

## The Use of Song in Teaching English Pronunciation (students and teachers' perceptions)

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### Abstract:

Teaching pronunciation is one of the difficulties faced by non-native speakers of English. Libyan students are among the non-native speakers of English, who find pronunciation challenging. Thus, adopting new methods of teaching pronunciation is paramount. One of the proposed techniques and methods are songs. Songs are thought to be useful methods of learning and teaching English pronunciation. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the effect of using songs on improving English pronunciation. For this purpose qualitative paradigm used in the study, a structured interview was employed to understand the perception of teachers and students of the use of songs to improve English pronunciation the data was analyzed thematically . The finding of this study was the perception of teachers and students of the use of songs to improve English pronunciation, they both approved the use of songs to teach and learn English pronunciation. This study suggests integrating songs as part of curricula or extracurricular activities. However, precautions should be taken in consideration such as culture, age, and other affective variables

**Keywords :** *perceptions, songs , pronunciation, classroom, secondary school*

## Introduction:

According to Kelly (2000, p.11) a speaker who ‘consistently mispronounce a range of phonemes’ can be hardly understood by his or her fellow listener. English pronunciation is difficult because of its irregular pronunciation, spelling and the crosslinguistic factors from the learner's first language. Besides, English phonetics is idiosyncratic as it includes various characters that are unusual from a universal point of view (Wells, 2000). Maniruzzaman (2008) also studied the main language problems and the possible solutions to the learning of Bengali EFL students. He found that most of the language problems faced by Bengali EFL students are due to differences between the two languages in terms of phonology. Begawan (2007) noted that the performance of students in the subject of the British media was weak and a cause for concern, despite the increase in the overall percentage of students that pass the test to go to secondary school. They said that students do not speak English. They tend to speak their mother tongue in and out of the classroom for communication. Similarly, Al-Shuaibi (2009) focuses on the phonology of phonotactics, and he found that EFL learners have difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters. He also has shown some processes involved in the pronunciation of these clusters; namely, reduction, substitution and deletion.

Even among ESL learners, the speaker's pronunciation error may inhibit successful communication (Ebong and Sabbdini, 2006; Kelly, 2000). Some areas that need to be considered are sounds, stress, length of vowels and intonation.

For example, according to the Ebong and Sabbdini (2006) and Kelly (2000), /ðei / as in “they” and /dei/ as in “day” are easily mispronounced especially by ESL learners (English as a Second Language Learners -L2) which leads to distortion of meaning. Moreover, these authors also add that the speaker's pronunciation error may inhibit successful communication. Hence, incorrect pronunciation may strain communication which leads to frustration to the speaker and the listener. Consequently, the speaker refuses to repeat the message too many times and the listener might get intimidated for not being able to process what is being said. Perhaps, this is the reason foreign language (henceforth L2) learners refuse to practice communication in English. In sum, pronunciation is important for intelligibility to avoid misunderstanding and frustration among speakers.

These characteristics of English sounds and their pronunciation consist of a large and elaborate vowel system with dental fricatives are voiced sibilants as well as arbitrary stress placement that are problematic for non-native speakers. Besides, foreign language learners may find it difficult to guess the pronunciation of English words because of its irregularities in spelling; for example, the letter c can be pronounced as /c/ as in centre, /k/ as in cat, or /tʃ/ as in the chair. Regarding vowels, irregularities are more intricate, since a cluster of letters may represent more than one sound. For an instance, “oug”, alone has eight possible pronunciations for example cough/kɒf /, bough/baʊ/, rough/ rʌf/, although /ɔ:l' ðəʊ/, through/θru:/, bought/'bɔ:t /, through /θrə/, lough /lɒk /, (Kelly, 2000, p. 126)

What makes it more complicated is that the learner's first language (henceforth L1) interferes with the production of English sounds as claimed by Laroy (1995) "... gradually we become attuned to our mother-tongue and tend to hear everything under its influence "(p.10). In addition, some English sounds do not exist in learners' L1. Hence, it is hard to train the articulatory organs to produce unfamiliar sounds which result in learners' tendency to pronounce English words with the influence of L1 sound.

In relation to this problem, songs have been used as a teaching aid in pronunciation teaching. Songs have been used to focus on sounds, words and connected speech (Ebong&Sabbadini, 2006). Using this method, students are trained to listen and pay attention to how a native speaker pronounces words without realizing the learning process that is taking place. In fact, a song that contains repetitive lyrics (e.g. chorus) is a form of disguising a repetition drill in a very effective way (Klauer, 1999). Consequently, since learners tend to have affective issues, their fear of sounding "too English" or different from their peers could be reduced as well. This is because they can freely attempt to sound like native speakers by the thought of merely imitating the singers. According to Schoepp (2001), "songs are one method for achieving a weak affective filter and promoting language learning." Hence, songs function as an indirect way of assisting pronunciation learning without ignoring learners' affective issues .

