

Young EFL Learner Beliefs about Classroom Songs

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Abstract: *We know mainly from common knowledge and partially from research that songs are among the most appropriate activities for young EFL learners. Therefore, any syllabus designed for teaching foreign languages to young learners contains songs as effective materials. However, research on songs is scarce in Turkish contexts considering the importance of the topic. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the beliefs of Turkish state primary school EFL learners about songs. Primary school EFL learner beliefs (n=129) were collected through a questionnaire and the results demonstrated that Turkish state primary school EFL learners have strong beliefs about songs, paralleling to previous research. However, results also demonstrated that songs were not being frequently used in Turkish EFL contexts. Therefore, the study concludes that classroom songs should be used more frequently in teaching EFL to young learners in Turkey.*

Key Words: *Young learners, classroom songs, English*

Introduction

Even though we cannot assume that an earlier start to learning a foreign language is automatically better, the teaching of compulsory EFL in primary schools has become common practice throughout the world and especially in Europe. Indeed, some estimates suggest that up to 80% of ELT globally is directed at students in primary or secondary schools, in a range of very diverse contexts around the world. According to Eurydice (2012) statistics, the compulsory teaching of a FL begins during primary education in virtually all European countries. In some countries, FL learning may begin very early in this stage of education whilst in others it becomes part of the core curriculum only in the final years. In some cases, where schools have a certain degree of autonomy in introducing languages into the curriculum, pupils start learning a FL even before it is compulsory for all.

In fact, all or almost all pupils already learn at least one FL by the age of 10 in Europe. Pupils are generally between 6 and 9 years old when they have to start learning a FL. The tendency to offer the provision of FLs from an earlier age, than previously, is evident in many European countries. The percentage of pupils enrolled in primary education in 2012 not learning a FL is 21.8%. In other words, nearly 80% of pupils start learning a FL in primary schools in Europe. English is by far the most taught FL in nearly all European countries during primary education (Eurydice 2012).

Given this context, we should set aside the arguments as to whether an early start to FL learning is beneficial or not, and seek for effective methods and materials to serve the YLs in the best means possible. Because, as clearly indicated thus far, ELT for YLs has expanded throughout Europe, and has become its own field of study as the age of compulsory EFL teaching has become lower and lower. So, we should concentrate on exploring appropriate methodologies and materials for YLs. In fact, songs are regarded as among one of the most appropriate and effective materials for young EFL learners. The term “*classroom songs*” will be used throughout this article, in order to avoid confusion between a “song”, such as a pop or a jazz song, and songs prepared specifically for the FL classrooms. Indeed, what is generally meant by songs when we talk about EFL contexts are “*classroom songs*”.

The purpose of this study is to explore the beliefs of Turkish state primary school EFL learners about classroom songs and to find out the current practice about classroom songs in the young learner EFL contexts. For this aim, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

- 1 What are Turkish young EFL learner beliefs about classroom songs?
- 2 What is the current practice about classroom songs in the young learner EFL contexts in Turkish state primary schools?

Classroom songs and young learners

Syllabus planning for young learner EFL contexts flourished as a reflection of the policies by lowering the teaching of compulsory EFL teaching. EFL syllabuses designed for young learners almost always focus on the communicative use of the English language, the skills of listening and speaking are set as priorities in primary education, and classroom songs are included as essential teaching tools for the young learner EFL contexts. Edelenbos et al. (2006), for example, argue that games and classroom songs have played a central part in a number of approaches in various countries. As to the philosophical background of this centrality, they talk about “*age-related language learning*” and they further argue that classroom songs are prime examples of age-related material.

In designing a syllabus for very young and young learners the focus should be on the communicative value of the language and should include games and classroom songs (Ersöz 2007). Similarly, Sharpe (2001) also argues that in planning the primary MFL curriculum attention should be focused on oral and aural ends. Thus, oral and aural learning in primary school MFL is *par excellence* an inclusive subject and that the limited amount of time devoted for MFL should be well spent and classroom songs should be included in the curriculum. When we plan a syllabus for the young learner EFL context we should make sure that it is experientially appropriate and that it definitely contains classroom songs, chants and rhymes (Bourke 2006). Cameron (2001) claims that in teaching EFL to young learners there is often a transfer of materials and activities from general primary practice, because primary practice has

some genuinely good techniques and ideas that work well with children and that among the prime examples of this transfer are classroom songs and rhymes. Indeed, classroom songs, rhymes, story-telling, role-plays and game-like activities with a high language content are strong features of many primary EFL contexts and pupils are able to memorize texts in classroom songs due to the melody connection. Classroom songs are also considered as appropriate for age-related language-learning and hence are referred as good practice and central to early language teaching. Therefore, any syllabus designed for teaching EFL to young learners contain or should contain classroom songs, chants and rhymes.

