

# The effects of pop music on improvement of listening comprehension skill in English language as a second language acquisition

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## **Abstract**

Music as an emotional tool or a universal language is significant in every aspect of our life including education sector. Accordingly, this article is aimed at considering the relationship between pop music and English language as a second language acquisition, investigating whether or not the use of pop music significantly improves educator's listening comprehension skills. To achieve this target, 20 Iranian participants (10 elementary students of and 10 advanced students) were selected and divided into 4 classes consisting of 5 members. As the research investigated the effect of pop music on listening comprehension skill an experimental design was employed. In each level one class was considered as an experimental group and the other one was a control group. While the experimental group was instructed through pop music, the control group had their normal course activities without any instruction on Music. Listening comprehension of all classes were assessed by pre-test, post-test, questionnaire, interview and observation. Statistically, the results indicated a remarkable improvement in the performance of the experimental group. Thus, in addition to entertainment, music can also be utilized as an educational tool to improve listening comprehension skills of learners.

**Keywords:** Pop music, Listening comprehension skill, English language, Second language acquisition

## **Introduction**

Music is a powerful emotional tool which encompasses many benefits (Frith, 2004, Miranda & Claes, 2009). Some of these benefits are physical and psychological effects on health. Lai and Good (2005) believe that listening to music improves insomnia. Lesiuk (2010) expresses that music affects brain and improves the quality of performance. Listening to music can also decrease depressive symptoms (Lin et al., 2011). Another benefit is increasing self-confidence which is also related to decreasing of depression, stress, and aggression (Shayan et al., 2011). In this regard, Chanda and Levitin (2013) assert that music reduces anxiety, helps with depression and even strengthens the immune system. McDermott et al (2014) claim that music deals with clinical problems ranging from Alzheimer disease to autism disorder. Besides, listening to music may reduce perceptions of pain among patients (Xue et al., 2018). Finn and Fancourt (2018) also emphasize on stress-reducing benefits of music. Moreover, Wilson and Macdonald (2019) maintain that music will increase the feelings of enthusiasm, joy, relaxation and patience.

In addition to human physiology and psychology, music is also inextricably linked to cultural and social fields (Barton, 2018). From the viewpoints of Mehr et al. (2019), music is a universal language for communications of humankind. As a socio-cultural phenomenon, music carries a lot of information about the

culture by which it was created, effecting the emotional sphere of people's lives and giving a deeper perspective into their minds. Accordingly, through melodies and lyrics people share a mutual way of communicating which flows freely beyond the boundaries and barriers of language, religion, nationality, age and so on. Due to the power of music in making communication, it is considered as a beneficial tool for students. Therefore, music is not only an important driving force of a society's culture, but also plays a vital role in pedagogical process. Since this research specifically investigate the effects of pop music on listening comprehension skill, the natures of each variables (listening and pop music) will be discussed as follows.

### **1. Listening**

Being a good listener, has a vital role in each communication. The significance of listening is tangible when it is said that 45% of the daily communication time is spent on listening (Feyten, 1991). Therefore, with regard to the significance of listening, many different definitions are proposed for this concept. Saricoban (1999) upholds that listening is one of the basic language skills. Listening is a medium through which children and adults obtain a great portion of their information and their understanding of the world including human affairs, ideals, values, and peception. For Musfirosh (2000), listening is a deliberate activity and its objective is to reach the required level of understanding and considering non-linguistic aspects such as tone, intonation, rhythm and sound range. Listening in its broadest sense refers to interpretations and attempts to understand what the speaker implies. In learning a new language, listening is the first fundamental receptive ability for beginners which can affect productivity. Therefore, according to Brown (2001), Students who possess great listening comprehension skills, also have a great competency in productive skills (speaking and writing) and are able to participate more effectively in communicative circumstances.

