

HARMONIZING FLUENCY: THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH SONGS ON SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG RURAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Abstract

In the contemporary context, English proficiency is a paramount skill, yet rural junior high school students in China grapple with challenges in speaking due to limited practice opportunities. This study investigates the efficacy of integrating English songs as an intervention to enhance speaking skills, particularly focusing on pronunciation and fluency. Employing a quasi-experimental approach, two classes were involved: a control class (7A) with 34 students and an experimental class (7B) with 32 students. Over a four-week period, the experimental group received English song-based intervention, while the control group adhered to traditional teaching methods. Pre-tests and post-tests, complemented by statistical analysis using SPSS software, revealed significantly higher mean scores for pronunciation and speaking fluency in the experimental class compared to the control class. The t-test results underscore a significant positive impact of English songs on improving speaking skills among rural junior high school students. This study establishes the value of incorporating English songs as a pedagogical tool, affirming its potential to address the unique challenges faced by rural students in acquiring essential English-speaking skills. Future studies incorporating qualitative research to deepen the understanding of the effectiveness of English songs in enhancing English speaking skills in diverse educational settings is recommended.

Index Terms: English Songs, Pronunciation, Speaking Fluency, English Speaking Skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills play a crucial role in the acquisition of English as a foreign language, demanding concerted efforts from English teachers to facilitate students' proficiency in this skill [1]. Particularly challenging for Chinese students, speaking remains their least developed language proficiency [2]. Recognizing this gap, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China recently introduced the 2022 English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education, setting a higher benchmark for junior high students to communicate effectively in English [3]. The curriculum also states that English teachers should adopt a variety of methods, such as the use of English songs and multimedia in the classroom, in order to enable students to speak English more effectively [3]. Optimally, based on the new curriculum, students are expected to be able to confidently communicate in English with good pronunciation and fluency.

Despite the curriculum's emphasis on meaningful communication, students face hurdles in expressing thoughts and opinions during class activities [4]. Contributing factors include anxiety, boredom, and a lack of vocabulary and proper pronunciation [5]. Traditional teaching methods, such as recitation and repetition, often fall short, hindering effective learning. To address this, some educators in China have turned to incorporating English songs in the classroom, creating an engaging environment that enhances pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall speaking proficiency [6], [7].

In the context of globalization, English proficiency is imperative for international communication, aligning with the goals outlined in the new curriculum [3]. However, the reality in Chinese junior secondary English education reveals a discrepancy between curriculum objectives and actual outcomes, with a predominant focus on listening, reading, and writing skills, and a neglect of speaking assessments [8],[9]. The inadequacy of current teaching methods, particularly in rural areas, contributes to a significant deficit in speaking skills among students, evident in inaccurate pronunciation, low fluency, and an inability to construct complete sentences [10]. This is especially noticeable in rural areas, where the teaching methods in English classrooms are still traditional, mainly based on the grammar-translation method [11], [12]. Many literature noted the underutilization of English songs in classrooms, where their potential to enhance linguistic knowledge remains untapped [13], [12]. The consequences of this deficiency extend beyond the classroom, impacting students' self-confidence, effective communication in real-life situations, and potentially hindering career development in a globalized workforce that prioritizes language skills [14], [11].

This research seeks to fill the gap in understanding the impact of incorporating English songs in the classroom, particularly in rural settings with limited resources. By focusing on pronunciation and fluency, the study aims to provide valuable insights into effective strategies for improving speaking skills among Chinese students, contributing to the broader goals of the new English curriculum.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aimed to examine the effect of the use of English songs on speaking skills in terms of pronunciation and speaking fluency of Grade 7 rural junior high school students in China. In line with this, the research question guiding the inquiry was “What is the effect of the use of English songs on improving speaking skills in terms of pronunciation and speaking fluency among Grade 7 rural junior high school students in China?”.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Components of Speaking Skills

Speaking is a vital language skill emphasizing effective communication. Scholars like [15] highlight its role in transferring information, focusing on comprehension and intelligibility [6]. Pronunciation, a crucial element, involves segmental and suprasegmental aspects, contributing to speaking objectives [16], [6].

3.2 Theoretical Framework - Krashen's Input Hypothesis

According to the Input Hypothesis, a learner picks up a second language through input [17]. Based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis, desirable language input should contain the following characteristics.

Firstly, the input language should be comprehensible which is an essential condition for the actual acquisition of language. Without comprehensible language input, students are exposed to more language input than they can receive, which significantly affects their learning effectiveness. Secondly, [17] stated the input language should be interesting and relevant. The more interesting and relevant the input, the more the learner will acquire the language without realizing it. Thirdly, the input of language material should not be grammatically sequenced. [17] Stated that the key to language acquisition is comprehensible input and teaching according to grammatical procedures is not only unnecessary, but also undesirable. Lastly, the input of language material should be a large amount of adequate reading and listening activities. Language learning requires a significant amount of input that's comprehensible, as well as a considerable number of understandable inputs is required for the acquisition of more complex language [18]. As learners' listening input gradually increases, they can naturally assimilate the language knowledge involved in the listening activities [18].

