

# Music and Song in the Japanese College Classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

Educators have long recognized the value of using songs in their foreign language classrooms not only to stimulate interest and motivation (e.g., Bartle, 1962; Coe, 1972; Smith, 1976), but also to introduce or reinforce pedagogical objectives (e.g., Dubin, 1974; Urbancic & Vixmuller, 1981; DeSelms, 1983). As well as exposing students to the pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and cultural elements of the target language, the lyrics of many songs provide the kind of authentic text that stimulates active listening and discussion among the adolescents or young adults who comprise the majority of foreign language learners. (e.g., Dubin, 1974; Leith, 1979; McLean, 1983; Murphey, 1990).

In recent years, resource books presenting song-based activities for classroom use have been published (Cranmer & Laroy, 1992; Griffiee, 1992; Murphey, 1992b), in addition to textbooks containing exercises using songs (Berglund, 1983; Dougill, 1989; House & Manning, 1992; Kanel, 1995b; Kanzaki, 1988; Mosdell, 1984; Posener, 1987; Sato & Sasanuma, 1988; Someya & Ferrasci, 1988). Some teachers, however, still hesitate to use songs for two basic reasons: (a) concern about their pedagogical effectiveness compared with conventional materials, and (b) concern about their own skill in using songs due to a lack of musical ability, background knowledge, or teaching techniques.

Many articles describing techniques for teaching with songs have appeared in language education publications, but there is still a lack of research on the effects of song use on language acquisition. For song-based activities to gain wider acceptance, it must be demonstrated that they are as effective as more conventional activities. The first part of this paper gives a historical and theoretical overview of song use in language teaching. The second part summarizes representative classroom research into song use, and concludes with a report on a study conducted by the author comparing song use with traditional methods for improving listening ability.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Music and song have been used in language classrooms for centuries, sometimes "with...periods of great popularity and others of almost total disuse (Murphey, 1990a, p. 135)." During the Middle Ages, singing was used for teaching Latin: "After the rhythm and flow of the language had been drilled by plain chant, which was based solidly on speech rhythms, the pupil began the formal study of Latin (Kelly, 1969 cited in Murphey, 1990a, p. 136)."

Proponents of song use in this century have stressed not only the linguistic benefits, but also advantages provided through increased enjoyment of activities and exposure to the target culture. Bartle (1962), for example, described how songs could successfully be used for background study and grammar review as well as "a touch of atmosphere and enjoyment necessary for building up a healthy approach (p. 11)." During this period, most teachers tended to use songs more for motivation and interest, cultural context, and grammar and pronunciation practice than for listening practice.

### **Authentic versus made-for ESL songs**

During the 1950s through the early 70s, educators looked for ways to utilize songs within the framework of the Audiolingual Method. When learners sang or recited choruses and refrains, with their built-in redundancy, one major weakness of the ALM was overcome: the boredom of repetition drills (Bartle, 1962; Jolly, 1975; Techmeier, 1969). Parker (1969) suggested paging through song books to find patterns and structures that suited the teacher's objectives, and then constructing drills from the songs.

However, because there is no control over structures, intonation patterns, or vocabulary in authentic songs, many ALM educators were in doubt as to whether the benefits outweighed the detrimental effects of exposing learners to incorrect models of spoken language (see Coe, 1972; Elson & Fox, 1983; Jolly, 1975; Kingsbury & O'Shea, 1979). Richards (1969) advised that

control be applied to the language of songs just as to any other part of the English course, and called for the creation of special English language learning songs. Shaw (1970) and Kingsbury and O'Shea (1979) described how teachers could make such songs, and listed the criteria: (a) an easy-to-remember melody; (b) rhyme; (c) a repeated chorus; (d) unstressed and contracted forms common to speech; (e) meaning; (f) one main focal structure or teaching point in context; and (g) a minimum of vocabulary. ESL song book authors Kingsbury and O'Shea (1979) opposed folk and pop songs in particular because, "at lower [proficiency] levels, the teaching of such songs will often degenerate into a vocabulary and explanation monologue on [the teacher's] part (p. 5)."

