

DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS FOR THE FIRST YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS THROUGH ENGLISH SONGS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop listening skills for the first-year non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry through English songs. To fulfill this purpose, 100 first-year non-English major students were selected from 4 classes. These participants were asked to answer the questionnaire, took part in some formal and informal discussions and made a face-to-face interview with the researcher about the use of English songs in class. The study was carried out over an eight-month course. Results revealed that the use of English songs made a fairly significant improvement to the students' listening skills. Some recommendations were finally presented based on research finding.

Key words: English songs, first year students, listening skills

1. Introduction

According to the theory of language acquisition, listening is the first mode for children to acquire a language (Peterson, 1991; Wulandari, 2011). It provides a foundation for language and cognitive development. Hunsaker (cited in Bozorgian, 2012) found that children achieve more than three quarters of what they learn in school through listening. Research has shown that improvement in listening skill positively affects other language skills: reading, writing and speaking (Bozorgian, 2012). Listening is also one of the most important language skills throughout human's life, which makes up the largest part of human's communication. As found out by different researchers (Wilt, Rankin, Feyton cited in Wulandari, 2011; Ralph & Stevens, Rankin cited in Bozorgian, 2012), people spend 45% of their communicating time to listen to each other, while they spend only 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing.

With that significance of listening in second language learning acquisition and communication, I have understood the importance of developing English listening skill for students at Thai Nguyen university of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF).

Acknowledging the benefit that English brings in the current time, our university has considered English to be one of the most important subjects in the process of students' learning. Textbooks have been changed, teaching methods have been changed and the hours of teaching English in class have been much higher than ever before. All of these aim at developing the use of English for students at our university. Moreover, in the context of being required to take a graduated examination with B1 level, our students have to try their best to fulfill this task. However, during the process of teaching English in the school and through the result of the pre-training tests, it was realized that most of the first-year students get higher marks at grammar, writing, speaking and reading tests, but listening test. Due to the fact that my students get lower marks at listening tests, it could be explained that there might be some problems with the structure of the school tests they used to take or the teaching methods that they used to get or the lack of desire and motivation of listening among the students. Teachers have tried many methods in order to develop my students' listening skills, among which, I have found that English songs can help.

On the whole, songs are believed to be able to improve the current listening teaching practice and develop students' listening comprehension.

Based on that rationale, the hypothesis for this study was formulated as follows: Using English songs can develop listening comprehension skill for the first-year non-English major students at TUAF in the academic year of 2021-2022.

2. Methodology

The subjects of the study are the first-year non-English major students. Most of the students come from the mountainous provinces of Vietnam. The chance for them to learn English is not as good as those who live in big cities. Most of them do not seem to concern about the importance of learning English because they focused on the subjects they have to take when taking part in a university entrance examination. When they enter the university, they fear English, they consider it a difficult subject to learn. They are bored and passive in learning English. For most of the students, it is only understood as an obligatory subject in university curriculum.

2.1. Methods of data collection

The research adopted questionnaire and interview as means of data collection. In addition, formal and informal discussions and small talks with teachers and students to collect more data for this study were also conducted.

2.2. Procedures and methods of data analysis

The aim of the questionnaires was to collect data relating students' attitudes towards listening skill, the reasons that caused students' difficulties in learning listening skill, teachers and students' attitudes towards English songs and using songs in teaching and learning listening skill, and the situation of using songs to teach listening skill at TUAF. Basing on categories established, data was then analyzed by using descriptive statistics (percentage) and qualitative statistics (informal discussions, interview). Pie chart, graphs and tables were mainly employed to analyze and compare figures. The information was gathered from two questionnaires were presented and analyzed as in finding and discuss

3. Result and discussion

3.1. Students' attitudes towards listening skill

Most of the students agreed that listening skill played a very important role in second language learning but it was the most difficult skill to be reached. As can be seen from Chart 1, a larger number of students (86%) thought that listening skill was very difficult, 10% of them considered listening skill was difficult and 4% of them said that it was not very difficult. 4% of the students who said listening skill was not difficult much had higher English level than the others.