For Rost (2002), listening in a broad sense is a process of receiving what the speaker actually states (receptive orientation); construct and express meaning (constructive orientation); negotiate and respond to the speaker about meaning (collaborative orientation); and create meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). Rost (2002) defines listening comprehension as an interactive process in which the listener participates in construction of meaning. Additionally, Tarigan (2008) states that listening is a process of listening oral symbols with attention, comprehension, appreciation, and interpretation in order to gain information and make sense of the communications. In Mukmiatun's viewpoint (2009) listening is an imperceptible mental process in which the listener should make a difference between sounds, understand lexical and grammatical structures, and also interpret them. Hamouda (2013) defines listening as understanding what others tell which consists understanding of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and meaning. Hamouda (2013) maintains that the listener should be able to repeat the text immediately, even though the listener may repeat the sounds without actually understanding them. Based on Listiyaningsih's work (2017), it can be concluded that out of other skills in language learning, listening is the fundamental one.

### **2. Pop Music**

Pop music, as the name denotes, is one of the most popular genre of music between people of different ages and cultures but there is no exact definition for this concept. Jones and Rahn (1981) propose twelve criteria by which pop music can be defined. These criteria are: 1) Number of audience, 2) heterogeneity of audience, 3) listener's unpredictability, 4) size of business, 5) efficiency, 7) aural transmission, 8.) simple and beautiful objects, 9) emphasis on performer, 10) standardisation; 11) variability; 12) degree of ephemerality. Because of these criteria, pop music is placed in a different category (Sakar, 2009). As a matter of fact, it is believed that the fundamental function of music is its potential to produce pleasure in the listener (Schubert, 2009) and pop music is rich in this quality. Due to the popularity of this music genre, listening to pop music can be an effective tool to make young learners enjoy learning. Davis and Blair (2011) affirm that pop music as a key player in education sector has penetrated the lives of students.

### **Purpose of Research**

The main purpose of this research is specifically to find out the effects of pop music as a technique in listening section. This research attempts to determine whether pop music significantly effects on listening comprehension skills of English learners and to discover what these possible effects are. Another purpose of this research is to determine whether the effects of pop music on listening comprehension is different between elementary and advanced English learners. After achieving the main purposes, ideally, the researcher hopes to encourage both students and teachers to apply pop music in actual circumstances of classrooms.

### **Research Question**

Two research questions are considered for this research:

- Does pop music significantly improve listening comprehension skill of English learners?
- What are the empirical demonstrated effects of pop music on listening comprehension skill in English language?

## Research Hypothesis

H0: Pop music does not significantly improve listening comprehension skill of English learners.

## Literature Review

Many scholars consider common origins for music and language (Brown, 2001; Mithen, 2005; Stansell, 2005; Besson et al., 2011, Kao and Oxford, 2014). In this regard, Brown (2001) creatively coins the word “musilanguage” which is the combination of music and language. Mithen (2005) points out that both music and language are holistic, manipulative, multi-modal, musical, and imitative. Furthermore, Kao and Oxford (2014) also explain about how music and language have been “holding hands” throughout history and point out that language wonderfully enlivens the music and music is considered as a source of inspiration for language. In fact, the combination of language and music may cause music to have the potential of positively affecting language acquisition because in this way the positive effects from both music and language can be applied. For this reason, a plethora of researches are conducted in which the effects of music on education, particularly on language acquisition, are assessed.

Murphey (1992) revealed that music is source of language for presenting and practicing syntax, lexicon, pronunciation, listening, reading, speaking, writing, and translation. Slijper (1998) conducted a research on the effects of music therapy in both residential and educational settings. This research uses a meta-analysis of twelve studies to investigate the effects of music therapy on academic achievement. The data analysis of this research indicated the benefits of music therapy on academic achievement which was small but significant. Quast (1999) who used the method of Suggestopedia, asserted that music have positive effects on language acquisition even when it is played passively. Students in Quast’s research showed less exhaustion and performed better on memory tasks. This research also revealed that different genres of music have different effects on students. In Fisher’s research (2001), students not only started their days with music, but also learned to spell words from music and read musical stories. The results of this study indicated that the active use of music in language learning is a useful way and teachers should include music into their curriculum.