During the 1970s and early 80s, many ESL song books were published which contained controlled vocabulary and grammar. However, some educators, basing their arguments on the changing premises of post-ALM approaches to language learning, began to counter previous objections to authentic songs. For many, selectivity was the answer to the made-for-ESL versus authentic song debate. Pearse (1981) recognized that controlling language was often necessary for beginners, but argued that "with careful selection from the 'top twenty' and best selling LPs, this can be done quite easily (p. 9)." McBeath (1986) advised teachers to be selective when using songs with non-standard grammar or excessive slang, but felt that songs constructed especially for ESL were often not as effective as authentic music because the lyrics could become "a meaningless collection of phonemes" written to satisfy a narrow pedagogical objective (p. 44). In addition, he noted that there were students who asked the teacher for clarification of song lyrics which they had memorized but had not yet understood.

### **Authentic songs: traditional and folk versus pop songs**

Teachers advocating traditional and folk songs have favored the familiarity and timelessness of the tunes and lyrics as well as the relevancy of the content. Osman and McConochie (1978) countered objections to folk songs (i.e., archaic language, strange stress and intonation, datedness, etc.), arguing that poetry has many of the same features, and that folk songs are both a history of the nation and a description of the lives of the people.

Proponents of contemporary songs argue that their currency, popularity, availability, and familiarity among young adult EFL learners make them better choices than traditional or folk songs (Dubin, 1974; Murphey, 1984; Wilson, 1985). Furthermore, there are indications that concerns about the quality of the language used in pop songs are exaggerated. Murphey (1988; 1990a; 1992a) analyzed the top 50 songs from September 1987 and found that, rather than containing archaic or unusual vocabulary and grammar, these songs made repetitive use of simple vocabulary, especially pronouns. Because of pauses, the speed was about half that of normal speech, allowing the listeners time to process meaning. The sentences were short, repetitive, and had many personal references.

## **THEORETICAL OVERVIEW**

### **The effect of music on cognitive and affective variables**

Anthropologists acknowledge the role of music and song in the historic development of human languages and the linguistic development of the individual. Studies of both normal and learning-disabled students suggest that properties of music (i.e., rhythm, melody, harmony, dynamics, form and mood) can aid the cognitive processing of first language vocabulary, can enhance retention, and can promote overall language development and reading skills (Botari & Evans, 1982; Gfeller, 1983; Isern, 1958; Jalongo & Bromley, 1984; McCarthy, 1985; Schuster & Mouzon, 1982).

Music can also break down affective barriers that inhibit learning (Lozanov, 1979; Meyer, 1956). Stoudenmire (1975) found music to be as effective as muscle relaxation training in reducing transitory anxiety. Listening to music changed the subjects' anxiety to a more relaxed mood, a state theorized by Lozanov (1979) to be more conducive to language learning. Saeki (1994) used background music to improve the classroom mood and to relax students while they were doing nonmusical activities.

Summarizing the findings of a number of studies investigating the psychological effects of music, Rosenfeld (1985) suggested that listening to a song can activate both brain hemispheres, leading to greater levels of concentration and awareness. Unlike language, music is generally processed through the brain's right hemisphere, whereas lyrics are generally processed through the left hemisphere. Research done by the U.S. Army in the 1960s found that workers became

more alert when listening to popular musical selections with a fast tempo. In another survey, 96% of the respondents reported feeling 'thrills' in response to music. It was found that people tend to have vivid and often emotional associations when listening to certain types of music. Rosenfeld concluded that music makes learners more receptive to subject matter by lowering psychological barriers, and increasing consciousness and emotional involvement in the learning process.

### **Musical ability and language aptitude**

Buck and Axtell (1986) examined the connection between musical ability and language aptitude, comparing language learning ability in music majors and non-music majors. They posited that musical training was related to the ability to distinguish different foreign language sounds. Music majors were found to score significantly higher on second language listening tests, suggesting that students with musical training have an advantage over their non-musically trained peers. The researchers concluded that musical training has the potential to enhance foreign language learning.