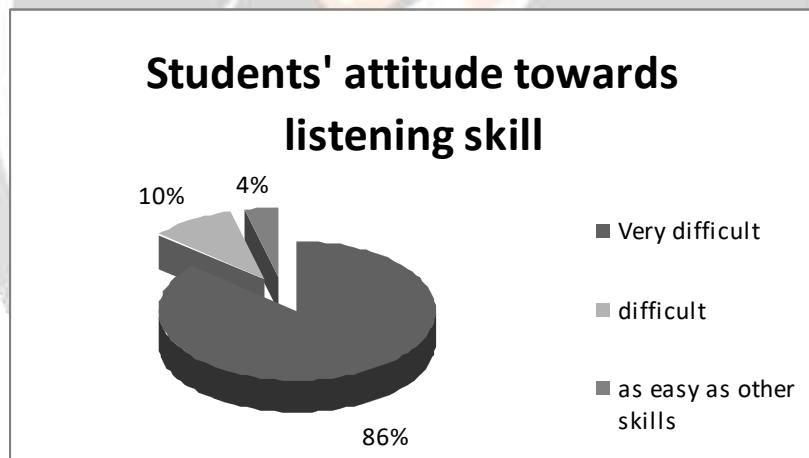


Figure 1: Students' attitudes towards listening skill

3.2. The factors leading to students' difficulty in listening skill

There are many reasons causing difficulties to students' listening skill, but most of them admitted that they had few chances to listen right from the secondary and high school level. Most of the teachers have found it easier to teach grammar and other skills, but listening. Another reason was that they could not keep up with the speaker's speed and were often left behind. As a result, they could hardly understand what the speaker had said. Besides, limited vocabulary is another important cause that makes listening difficult for the students. Unfamiliar to speaker's accent and unfamiliar topics are also the main reason preventing them from understanding the whole text. The chart below shows the reasons cause students' difficulty in listening skill.

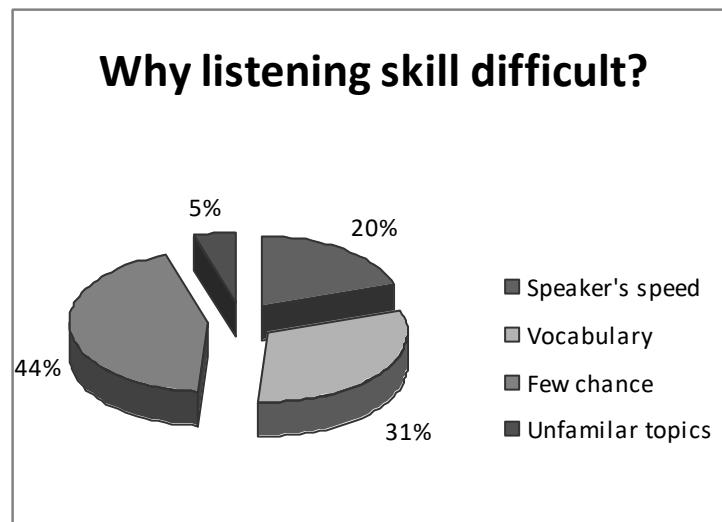


Figure 2: Why listening skill is difficult?

3.3. Teachers' attitudes towards using songs

To carry out the study, the researcher also got teachers' opinion about using songs to teach listening skill mainly from the questionnaire and interview. Firstly, when being asked about their attitudes about English songs, whether they liked or disliked. All of them said that they (100%) liked listening to English songs. However, when asked if they had ever used English songs to start at the beginning and during a lesson in order to get students' desire from the lesson, some of them said yes and others of them said they had never tried before. They said that they had no ability to perform an English song, even though there were some in textbook. The table shows the teachers' attitudes towards using songs to develop students' listening skill.

