

A Study on the Effects of Using English Pop Songs on Learning Motivation for Sixth Graders

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Abstract

The **purpose** of this study is to explore whether an English pop song instruction can promote students' English learning motivation. This research was conducted with 84 sixth graders as the **participants**, studying at a public elementary school in Kaohsiung city. The participants received a ten-week **English pop songs instruction**, 40 minutes per week. Five English pop songs were selected as the teaching materials for this study and the motivation questionnaire pretest and post-test were distributed before and after the instruction to collect data for quantitative analysis. Paired-samples T-test procedures were employed to compare the scores of the pretest and post-test of learning motivation questionnaire which was aimed to test four different components of learning motivation: value component, expectation component, affect component and executive volition component. **The main findings of the study indicated that the English pop song instruction facilitated the development of the sixth graders' English learning motivation.** Among the four components of learning motivation, value component, affect component as well as executive volition component were significantly affected by this instruction while expectation component showed no significant difference. Therefore, **this study concluded** by outlining pedagogical suggestions for English teachers to use English pop songs as authentic materials in the EFL classroom to create a motivating and enjoyable learning environment.

Key Words: learning motivation, English pop songs



INTRODUCTION

Motivation for the Study

English language teaching (ELT) in Taiwan has been conducted for a long time. However, there is no surprise that English learning seemed to be short of attraction as an unconquerable subject for most Taiwanese students. The researchers have found that sixth graders tended to have lower learning motivation in English classes than other graders did. Many students have learned English in cram schools for years and think the contents of English classes in general schools are too easy and seem to lose their interest in English classes. On the other hand, those underachiever lack confidence and motivation in English learning as well because they think English is too hard to learn. One possible reason leading to the low learning motivation might be the uninteresting teaching materials which mainly focus on grammar learning and the exam-oriented instruction. That means what students learn from English classes hardly be used in real daily situations (Chen & Chen, 2009). Also, most classroom activities are teacher-centered that students might easily lose their interest in and concentration on learning. Warrington and Jeffrey (2005) concluded that students' previous negative learning experiences had a crucial influence on their motivation toward English learning in the future. For this reason, English language instructors should carefully choose teaching materials and take their teaching methods seriously to motivate students to

learn. Thus, as Engh (2013) stated, using songs in English-learning classroom has become a well-chosen approach that can attract some scholars.

Music plays an important role in a variety of activities in human daily lives. It provides a relaxing atmosphere and helps reduce one's pressure (Moradi, 2014). It also has been believed the strong link between music and children's intellectual development. Considerable evidence from neuroscience suggests that music can have a lasting positive effect on children's abilities of language, mathematics, attention and motivation (Yilmaz, 2011). With the features of lovely melody and varying tempos, music provides the enjoyable learning atmosphere and easily arouses learners' interests and motivation (Lee, 2010). Consequently, more and more researchers, like Moradi (2014) and Wen (2009) recommended teachers to use music, such as soft music or pop songs, as the backdrop or teaching materials in their English class.

Another reason of using English songs as teaching materials is that 99 percent of popular music are "entirely or predominantly in English" (McKay, 2002, p.17). That means English pop songs are available almost everywhere and teachers can easily use them as the authentic teaching materials. Although students may listen to the English songs provided in their textbooks, these songs do not attract students' attention, because their lyrics and melodies are not popular with young people. Therefore, using English pop songs



in an English class seems a good way of attracting students' attention and intriguing their learning motivation.

Purposes of the Study

This study aimed to conduct the implementation of using English pop songs in English classes for sixth graders and to examine how this instruction enhanced students' learning motivation. Thus, the purpose could be to investigate the effect of sixth graders' motivation on English pop songs instruction.

Research Questions

Based on the purposes of this study, the following questions were generated:

- (1) Are there any significant differences on the participants' performances of English learning motivation before and after the English pop songs instruction?
- (2) What are the participants' responses toward the English pop songs instruction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following discussion gives a general review of theories and previous research related to this study. In section one, some theories of learning motivation will be reviewed, and the related theories and values of using songs in language learning will be included in section two. The third section explores various studies related to English pop songs and language learning.

Learning Motivation

Motivation is the key to all human activities. It provides the inner drives,

impulses and desires that move one to a particular action (Chang 1996). Among motivations, language learning motivation is the one more complicated than human motivation or general learning motivation due to its unique and specific nature of the language (Chen, 2011). Since learning motivation is the backbone of the language classroom, language teachers regard the skills of motivating their students as an essential part of their teaching profession. Some important theories related to the present study are highlighted in the following.

