Using Songs as a Prompt for Writing an Academic Response Paper: A Comparative Analysis with the Traditional Reading Based Prompt

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Abstract

The paper investigates whether the use of songs as a prompt for writing an academic response paper can bring a noticeable change in the performance of the students' in-class writing activities. The study is conducted by collecting data from 50 students of the Composition and Communication English Course of East West University of Bangladesh where all the students have almost the same level of linguistic competency. Among these 50 students, 25 students are given the lyric of a motivational song and are asked to write a response paper on a given prompt whereas, the other 25 students are also asked to write a response paper on the same prompt after listening the audio version of the same motivational song along with its lyrics. The data analyses of the scores of response papers show that even though the two groups are similar in terms of executing pre, while and post activities in the classroom and also in using same prompt, there has been a remarkable positive difference in the performance of the group which has been exposed to the audio version of the song. This paper also tries to find out the students' perception regarding inclusion of songs in an academic scenario.

Keywords: Inclusion of song, enjoyable learning process, response paper.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, over the years, ELT experts have recommended many ways of improving the quality of students' academic write up. Out of these many suggested ways, two techniques of teaching writing are popular among the ELT practitioners of Bangladesh. The ELT practitioners usually try to elevate students' academic writing quality either by teaching them the structure of

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composing a particular genre of academic composition, or by providing them the sample materials that exemplify the ideal version of that specific type of academic write-up. Following these ways, generally, students can improve the structure of their academic write up. However, in case of upgrading the "content" of an academic write-up, the students' performance, in general, is not satisfactory. This paper attempts to deliver a technique of upgrading the content of students' response paper write-up through the inclusion of songs as prompt. Songs, that combine music and lyrics in a string, exhibit the nature of target culture, provide relaxation and recreation to human mind and an authentic material (lyric) to teach the target language, have always been negligible in its application in the ELT classroom despite its multifaceted characteristics (Shen, 2009).Though occasionally the evidence of incorporating songs in teaching speaking and listening have been found, very few attempts of using songs in teaching writing have been made so far.

Rationale behind the research

Before discussing the issue further, I need to share some background incidents to justify the rationale behind my research. One of the important objectives of the "Composition and Communication Course" of East West University is to teach the techniques of writing an academic response paper. Here, the students are expected to respond to different social, cultural, moral and interpersonal issues. To cover this topic, I had allocated two classes (each class's duration was 90 minutes) for two different sections (sec-A and sec-B). In the orientation class of response paper, the structure of response paper was being discussed through the spontaneous elicitation from the students. The following task was writing a response paper on a homegrown reading text named "The impact of reality shows in our society". The same teaching techniques and material had been used in both sections. While checking the students' write-up after the first class, I found that students of both sections' understood the structure of response paper, but the content was in general very poor although the topic was quite familiar and popular among the young generation. When I asked the reason for insufficient detail in the content part, most of my students said, "They can't feel the way the author feels about the matter". This point struck my mind and I started reading their personal history in their student profile form where most of them mentioned listening to contemporary songs as their hobby. So, I decided to integrate their hobby

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with their classroom activities. For this reason, I chose a contemporary motivational song and incorporated that as prompt in the following class. In order to see the outcome, I decided to analyze the significance and impact through quantitative analysis.

Research Questions

Precisely, this paper focuses on the issue whether the use of songs as a prompt for writing an academic paper can bring a positive change in students' write-up. It also tries to shed light on another important aspect, i.e. the students' perception regarding the success of songs' inclusion in the academic write-up. This paper addresses two research questions:

1. Does the inclusion of songs as prompt bring any positive change in students' write-up?
2. What is the students' perception about inclusion of songs in their classroom activities?

The paper tries to find out the answer of the first research question by collecting data from 50 students studying in two different sections (each has 25 students) of "Composition and Communication Course" of East West University in Bangladesh. In order to measure the impact of songs' inclusion in the response paper write-up, two sections students' written test scores of have been compared, whereas, one section got the chance to read the lyrics of a motivational song and another got the chance to listen to song along with the lyric of the same motivational song. To get the answer of the second research question, a set of questionnaire has been distributed to each student.