Table 1: Teachers' attitudes towards using songs

Songs as a useful tool to teach listening skill	Number of teachers
Agree	90%
Disagree	10%

3.4. Students' attitude towards using songs

When the question “*What do you think if your teacher uses English songs to motivate your desire of listening?*” was raised, most of the students (80%) answered yes; “*we like the way teacher doing so*”. At the second stand, 10% of the students said that they like a bit because they had ever heard about the songs once or twice before. A small number of students (8%) had no idea because they were shy to talk about their feeling, and they did not know how to express their thought. There were still some of them (2%) said that they did not like it. The chart below shows the students' attitudes towards using songs to develop listening skill

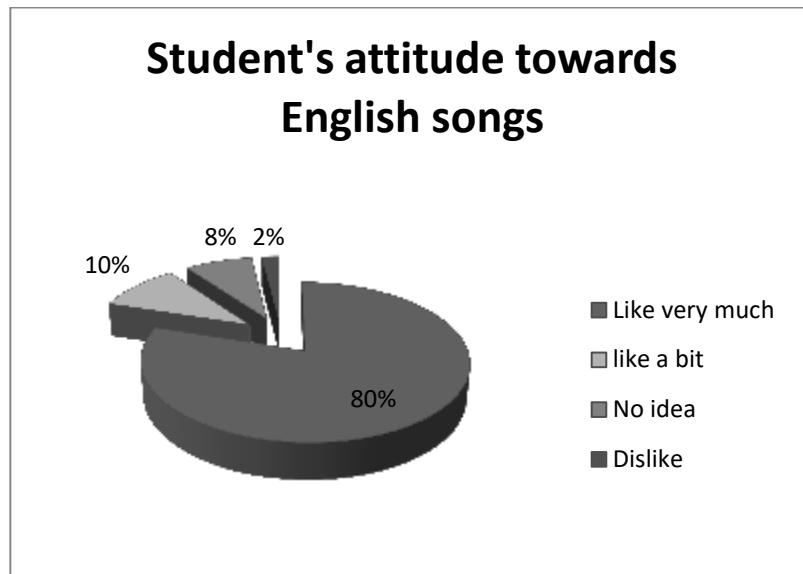


Figure 3: Students' attitudes towards using songs to develop listening skill

3.5. The situation of using songs to teach listening skill

To make the study more available, the researcher carried on asking the teacher about their using songs in class through the interviewing question “*have you ever used song in class to motivate students' desire of listening?*”, the researcher found that although most of teachers said that they liked English songs. 33% of them said that they sometimes use songs in class; meanwhile 20% says that they rarely exploit songs as a means of teaching listening. The reason is that they have no ability in performing any English songs. (*They confessed*). Most of the teachers never use songs in teaching English, making up 47%. From the answer, it can come to a conclusion that songs have not been used to teach English in general and listening skill in particular as much as possible. In contrast, the number who never used songs to teach listening skill is not small at all.

