is to internalize metrical patterns as well as tunes... song lyrics provide high-interest reading matter in any classroom" (Moffett, 1992, p. 290).

English skills, which areas to focus on, and how to select learning materials. There are many English books and materials available in bookstores in Vietnam. These books are either written by foreign authors and imported, or edited by local writers. English language learners, adult or young, are often confused and do not know how to choose a suitable book. I told him not to rush, and that he should have suitable strategies. More important, he should believe that he was able to learn English, and that learning English was much fun. In weeks that followed our talk, I helped

him learn vocabularies and some grammar exercises in contexts. And of course, I helped him listen to some English songs each time we met each other. He learned the words and their pronunciations quickly as he glued to the songs and their rhythms. He said he could feel “flow of words” in each song and he loved that. He commented that his teachers of English at school did not pronounce as the singers or as I did. I told him that this was maybe because the singers were native speakers of English and I had more chances to go abroad to study. I also told him that this was because I love English and tried to get it improved by listening to English songs, watching English programs, and interacting with native speakers of English.

Before I went on leave, I recommended that his parents should find him a good English language center where he would have chances to interact with native speakers of English to

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continue his newly discovered passion for English. I also sent him several video and audio files, CDs of English programs, and English songs on a weekly basis. Sometimes we learned via Skype or Yahoo chats. I encouraged him to watch the video, listen to songs that he thought he liked, and do some follow-up exercises. He completed these exercises and sent them back for my comments. I also suggested that he try to guess the meaning of difficult

words in each song before looking them up in a good dictionary. By the time I returned, he had finished one course at the elementary level at the language center. He was proud when he shared with me some of his favorite songs and even translated these songs into Vietnamese. I knew that his English had improved and he could himself navigate to the songs he loved, sometimes with my help in unraveling things that puzzle him in such songs.

Below is the dialogue my student and I made via mobile phones recently, when I am pursuing my doctoral program in America and he is now in his senior year at a high school in Australia:

- T: How's things?
S: Good. Everything's okay. So far so good.
T: How's your study? Anything hard?
S: I have trouble with writing essays. You know I'm not good at literature. Now I have to write about Australian literature. Damn!
T: You could get help from your teachers or local friends. And you could use the net. I know you can make it, man. What about Accounting (a subject at his school)?
S: You know it's hard, right? I don't get the terms.
T: You have dictionaries, course books, reference books, don't you?
S: My books have not arrived yet. I ordered them 2 weeks ago. I have to do a lot of readings via the Internet. Do you have these books?

The then struggling and low-achieving student is now a promising 12th grader. The dialogue is in English, of course. He can chat with me in English all the time now. I believe that my student was comfortable and even engaged when learning English via listening to pop songs. As Moffett (1992) argues, language learners benefit from listening to recorded or live music: "Songs too are a good stimulus for writing... It's true that when one medium is joined with another, as language with music, both are enhanced and hold greater interest for students" (p. 212-213). Moffett also believes that poems and songs are closely related and good material in classrooms, since "to sing is to internalize metrical patterns as well as tunes... song lyrics provide high-interest reading matter in any classroom" (p. 290).

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Struggling students need some form of support from the teacher at first. The teacher will then reduce the level of assistance and increase students' responsibility (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986). As a teacher, I first tried to motivate my student in his English learning by immersing him in songs and their related background stories. When I realized that English songs inspired my student, I helped him keep the high level of motivation and expectation and pushed him to explore English songs and the English language himself. I stood beside, as a guide, and was ready to provide more support along his exploration of songs and English learning. I believe that I moved from "teaching by telling" to "teaching by modeling and scaffolding," and finally, to "teaching from behind," as suggested by Ailing and Pearson (Ailing & Pearson, 2003).

It is possible that exposure to English songs helped my student transform from a misbehaving boy to a more positive and motivated student. Clearly, at the beginning, my student needed some help to pull him out of his situation at school. He needed some motivation not to give up his learning effort. As Madden puts it, "It is probably safe to say that most students want to please their teacher... those who are unable to meet the teacher's expectations tend to gravitate to one side of the continuum and decide to give up trying" (Madden, 2002, p. 92). I was fortunate to find some English songs that helped my student avoid such a "giving-up."

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I recently received good news from the high school where my student is attending now. The academic advisor at the school told me that he did struggle himself for the first semester of being a student in an English speaking country. Yet there were some signs that the student tried in most of the subjects at school since he got some As (in math and science) and some Bs in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes where writing essays on literary works seemed to torture him the most.

The most important thing, the advisor said, was that my student is now happy with what he is doing and going to do. My student told me that if his study was good enough, he would apply for a B.A. program in an American university. And I think my student is on the right track to realize his ambitious plan.

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Tuan Truong is from Vietnam where he taught English and translation to ELL students (from young children to college students).

His interests in teaching and languages brought him to Melbourne, Australia where he received his Master's in applied linguistics from the University of Melbourne. Tuan is currently a research assistant

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