Songs are used as a teaching aid because of several advantages. In the current cutting-edge technology, songs are accessible to almost all teachers (Rogers, 2000). This means that teachers do not have to go the extra mile to prepare an effective teaching material. Moreover, Rogers also stated that permission to use songs is not necessary since the purpose is educational and no profit is made out of it. Hence, issues like plagiarism do not arise. Other than that songs are memorable because of its rhythmic language. It is memorable because music can activate the long-term memory to absorb input more quickly and easily. Barros, (2003). claimed that "music stabilizes mental, physical and emotional rhythms to attain a state of deep concentration and focus in which large amounts of content information can be processed and learned." This shows how songs can be used to help in optimizing language learning, particularly in pronunciation learning .

Since pronunciation is important and also difficult, songs have been used to assist pronunciation teaching. Researches have been done for overseas setting and hence, this study investigates if the same method is effective in the Libyan context among Libyan secondary school students. The emphasis on comprehensible pronunciation, pronunciation teaching and learning are still problematic, specifically in the Libya context. Thus, this study explores ways and means to support pronunciation learning and teaching among EFL Libyan students.

### **Research Objectives:**

To explore students' and teachers' perceptions on the use of songs to teach English pronunciation.

## Research Question

Based on the objective above, the following research question was formulated:

1. What are the students' perception on the use of songs to learn English pronunciation?

## Literature review:

As to achieve a good command in a particular language, learners do not only need to be proficient in written form but their speech need to be understood, too. However, spoken language seems to be the problematic area (Yule, 2004). Yule cites the case of Joseph Conrad, the famous novelist, as an evidence of the difficulty of mastering a native-like spoken English. Conrad wrote many literary pieces of work; however, he still speaks English with strong Polish accent (Yule, 2004, p. 191). Speaking is a skill requires mastery of pronunciation, among the other different language components. Even though proficiency in oral form requires mastery of other skills such as grammar, syntax and discourse, pronunciation is regarded as the most important. Fraser (2000a) argues that pronunciation is more important than the other language components because a speaker with good pronunciation will be intelligible even if he has other language errors. However, a person who suffers from serious problems in pronunciation will be difficult to understand even if he masters the other language aspects such as grammar (Fraser, 2000). By the same token, Varasarin (2007) states that pronunciation must be taken as important as grammar, syntax and discourse, as it is a principal component for successful communication. Therefore, mastering these

skills but leaving out pronunciation is like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces.

In short, pronunciation should be comprehensible to achieve successful communication. Intelligibility can be understood as speaking clearly and being easily comprehended (Gill, 1993). In addition to this, and according to Abercrombie (1991), intelligibility can also be taken as pronunciation that can be easily understood with making great deal of conscious effort on the part of listener. Even though pronunciation is regarded as only one of the factors that lead to intelligibility speech, 'gravity research', which intended to study linguistic features that determine intelligibility and interpretation of meaning, has consistently raised the significance of pronunciation (Rajadurai,(2006. In relation to this, Gill (1993) also added that if the purpose of using the language is for international communication, then the speaker has to aim for international intelligibility. Gilbert (1984) was quoted in Varasarin (2007) as saying that if learners' cannot be understood easily, they are at the disadvantage of being cut off from communication with native speakers. This is due to what Nair, (2006) study suggested, that is "smaller divergences are usually not of great concern, but when the pronunciation differs too much, i.e. when there is too much phonemic overlap, it can lead to irritation and confusion for native speakers." Moreover, since English is regarded as the international language, Rajadurai (2007) suggested that there is a need for speakers to understand each other's Englishes. There is logic behind this because due to the widespread use of English around the globe, the need extends not to only achieve intelligible conversation

with natives but also with non-natives with different first languages.

Mofarreh (2005) says that, the aim of teaching oral component in the classroom is to improve students' ability to communicate. This is necessary for students, so as to be able to express themselves, in order to improve communication skills and their understanding as well as to respect the cultures of other nations.

However, there are several factors that need to be considered when discussing pronunciation. These factors may include sounds, stress, length of vowels and intonation. A slight difference in these factors can change the intended meaning of the speaker. According to Kelly (2000, p.11), a speaker who "consistently mispronounces a range of phonemes" can be hardly understood by his or her listener. For example, / 'ðei / as in they and /dei/ as in a day are easily mispronounced, especially by L2 learners which leads to distortion of meaning. Moreover, the speaker's pronunciation errors may inhibit successful communication (Ebong&Sabbadini, 2006; Kelly, 2000). Hence, incorrect pronunciation may hinder communication which leads to frustration to the speaker and the listener as well. Consequently, the speaker refuses to repeat the message too many times and the listener might get intimidated for not being able to process what is being said. In sum, pronunciation is important for intelligibility to avoid misunderstanding, and frustration among speakers.