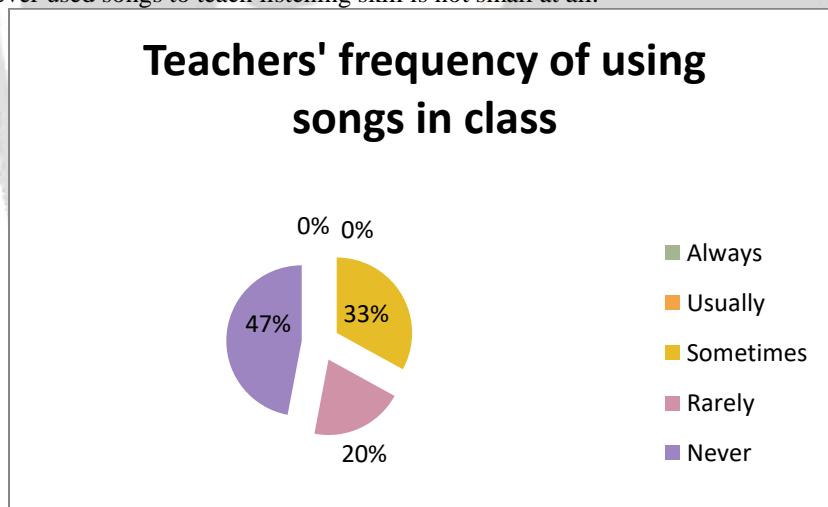


Figure 4: The situation of using songs to teach listening skill

3.6. Reasons why students listen to English songs

When the researcher asked students the amount of time, they spend listening to English songs, most of them said that they often listened to English songs whenever they like. They spent about one hour and a half of an hour hearing to them (85%). Some others said that they listened to English songs whenever they had free time. A large amount of the informants (95%) shares the same opinion about their aim of listening to songs is to relax and for pleasure. Listening to songs really makes them feel comfortable and refresh after hours of working or studying hard. Meanwhile, there is a small portion (15%) of students saying that their main purpose is to improve listening skill. None of them listens to English songs to stay awake or for studying. The table below shows reasons that students listen to English songs

Table 2: Reasons why students listen to English songs

Options	Results (%)
For pleasure	95%
Professional reasons	0%
To stay awake	0%
To improve listening skill	15%
To relax	85%

3.7. Teachers' opinion about advantages and disadvantages of using songs to teach listening skill

When the researcher asked the teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of using songs to teach listening skill, all of the teachers said the first advantage of using song is to reduce boredom in class (100%). There are also a large number of teachers agreeing with the point that songs can help students relax during the lesson (89%). Songs help students listen better (63%). In the contrary, fewer teachers approve the idea that listening to English songs can attract their students to the pronunciation of the words in songs (17%) because they said that singers' speed and different accents made their students confuse a lot.

Table 3: Teachers' opinion about advantages of using songs

Options	Results (%)
Reduce boredom in class	100%
Pay attention to the pronunciation of the words	17%
Help students relax during the lesson	89%
Help students listen better	63%

Beside some advantages, there are also several disadvantages of using songs to teach in class approved by teachers as in the table below: (**Table 4**)

Table 4: Teachers' opinion about disadvantages of using songs

Options	Results (%)
You cannot sing	33%
The class becomes noisy and out of control	24%
Cannot find suitable songs	85%
Students are distracted by music	69%
Class time is limited	54%
The sounds are not clear because singers usually link sounds together	24%

One of the most popular problems that teachers agree with is that they find it really difficult to find appropriate songs for their students (85%) because it often takes them a lot of time to find suitable songs. It is the reason why they rarely use songs in class. At the second rank is the problem with students distracted by music, which accounts for 69%. Next is the class becomes noisy, out of control, or limited time in class making up 54%. 24% of them think that songs are not clear enough for student to hear because singer often link sounds together. In addition, teachers worry about their ability to sing (33%) since they say that they could not sing and they often avoid being asked to perform an English song.

3.8. Students' opinions about advantages and disadvantages of using songs to learn English

After a period of time learning listening skill, many of students became interested in listening to English songs as the bar chart below:

