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LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH MUSIC – THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY MUSIC STUDENTS

Abstract: The benefits of using music in EFL and ESP classes are both non-linguistic (motivation, socializing, activating similar neurological paths) and linguistic (language recall, improved language skills), as proven in the numerous research. The aim of the paper is to get a deeper insight into Department of Music Art students ESP context, investigate students' awareness, knowledge and experiences of the relationship between music, musical performance and creativity and acquiring a good command of English as a foreign language, in this case ESP. As the results have shown the lack of awareness and theoretically grounded practices in which music is used to improve and facilitate learning English, we have made some suggestions how to change this situation. Examples of instructional musical activities are provided as the solid base for starting to use music in EFL systematically. This paper should greatly serve both ESP and EFL teachers as well as all educators in their future practices.

Keywords: music, English as a foreign language, foreign language learning, instructional musical activities, ESP.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many teachers feel that use of music in a foreign language classroom can be beneficial for their learners. They feel that learners of a FL are more motivated and less anxious or stressed when they learn with music. The same is true for EFL classrooms. Furthermore, some argue that there are linguistic benefits in learning EFL or ESP for that matter, through music, as songs and chants provide rhythm, melody, repetition and some kind of story, which are known tools for creating pleasant and beneficial atmosphere for learning English. Others believe that, combined with movement, action and acting, music and songs provide a wonderful context for language learning, especially for children (Engh 2013a; Tse 2015; As-sadilah, Barokah 2018; Graham 1993).

There are also research studies in the fields of cognitive science, anthropology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, first language acquisition and second language acquisition that argue strong relationship between music and language

learning (Engh 2013b: 113). So in the use of the Audio Lingual Method in the 1950s through 1970s music was occasionally used to reduce boredom between the repetitive drills. With the application of Suggestopedia teaching method, the role of music became different – to produce relaxed state of mind that makes the brain receptive to inputs and activate the subconscious. And in case of children, TPR was also introduced as a successful method, which combined music, movement and language, in teaching English to children at the beginner level (Richards, Rodgers 2022). However, it was not until the introduction of the Communicative Language Teaching and Task Based Instruction that there arose the need to provide pedagogical material in order to use songs and music in the language classroom (Griffiee 1992) and the need for more theory-based and systematic use of music in foreign language teaching and learning (Degrave 2019: 415). Many of the studies on the benefits of music to foreign language learning have dealt with young learners, but the growing body of studies has also been investigating teenager and adult foreign language learners.

Despite foreign language teachers' positive attitude towards the use of music in the language-learning classroom, it has been noted that the actual use of music seems to be occasional (see Ludke, Morgan 2022; Besedova et al. 2019).

At the same time we are not familiar with any research on the influence of linguistic skills on music development.

2. BENEFITS OF MUSIC USE ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The benefits of music on foreign language acquisition can be divided into non-linguistic and linguistic aspects.

2.1. NON-LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

The social aspects of including music in the language classroom are based on the fact that humans evolved singing songs before speech and this tradition has survived through centuries to this day (Trehub, Trainor 1998). Apart from being an activity performed by parents and caregivers, singing has evolved as a collective activity in which both the musical and emotional element and the linguistic element were passed down on the younger generations and broader community. On that note, it has been argued that the use of songs and music in the foreign language classroom enhances social harmony (Huy Lee 1999), creates a safe space to experience learning collectively, contributes to the building of a community (Lems 1996; Lake 2003) and increases social interaction (Assadilah, Barokah 2018). It

is also suggested that songs and music can provide more realistic insight into the target culture (Jones 2008: 10). Therefore, all of these speak in favour of teachers using music in the foreign language classroom in order to create positive and uniting context for foreign language learning.

The neurological aspects shed light on the complex relationship between music and language. There we discover opposing research results. On the one hand, there is proof that specific neurocognitive functions are controlled by the right hemisphere in the brain in music production, and left hemisphere in case of language use (Milovanov, Tervaniemi 2011). On the other hand, due to the developments in technology of brain analysis, the research has come to the conclusion that “[...] it leads to the hypothesis that syntax in language and music share a common set of processes (instantiated in front brain areas) that operate on different structural representations (in posterior brain areas)” (Patel 2003: 674). In other words, recent research on neurophysiological aspects related to music perception shows that music can be considered equivalent to language, the language and music components share some brain fragments thus dismissing the importance of the distinction between two hemispheres (Picciotti et al. 2018).