Eady and Wilson (2004) studied the effects of music on education and revealed positive impact of music on both academic achievement and study skill. They applied pop and technology music. Morales’s work (2008) was based on the utilization of rock music in teaching and learning English. In this study, three features were significant. These features were preliminary consideration, consideration of music as an authentic material and consideration of music in listening tasks. Morales (2008) was concerned with careful selections of music and emphasized on deep listening. The two Chen scholars (2009) attempted to investigate whether English pop music effects on the motivations of elementary students to learn English and also attempted to investigate the relationships between student’s motivation and performance. According to the results of their study, most students were interested in learning English pop music and after participating in this classroom, their learning motivation as well as their learning performance was changed. A high correlation was also found between their motivation and performance.

Regarding Lee’s research (2009), the usage of contrastive musical compositions, was shown to be an effective way for teaching urban young children to gain a perceptual understanding of music. Lee (2009) argued that music with contrasting elements can motivate urban children to participate in spontaneous physical activity as well as learning spoken language. Ornerova (2009) analyzed teachers and student’s attitudes toward applying pop music and found that lessons with music are interesting, instructive, positive, relaxing and enjoyable for both teachers and students. Besides, in this research, the inclusion of pop music in text books of lower secondary and upper secondary school has been analyzed. The research findings indicated that learning English through pop music was mostly addressed to teenagers of new generation. On that account, teachers should use music regularly within their curriculum. (Ornerova, 2009). In a research conducted by Rafiee et al. (2010), the effects of humorous music on listening comprehension and on immediate and delayed recall by a group of EFL learners were investigated. The result showed that in the listening comprehension test, the performance of experimental group was better than the control group, although the effects of humorous music did not differ significantly between the immediate and delayed recall tests.

Tavakoli (2013) examined the effects of task-based language teaching to EFL learners. In this research music was utilized in order to make grammar instruction less dull. The findings indicated that task-based language teaching accompanied with music may result in better performance of learners. Ghanbari and Hashemian (2014) made a comparison between applying music and previous traditional method, investigating its effects on the young learner’s listening comprehension and pronunciation. In addition, they attempted to find whether gender significantly differs between the pronunciation and listening comprehension of young learners. The results revealed significant effects of applying music on the listening comprehension and pronunciation of young learners, even though there was no significant effect of gender on these variables. Furthermore, Listiyaningsih (2017) stated that listening to English music can improve student’s vocabulary. Therefore, on the basis of this research, listeners who listen to the English music, gain a wide range of vocabularies which results in better speaking level. This is possible through repeating the music, taking a note of unfamiliar words, and trying to remember them. At last, it can be concluded that music can have a positive effect on language acquisition but in

spite of the historically strong evidences, this field of study still needs to be under researched and specifically investigate the important and effective variables in teaching.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant**

For the purpose of the research, a total of twenty Iranian male and female students of an institute in Qazvin were recruited as the sample of the research and placed in four classes based on their age and language level. Two classes were comprised of elementary English learners, aged between 6 to 12 and two classes were advanced English learners, aged between 17 to 22. In each level, one class was randomly assigned into the experimental and one was assigned as control group.

### **Instrument**

At the beginning of the research, a placement test and a questionnaire were administrated to collect background information about student's interests and to distinguish their level of listening skill. Similarly, in attempt to answer the research questions, another questionnaire and a post-test were repeated at the end of the research. Both tests and the questionnaires were required students of all classes to rate their listening skill (from poor to excellent) and their enjoyment of pop music (from completely unenjoyable to enjoyable). The student's questionnaire contained open-ended questions about listening skills as well as enjoyments and ideas about pop music. The questionnaire also asked about anticipated and identified effects of pop music as well as strengths and weaknesses of the classes. The students were shortly interviewed and their performance was observed during each session. Each of the sessions was audio-recorded, and field notes were taken during and after observations of each session.