The most prominent features of classroom songs that reinforce language acquisition include their rhythmic and repetitive nature and the joy that the association between melody and content brings to the learning activity. When an input is assimilated through songs, that input is stored with other co-occurring elements, that is, the melody of the song and the emotional elements germinated by the melody. Multiple clues related to the stored input foster the retrieval processes from the registry web in the semantic and structural schemata. Thus, the use of classroom songs will ease both internalization and retrieval processes of the phonologic forms of language. The fostering influence of songs in the learning of a FL doubles, when the learners are young. This is because children are keener to rhythm and they have not yet constructed personal barriers as it is stated by Krashen (1981). Providing the children with a sufficient amount of input and interaction, embedded in a range of intrinsically interesting cross-curricular activity is important. Therefore, teachers of young learners may make an important contribution to early language education by introducing their classes to classroom songs.

Classroom songs are important teaching tools in creating a safe and natural classroom ethos and therefore may prove to be helpful in overcoming feelings of shyness and hesitation on the part of the learners. Because having a look at the learning characteristics of young learners will reveal that they need to develop a strong emotional attachment to their teacher. Their education, including language education, is a process to which they should be encouraged to contribute physically, emotionally and intellectually. Because of their limited attention span, young children need variety of activity. At this age many children are shy and they should join in classroom activities when they feel ready rather than when the teacher demands (Djigunovich and Vilke 2000). Classroom songs help children to learn because they provide a safe, non-threatening context within which to play with language. They provide excellent opportunities for repetition and practice which would otherwise be tedious. This repetition helps learning and this in turn leads to familiarity so that children feel comfortable with a language other than their mother tongue.

As most teachers find out, students love listening to music in the language classroom. Students often hold strong views about music and students who are usually quiet can become very talkative when discussing it. Singing is definitely one of the most effective language learning strategies reported by most children. Klein (2005), for example, who provides a comprehensive account of teaching English to eight- to ten-year-old German pupils at the beginning level, argues that teaching young learners is different from teaching adults. Young children tend to change their mood every other minute, and they find it extremely difficult to sit still. On the

other hand, they show a greater motivation than adults to do things that appeal to them. Therefore the language teacher has to be inventive in selecting interesting activities, and must provide a great variety of them. On this matter Klein (ibid.) reports that her experience shows that children respond enthusiastically to classroom songs and welcome them. Similarly, Shin (2006) claims that one way to capture the attention of young learners and to keep them engaged in activities is to supplement the activities with lots of brightly coloured visuals, toys, objects or classroom songs.

Finally, Şevik (2011:1029) provides the following comprehensive summary about the advantages of using classroom songs in young learner EFL contexts. Classroom songs:

- are regarded as the most effective way of teaching listening comprehension to young learners
- are a common feature of many primary MFL programmes
- are regarded as one of the mostly-enjoyed activities and one of the most effective language learning strategies by most young learners
- when used in appropriate ways, may extend young learners' attention spans
- are regarded as a good means for age-related language learning
- accelerate memorization
- provide a variety of comprehensible input
- provide a safe and natural classroom ethos
- provide a large amount of repetition which is not tedious and which results in automatic use of the target language
- provide a rich source of culturally-related elements.

Methods

Research Design

This study was designed as a descriptive study with an aim to explore the beliefs of young EFL learners about classroom songs and to explore the current practice about classroom songs in the young learner EFL contexts in Turkish state primary schools.

Participants and research sites

129 Turkish EFL learners all studying in Turkish state primary schools at Grade 4 (aged 10-11) in the southern city of Burdur, Turkey, voluntarily participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the primary schools and participants to get the most adequate data from the pupils within the researcher's reach in this city. The participants were selected from 4 different primary schools in Burdur city centre. The pupils' ages ranged between 10 and 11. The reason for this is the flexibility in recruiting pupils to primary schools in Turkey. Those, aged 10 occupied the lowest portion with 39,53% (n=51), and those aged 11 occupied the highest portion

with 60,46% (n=78). In regards to gender, the distribution was almost equal with 51,16% (n=66) girls, and 48,83% (n=63) boys. The 4 state primary schools were all centrally located and qualified English language teachers were running the EFL lessons in the 4 primary schools.