Psychological aspects include lowering language anxiety and thus improving language performance (Dolean 2016; Engh 2013a; Murphey 1992b; Kim et al. 2024) and boosting motivation by the use of authentic texts in songs (Mishan 2005). It is also noted that the use of music can help sustain attention. Thus Wolfe and Noguchi (2009) observed that the participants of the research were more focused, attentive and engaged when they listened to a musical rather than just a spoken story.

2.2. LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

According to the growing body of scientific evidence, using music in foreign language classroom can be beneficial to different language skills such as vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, reading and writing skills or phonetic acquisition (Degree 2019: 415).

Different studies report a more successful acquisition and retention of vocabulary in the foreign language when the music is played in the background, but especially when using songs and rhythmic activities (De Groot 2006; Legg 2009; Ludke, Ferreira, Overy 2014).

Concerning using songs to improve listening comprehension as opposed to material from the textbooks spoken out loud there is no evidence of either treatment being more effective than the other. However, the listening skill of segmenting more successfully foreign language speech can be highly improved by presenting the sung stream with an association to the syllable/pitch (Schön et al. 2008).

The musical component of language is the earliest aspect of language children use and understand. As stated by numerous studies, speech/language and music have common features; and the same is true for foreign language learning and music performance. Above all, these include the temporal acoustic properties of speech and musical sound and the detection of pitch differences – which are specific of both domains (Milovanov, Tervaniemi 2011). Other important commonalities of language (including foreign language) and music are melody/intonation and rhythm/stress patterns. Degrave (2020) examined whether melodies or rhythm can help French-speaking university students to perceive lexical stress in Dutch. After having heard musical stimuli, the related target words were introduced and practiced. Four different stress patterns were used. The results show that the experimental group obtained significantly higher results than the control group. Similarly, Vukićević and Ćirković-Miladinović (2023) applied instructive musical exercises on three types of sentences. After the systematic intervention which included music, a significant improvement was marked in all four aspects: intonation, rhythm, pitch and stress.

3. THE RESEARCH SAMPLE AND RATIONALE

The main aims of the research are to investigate:

- if during their English classes in the past and at present music students used and are using musical forms and tasks in order to facilitate their EFL ESP language learning and use;
- if the music students perceive the connection between music properties and English language properties and in which way this connectedness exists according to them;
- if they use the knowledge and experience about the rhythm, pitch, intonation and stress in English to the complexity of their music expression and vice versa;
- if they consider music and language (in this case English) as different arts.

Undergraduate students from the Department of Music Art (DMA) at the Faculty of Philology and Arts provided answers in the Google Forms Questionnaire¹ about their opinions and experiences in learning English through music and learning music through English. The students who took part in the research were at the time students of the first year of undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, Music department (academic years 2020/2021, 2021/2022, 2022/2023 and 2023/2024). Students have different music majors: solo singing,

¹ <https://forms.gle/x1D7eXzunL7W2Hk37>

music in media, musical theory and pedagogy and playing different instruments such as accordion, piano, violin, viola, counter base, flute, harp and tambour.

In total, 82 students of Department of Music Art took part (25, 17, 20, 20 from academic years 2020/2021, 2021/2022, 2022/2023 and 2023/2024, respectively) in the study. Most of them learned English from either the start of elementary school or kindergarten, i.e. 12 to 14 years prior to the research; therefore, we concluded that they have enough experience in learning and using English to be able to take part in the research.

This research by its nature is a mixed-method research as some of the questions in the questionnaire were graded according to the five-point Likert scale and thus analyzed. Other questions, however, were of the open-ended type and were analyzed in qualitative manner.

The questionnaire had 3 groups of questions:

- Background information about their year of study, their major and years of learning English;
- DMA students' perceptions about themselves as artists, their first contact with art, essential characteristics of art, being talented, respecting art form and present daily habits and behaviours concerning art (music);
- The connection between music and English as a foreign language (as forms of art, as phenomena which both have intonation, pitch and rhythm), the best ways to learn EFL/ESP, the experiences (past and present) of using music in order to learn English.

4. THE RESULTS

From the point of view of its creator, DMA students consider art to be something eternal which conveys emotions and thoughts of the creator. It is universal and can reach people from other countries and centuries. Art is something, some stated, which can bring us closer to God and which lets us express our own feelings. Music as art is a possibility by the artist who performs famous pieces to also show his or her own personality and feeling for art. For many art is an escape from reality. Many also state that a performer should bring the music piece to the public as close as possible as it was created by the author and according to the norms of the period in which it was created, but should also include his or her own personal touch, expression and art taste and style. On the one hand, art is a unique expression of thoughts and emotions, and on the other a universal language or a way to communicate with art consumers.