### **The primacy of listening in language acquisition: the Din and SSIMH phenomena**

Methods of language learning popular during the first half of this century, such as the Direct Method or the Audiolingual Method (ALM), emphasized oral production at early stages of language instruction. This position, however, was challenged Postovsky (1974), who noted that aural comprehension preceded speech in child language acquisition. In experiments on students studying Russian, Postovsky found that emphasizing listening and writing practice at the early stages of language learning produced greater progress in the students' language development than that made by students who were required to produce the target language immediately. Later, Barber (1980, cited in Krashen, 1983) identified a phenomenon which she called the "Din in the head." This phrase referred to involuntary mental repetition or review that often occurred after extended periods of foreign language input. Krashen (1983) hypothesized that this Din was a result of the stimulation of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). In separate studies, Bedford (1985), De Guerrero (1987), and Parr and Krashen (1986) found that approximately three-quarters of the second language learners surveyed had the Din experience to some degree.

Expanding on theories related to the primacy of listening in language acquisition and the significance of the Din in stimulating the LAD, Murphey (1990b) hypothesized that songs might provide a Din equal to or better than normal conversational input. Murphy described what he called the "song-stuck-in-my-head" (SSIMH) phenomenon, referring to a song or melody heard repeatedly in the mind. He administered a questionnaire to 49 subjects: 30 native speakers of English and 19 of other languages. All reported having experienced the SSIMH and all but two said they had it in a second language. Murphey proposed that, like the Din, the SSIMH phenomenon may be another innate developmental strategy of the LAD. In contrast to Krashen's concepts of the Din, however, Murphey agreed with the view of Postovsky (1974), suggesting that the SSIMH phenomenon does not necessarily need *comprehensible* input. He suggested that if aural exposure does affect subsequent language learning, many English language students have already experienced a significant amount of input through songs, even though such exposure may not have been linguistically meaningful at the time.

### **Interest and motivation**

Researchers have found that interest and motivation play a pivotal role in successful language learning (Brown, 1987; Chaudron, 1988; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Nunan, 1989; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Thus, it is essential to use teaching materials which students are interested in and are familiar with, for example, media-based material such as movies, TV, and popular songs. Movies and TV provide visual and aural stimuli, but in many non-English speaking countries viewers tend to rely on first language sub-titles or dubbed translations, whereas songs are usually heard in the original language. Furthermore, young people, who comprise the majority of EFL learners around the world, are listening to English music. In a survey of Swiss adolescents, Murphey (1984) found that the subjects listened to between eight and twelve hours of English songs weekly; more time than they actually spent in their English classes. The situation in other non-native English speaking countries is most likely similar due to the prevalence of English songs on radio, in TV commercials and on the sound tracks of movies.

The content of English songs also attracts the attention of adolescent learners. The topics and language of pop songs often reflect young students' interests, values, and tastes more accurately than the material used in commercial textbooks (Dubin, 1974; Loew, 1979; Murphey, 1988; 1989). McLean (1983) found that conventional texts used with French EFL students were less successful in motivating the learners than lyrics from popular songs.

Dubin (1974) provided convincing arguments for the inclusion of contemporary music in the L2 classroom, emphasizing that pop music is truly "popular" because, "it is an idiom familiar to a broad span of young people and not just those living in the United States....The culture heroes of music, and their themes provide the English that students want to understand (p. 1-2)."

### **Student attitudes toward the use of songs for language learning**

In a survey of 550 Japanese college students who studied listening using pop song gap-fill (cloze) quizzes, Kanel and Grant (1993) found that regardless of English proficiency level, major or sex, respondents felt that song quizzes increased their interest and motivation towards studying English and were as beneficial as, or more beneficial than, other nonmusical classroom materials in improving their listening ability. The students suggested that such song-based exercises should be done often, perhaps every class. In an earlier survey of American students studying Japanese (Jolly, 1975), respondents felt that songs created a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, livened up the pace of the lessons, and were an effective means of increasing vocabulary, studying Japanese culture, and discovering the relationship between language and culture.

### **Songs versus conventional listening materials: Classroom research**

Studies measuring vocabulary and listening ability improvement have shown that listening materials based on songs are as effective as conventional materials. Hahn (1972) found that junior high school male subjects studying German vocabulary through songs achieved significantly higher scores on vocabulary tests than subjects studying vocabulary through dialogs. Female subjects' scores, on the other hand, did not vary with either treatment. Hahn suggested that the traditionally unmotivated 12-13 year old male learners' increase in motivation produced by the use of music may have accounted for their higher scores.

Medina (1993) found that limited-English proficiency Spanish-speaking elementary school students made the same gains studying vocabulary through songs as they made using spoken versions of the material. She concluded that music was as viable a vehicle for second language acquisition as nonmusical means.

