

## THE NEXUS BETWEEN MUSIC AND LITERATURE IN EFL/ESL

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### Abstract

Keeping students motivated and interested when teaching literature in the EFL\ESL classroom while stimulating them to better their language skills is an arduous task. However, it is not an impossible one. Many scholars in the SLA field agree that integrating music in language and literature classes can be beneficial in terms of increasing students' motivation, in-class participation and their overall interest in the school material. The students' heightened interest and their active participation in class will have a positive impact on the improvement of their language skills. Making use of music can be especially fruitful in teaching literature. Moreover, the nexus between literature and literature-inspired music can be exploited for the purposes of teaching EFL\ESL.

The aim of this paper is to prove that teaching English by exploiting literature and music, i.e. songs is advantageous and favourable in the EFL\ESL context, meaning that when the teacher relates specific well-known and popular songs to books or novels, the students will not only be encouraged to participate more actively in classes, but they will also be inspired to read various pieces of literature, and, thus, enhance their English language skills in general.

**Keywords:** EFL, SLA, music, literature, teaching literature via music, motivation, language skills

### Introduction

Numerous scholars (Cook, 1996; Gardner, 2000; Gee, 2004; Legg, 2009; Woodrow, 2006; Woolfolk, Hughes, & Walkup, 2008) urge teachers to consider learners' need and interests when choosing the content and methods in order to improve students' motivation. Batluk (2015), for instance, in her study "A Case Study of Swedish Upper-Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Possible Impact of Listening to Vocal Music on Their Extramural English" points out that music has the power to motivate students to learn English and claims that songs have a positive impact on the acquisition of the English language. Via literature, teachers help their students 'build bridges' to worlds they cannot physically visit; travel through time, and empathize with and understand people they have never met. Nevertheless, teaching literature has other benefits as well – it enhances language awareness. Asking learners to examine sophisticated or non-standard examples of language which occur in

literary texts makes them more aware of the norms of language use (Widdowson, 1975). Having both literature and music in the EFL\ESL classroom is beneficial for the students in a sense that it aids their language acquisition and it betters their language skills.

The aim of this paper is to prove that the relationship between music and literature can be utilized in teaching EFL\ESL. In other words, by exploiting the connection between music and literature students can improve their language skills and their motivation for studying will be increased.

### **Teaching literature in EFL\ESL classes**

Teaching literature in EFL\ESL classrooms has numerous benefits. Literature overview reveals that scholars have recognized various advantages of teaching literature within EFL classes. Thus, for instance, Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan (2011) in their paper titled “Literature in EFL/ESL Classroom” summarise the merits of teaching literature in EFL as follows: Authenticity, Motivation, Cultural/Intercultural awareness and Globalization, Sociolinguistic/Pragmatic Knowledge, Grammar and Vocabulary Knowledge, Language Skills, Emotional Intelligence (EQ), and Critical Thinking.

Authenticity is one of the merits of teaching literature in EFL\ESL. Literature is inherently authentic and provides authentic input for language learning (Ghosn, 2002; Shrestha, 2008). Maley (1989a) states that literature deals with non-trivial things which are personally relevant to the students.

Motivation can be crucial when it comes to learning literature and reading literary texts. Literary texts are very motivating due to their authenticity and the meaningful context they provide (Ghosn, 2002; Van, 2009). Literature deals with things which are interesting in nature and includes little if any uninteresting things (Maley, 1989a). Adding to this, students are encouraged to read things that genuinely interest them.

Another benefit of teaching literature is that it promotes cultural and intercultural awareness (Van, 2009) especially in the era of globalization (Tayebipour, 2009). As literature deals with universal concepts (Maley, 1989a), it boosts the students’ consciousness and the understanding of the English culture. Given that culture is considered one of the five language skills that language learners should master, it goes without saying that it is important for students to immerse in the culture of the language they are studying as much as possible. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the other language skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading) can also be developed through literature.

Literature can be very helpful when it comes to EFL students' acquiring sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge. In other words, literature can develop sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge as manifested in communicative competence models (McKay, 2001). The communicative competences of the students can be strengthened by reading literature and examining literary texts.

Literature deals with a potpourri of language types and varieties from slang to formal and various subject matters (Maley, 1989a), which means that students are exposed to different kinds of language varieties and their acquisition of the language feels more authentic and natural. According to Arthur (1968) syntactic knowledge and vocabulary enrichment can be accelerated through literary texts. The stock of the students' vocabulary is enriched and they correlate and internalize the sentence structures that they come across in literary texts.

Also, literature fosters empathy. As Ghosn (2002) puts it, reading literary texts fosters emotional intelligence. Oatley (2004, 216-218) claims that literature can serve as a diverse source of examples of emotional life because the authors of literary works have written about emotions that may have sufficient resonance with generations of learners.

Finally, teaching literature helps students develop their critical thinking abilities. Literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language (Langer 1997). Gajdusek, van Dommelen (1993), Ghosn (2002) and Van (2009) believe that literature is a good medium for critical thinking enhancement among language learners.

Teaching literature in the context of EFL\ESL in particular is also deemed highly beneficial. However, this can entail some reluctance as well. According to Or (1995) there is a general perception that literature is particularly complex and inaccessible for the foreign language learner and can even be detrimental to the process of language learning. This is why EFL textbooks in general, include merely a couple of pages dedicated to literary pieces and literature.