One effective significance of the motivation construct has been distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation defined by Deci is when engaging in activities, the learners require no apparent reward but enjoy the activities. That is, the intrinsically motivated learners tend to study because they want to study for their own sake not for the outside rewards. For instance, they may learn foreign languages to satisfy their curiosity, interests, or the feelings of challenge and competence, instead of getting a better job. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation refers to doing something that leads to separate outcome beyond the self, such as money, prizes, grades, etc. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). With the extrinsic motivation, students study for outside rewarding consequences, like receiving a reward or passing a test.

As for the discussion of L2 learning motivation, Gardner and Lambert (1972)



firstly identified two distinct orientations: integrative and instrumental orientation. Integrative orientation refers to language learning for personal desire of learning and interests in culture of the target language, while instrumental orientation refers to language learning for external rewards or an academic goal. In Gardner and Lambert's view, integrative motivation would be more positive than instrumental motivation in language learning. However, some researchers have thought Gardner's claim might not sufficiently explain the motivation of EFL learners, because Gardner conducted the experiment in Canada, where both English and French are official languages; however, in Asian countries such as Japan and Taiwan, English is treated as a foreign language and learners here do not have immediate needs to use English in their daily lives (Chen, 2011). Kouritzin, Piquemal and Renaud (2009) argued that Gardner failed to consider the "social contexts of learners" and the "differences between foreign and second language learners and the language they study" (p.289). That is, learners in an EFL environment may show different learning motivation orientation from those receiving bilingual education in which English is treated as the second language. In Taiwan, an EFL environment, different learning motivations might influence students' related learning behaviors, so it is needed to focus on the discussion of learning motivation in Taiwanese educational setting.

Based on Pintrich's motivation theories Liu, Chang, Hsu and Chang (2005) constructed the "Primary School Learning Motivation Scale" and divided the learning motivation into three components: value, expectation and affect. Value component is the supporting reasons of students' learning, including the importance, effectiveness and interests toward learning. Expectation component includes students' self-expectation of learning achievement and the faith of self-efficacy. Affect component implies students' emotional reactions toward learning and test anxiety. In 2009, Liu reported that executive volition component can be one vital element influencing learning behavior. Learners with high executive volition component of motivation are able to carry out their studies persistently. Therefore, in order to specify motivation types valid to meet the Taiwanese primary school students' educational background, the motivation questionnaire in this study was designed based on Liu's analysis of four motivation components.

Theories and Values of Using Songs in Language Learning

Songs have been used as teaching materials in the field of foreign language learning for a long time. Some studies describe that the melodies and lyrics of songs are able to contribute to language learning and make influence on students' learning abilities because most songs are delightful and meanwhile provide the language that students use in their real lives. The features of repetitive musical



pattern and contents of lyrics help students practice the target language efficiently (Geyer, 2001). Lo recommended that songs and rhymes could be applied as comprehensible input to facilitate students to learn alphabets as well as vocabulary and to improve their four skills in English (cited in Hsieh, 2010). Brand's (2007) advocated that song lyrics helped create a natural speaking environment for language learners, providing native speakers' culture, value and beliefs. The use of songs in English class can extend vocabulary and comprehension skills, develop listening and speaking skills and improve learners' attention and memory. Therefore, more and more teachers and researchers try to examine the effects of applying English songs in English language learning.

In addition, songs can create a relaxing, pleasant and non-threatening learning surroundings in which students may lower their anxiety filter and be more willing to learning. In language learning, the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1981) indicated that learners' feelings and emotions had substantial impact on learning quality. Krashen argued that "performers with high or strong filters will acquire less of the language directed at them, as less input is 'allowed in' to the language-acquisition device" (1981, p.22). EFL students might have some learning frustration and stress when they first face the unknown language and "the learners' emotional state is just like an adjustable filter which freely passes or hinders input

necessary to acquisition" (Lee, 2010, p.10). Accordingly, in a friendly environment, students' learning anxiety will be reduced and their interests will be fostered. In other words, the positive learning attitude can occur in the relaxing classroom atmosphere and students with a low affective filter are able to receive more input and learn effectively. Based on the above reasons, using English songs in English classes can benefit students since the delightful music creates a friendly learning atmosphere that supplies a low affective filter (Engh, 2013) and easily enhances students' learning interest and motivation.

In the examination of the related literature, a number of empirical studies have been conducted on using songs as an aid to language learning. Li and Brand (2009) implemented an experimental study to examine the effectiveness of varying use of songs (all-music group, half-music group and no-music group) on vocabulary acquisition, language usage, and meaning for adult students in the People's Republic of China. The results showed the all-music group obtained higher scores of achievement test and showed a more positive attitude toward English learning as well as a greater confidence in the instruction. In Taiwan, the main findings of Lee's (2010) research also reported that both second graders' learning motivation and phonological awareness could be promoted by nursery rhymes. In view of the reviewed studies, the constantly encouraging findings have agreed that use



of using English songs could result in considerable improvement of students' learning motivation.