## Pronunciation Problems among Arab Students:

As regards the Libyan students, the literature indicates that there are several factors that contribute to the inability of Libyan students to master English, including its pronunciation. Fallaj (1998) argues that Libyan students suffer from serious problems in using English or mastering it due to many factors. These factors include insufficient instruction time, as English is taught only for 2-4 hours per week, which is not enough to master a second language. Fallaj (1998) adds that lack of teaching materials is another factor that causes weakness in English use among Libyan students. One more relevant factor that was mentioned by Fallaj is the use of traditional teaching methods, namely, Grammar Translation Method and Audio-lingual Method, which are not the best in teaching English.

Rababáh (2002) discussed the communication problems faced by Arab students of English. He also believes that the weakness of EFL students is caused by various factors, such as the curriculum and the teaching methods, and the lack of practicing environment of the English language. In view of the fact that English as a foreign language, Arab students have many problems with the system of English pronunciation. Arab students have different dialects, so that their problems will vary from student to student. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) presented the following examples of the most common pronunciation problems for most Arab students of English:

- 1- /p/ vs. /b/: Arabic does not have /p/, and students may substitute /b/ for /p/
- 2- /v/ vs. /f/: Arabic does not have /v/, and students may substitute /f/ for /v/

3- /r/: may be pronounced as a trill

Avery and Ehrlich (1992) mentioned that Arab students who learn English have many problems in relations with the English vowels because these sounds lack counterparts in the Arabic language. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) found that students do not distinguish between certain vowels, such as / e / vs. / I / as in “set” and “sit”. In the same vein, Abu Seileek (2007) found that Arabic speakers have difficulty in producing stress patterns due to the differences between English and Arabic in terms of stress. By the same token, Al-Shuaibi (2009) found that EFL learners face difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters. He also indicated some processes involved in the pronunciation of these clusters, namely, reduction, substitution and deletion. Similarly, Wahba (1998) investigated the problems faced by Egyptian learners of English as a foreign language. His study revealed that certain phonological errors committed by the EFL learners are related to stress and intonation.

English teachers should be constantly searching for variation to avoid the monotonous atmosphere that makes language learning tedious. Since pronunciation is viewed as a difficult area to be taught and learnt, songs are suggested to be used as teaching material to aid pronunciation teaching. This suggestion comes up because songs are said to be motivating, contain authentic language and rhythmic language that can assist pronunciation teaching or learning.

The other reason that supports pronunciation teaching through the use of songs is songs’ authentic language. In most cases than not, English songs show English in real use (Kaluer,

1999) and are sung by native speakers of English. Nowadays, songs that use daily conversational language are increasingly getting attention and hence, this provides students with another source of how language is used for daily conversation. This is in line with Medina, J. & Lee, S. (2002) statement that music offers “linguistic and cultural elements appropriate for the teaching of English” (Kwong, 2006). Even though in such songs sometimes grammar is sacrificed for the sake of smoothness in rhymes (Klauer, 1999), it can be solved by having students discuss the ungrammaticality of the songs. In addition to this, Kwong (2006) opined that besides its repetitive patterns, a song’s conversation language that provides variety and fun is what teachers need to motivate different types of language learners. As mentioned before, English learners have a tendency to learn English language visually than auditory and hence, listening to songs can train students to trust their ears and not their eyes. This is supported by McCarthy who wrote “...language teaching cannot fail to benefit if each learner has been made more aware of linguistic phenomena generally and is better able to recognise and identify them quickly, confidently and reliably when perceived through his own ears,” (1978, P. 14 & 15). Therefore, songs serve as a platform for training learners’ ears with authentic English language. In conclusion, songs’ authentic language, the repetitions and rhythmic language and topped with the motivating features are the rationales for using songs to teach pronunciation. Although songs might not be the main method for pronunciation teaching, the literature has proven that songs are highly beneficial to aid the lesson.

## METHODS:

Seven (7) teachers and ten (10) students were selected as sampling for qualitative data. They were interviewed about their perception of the use of songs in teaching English pronunciation. The participants are Libyan English teachers and students who welcomed participating in the interview. The interview was structured, as based on certain questions, the participants provided their answers. The following interview has been designed to investigate the student and the teacher perspectives in the use of English songs to teach pronunciation.

Students interview questions:

Q1- Why you enjoy learning English using songs?

Q2- Do you think singing English songs improve pronunciation?

Q3- What other ways have you used to improve your English language pronunciation?