DMA students strongly believe that artists (both creators and performers) are different from people who are not, because they are more emotional, capable of conveying their ideas and emotions to other people by playing music or draw-

ing/painting. They possess more understanding for other people and their emotions. Their love for the music art is bigger than any problems or situations and that makes them different from other people. Art is something noble which they cherish and love, compared to other people who are in an overrated pursuit of the material assets unfortunately.

The form in which a music piece is composed is important as a basic structure, but an artist, whether the creator or the performer, should not let the form limit him/her – for example, the pianist Glenn Gould which was known for his unusual interpretations of Bach's work which did not obey the original form. Another opinion is that it is important to obey the principles of the musical period when performing works of classical music, but to find balance and express one's own feelings and ideas.

Whether using language and communicating in it is some form of art as music is, students are not sure. Thus, 35.5% state that it is undoubtedly some form of art, 25% state that it may be form of art but they are not sure, 16.8% state that it resembles art but it is not, 22.7% state that language is not a form of art and that these are two completely different things. They believe it is, but cannot reflect much further. Some state that some actors or public figures have a nice way of expressing themselves and a pleasant melody when speaking. So language is not necessarily form of art per se, like music.

The vast majority of DMA students acknowledge that there is a connection between language and art, some connection between language and music, but they are not clear on which kind. Others think that language is also made of melody and tones/pitch and acknowledge that some actors or people around them have pleasant voices or way of expressing themselves. Many state that they have not thought about any connection and if there is some, they cannot think of a more specific answer.

Although a vast majority of students (97%) believe that learning English as a foreign language through songs and music can be beneficial, they state that they rarely learned songs and chants in English in state schools. It is very hard for them to remember a song or a chant which they learned in elementary school in English. This supports the findings on the same topic in other studies.

In another research by the author, DMA students report that the best way for children to learn English is to watch and listen to cartoons (39.7%), listen to songs and music (22.4%), read comics (11.4%) and watch series (11%) (Matic 2024). This is also supported in the literature for EFL teachers – they believe in the benefits of music on foreign language learning but do not practice it.

Similarly, on the one hand, students think that the feeling for rhythm and melody can help them learn English with more ease and more successfully, 55.2% answered positively, 37.8% are not sure and 7% of students answered negatively. As to how, students gave some vague answers and illustrations or left blank answers. In case of a concrete situation offered to solve as to what solo singers should

do when they are to perform a music piece in English, a vast majority suggested to keep the translation under the original text and consult it when in doubt. Many of the students think that emotions can be conveyed correctly by looking at the translation into Serbian. Most also thought it not necessary to practice the text of the music piece by speaking and working on the language intonation, rhythm and similar in English.

As for music students' present behaviours in using English as a foreign language in their everyday professional lives, 37.8% state that they use English for the purpose of the music profession on daily basis, 27.8% on weekly basis, 17.8% of students use English once in two weeks and 16.6% rarely use English for professional purposes, perhaps once a month. Most students need English for their research for information in the music field for seminar papers, finding information about certain periods and composers in history, communication with foreigners on Erasmus+ exchanges or Master classes abroad. They rarely listen to some music works in English. Out of college, over half of music majors use English on daily basis (53%), one fourth a couple of times a week (24.8%), 13% once a week and 9.2% a few times a month to watch series and films, listen to music other than classical, play online games, read short online information, listen to podcasts on various topics and (rarely) communicate with foreigners. The purpose of these questions was to find further possible proof of students' awareness of interrelatedness between music and English as a foreign language.

The same reason was behind asking DMA students to name a simple song in English with characteristic rhythm and melody which would help children learn both the melody and lyrics easily.

5. DISCUSSION

As can be seen from the above presented information, students of the Department of Music Art at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, Kragujevac University, consider music as a form of art greater than them, worth spending time and effort on. As creators and performers of art, they think themselves as bound but not limited by the form and consider their most important role to be conveying the information and emotions of great artists to the public and at the same time adding a personal artistic touch of their own. They perceive themselves as different from non-artists by their higher sensitivity, empathy and conveying feelings to a broader public. Asghar et al. (2006: 2) found that musicians as artists are different from other people by their intellectual efficiency and psychological mindedness.