### **Design**

Since this research investigates the effect of English pop music on listening comprehension of English learners, a mixed method of research in an experimental design was employed. Accordingly, in order to answer the research questions and gain valid or reliable results, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed. The independent variable of this research was listening to pop music and the dependent variable was listening comprehension skill in English language.

### **Procedure**

According to the result of pre-test and the questionnaire, ten top English pop music were selected. In each session, 45 minutes were devoted to practicing two English pop music. The music was played in the class, following three phases of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. During five sessions, students of the experimental groups listened to the selected pop music and were commonly taught the music in via three steps. At the first step some pictures and questions about the music were posted on the board since it is important to give students a reason for listening and this is possible by giving pre-listening questions. Next, the music was played and students only listened to music for one or two times. At while-listening activity, the teacher stopped the music and asked the students to retell the last verses of the music. Often a teacher has to play a certain part of the music several times in order to help the students comprehend better. After the music was repeated at least for three times, the teacher wrote the music on the board and underlined, pronounced and translated the words. When students became familiar with the new words, they followed the teacher and worked on the pronunciation and meaning of the new words several times.

Secondly, the teacher sang the music and again students listened carefully, but this time they tracked the lines of words on the board, in that time, they knew the new words and their meanings. Therefore, as a post-listening activity they could answer the questions and follow the teacher in singing the music. Then, all the class sang the music altogether beautifully and the teacher corrected them if there is a problem in pronunciation. At the end of this phase, the teacher asked the meaning and pronunciation of new words again to make sure everything is clear. The new music was practiced every session at the end of each class and when they mastered the music, a new one was presented. Meanwhile, the control group was taught by conventional methods and had their usual teacher-fronted class without listening to music. Finally, both groups were post tested on their listening comprehension. The post tests were pictorial, oral (for elementary level) and fill in the blank tests (for advanced level) in which learners should have named the specified pictures and have completed the missing parts.

## **Data Analysis**

In this research, quantitative and qualitative data were collected through tests, Interview, questionnaires and observations. The collected data helped the researcher to find the student's attitudes towards applying music in teaching listening skill. The results of descriptive statistics indicated that students considered listening as a difficult skill before using music. But after applying an experimental lesson, they had positive opinions about listening and felt they liked listening much more than before. There was also a high correlation between their learning motivation and learning performance. Dealing with data analysis, the score of listening test was listed from the lowest to the highest. Afterwards, the data which are taken from experimental class and control class were compared and analysed to find out its significance and to determine the means score of two classes so that

the effectiveness of the use of Pop music could be sought. Then, in order to increase the research's validity and reliability, the data obtained from classes of different levels and ages were compared together to make sure that different parameters or circumstances won't effect on the result.

### Result

**Table 1. Student's score of pre-test and post-test**

		Score of pre-test	Score of post-test
<b>Control group</b>	<b>Elementary English learners</b>	60	62
		45	39
		37	44
		50	55
		77	81
	<b>Advanced English learners</b>	42	46
		75	77
		54	55
		80	77
		65	71
<b>Total score</b>		585	607
<b>Mean</b>		58.5	60.5
<b>Experimental group</b>	<b>Elementary English learners</b>	80	99
		35	64
		76	87
		47	73
		57	96
	<b>Advanced English learners</b>	37	59
		63	89
		76	98
		44	84
		55	69
<b>Total score</b>		570	818
<b>Mean</b>		57	81.8

The quantitative statistic of pre-test and post-test imply that although at first there was no significant difference in the listening comprehension skill of the experimental and control groups, but at the end of the study there was a significant difference between these groups. The performance was high with pop music as compared to no pop music. In other words, the experimental group scored better than the control group but here was no significant between elementary and advanced learners. By comparing the scores of two levels or two age groups and still achieving the same result, it can be concluding that the hypothesis of this research is accepted.