Alley (1990) compared first year high school Spanish students' progress in listening comprehension using song-based listening texts with traditional dialog or narrative listening texts. The learners made equally significant progress with both types of material. On post-treatment questionnaires, students studying with the conventional materials expressed somewhat greater approval of the materials and procedures than the song group, but both groups found the instruction beneficial to their comprehension of spoken Spanish.

Urbancic and Vixmuller (1981) used song gap-fill exercises with students of Italian to review pronoun usage. Although many of the blanks remained empty or were filled in incorrectly the first time the students listened to the song, they were able to correctly fill in 30% more blanks in a repeat of the exercise following a discussion of the song's content. The researchers attributed the relatively high gain to the increased level of interest that the discussion generated, and the relaxed learning situation it provided. They also noted that students spontaneously corrected each other more in the discussions than in regular homework correction activities.

Grant, Clark and Koch (1995, in press) compared gains in listening comprehension made by two groups of Japanese EFL students. One group studied listening through song-based gap-fill quizzes and the second used song-based comprehension quizzes. Both groups made equally significant progress. On post-treatment questionnaires students indicated that both methods improved listening skills "particularly in the areas of meaning comprehension, pronunciation, intonation, and the ability to distinguish contractions (Clark, 1994, p. 22)." The researchers concluded that both methods gave variety to song-based lessons and effectively complemented conventional techniques.

### **This researcher's study**<sup>1</sup>

This researcher conducted a study at Kinki University in Osaka, Japan, during the 1993-94 academic year to determine:

- a) whether students' listening ability would progress as effectively using song gap-fill exercises as with traditional listening exercises, and
- b) whether song exercises are equally effective at all levels of English proficiency.

#### **Hypotheses:**

- a) Combined post-test mean scores for *song* groups would be equal to, or higher than the combined post-test mean scores for the *textbook* groups;
- b) Subjects at all levels of listening proficiency would show significant improvement;
- c) There would be no interaction between treatment and level.

## **METHOD**

### **Subjects and Design**

The subjects consisted of 692 predominately male Japanese university non-English majors enrolled in 20 first or second-year required English classes. Assignment to classes was based on students' academic majors, identification numbers, and year in school rather than on placement tests or self-grouping. Ten full-time instructors (nine Japanese and one American, the researcher) each selected two classes and randomly assigned one to the song group and the other to the text group. The instructors made an effort to select the two classes from the same academic major, and with the same course designations.

### **Measure**

The JACET Basic Listening Comprehension Test was selected to measure initial ability and final progress. The Basic Test, designed for beginning students, was selected as a more appropriate measure of non-English majors' level of proficiency. Because there was no part B available at the time, it was used for both the pre- and post-test. Since the test administrations were separated by more than six months and the answers never revealed to the subjects, it was felt that any practice effect would be minimal, and equal for both treatment groups.

The test consists of forty multiple choice items divided equally into four sections: 1) picture, 2) statement, 3) dialog, and 4) narrative. The taped instructions are in Japanese, and the items are heard in English only once. The time of the test is approximately forty-five minutes. Subjects were given the pre-test in the second week of May with no prior warning, and given the post-test in the third week of November, also with no prior warning.<sup>2</sup>

Though the construct validity of the test has never been empirically demonstrated, considerable attention has been given to reliability; JACET determined a Cronbach Alpha value of approximately 0.9 (JACET, 1993).

### **Classroom materials and procedures**

Song groups were taught listening through a series of worksheets with song lyric deletions prepared by the researcher. In addition, a sheet with a brief 120-150 word background on the singer(s) was provided for the instructor to read to the class before the quiz if time permitted. Deletions were of a single lexical item except for occasional contracted forms. There were between 15 and 30 item deletions per song depending on the tempo and length of the song. The difficulty of the items was gradually increased over the course of the study as students became accustomed to the exercises.

Instructors played the song two times for the quiz. After the second listening, instructors put the answers on the blackboard while students corrected their own quizzes. Instructors then played the song for a third time while students analyzed their errors. Some of the instructors collected the quizzes, but they were eventually returned and students were allowed to keep them.

Text groups were taught listening through commercially available textbooks, or instructor created listening materials. The textbook selection was left to the discretion of the individual

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this report appears in Kanel, 1995a.