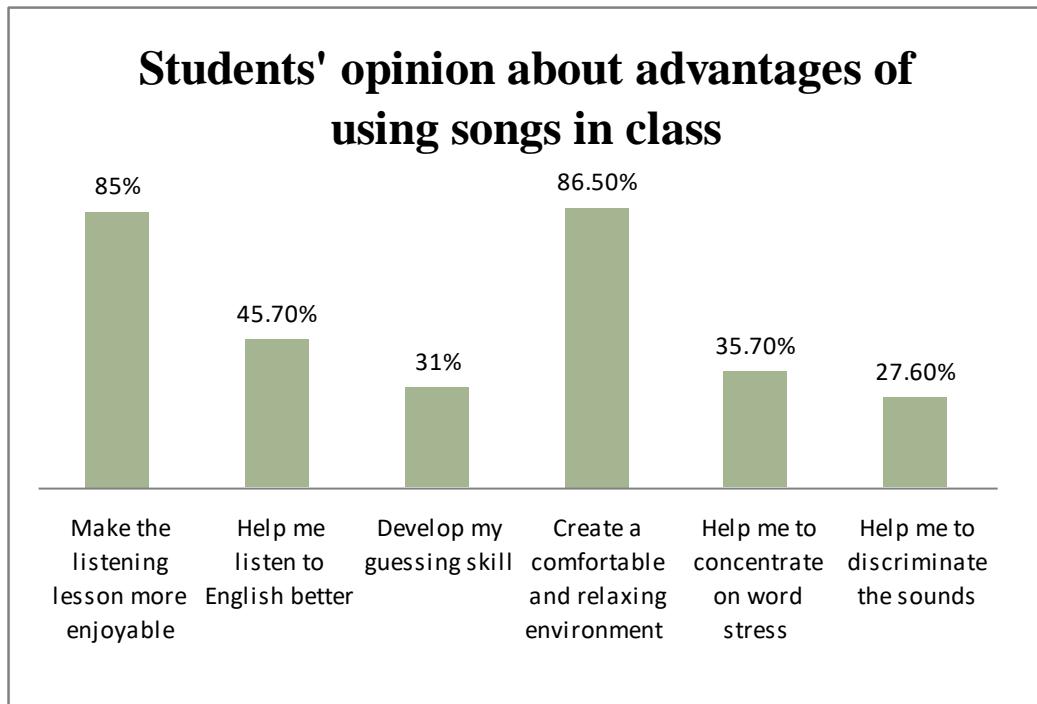


Figure 5: Students' opinion about using English songs in class

It can be seen from the chart that most of the students agree with the point of listening to English songs makes lessons more enjoyable (85%) and also creates a comfortable and relaxing environment (86.50%) while learning English. Besides, listening to English songs also helps students improve their listening skills, which is admitted by 45.70% of the informants. Guessing skill is in the first position which makes up 31%, the second position is students' skill of awareness of word stress (35.70%) meanwhile the skill of sound discrimination is put at the bottom of the list (27.60%). Beside a lot of benefits that students can gain from listening to English songs, there are also some disadvantages of songs used in class.

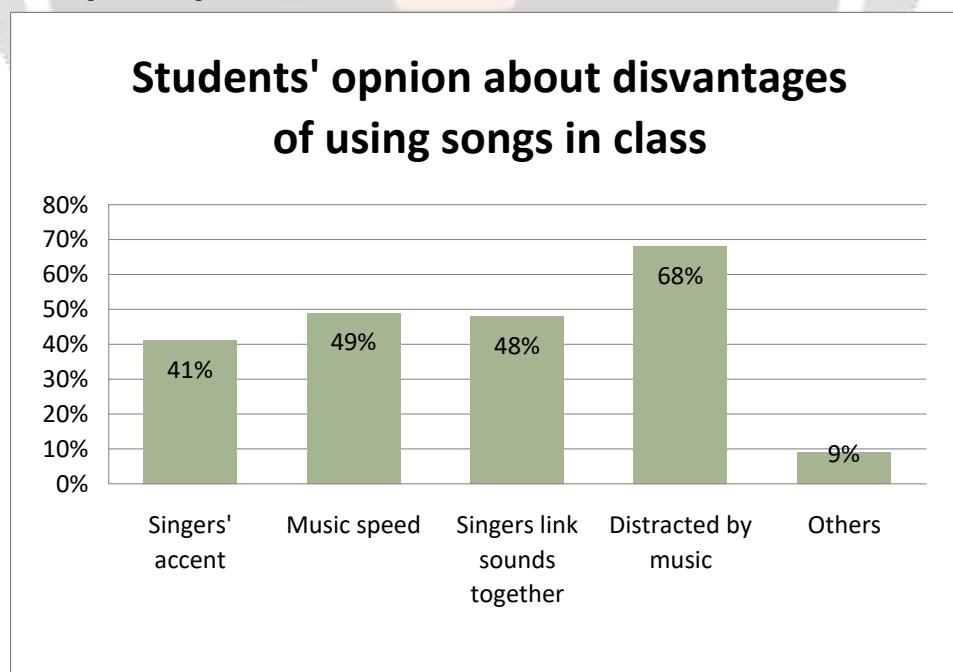


Figure 6: Students' opinion about the disadvantages of using songs in classes

As can be seen from the chart, a large number of students say that they are distracted by music if they are listening to music to do the tasks (68%). After that, it is problem with the speed of most songs. Some songs are too