English Pop Songs and Language Learning

Based on the discussions in the previous section, the application of English songs as teaching materials has presented its enormous values in language acquisition. However, mostly songs on textbooks are composed for students to practice the specific sentence patterns or vocabulary that the students just learned. As a result, the songs on the textbooks cannot be treated as the authentic materials. Furthermore, most sixth graders regard the songs in the textbooks or nursery rhymes as being childish and don't want to sing at all. For sixth graders, the pop music is more attractive than other kinds of music since sixth graders nowadays are more mature and easily influenced by popular culture (Chen & Chen, 2009). For teachers, English pop songs can also be easily obtained through the Internet as well.

Some studies, such as Murphey (1992) and Campbell (2006), have discussed the importance of English pop songs in language learning since pop songs offer an interesting materials for teacher to use and increase students' learning motivation. Wen (2009) summarized Chang's statements about the advantages of using English pop songs. There are various merits of applying English pop songs as teaching materials. The lyrics of English pop songs are usually repeated with the same beautiful melody, so

students practice singing the songs repeatedly and easily (Lems, 2001). Moreover, teaching English pop songs in class can create a relaxing and low anxiety circumstance which ease students' tension caused by learning foreign language (Shen, 2009). In sum, the above studies showed that English pop songs may provide beneficial language acquisition resources for both teachers and students.

However, only few studies in Taiwan have explored English pop songs in terms of their effectiveness on elementary school students' learning motivation. Some studies have focused on using pop songs instruction on high school students' English learning motivation or learning performance (Lee, 2013; Tung, 2012). Others have examined its effect on elementary school students' English learning attitude (Wen, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to bridge this apparent research gap by merely putting emphasis on probing the effects of applying English pop songs on sixth graders' learning motivation and their reflections toward the English pop songs instruction.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this research were 84 students, 40 girls and 44 boys, chosen from three classes of grade six in an elementary school in Kaohsiung City. Some students have learned English in cram schools for years; thus, the participants' English proficiency levels are varied.



Research Design

The research was designed to examine the effects of using English pop songs on sixth graders' learning motivation. The duration of instruction consists of 10 weeks of 40-minute class each week. Before the experiment, the pretest on learning motivation questionnaire was administered among the participants to compare with the post-test on the same items to examine the effects of improving students' learning motivation after the implementation of English pop songs.

Materials and Activities

A lot of English pop songs can be used as teaching aids in English classes, but not all of them are suitable for sixth graders. Murphey (1990) believed those songs that students are interested in and want to hear or sing will have the greatest impact on them. According to Abbott (2002), songs could be the meaningful and comprehensive learning materials for learners when the instructors take into consideration of their tempo, clear pronunciation, repetition, language level, vocabulary and "the extent of metaphorical usage"(p.11). Griffee (1990) also recommends using short and slow songs for beginning level learners. That is, one of the criteria of selecting suitable English pop songs is to choose the songs which meet learners' language proficiency level as they could provide the meaningful input for learning. Moreover, the pace and rhythm of melody should be slow and easy to follow. Based on the suggestions above and the related objective of students'

textbook and cultural theme, five English pop songs were chosen in the present study: "Simple Gifts", "What Does the Fox Say", "Let it Go", "White Christmas", "Season in the Sun".

As for activities, Abbott (2002) suggested three main categories of music activities that are often used in English class: listening, rhythmic speaking and sing-along. According to Abbott, the gap-fill tasks, such as dictation or cloze exercises, are the most common listening activities (2002). Abbott also said that "speaking the lyrics is an excellent alternative activity suitable for use with students who feel uncomfortable singing in public" (2002, p.13). Based on Abbott's suggestion, the following was the teaching process of English pop songs instruction in this research. First, the fill-in-blank test generated from the lyrics was given to the students and they were required to figure out the missing words of the lyrics while listening to the song. Next, the students had a second chance to listen to the song and checked the filled-out words. After the lyrics were explained, the students would read the lyrics and then sing the song with the music. Finally, the students would finish further activities about the song, such as writing the worksheet or doing a singing performance.