As to the connection between language, in this case English, as a form of art and music as an other form of art, DMA students consider language to be a form of art when spoken by actors, thus in specific context only. Students also seem to be unaware of the deep interplay of music and language. Although they pay lip ser-

vice to their mutual benefits, they seem to mostly perceive music and language as two separate notions. As FL and EFL teachers, these students also feel that using music in learning a foreign language is beneficial but do not recall many situations in which they learned/learn English through systematic use of music – background music, songs or rhythmical activities throughout their schooling (as defined by Degrave 2019). Similar results can be seen worldwide (to name a few studies: Ludke, Morgan 2022; Besedova et al. 2019).

In their research on practicing intonation, stress, pronunciation and pitch in three types of sentence constructions in English with the help of simple music melodies, i.e. instructive musical exercises, Vukićević and Ćirković-Miladinović came to the conclusion that melody in music can to a great extent help EFL students improve all their aspects of English pronunciation. This research should be used in the light of the result of our research as the guideline to the possible and useful future systematic teaching approach to DMA students as EFL/ESP students. This approach would make these students aware of the different properties of the English language and enable them to make progress with ease, as they are already familiar with the properties of musical pieces.

Similarly, the practice of English stress patterns can be applied with the help of suitable melodies, as stated by Delgave (2020), which would also be beneficial to the music art students. This would help music majors conveying the feeling through music and lyrics with more ease and freedom and save them on relying heavily on the translation as is now the case.

By systematic and frequent exposure to music, songs and rhythmical activities in English from the young age, as suggested by many authors (e.g. Assadilah et al. 2018; Graham 1993; Besedova 2019), the exposure to meaningful input both linguistic and music, future independent EFL user, and especially DMA students, could benefit greatly. Thus they would overcome difficulties in using English in a pleasant and meaningful way and start making connections between language and music from an early age.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there are many indisputable non-linguistic benefits to using music in an EFL/ESP classroom (as presented at the beginning of this paper), we concentrated on linguistic aspects which learners can benefit from when learning the language through music. Surely, as stated previously, benefits to vocabulary acquisition and retention, listening and reading comprehension are evident as well. But bearing in mind that the research was carried out on DMA students, the pronunciation, intonation and oral communication were the focus of this study.

Systematic instructional musical activities where melodies are matched with different areas of pronunciation (intonation, pronunciation, stress and similar)

should be vastly and frequently used by EFL teachers in their classrooms. From an early age of learning English as a foreign language, students should be exposed to simple songs and rhythmic activities as well as similarities and interconnectedness between music and language should be discussed directly.

ESP teachers should also try to discuss and present more cases to their students and create for them more situations where they can experience and practice the connection between English language and music.

This paper can serve as the starting point for further research on the benefits of music on learning English as a foreign language not only in the area of pronunciation but in other linguistic areas. Furthermore, it can provide a deeper insight into what the context of ESP in case of DMA students is and point to examples of good practice – use of musical instructional activities to improve English as a foreign language.

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УЧЕЊЕ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ КРОЗ МУЗИКУ – СЛУЧАЈ СТУДЕНАТА МУЗИКЕ НА УНИВЕРЗИТЕТСКОМ НИВОУ

Резиме: Користи употребе музике у учењу енглеског као страног језика и енглеског као језика струке су и нелингвистичке (мотивација, социјализација, активирање личних неуронских стаза) и лингвистичке (памћење, унапређивање језич-

ких вештина), што доказују бројна истраживања. Циљ овог рада је да се стекне дубљи увид у контекст енглеског као језика струке студената на Одсеку за музичку уметност, испитају свесност студената, знање и искуства која се тичу односа између музике, музичког извођења и креативности и доброг познавања енглеског као страног језика, у овом случају енглеског као језика струке. Како су резултати показали недостатак свесности и теоријски утемељене праксе у којој се музика користи да се побољша и олакша учење енглеског језика, дали смо предлоге како да се ова ситуација преокрене. Наведени су примери дидактичких музичких активности који представљају солидну основу да се започне систематска употреба музике у учењу енглеског као страног језика. Овај рад би могао да умногоме буде од користи и професорима енглеског као страног језика и енглеског као језика струке, као свим другим едукаторима у њиховим будућим практичним корацима.

Кључне речи: музика, енглески као страни језик, учење страног језика, дидактичке музичке активности, енглески као језик струке.