Literature Review

Songs should be used in the ESL and EFL classrooms more often for their versatile characteristics. "Being a combination of music and language, songs have innumerable virtues that draw our attention" (Shen,88). Identifying this virtue, at first GeorgiLozanov incorporates music into his teaching method-*Suggestopedia* and later on, many statistical and empirical studies have shown that "Adults are more engaged in listening to music, than in reading" (Bellver, Catherine G., 887). It has been observed that young people are often influenced by the lyric of a song as they submit themselves completely to this aural stimulation. According to

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Abbott (2002), "When song lyrics are presented in both visual and auditory formats, carefully designed music activities have the ability to tap into the four modalities: visual, auditory, emotive and kinesthetic". On this note, Bolitho et al. mentions "Acquisition of automatic language skills depend on rich, meaningful, repeated exposure to comprehensible input without awareness" (253). In this regard, "songs are an authentic resource in language teaching" (Maley, 93) for their cultural and thematic richness, idiomatic and poetic expression and harmonious rhythm through which learning take place spontaneously and automatically. In Shen's(2009)words "although most students regard listening to as well as learning English songs as entertainment, they are also learning implicitly and unconsciously, which is a much more pleasant and efficient way to promote language awareness than mechanically memorizing tedious course-books of vocabulary and grammar"(91).

Another important virtue of song is, it decreases the anxiety level of human mind by guiding it to a particular direction. Larsen-Freeman says, "Anxiety, associated with negative feelings, such as upset, tension, frustration, self-doubt and fear, would impede language learning" (189). Through incorporating English songs in the EFL classroom, teacher can provide less anxious ambiance to the learners, which can facilitate meaningful acquisition of language. According to Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, affective learning which is effective learning will occur when the affective filter will be lowered. At this state, the learners become highly motivated and thus the learning process become effortless and effective. Songs, in brief, help to lower the affective filter, create a bridge between the learners and their desired goal, and hence make the whole learning process pleasant and enjoyable.

The justification of using songs in the ELT/ESL classrooms will be more validated if we consider the Multiple Intelligence (MI) theory proposed and elaborated by Gardner (1993). According to MI theory, each individual possesses "distinct types of intelligence in varying degrees". Different types of intelligence are not isolated and irrelevant, but "inter-reliant on" and "complementary with each other". So it can be assumed that the linguistic intelligence of a learner is inter-dependent with his musical intelligence to some extent. Therefore, it is inappropriate to explore only one type of intelligence in EFL/ESL learning.

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Method

The study was conducted at East West University, which is one of the top ranked English medium private universities in Bangladesh. The data were collected from two English language classes of two different sections (sec-A and sec-B) who are enrolled in the same course "Composition and Communication Skill". English classes of these two sections held consecutively on November 8(sec-A) and November 9, 2016. In order to find out the answer of first research question, two sections' test scores have been collected as data, and to analyze the second research question a set of questionnaire has been distributed.

Participants

The majority (38 out of 50) of the 50 young urban adults (aged19-21) who participated in the study are the freshmen of BBA (Bachelor in Business &Administration) department. Rests of the student are from Department of English. All of them studied English as a second language for 12 years in their pre-university schools (Primary, Secondary, and Higher Secondary) but their medium of instruction for other subjects was Bengali; they only had English First Paper and Second Paper as English course. After getting admitted at the university, they had to complete two pre-requisite English courses (English 101-Basic English and English 100- Improving Oral Skill) before enrolling in this course. All of them can be considered as good students as they have enrolled in the university through a very competitive admission test. It is also important to mention that these students got at least 80% marks in English in their Higher Secondary Exam which substantiates that they have good command over English.

Materials

As material of this study, I have used the contemporary motivational song "Am I Wrong" (Nico &Vinz, 2014)in two different sections (sec-A and sec-B) .However, the difference is, sec-A (controlled group) responded by reading the lyric of the song and sec-B (treatment group) got the advantage to listen to the song as well.

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Classroom Activities

The classroom activities of the two sections were almost identical except one difference that sec-B got the chance to listen to the song. The allocated time for a single class was 90 minutes.

Phase	Classroom activities
Phase 1	Greeting-5"
Phase 2	Discussion based on Ss' day 1 write up-15"
Phase 3	Review structure of response paper through elicitation-10"
Phase 4	Sec-A (handout distribution and reading)-7" Sec-B (handout distribution and listening to the song)-7"
Phase 5	T's instruction (shows rubric of the response paper)-5"
Phase 6	Test-response paper writing on the same topic-25"
Phase7	Peer feedback (following checklist)-7"
Phase 8	Revising-8"
Phase 9	Submission-3"
Phase 10	Wrap up-5"

Table 1: *Classroom activities*

Note "=minutes

Test

In both sections, the students had to appear in a 25 minutes test where they had to write an answer (within 150 words) to the same question after having a review and elicitation session for 25 minutes in the beginning part of the class. After the test, they were asked to exchange their scripts in order to do peer checking following the grammar side of the given rubric (see- table: 2). After receiving peer feedback, students got the chance to revise their scripts following their peer feedback. Their answer was marked on 5, out of which 2 marks were allocated for the content and 3 marks were given for language. The used rubric(table -2) is given here.