Research instrument

A questionnaire in Turkish was prepared by the researcher and was administered in 4 different Turkish state primary schools in the southern city of Burdur at the end of the 2012-2013 academic year. The questionnaire was composed of 16 questions, prepared under the light of the relevant literature. In the first part of the questionnaire the participants were informed about the purpose of the research. In the second part, they were asked to fill in demographic information about their gender and age. In the third part, the participants were asked to choose the best option which represented their opinion about classroom songs in learning EFL. The questionnaire included a three-point Likert type scale with three options, namely: 'agree', 'undecided', and 'disagree'. The last two questions asked the participants how many English classroom songs they already knew and how many they would like to learn per academic term.

Limitations of the study

The findings of this study are limited with the views of 129 Turkish state primary school students all studying in Burdur, Turkey. Therefore, the findings are not generalisable to all over Turkey. However, considering that education is nationally managed with the same standards by the National Ministry of Education in Turkey, similar findings are to be expected in other young learner EFL contexts in Turkey. Classroom observations and student interviews would surely have strengthened the study; however this was not possible due to teacher and parental concerns.

Data analysis

Following the administration of the questionnaire, the results obtained from the participants were analysed using an SPSS 11 package programmer. Each participant was given a participation number and the data were entered accordingly using descriptive analysis method. Later, the frequencies and percentages for each question were presented in 2 tables.

Results and discussion

The results obtained from the analysis of data for each statement will be presented in two tables and a discussion about each table will follow in this part of the study. Table 1 sets out the young EFL learners beliefs about classroom songs in percentages, for the first 14 statements in the questionnaire. The discussion about Table 1 below will focus firstly on the mostly agreed three statements, then the mostly disagreed three statements and the mostly undecided three statements will follow, and finally the remaining three statements will be discussed.

Results from Table 1 reveal at first look that statement eight is the mostly agreed item, with an agree rate of 86,05% (n=111). 13,18% were undecided and only 0,78% (n=1) disagreed with statement eight. This finding strengthens and parallels the earlier arguments and research findings that classroom songs develop the listening ability of YLs. Statement four is the second mostly agreed item, with an agree rate of 81,40%. 13,18% were undecided and only a minority of 5,43% disagreed with statement four. This result shows that YLs enjoy learning English through classroom songs. Statements two, five, and fourteen are the third mostly agreed items, with an agree rate of 79,07%. Statements two and five are both related to vocabulary learning and classroom songs. The results that they were equally agreed by the participants strengthen the reliability of these two items. This finding means that YLs remember and learn vocabulary easily by means of classroom songs, an argument paralleling previous discussions and research findings and in a way strengthens the arguments that classroom songs accelerate the memorisation of vocabulary. Results of statement fourteen reveal that classroom songs increase YL motivation, an essential factor in learning a FL. Only two participants disagreed with this statement.

Table 1: Young EFL learner beliefs about classroom songs (n=129)

Statements	Options					
	Agree		Undecided		Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. We should learn more classroom songs in English lessons	89	68,99	34	26,36	6	4,65
2. I remember the vocabulary easily when I learn them through classroom songs	102	79,07	23	17,83	4	3,10
3. Learning classroom songs in English lessons is a waste of time	9	6,98	14	10,85	106	82,17
4. I enjoy learning English through classroom songs	105	81,40	17	13,18	7	5,43
5. I learn vocabulary easier through classroom songs	102	79,07	24	18,60	3	2,33
6. Learning classroom songs is not effective in English lessons	3	2,33	27	20,93	99	76,74
7. I enjoy making various movements when learning classroom songs	87	67,44	28	21,71	14	10,85
8. Learning classroom songs in English lessons develops my listening ability	111	86,05	17	13,18	1	0,78
9. Learning classroom songs in English lessons increases my self confidence	85	65,89	34	26,36	10	7,75
10. Our teacher frequently teaches classroom songs in English lessons	6	4,65	35	27,13	88	68,22

11. I can sing a classroom song after listening to it a few times	79	61,24	45	34,88	5	3,88
12. There are a lot of classroom songs in our English lesson course book	23	17,83	33	25,58	73	56,59
13. I can answer the questions easily after listening to the classroom songs	55	42,64	61	47,29	13	10,08
14. Learning English through classroom songs increase my motivation	102	79,07	25	19,38	2	1,55

Item three is the mostly disagreed statement, with a disagree rate of 82,17% (n=106). 10,85% were undecided and 6,98% agreed with this statement. This finding again strengthens previous arguments about classroom songs in that classroom songs is not a waste of time when learning English and that classroom songs should be included in designing syllabus for young EFL learners. Item six is the second mostly disagreed statement, with a disagree rate of 76,74%. 20,93% were undecided and only 2,33% agreed with this statement. This finding also strengthens previous arguments that classroom songs are appropriate age-related materials for YLs, and that they are considered as effective in EFL contexts. Item ten is the third mostly disagreed statement, with a disagree rate of 68,22%. In fact this item is also the third mostly undecided item, with a rate of 27,13%, thus making a total of 95,35%. This finding reveals and strengthens the fact that classroom songs are not being frequently used in Turkish YL EFL contexts (i.e., see Şevik, 2011).