### Problem and Challenges

Applying pop music in classroom yields a lot of good points to English learners but some unavoidable problems and challenges also go along with them. For this reason, this research is conducted in light of some significant problems and challenges. The first one is related to the nature of music itself which can be so appealing to some students that they follow it passively just for entertainment. Besides, the differences in accents of the singers, may cause some pronunciation problems. Thus, selecting understandable music are the matter of significance for this research. The rhythm, length and content of the music should also be appropriate for students. Another big problem is dealing with noisy classrooms because noises can disrupt the classroom activities and student's concentration which is one of the important parameters in a deep and good listening process. These issues are some of the identified problems and challenges which were encountered by students while applying music for listening comprehension skills. It should be mentioned that, these issues are also difficult for the teacher. Therefore, teachers need a lot of experience, energy, positivity, patience and creativity.

### Discussion and Implication

Based on to the data analysis of this research, there was a significant difference between experimental and control groups, suggesting that the experimental group had a better performance and listening to pop music does positively effects listening comprehension skills of English learners. At the end of the research, learners indicated their enthusiasm about participating in English classes and seemed to be more active and interested in listening tasks than before. The students were also interested in group singing. Moreover, due to different music tastes, the selection of music was taken into account. Some of students recommended their favourite pop music to the class

and they were also encouraged to select the music instead of the teacher. As they expressed, the tedious atmosphere of their class was changed and they were willing to continue this procedure to the end of term. According to the observation of the researcher as a teacher, even those shy students were changed to be more confident and creative. Music not only enables student's creative side but also boost their imagination because in each session after listening to the music they were attempted to interpret the meaning of lyrics and spoke about their ideas. This wonderful changes in the performance of English learners can be attributed to the joy of listening to pop music.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, since most English teachers are conducting traditional approaches of teaching, utilizing pop music as a technique in English classes can foster the learning and teaching's process. Although, this research just scratches the surface of the topic and does not consider other factors. In this research, male and female participants of two English levels or two age groups were selected and different factors were taken into account but due to the problems and challenges, additional researches are required. For future researches, it is suggested to add more variables and expand or generalize the research to students of more than two grade levels and different societies or cultures. Moreover, finding greater numbers of participants and mediating wide ranges of age groups in researches of similar nature, can give extra information and increase validity or reliability. Consequently, further researches should compare and analyse the result of this research with those researches which are conducted on different levels. Although this research specifically focuses on pop music but its purposes and structure may be potentially applicable for applying other music genres.

### **Conclusion**

The result showed that the majority of the students are interested in pop music and its continuous utilization will assist their listening comprehension skill. The treatment provided some benefits for the students to improve their performance in listening tasks. The students gave full attention and concentration to the English pop music which made the students to become more active in doing listening tasks in the classrooms. The reason is when people listen to their favourite genre of music that they enjoy, they often listen to it whole- heartedly. In actual fact, if English learners feel motivated in listening to pop music that they enjoy, they will listen to the music again and again. They repeat playing the pop music, not just for entertainment but also for getting involved with music and for listening comprehension. They automatically find out the meanings of the lyrics and deeply comprehend another culture. As a result, their other language skills such as speaking, writing, reading and translating skills will be improved.

To summarize, the results of this research revealed that from a psychological point of view, listening to music makes studying complicated courses easier, reduces learning anxieties in classrooms, keeps students focused, contributes to a more positive classroom environment, increases student's motivations, boosts student's self-esteem and self-confidence, encourages students to be more active, and finally nurtures their creativity. Moreover, from cultural and social perspective, listening to pop music fosters intercultural or social belonging of students and makes students to communicate or exchange their informations and emotions. Overall, it can be claimed that listening to pop music improves academic achievements of English student which results in their better pronunciation, helps them to learn and memorize new vocabularies, improves their grammar, boosts their fluency or accuracy of skills and creates more appropriate translations. Given the significance and benefits of listening to pop music, teachers should consider applying pop music in the English curricula of their classrooms as much as possible. Nonetheless, the English students should be encouraged to individually listen to those pop music after the class in their free time.

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