The use of English songs in the classroom is valuable and effective after understanding this theory. English songs as teaching materials in the English classroom can meet the four conditions of ideal input. With appropriate English songs that are comprehensible and relevant to the themes that teachers prepare to teach, students are greatly encouraged and deeply engaged in the learning process [19]. Songs provide students with authentic English expression and explicit English pronunciation because they have a strong sense of rhythm and conciseness [20]. Therefore, English songs with comprehensible lyrics provide the opportunity for students to perceive the composer's meaning, construct more realistic and concrete situations through their understanding of the songs and improve language acquisition skills. Diverse teaching strategies, including the use of English songs, are essential for motivating students and developing speaking skills [21].

3.3 Benefits of Using English Songs in Learning English

English songs offer psychological benefits by enhancing motivation, lowering anxiety, and fostering a positive learning environment [22], [23]. Linguistically, songs facilitate speaking and listening skills, aid in vocabulary memorization, and provide authentic language exposure [24], [20]. For example, the study of [20] suggest an overview of how students can practice and correct pronunciation by using English songs because songs contain supra-segmental elements that affect the pronunciation of the English language through rhythm, stress, and intonation. Another study by [25] concurred with the result as she has found that learning aided by utilizing English songs developed her students' language proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing as well as pronunciation, rhythm, grammar, and vocabulary.

Besides the above benefits, English songs also address psychological issues like reluctance and anxiety while also tackling linguistic challenges such as pronunciation and vocabulary [25]. Incorporating songs in the classroom creates an engaging and motivating environment, boosting learners' interest and linguistic competence [26]. Research indicates positive attitudes toward the use of English songs in classrooms [27], [28]. Given the above, it was found that only a few experimental studies have focused on the practical effectiveness of songs in teaching speaking skills, presenting an opportunity for further investigation. There is a need to bridge this gap by experimentally examining the impact of English songs on speaking skills, especially one which focuses among rural school, under the lens of the new English curriculum introduced in China since 2022.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach, specifically utilizing a quasi-experimental research design. The aim of this study was to test objective theories by examining the relationship between variables. The research focused on evaluating the impact of using English songs on the speaking skills of rural junior high school students. This study involved pre-tests and post-tests. The pre-test assessed the initial speaking skills of both groups, and the treatment (teaching with English songs) was applied to the experimental group. Post-tests were then conducted after 4 weeks to evaluate changes in speaking skills.

4.2 Sample

The study was conducted in Sunshine Junior High School (pseudonym), a rural school in China. Two 7th-grade classes participated: the experimental group (n=32) utilizing English songs, and the control group (n=34) employing traditional teaching methods. Table 3.1 detailed out their composition.

Table 1: Demographics of Samples

Class	Age	Boys	Girls	Total Number	Grade
Experimental class 7B	12-13	15	17	32	7
Control Class 7A	12-13	16	18	34	7

4.3 Procedure

The study spanned four weeks, from September to December 2023. The experimental group received treatment through English songs, while the control group followed traditional methods. In the English textbooks, each unit includes 4 parts, namely, speaking, listening, reading and writing. The experimental class 7B used English songs to teach the speaking component, which was about fifteen minutes, while the control class 7A used a typically practiced method focused on rote memorization and practice. The rest of teaching activities on the other three components were implemented the same to the experimental class 7B and control class 7A.

Table 2: Description of Activities Involved During the Speaking Component for Controlled and Experiment Classes

Experimental Group (7B)	Control Group (7A)
Listening to the song- for students to acquaint with the song	Teacher read the dialogue
Reading the lyrics of the song- for comprehension	Students repeat the dialogue
Discussing the meaning of the song with their classmates, based on their understanding,	Students were asked to memorize the dialogue.
Re-listening to the song- Students are instructed to identify all different speech sound changes in the song during the second hearing, including link, weak form, assimilating, reduction, and the absence of explosion.	
Singing along	
Teaching- Teacher to clarify the meaning of the song, with a focus on pronunciation	
Singing in unison or alone groups singing were implemented in the lesson and the group members correct each other's pronunciation, intonation, and other aspects	
Presentation- whole class sing together	

4.4 Selection of the English Songs

[29] And [22] emphasized that the criteria of selecting English songs are that the themes of the songs should be positive instead of relating violence, vulgar languages, and religion. Moreover, [22] points that the English songs should be selected to support the learning outcomes and the lyrics should be comprehensible and suited to the learners' age. Based on these standards, six songs which were aligned with the above criteria and related to the themes of the textbook following the curriculum were selected. For example, the song "Old Lang Syne" was used to teach the topic 3 on Best Friends, while "Merry Christmas" was chosen to be used in topic 5, with the theme "Celebrations and Holidays in America".