<sup>2</sup> Because the JACET test is available only twice a year, May and November, the amount of time for treatment was limited to 14 weeks not including the intervening two month summer break.

instructors, however, the researcher provided a list of textbooks that contained exercises comparable to items on the JACET test. Instructors were directed to select materials they felt would be most beneficial to students' listening comprehension development.

Listening materials in both text and song groups were used for 20-30 minutes of class time per week for the 14 class periods between the pre-test and post-test.

Instructors were directed to use identical materials and methods for both song and text groups for the remaining 60-70 minutes of class time.

### Analyses

Analyses were based on the raw scores obtained on the JACET Basic Listening Comprehension Test (max. score = 40 points). Mean scores on the pre-test were compared with post-test scores using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine the effect of the two treatments. Table 1 presents pre- and post-test descriptive statistics for the two main treatment groups.

**Table 1: Pre- and post-test descriptive statistics for both treatment groups.**

Treatment	Pre-test				Post-test			
	N	mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Gain
Song	334	17.308	4.568	.250	19.746	5.668	.310	+2.438
Text	358	17.693	5.323	.281	19.846	5.875	.311	+2.153

Histograms and cell plots of mean scores and standard deviations on the pre-test for the total population (N=692), song group (N=334) and text group (N=358) were examined, and showed normal distributions and variances, satisfying the assumptions for ANOVA. A one-way ANOVA of the combined mean scores for all song group subjects (17.308) and text group subjects (17.693) showed no significant difference between the groups in pre-test mean scores ( $F=1.032$ ;  $p=.3100$ ;  $\alpha<.05$ ; Range=26). This supports the stipulation that the two main treatment groups were at the same level of proficiency.

A two-way ANOVA using the levels assigned to subjects by the results of the JACET test, (i.e., A,B,C,D.<sup>3</sup>) as an independent variable confirmed that there were four distinct levels ( $p=.0001$ ). Table 2 presents pre- and post-test descriptive statistics for treatments at the four proficiency levels.

**Table 2: Pre- and post-test descriptive statistics for treatments and levels.**

Treatment	Level	Pre-test				Post-test			
		N	mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Gain
Song	A	14	27.571	1.555	.416	31.000	2.717	.726	+3.429
Text	A	30	28.133	1.697	.310	29.467	4.232	.773	+1.334
Song	B	96	21.740	2.084	.213	23.479	4.867	.497	+1.739
Text	B	100	22.020	1.954	.195	23.030	4.906	.491	+1.010
Song	C	177	15.853	1.868	.140	18.181	4.086	.307	+2.328
Text	C	182	15.599	1.883	.140	17.747	4.306	.319	+2.148
Song	D	47	10.681	1.400	.204	14.660	3.766	.549	+3.979
Text	D	46	9.761	1.980	.292	14.957	2.875	.424	+5.196

<sup>3</sup> Originally there were five levels assigned by the JACET test, S, A, B, C, D, with S being the highest. However, since there were only a combined total of 14 subjects in the S category their data was deleted from the database.

Several analyses were conducted to determine the effect of the two treatments and whether there was any interaction between treatment and proficiency levels. First, a one-way ANOVA of the post-test mean scores of the two treatment groups showed no significant differences, supporting the first hypothesis that the song group would perform as well as the text group (song=19.746; text=19.846;  $F=.053$ ;  $p=.8185$ ). A two-way ANOVA showed no significant interaction between treatment and level ( $F=.431$   $p=.7307$ ).

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), which adjusted the post-test scores using the pre-test as covariate, compared pre- and post test scores and showed that both groups had improved significantly over pre-test scores ( $F=681.018$ ;  $p=.0001$ ), confirming the second hypothesis that both groups would improve significantly. A two-way ANCOVA, comparing the progress of the treatment groups at each level, showed that there was significant improvement at all levels for both treatments ( $F=5.709$ ;  $p=.0001$ ). These adjusted post-test scores again showed no significant interaction between treatment and level ( $F=.812$ ;  $p=.3676$ ). Finally, a repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed the results of the individual ANOVA and ANCOVA procedures. The interaction bar charts and plots in Figures 1 and 2 graphically depict the progress made by both groups and at the four proficiency levels.