fast for them to keep up with, accounting for 49% of the respondents. Standing a little bit at the third place, 48% of the students feel annoyed by unclear sounds in the songs because most of the singers often link sounds together. They find it difficult to discriminate each word or sound. Different singers' accent is also another problem that students may encounter, making up 41%. Meanwhile only 9% of the total suggests some other difficulties while listening to English songs such as word recognition, word stress, intonation, and so on.

3.9. Favourite activities while students are listening to English songs

From the action research and survey questionnaire, all of the students (100%) agreed that English songs help improve their listening skill at a certain extent. Below is the summary of which activities they like doing while listening to English songs.

Table 5: Favorite activities while students listen to English songs

Options	Results (%)
Matching the lyrics	64.3 %
Multiple choice questions	5.7%
Gap- filling	78.5%
Discussing about the meaning of the song	52.3%
Dictation	11.4%
Arranging jumbled lines	84.2 %
Correcting mistakes	38.5%
Finding the words appeared in the song	54.2%

From the table, it can be seen that the students' most favorite activity is arranging the jumbled lines, counting for 84.2%. Explaining about their choice, they said that this kind of task was the easiest and it did not require much their attention. At the second stand is to listen to the songs and fill in the blank with a missing word, which makes up 78.5%.

Listening and matching the two halves of the lyric is the third of their most favorite activities (64.3%).

Another type of task that would attract students a lot is listening to the song and circling the words appeared in the song, which was utilized by 54.2%. Besides, many students also like listening to the songs and correcting mistakes in the songs such as finding out the extra words or wrong words in the lyrics. This is realized with the portion of 38.5%.

The next activity that students show their concern is discussing about the meaning of the songs (52.3%).

Only 11.4% of the students show their interest to dictation, even a smaller number of them (5.7%) think that doing the multi-choice questions while listening is interesting.

4. Discussions of the findings

From what were analyzed above, it is suggested that songs can be used to motivate students to learn listening skill at a certain extent. A large number of the students said that they like listening to English songs because the English songs used in class not only made the lesson more interesting but also motivated them to learn listening skills. Therefore, the students held positive attitudes towards listening. This is a decisive factor to the success of a listening lesson.

The choice of suitable songs is also one of the important factors that affect to the students. It is noted that song lyrics can now be found easily on the Internet, so language teachers have access to an enormous variety of music to bring to class. How should songs be chosen? It is important to think of the students. What level are they in? How old are they? What kind of music/songs do they like? In addition, it is essential to evaluate the song itself. Does the rhythm make it comprehensible? Is the singer's voice clear enough? How fast is the song? How complex are the structures and the vocabulary?

5. Conclusion and recommendation

Using songs in teaching listening skills does not require teachers to become competent singers, but if they are, it will be more effective. If they are not, they can invite musically talented students to prepare and perform songs. Live performance creates a feeling of something real and close to the students, not just something on tape or video.

From my own experience, contrasting how I studied in high school and university with what I am doing now, I strongly recommend the use of songs in teaching not only listening but also grammar, vocabularies, concepts, pronunciation and culture. Not all the people like music, but if they might be receptive to this creative and active type of practice if they know why they are doing it and what they should learn. The key to keep in mind is that songs provide rich, engaging contexts that make it easier for learners to internalize structures.

Beside a lot of benefits that using songs brings to the students, there are some problems that need to be careful when using songs in class. Therefore, the researcher has proposed several recommendations for teachers in choosing and using suitable songs in class so that they can make the lesson more interesting and help students enjoy the lesson.

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