This same situation is found in the case of the EFL\ESL textbooks used in the primary and secondary schools in Macedonia. Literature and language are not taught as separate subjects. In fact, the focus is placed solely on teaching the English language and teaching English literature is completely overlooked. In contrast, the Macedonian language and literature are taught as separate courses; the syllabi includes distinct sections dedicated both to language and literature. The specifics about the EFL curriculum in Macedonia are available on the official page of the Bureau for Development of Education at the Ministry of

Education and Science. The EFL syllabi in Macedonia are focused on one goal: to better students' language skills – listening, speaking, reading, writing, as well as to enrich their vocabulary and their grammatical competence.

But all is not that bleak – although the official curriculum proposed by the Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science does not put literature in the focal position, some enthusiastic EFL teachers give extracurricular classes to their students and within these classes, among the other activities, they assign students to read various pieces of literature.

### **Teaching literature via music/songs**

The theory about music and its benefits in language learning, i.e. the pedagogical value of music and songs in foreign and second language learning has been researched in numerous studies (Ajibade and Ndububa, 2008; Chou, 2014; Coyle and Gómez Gracia, 2014; Davis and Fan, 2016; Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal, and Carrero Olivares, 2012; Schön et al., 2008; Salcedo, 2010). Scholars such as Cooper (2010), Paquette and Rieg (2008) and Trinick (2011) have discussed the benefits of music regarding the field of SLA and cognitive science, and have emphasized music's therapeutic, cultural and pedagogical features in particular.

Thus, for instance, terBogt et al. (2014) claims that “most adolescents love music as it provides the soundtrack for a developmental phase characterized by rapid and profound physical, emotional, and intellectual changes” and that music is “an indispensable aspect of adolescent social gatherings, and pop music particularly often addresses partying and having a good time.”

According to the findings of Sharman and Dingle's research (2015) listening to music results “in an increase in positive emotions” and stimulating positive emotions in the classroom can increase learning and in-class student participation.

Other studies have proved that music not only helps and encourages language acquisition but also motivates students to be more actively engaged in mastering the language (Cooper, 2010; Trinick, 2011; Schön et al. 2008; Mashayekh and Hashemi, 2011). Paquette and Rieg (2008) have mentioned the cognitive, affective, and linguistic benefits of music by arguing that music helps in developing automaticity, i.e. that it has a weak affective filter and promotes genuine language interactions. Moreover, music can be used in teaching literature, as literature has a close connection to music. Harmer (2001) points out “music is a powerful stimulus because it directly speaks to people's emotions and allows the brain to analyze it. It

can change the atmosphere in the classroom and it prepares students for a new activity while, at the same time, it amuses and entertains them. It establishes a connection between the world of leisure and the world of learning. Textbooks that contain song lyrics, in fact, are the most useful materials for students to work with. Therefore, teachers should include songs that their students like and whose lyrics are appropriate for their learners' age and interests, in terms of topic and subject matter.”

Harmer (2001) in his study also recommends activities for efficient implementation of song lyrics in class, such as, for instance, the following:

1. The teachers blank out various words in a song and give the students a list of the omitted words. The students fill in the missing words using the given words while they are listening to the song;
2. The students put the scrambled lines of a song in order;
3. The students complete the half-finished lines while listening to the song,
4. The students listen to a song and then they discuss the possible title of that specific song, etc.

Additional set of ideas as to how music can be used in teaching literature and language successfully can be found in the lesson plans created by the Mensa Education and Research Foundation. The series of lessons developed by Lisa Van Gemert, a Mensa Foundation's Gifted Children Specialist, are primarily created to be effective in a classroom setting. In these lessons the students are encouraged to analyze songs alongside various literary pieces.

One more example that highlights the success and benefits of using popular music to teach literature is that of a teacher, Michele Dunaway, who works at Francis Howell High School in St. Charles, MO. Dunaway, in an article and a column about teaching for the online site, Visual Thesaurus, wrote about the impact that music has on the students' ability to learn literature and their motivation to do so. In this article he discusses the idea that literature teachers should make the connection between the books that their students are assigned to read and the real world. This is necessary, as Dunaway explains, because students need to create a sentiment for the books that they are reading in order to better understand them. Dunaway writes that this can be achieved with the introduction of music and songs in the literature classes. Nevertheless, it is crucial for teachers to make the right song selection that would be suitable for their classroom. In this article he mentioned that in his lessons she paired up Switchfoot's song "Meant to Live" with John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men". Also,

when they were working on "To Kill a Mockingbird" her students created 10-song CDs that represent 10 scenes from the novel and then they wrote an explanation why they made that selection.

However, this paper does not call for a complete replacement of books and written texts with songs and music in EFL\ESL classes. Songs and music can only be used as aids to build background knowledge and to increase students' motivation to read and think about the assigned pieces of literature. Books, textbooks and other reading materials cannot be altogether replaced and put aside. Music can only benefit both teachers and students when it is properly introduced and when it complements books and/or other written texts.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the positive impact of combining literature and music in teaching English as foreign/second language. The literature overview clearly points to the fact that teaching literature in EFL\ESL classes has its difficulties, but it also has numerous benefits. As literature shares a connection with music, this link between these two can be exploited for the purposes of teaching literature to EFL\ESL students, in order to increase students' motivation and willingness to learn, as well as to improve their language skills. Teachers can use popular songs to pique the interest of their students and motivate them to read and learn about the assigned reading material. The fact that many musicians and artists have created songs which are directly or loosely inspired by literature can be extremely beneficial for teachers as they can incorporate those songs in their lessons and by correlating music to a literary piece, the students' interest to read, analyse and discuss literature will be dramatically increased.

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