Instruments

The motivation questionnaire in this study was designed based on Chen (2013) and a bit further revision was done to meet the sixth graders' learning motivation. According to the learning motivation



analysis of Liu (2009), the questionnaire includes 20 questions which were divided into four sections: value component of learning motivation (Items 1~6), expectation component of learning motivation (Items 7~11), affect component of learning motivation (Items 12~16) and executive volition component of learning motivation (Items 17~20). Among the 20 items, a Likert-type response format was adopted, consisting of five-point scale corresponding to 1 (strongly distress), 2 (distress), 3 (no strong feeling either way), 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree), which measured the degree to which the participants report their English learning motivation. The higher scores indicate the higher extent English learning motivation. The learning motivation questionnaire post-test was composed of items identical to those in the pretest questionnaire, yet added with five relevant open-ended questions which were designed to get a deeper understanding of students' reflections and feeling about the English pop song instruction.

Data Collection and Analysis

The English pop songs instruction lasted for ten weeks. After the 10-week instruction, the post-test of learning motivation questionnaire was conducted to explore the differences on the participants' learning motivation before and after the English pop songs instruction. The total scores of motivation questionnaire pretest and post-test were used for the paired-samples T-test to examine differences in participants' learning

motivation as well as with value component, expectation component, affect component, and executive volition component. The participants' answers to the open-ended question were classified into certain patterns and described synthetically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main purpose of this research was to explore using English pop songs instruction in developing sixth graders' learning motivation. Based on two research questions, the results and discussions were presented into two sections: the effects of the English pop songs instruction on students' learning motivation and students' responses toward the English pop songs instruction.

The Effects on Students' Learning Motivation.

In order to examine the effects of English pop songs instruction program on the sixth graders' learning motivation, the motivation questionnaire pretest and posttest were completed by students before and after the instruction. Four components of learning motivation were included: value, expectation, affect and executive volition. The data analysis was performed with SPSS to compare the scores of the learning motivation pretest and posttest. The results of which were displayed in Table 1. Table 1 shows mean motivation scores of the pretest and the post-test are 73.79 and 79.46 respectively, and *SDs* of the pretest and the post-test are 13.94 and 13.53 respectively. A T-test analysis on



these values yields a t -score -2.80 ($p=.006 < .05$). This suggests that after receiving English pop songs instruction, the participants got the higher scores in the learning motivation questionnaire,

implying that the English pop songs instruction had positive effects on promoting students' learning motivation.

Table 1. Results of Paired Sample T-test for Learning Motivation Questionnaire

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>
Pretest	84	73.79	13.94	83	-2.80	.006
Post-test	84	79.46	13.53	83		

Note. N= the number of participants; SD= standard deviation; df= degrees of freedom; sig.= statistically significant.

To further realize which component of motivation would be enhanced most, the scores of both pretest and post-test motivation questionnaires in terms of four subcategories: value component, expectation component, affect component and executive volition were subjected to paired-samples T-test statistical procedures. The outcomes were presented in Table 2. Table 2 shows that mean motivation scores of the post-test of value component ($M= 23.88$), expectation component ($M= 20.33$), affect component ($M= 20.82$) and executive volition component ($M= 14.43$) are much improved more than those of pretest of these four identical components (*Means* of 22.32, 19.68, 18.99 and 12.74). Meanwhile, and the standard deviations of the post-test in the aspects of value component ($SD=3.41$), expectation

component ($SD=3.88$), affect component ($SD=4.12$) and executive volition component ($SD=3.73$) are all lower than the pretest of value ($SD=3.41$), expectation ($SD=4.09$), affect ($SD=4.6$) and executive volition ($SD=4.29$). The results indicate that the participants' four motivation components have been increased and their responses on these four components were more similar than those of the pretest. A T-test analysis on these values yields a t -score -2.71 ($p=.008 < .05$) of value component; a t -score -2.84 ($p=.006 < .05$) of affect component and a t -score -2.69 ($p=.009 < .05$) of executive volition component. This implies that the English pop songs instruction had significant effects on value, affect and executive volition components, but no significant effect on expectation component.

Table 2. Paired Samples T-Test for the Subcategories of Learning Motivation Questionnaire

	Component	Number of items	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>
pretest	Value	6	22.32	3.41	83	-2.71	.008
post-test			23.88	3.82	83		



pretest	Expectation	5	19.68	4.09	83	-1.13	.262
post-test			20.33	3.88	83		
pretest	Affect	5	18.99	4.60	83	-2.84	.006
post-test			20.82	4.12	83		
pretest	Executive volition	4	12.74	4.29	83	-2.69	.009
post-test			14.43	3.73	83		

Note. N= the number of participants; SD= standard deviation; df= degrees of freedom; sig.= statistically significant.