4.5 The Instrument

The pre-test and post-test of speaking in this research were adapted from the study of [10] which was to examine the effectiveness of the role-play in improving speaking skills among junior high school students. The samples used in [10] study were of the same educational level as the samples of this study, who also utilized the nationwide standard textbook. There were various types of items in the test, including questions of testing vowels, consonants, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, linking, rhythm, reading a short passage and answer questions and free talk. To align to the objective of this study, only items related to speaking were adopted. To ensure the validity of the pre-test and post-test of this study, the experts from the school's English department assessed the validity of question items which should be aligned with the course learning objectives of speaking skills. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted with a third class of the same grade (n=10) who were not the participants of the study. From the expert validation two items were modified accordingly based on the comments. This resulted in the final instrument containing two sections - section A and section B. Section A was designed to

examine the pronunciation including vowel, consonant, link, intonation, stress, and weak form while Section B was designed to examine the speaking fluency in terms of speaking skill. The result of the pilot study indicated that the items are reliable, with a Cronbach Alpha of 0.8 ($\sigma=0.8$) which is Good reliability [30].

4.6 Data Analysis

To ensure that the data of both classes are comparable, a normality test-Shapiro-Wilk test, was conducted. The result of the tests are presented in Table 3 and Table 4 below. It was found that at a significance level of 0.05, both classes' p-values exceeded 0.05, indicating that the data from both classes exhibited a normal distribution and t-test is valid to be used as comparative measure for both classes.

Table 3: Normality Test Results on Pronunciation of the Controlled and Experimental Classes before Intervention

Class	n	Mean	Std.	Skewness	kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk test	
						Statistic W	p
Control	34	64.32	12.05	-0.106	-0.662	0.984	0.889
Experimental	32	63.84	13.32	0.002	-0.425	0.992	0.997

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Table 4: Normality Test Results on Speaking Fluency of the Controlled and Experimental Classes after Intervention

Classes	n	Mean	Std.	Skewness	kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk test	
						Statistic W	p
Control	34	21.176	5.374	0.019	-0.328	0.994	0.999
Experimental	32	25.25	5.454	-0.011	0.521	0.986	0.989

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

5. RESULTS

5.1 Analysis of Students' Pretest Scores of Pronunciations and Speaking Fluency

The pretest scores for Pronunciation (Table 5) and Speaking Fluency (Table 6) revealed comparable proficiency levels between the control (34 students) and experimental (32 students) classes, suggesting no statistically significant difference for both pronunciation ($p=0.864$) and speaking fluency ($p=0.822$). This finding aligns with the literature, emphasizing that a balanced starting point is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of interventions [30]. Both sets of pretest scores exhibited normal distributions, ensuring a reliable foundation for subsequent analyses.

Table 5: Independent Group T-Test Results on Pronunciation of Controlled and Experimental Classes before Intervention

	Class (Mean±Std. Deviation)		t	p
	Control class (n=34)	Experimental class (n=32)		
Score	64.38±12.05	63.84±13.32	0.172	0.864

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Table 6: Independent Group T-Test Results on Speaking Fluency of Controlled and Experimental Classes before Intervention

	Class (Mean±Std. Deviation)		t	p
	Control class (n=34)	Experimental class (n=32)		
Score	20.41±6.51	20.78±6.75	-0.226	0.822
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

5.2 Analysis of Students' Posttest Scores Pronunciation and Speaking fluency

Following a 4-week intervention involving English songs, a significant enhancement in pronunciation ($p=0.020$) and speaking fluency ($p=0.003$) were observed in the experimental class compared to the control class (Table 7 and Table 8). A further testing using the paired t-tests confirmed this improvement, supporting a significant increase in pronunciation scores ($p=0.020$) and speaking fluency ($p=0.003$) for the experimental class ($p<0.05$). This suggests that the use of English songs positively influenced students' pronunciation abilities.