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Content- 2marks	Language-3 marks
• Proper Addressing to the prompt • Clear, meaningful, relevant ides • Followed by adequate examples, evidence, and reference.	**Organization - 1 Mark** • Stance in Introductory sentence • Body covers proper sequence of ideas • Concluding sentence • Use of transitional words **Grammar & Spelling - 1 Mark** • Subject Verb Agreement • Proper use of tense • Proper use of articles • Proper use of Punctuation **Variety of sentence - 0.5 Mark** • Variation of simple/complex/compound sentences • Active/Passive • Starting with clause/gerund/infinitive **Vocabulary - 0.5 Mark** • Use of appropriate word • Use of non-frequent word • Did not repeat the same word

Table 2: Rubric

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Data Analysis

Marking the papers: Two independent raters marked the papers in terms of their content (two marks) and linguistic features (three marks). The two sets of marks for the same sections (Sec-B) were analyzed through Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test and a high correlation coefficient was found between them, $r = .89$

Statistical analysis: SPSS was used to analyze the participants' posttest scores and a post-hoc LSD (least significant difference) test was employed to find out the difference between the attained scores of the sec A (controlled group) and sec B (treatment group) students. Cohen's d was used to calculate the effect size.

Results

The descriptive analyses are presented in Table 3. It illustrates Mean scores in terms student and section and Table 4 shows the results of the post-hoc LSD test.

Note "=minutes

Section	N	M	SD
Section A	25	1.1660	.22301
Section B	25	1.368	.2982

Table 3: Mean scores in terms student and section

Conditions	Mean Difference	P	Cohen's d
Section A vs. Section B	0.202	*.002	.7671

Table 4: Results of the post-hoc LSD test

Note. * $p < .05$

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It is evident from Table 3 that, Section B i.e. the treatment group did better than Section A, which is the controlled group as section B's mean score is 1.37 whereas, section A's mean score is 1.16. When section A and section B's test scores (allocated marks on content is 2) have been compared (see table 4), the mean difference shows 0.202, p value is 0.002 which indicates that the difference is statistically significant. Here, the effect size or Cohen's d is 0.77. With a Cohen's *d* of 0.77, 79 % of the treatment group will be above the mean of the control group, 69 % of the two groups will overlap, and there is a 71 % chance that a person picked at random from the treatment group will have a higher score than a person picked at random from the control group.

Discussion

In the beginning of the discussion, it is necessary to mention that while conducting the classroom activities in these two sections, all other variables like same level students, teacher, time, question pattern, rubric, classroom procedure are being controlled. Now, If we draw attention to the difference between the attained scores of sec A and sec B, it is quite evident that sec-B, who got the chance to listen to the song, received better marks than the students of sec A who wrote the answer by reading the lyrics of the song. Logically, the result should be opposite, i.e. sec-B should score less than sec-A, since these students, from their primary level of education, are being accustomed to the "reading comprehension culture". It was not at all convenient for them to write an answer with enriched content after listening to the song along with reading the lyrics. There was huge probability that majority of the students might get distracted by the music of the song. Nevertheless, the students of sec-B stayed focused in their answer and enriched their answer with meaningful, relevant ideas. Hence, in answer to the question no. 1- "Does the inclusion of songs bring any positive change in the students' write up?"- from the data analysis it can be said that the inclusion of song has enriched the content area of the sec-B students' response paper write up, which, in fact has a visible impact on students' overall score. We can draw Abbott's reference here to understand the reason behind Sec-B's better performance.

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Because music activities are motivating, enjoyable, and relaxing, and provide a meaningful context for practicing and automatizing language skills, ESOL teachers may find that music facilitates language learning by increasing learning retention and effectiveness in a wide variety of teaching context. (p. 17, 2002)