To investigate specifically the effects of the English pop songs instruction on participants' learning motivation, the scores of each individual item of the pretest and the post-test are subjected to t-test statistical procedure, too. The outcomes are displayed in Table 4. According to Table 4, Item 4 on value component has the higher scores ($t=-6.837$, $p=.000 < .05$) than all the others which shows that after the treatment, students tended to believe learning English was helpful for them. In addition, among the items of executive volition motivation, Item 17 with the highest scores also illustrates that students were extremely willing to watch the English programs or news on TV. Figures of affect component, like Item 12, Item 13, Item 14 indicate that after the English pop songs instruction, students thought learning English was interesting and would expect for the English class. It is evident that students' learning motivation was influenced by teacher's teaching materials. Furthermore, Item 11 of expectation component was designed to realize the participants' self-confidence on English assignments

and exams, and the result shows students became more confident in their performances of English tests than before. In short, the English pop songs instruction provided student with an enjoyable learning environment where lowered their filter, helped them obtained more meaningful input, and created self-confidence of learning (Shen, 2009).

Students' Responses toward the English Pop Songs Instruction

Apart from the items of four motivation components, the open-ended questions were also designed in order to obtain further understanding of students' feelings about the English pop songs instruction. As for students' responses to Question 1, most students (about 78.6%) expressed that they liked the English pop songs instruction because English pop songs are more pleasant than the songs on the textbooks. Also, for Question 2, the majority of students (77.3%) agreed that learning English through singing English pop songs was more interesting and they felt more confident in learning English successfully than before. Firstly, the main reason was when learning English pop songs, they are able to get more



understanding of different cultures and customs through the lyrics, which was more useful in their daily life. Secondly, they like to sing the pop songs with their friends after class. Question 3 was designed to realize the students' favorite songs. The top two popular songs are "Let it Go" and "What Does the Fox Say". The participants liked these two songs due to the delightful melody of the songs and also partly because they could connect the songs with the film they saw. Finally, about 65.2% of the students believed that the English pop songs instruction facilitated their English learning, particularly in terms of oral fluency and vocabulary acquisition.

To sum up, based on the students' reflections, most of sixth graders liked English pop songs more than the nursery rhymes that were provided in their English textbook. Also, most students had positive feedback to the English pop songs instruction. However, some students had suggestions of choosing the songs they liked. In general, students' feelings toward the instruction of using English pop songs in class were positive. It was helpful for the students to foster their learning motivation on learning English through applying English pop songs in English class.

CONCLUSION AND

SUGGESTIONS

The aim of this study was to examine whether the use of English pop songs improved the grade six students' English learning motivation. Based on the results and discussions presented above, the main findings are summarized as follows.

To begin with, the results showed that the application of English pop songs in English class had beneficial effects on improving students' learning motivation. That is, students' learning motivation had significantly increased after English pop songs teaching. The result is the same as that in Chen's study in 2013.

Moreover, according to the collected data from the open-ended questions, it can be concluded that most of the students had positive reflections toward English pop songs instruction.

They were fond of learning English pop songs in two aspects. First, students expressed their English learning motivation was promoted by the pleasant melody, the repetitive lyrics and the understanding of different cultures, which is correspond to Shen's (2009) suggestions.

In addition, the students had positive attitude toward English learning and they would be much willing to listen to the English pop songs on



internet, radio or TV in the future.

Although the findings of this study demonstrated that the English pop songs instruction had positive impact on improving students' learning motivation, there are some improvement to be made. The instruction was conducted for ten weeks with forty minutes per week and the effects of this English pop songs instruction on students' expectation component of learning motivation were not so significant (see Table 2), which showed that during such a short period of instruction, the expectation motivation was not easy to get promoted. Besides, in the light of the students' responses toward the English pop songs instruction, more than half of participants felt their English abilities had been improved through the appreciation of English pop songs. Therefore, several pedagogical and research suggestions are given in the following:

1. It might be worthwhile for English teachers in Taiwan to provide their EFL students With creative teaching and authentic learning materials by using English pop songs. Since students are interested in the song lyrics and enjoy singing them, they may be more willing to learn the vocabulary and sentences of the lyrics (Chen & Chen, 2009). In other words, teachers should carefully design the lesson plan and prepare more different types of songs related to teaching subjects. Then, students would be able to learn English with fun and confidence and learn it

efficiently.

2. For the further research in the future, we recommend that more time should be

Assigned for various learning practice activities. The time assigned for this English pop songs instruction was insufficient, so the effects on the expectation component of motivation was not significant in this study. Additionally, based on students' reflections, it is suggested that the subsequent research can investigate the effects of English pop songs instruction on elementary students' English learning achievement, especially in terms of four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

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