Table 7: Independent Group T-Test Results on Pronunciation of Controlled and Experimental Classes after Intervention

	Class (Mean±Std. Deviation)		t	p
	Control class (n=34)	Experimental class (n=32)		
Score	65.06±11.72	71.91±11.53	-2.391	0.020*
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

Table 8: Independent Group T-Test Results on Speaking Fluency of Controlled and Experimental Classes after Intervention

	Class (Mean±Std. Deviation)		t	p
	Control class (n=34)	Experimental class (n=32)		
Score	21.18±5.37	25.25±5.45	-3.056	0.003**
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Pronunciation

The positive impact of English songs on pronunciation skills aligns with existing literature emphasizing the motivational and participatory aspects of song-based learning [26]. The study challenges the notion that singer accents may hinder pronunciation improvement, emphasizing the importance of song selection and curriculum alignment. The results contribute valuable insights to ongoing discussions on innovative language teaching methods [20]. Additionally, the statistically significant difference in posttest scores ($p=0.020$) indicates the effectiveness of incorporating songs into language teaching. This finding diverges from prior studies that have posited challenges associated with using English songs to enhance pronunciation. These studies suggest that singers often introduce accents while singing, potentially hindering the benefits for students focusing

on pronunciation [31]. Notably, [31]'s research involved Malaysian university students already possessing a foundation in English pronunciation, prioritizing the attainment of an accent-free pronunciation. It is essential to recognize the distinct characteristics of their sample, as Malaysia boasts a more extensive English language application environment compared to the context of this current study.

Furthermore, our investigation specifically targets seventh-grade students in rural areas, characterized by comparatively weaker pronunciation foundations. Song selection played a pivotal role in our study, emphasizing lyrics that were not only comprehensible to the students but also aligned with the thematic content of their curriculum. Consequently, the observed improvement in English pronunciation skills in our study suggests a nuanced contextuality in the effectiveness of using English songs. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that song lyrics often encompass connected speech elements, such as assimilation and contractions, which may lead students to mispronounce words. Paradoxically, it is precisely due to these characteristics inherent in English songs, reflective of authentic communication patterns, that advocates for their integration into the classroom persist. These connected speech and contraction features mirror those utilized in everyday English communication, emphasizing the practical relevance of incorporating English songs as instructional tools for pronunciation improvement.

Moreover, the literature discussing the role of songs in teaching English stresses the importance of stimulating students' interest and motivation [23], [6]. The findings of this study corroborate these claims, suggesting that the engaging nature of English songs played a pivotal role in enhancing students' motivation to learn and improve their pronunciation skills. The positive impact of songs on students' active participation and openness to speaking English aligns with [20]'s conclusion that songs encourage pronunciation imitation, stress, rhythm, intonation, and connected speech.

This stark contrast between the experimental and control group further supports the assertion that the use of English songs, as a pedagogical tool, significantly contributes to pronunciation development. The nuanced analysis of pretest and posttest scores enhances the robustness of these findings, indicating that the impact observed is attributable to the intervention and not a mere fluctuation in individual performances.

6.2 Speaking Fluency

The noticeable enhancement in speaking fluency scores within the experimental class following the intervention with English songs is a significant discovery. It underscores the positive impact that a music-infused teaching approach can have on language skills, aligning with [32]'s argument that singing contributes to speaking fluency development.

However, it is noteworthy that these outcomes differ from those reported by [33], who found no correlation between listening to English songs and English-speaking proficiency among Indonesian English major university students. The quantitative methodology employed in Lailatuzzakiya's study [34], focused on listening without classroom integration, may account for the variation in results. In comparison to the seventh-grade rural students in this study, the differences in the research subjects, English university

students, and their decent English-speaking foundations might have caused the variations in the research outcomes. Additionally, this study solely focused on listening to English songs without considering the integration of these songs into English language learning in the classroom, which might also contribute to the differing research results. [33], however, reported that teaching methods and learning environment are crucial in influencing speaking skill. Therefore, effective methods of applying English songs in the classroom are important for improving English fluency. Moreover, these findings support previous studies suggesting that the use of English songs in learning English is an effective method for enhancing students' speaking skills by listening to and singing along with them [35].

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses the challenge of low English-speaking skills among rural Chinese seventh-grade students by investigating the impact of incorporating English songs into the classroom. The quasi-experimental design reveals a statistically significant improvement in pronunciation and speaking fluency for the experimental group compared to the control group, highlighting the efficacy of English songs. The findings contribute to existing literature, filling a gap in experimental research methodologies at the middle school level and providing quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of English songs, specifically for rural students in China.

The implications extend to English song studies, rural education, and student-teacher dynamics. Beyond enhancing pronunciation, the use of English songs significantly boosts speaking fluency, fostering a more engaging and proactive learning environment. Educators in rural areas can leverage English songs as powerful tools to enhance oral proficiency, moving away from less effective methods like rote memorization [36]. Future research could benefit from a more comprehensive approach, including observing classroom performance and interviewing teachers, extending the experimental duration, and increasing sample sizes for broader generalizability. These recommendations aim to strengthen the empirical foundation for the positive impact of English songs on spoken English skills, especially in rural educational settings.

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