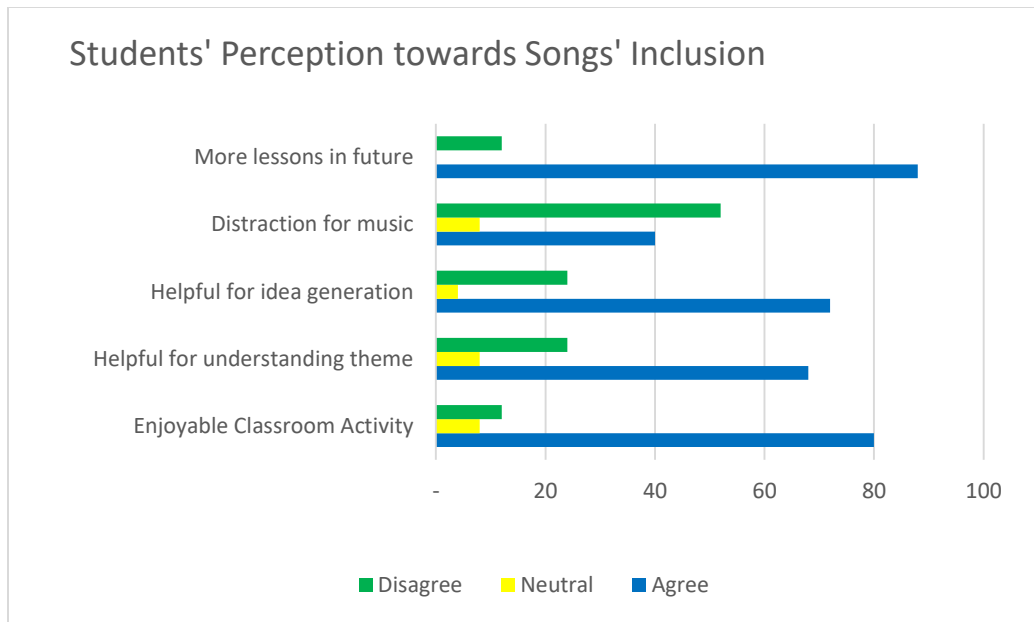**Data Collection for Research Question 2**

Through the above-mentioned discussion, we have got the answer of our first research question, but in order to find out the answer of question no.2-"What is the students' perception regarding songs' inclusion in their classroom activities?", one set of questionnaire (see Appendix: A) consists of 5 close ended questions were distributed among the students of the treatment group (sec-B). The questions were prepared to understand students' perception regarding the inclusion of song in their response paper lesson. The questions address the following themes:

a. Students' level of enjoyment.
b. Helpful for understanding theme
c. Helpful for idea generation
d. Distraction from content due to music
e. Integrating songs in future lessons.

After the data collection, the raw data were presented through the bar diagram of Microsoft Excel.

Result and Analysis for Research Question 2

To understand students' perception regarding the inclusion of songs, we need to take a closer look at Figure -1.

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Figure 1: Students' Perception towards Songs' Inclusion

The given Figure-1 demonstrates that most of the students (of sec-B) have responded positively regarding songs' inclusion in their classroom activities. Here, a good percentage (80%) of students has enjoyed classroom activities as they have agreed on the point that the songs' inclusion in their response paper lesson helped them to understand the theme and to generate ideas. Nevertheless, some of the students (40%) said that music, at certain point of this activity, has distracted them from concentrating on the songs' message. But the brighter side of this study is that the majority (88%) of the students want more lessons like this in future.

Conclusion

However, this study is not without limitation. The statistical findings would be more generalizable if the study was conducted with more participants. Moreover, if the same technique could be applied using different songs with different level students, the result would be more comprehensible.

From this research, we can draw a conclusion that the inclusion of songs as a prompt can bring a positive outcome in students' academic write up as the students enjoy the whole learning process. Song, which is a combination of music and lyrics, can be used in various ways in teaching writing since the intrinsic features of song make the learning process effective and

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enjoyable. But, before applying this technique in a classroom we need to consider learners' aptitude, level and interest and exposure towards music. Only then, they will be able to engage themselves in the classroom activities and the outcome will be positive.

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Appendix A

Students' Questionnaire

Course Code:

Date:

Institution:

The purpose of this questionnaire is to understand students' perception regarding songs' inclusion in their classroom activities. I would like to ask you to help me in my research by choosing correct option for the given statement. Please answer honestly.

Respond from 1-5

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1. **The classroom activities were enjoyable :**
                                    a. Agree b. Neutral   c. Disagree

2. **The classroom activities were helpful to understand the theme**
                                    a. Agree b. Neutral   c. Disagree

3. **The inclusion of songs was helpful to generate ideas.**
                                    a. Agree b. Neutral   c. Disagree

4. **The music of the song distracted us from songs' message.**
                                    a. Agree b. Neutral   c. Disagree

 5. **I want more lessons like this in future.**
                                    a. Agree b. Neutral   c. Disagree

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