Teachers interview questions:

Q- What are your views on the use of English songs to teach in an EFL classroom?

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

The main themes from the participants' perspectives of using songs in classroom were:

### **a. songs are useful to imitate natives:**

Some respondents mentioned that using songs is beneficial at the different learning levels. It allows imitation of the native

speakers of English pronunciation. One of the interviewees said that “I do agree but using songs in teaching English as a foreign language is so important both in the early stages and in the advanced stages so it is so important to use songs so that students can learn English in a situation and use English as said by the native speakers”. Another interviewee noted that “well absolutely when the student listens to songs he gets the appropriate pronunciation of the words, the songs guide the students for the correct pronunciation, for my opinion, English songs are better and they improve pronunciation”.

### **b. Songs should be carefully selected:**

Some interviewees mentioned that songs have a problem of having many slang and difficult words. One of the interviewees noted that “I think it's very difficult to use English songs to teach EFL class as songs have a lot of difficult words which are not understood for the students”. He also mentioned that “I think they are unsuitable for the students as they have many slang words and colloquial words which are not benefit for the students”. Thus, I think it is paramount to select the proper type of songs and be very selective.

### **c. Songs are available source all the time:**

One of the advantages of using songs is their availability all the time. They can be used while driving, staying at home or even walking in street. This makes songs have advantage over the other available sources of learning English pronunciation. One of the interviewees mentioned that “generally speaking I use English songs most of the times especially when I need

some vocabulary of some lessons so I used to listen to songs like backstreet boys and west life so I prefer to listen to dance music”.

#### **d. Songs are good input methods:**

Songs were found by some teachers as good input methods. They can provide of a source of continuous exposure to the target language. They can then improve their pronunciation. One of the interviewees noted that “students when they listen to things they understand more than reading the thing, I think songs can help them so much”.

#### **e. Songs can be unconsciously memorized and repeated:**

Many students by nature can memorize songs and repeat them. This, as a result, contributes to enhancing their pronunciation and making it sound better. One of the interviewees mentioned that her students like using songs and repeating them. She said that “... they keep repeating after me after that at the same day or the next day they start singing the song and never forget it”.

#### **f. Songs are favourable methods for learning pronunciation:**

Songs like listening to music and songs, and thus songs are favourable and interesting source of learning pronunciation for them. One of the interviewed teachers mentioned that “I support using songs in the class because I think my students like to sing in the class”.

### **g. Students' perspective of using songs to learn English pronunciation:**

In general, the interviewed students showed their interest in using songs to learn English in general, and pronunciation, in particular. The major themes of the interview are summarized in the following points.

### **h. Songs can improve accent:**

One of the interviewed students think that listening to songs can make her English pronunciation better, and can make her accent native-like. She said that “it helps pronunciation I actually used to listen to English songs not even to improve my translation but also for improving my English accent”.

### **i. Songs are fun method of learning pronunciation:**

Although some students reported their use of other methods to learn English pronunciation, they mentioned that songs are more fun than the other methods.

### **j. Songs enhance repetition:**

Some of the interviewed students expressed their favour of using songs to learn English pronunciation. They mentioned that songs are a method to enhance repetition. They can allow a learner listen and repeats what he listens to in a fun way. One of the interviewees said that “I enjoy it [listening to songs] because it an easiest way to learn English and when you repeat you learn it really improve my language”.

## **What are the students' and teacher perception on the use of songs to learn English pronunciation?**

The students expressed their preference of using songs to learn English pronunciation. They found it a dynamic way to make the class more interesting and active. I think that it is normal that students at this age level to prefer using songs, which are like a part of their everyday life activities. They listen to songs online, or store them on their podcasts. Moreover, teenagers by nature can memorize songs and repeat them. This, as a result, contributes to enhancing their pronunciation and making it sound better. Songs were also reported as favourable and interesting source of learning pronunciation for them. In general, the interviewed students showed their interest in using songs to learn English in general, and pronunciation, in particular. They mentioned that songs can improve one's accent, and can make his English pronunciation better, and can make his accent native-like. One more advantage of using songs is their being fun.

### **Limitations of the Study:**

The study had limitations. For example, some psychological variables such as motivation and interest in learning English and correct pronunciation could be variables that affect the acquisition of correct pronunciation. The sample size could have been larger, as well. The treatment period, if possible, it could have been for longer time.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies:**

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that future studies should investigate the correlation between using



songs and the improvement of students' level in pronunciation, and in the other language components. It is also recommended that future studies encompass other variable to be investigated such as motivation among learners. The study also could be replicated on a larger sample size. It is further suggested that other methodologies could be followed in doing similar studies. For example, including loud-out protocols could help to understand how learners perceive find the use of songs in learning English pronunciation.

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