FIGURE 1

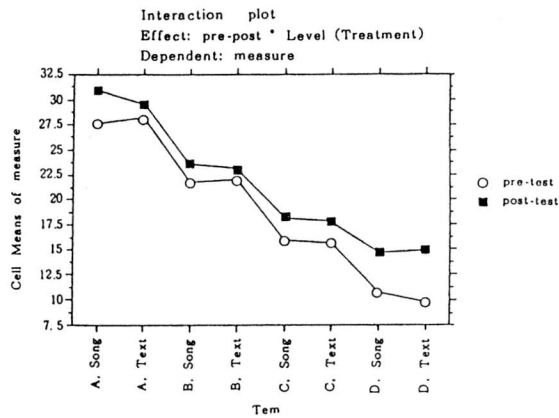
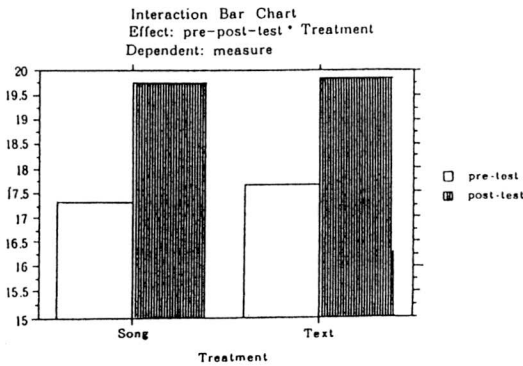


FIGURE 2



## Results

Intervening variables present in a study of this nature, (i.e. outside exposure to English, musical training and aptitude, methods of individual instructors, gender, time of day, classroom environment, seating arrangement, etc.) make it impossible to posit a direct causal relationship between the treatments and improvement in listening ability shown by both groups. However, the purpose of this study was to examine whether simple song gap-fill exercises would be as effective at improving listening test scores as traditional listening methods. Comparisons of pre-test scores with post test scores showed improvement for both text and song groups at all levels, and that neither method was more effective.

### Follow-up questionnaire

The responses of the two treatment groups to a follow-up questionnaire varied little in regard to the procedures used in class, or the positive educational benefits of their respective listening exercises. Items which asked whether the exercises helped improve pronunciation, intonation, and contracted forms all received approval ratings of 50-60% by both groups. In addition, both groups indicated that they wanted to do the exercises regularly. The song group, however, favored doing the exercises more often than the text group (song=74%; text=58%), and agreed more on the worth of the time spent on the quizzes (song=61%; text=48%). The song group also showed more increased interest in studying English (song=50%; text=32%).

### Discussion

Even though the materials used by the text group were more similar to the items on the pre-post-test than the song group's gap-fill exercises, the results showed that both groups and at all levels made significant progress. A combination of gap-fill exercises and comprehension questions based on the songs' content may have increased scores to the point where they would have been statistically significant. In addition, comparisons of pre- and post-test mean scores show that the song group had a slightly higher gain rate than the text group. Because there were only fourteen class periods prior to the post-test, there may not have been enough time for the positive effects hypothesized for the song method to outperform the text method.

Tighter controls on the various intervening variables could reveal what specific pedagogical advantages songs may have over other types of listening activities, and whether any such advantages result from increased interest and motivation, or from effects on listening development produced by the Din or SSIMH phenomena mentioned earlier.

This study was intended to be more descriptive than inferential; however, the results should provide additional encouragement for teachers to try employing song listening quizzes in their classrooms. Moreover, it is apparent from students' responses to the follow-up questionnaire that they feel they benefit educationally from song listening exercises, and that they want to do them regularly.

### CONCLUSION

Music has become a more common element in the foreign language classroom. Teachers recognize its potential to motivate, and students appreciate the authentic cultural and linguistic benefits it can provide. Song-based tasks can provide a valid complement to traditional classroom tasks, and can be adapted to practically any area of the curriculum. Studying language through songs can help even the most unwilling students overcome their passivity in the classroom, and stimulate a greater interest in their own progress. By using simple gap-fill techniques most teachers should be able to make songs at least a part of their teaching repertoire. Further empirical research into both the theoretical and practical pedagogical advantages of music and song needs greater attention. However, it is hoped that this paper has expanded teachers' knowledge of the use of songs in language teaching, and shown that they can provide both a pleasant and effective alternative to conventional materials and methods.

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