Item thirteen is the mostly undecided statement, with a rate of 47,29% (n=61). 42,64% agreed with this statement and 10,08% disagreed. The reason for the high undecided rate may be due the fact that classroom songs are not a common practice in the research schools, and therefore the participants cannot be sure about this statement. Item eleven, closely related to item thirteen, is the second mostly undecided statement, with a rate of 34,88%. However, 61,24% of the participants agreed to statement eleven and only 3,88% disagreed. This finding may mean that it is easier for YLs to learn to sing a classroom song than to answer questions about the classroom song. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, item ten is the third mostly undecided statement, with a rate of 27,13%.

The analysis of the results for the first statement reveals that the majority of the participants, 68,99% (n=89), think that they should learn more classroom songs in English lessons. 26,36% are undecided and only 4,65% disagree with the first statement. This finding parallels and strengthens previous research findings and arguments, and thus reveals that classroom songs should be included in primary EFL syllabuses. Results for statement seven indicate that most of the participants, 67,44% (n=87), enjoy making movements during classroom songs. 21,71% are undecided and 10,85% disagree with this statement. Unlike previous research, the participant beliefs about making movements were relatively low in this research. This may be due to the low frequency of teaching classroom songs in the research settings. Results for statement nine indicate that most of the participants, 65,89% (n=85), think that classroom songs increase their self-confidence. 26,36% are undecided and 7,75% disagree. Finally, results for statement twelve reveal that 56,59% (n=73) of the participants think that there are not enough classroom songs in their course books, and another 25,58% are undecided on this topic, thus making a total of 82,17%. This finding parallels to the findings of statement ten, and thus strengthens the argument that classroom songs are not used frequently in Turkish YL EFL contexts.

Table 2: The current practice about classroom songs (n=129)

Statements	Average
15. How many English classroom songs do you know?	1,29
16. How many English classroom songs would you like to learn each term?	4,57

Table 2 sets out the current practice about classroom songs in the research settings. The participants were asked the two questions mentioned in Table 2, and their answers are presented in averages. According to the answers to question fifteen, the participants knew an average of 1,29 classroom songs. Considering that the data were collected at the end of the school year, this result means that the participants learned an average of 1,29 classroom songs over two terms (a total of 36 weeks, 180 school days, 108 English classes). Participant answers to this question ranged from 1 classroom song to 5 classroom songs, which show that the four teachers in the research schools had different frequencies of teaching classroom songs. This average helps us to understand the percentage for statement ten, as explained earlier.

Finally, question sixteen asked the participants how many classroom songs they would like to learn each term (a total of 18 weeks, 90 school days, and 54 English classes). Participant answers to this question ranged from 3 classroom songs to 8 classroom songs, which show that the participants would like to learn almost seven times more songs than the current situation. The average classroom songs they would like to learn is 4,57 per term. This finding also strengthens participant beliefs especially about statement one, mentioned earlier.

Conclusion and recommendations

The primary aim of this study was to explore the beliefs of Turkish state primary school EFL learners about classroom songs and to find out the current practice about classroom songs in the young learner EFL contexts. Reviewing the relevant literature about classroom songs it becomes clear that they are regarded as a sine quo non for EFL teaching to young learners, that they are a common feature of many primary MFL programmes, that they develop the listening ability, that they are regarded as one of the mostly-enjoyed activities and one of the most effective language learning strategies by most young learners, that they provide comprehensible input, and that they accelerate memorisation, especially the memorisation of vocabulary. As the findings of this study demonstrate, according to the primary school EFL learners in this study, classroom songs are regarded as important, necessary and effective in EFL contexts.

It is worthwhile to revisit some of the research findings presented in Tables 1 and 2. The findings clearly demonstrated that classroom songs develop students listening abilities, with an agree rate of 86,05 (n=111) and only one student to disagree. This finding parallels and strengthens the arguments so far that classroom songs are an effective way of teaching listening comprehension. Again paralleling previous research and arguments, the findings of this study demonstrated that young learners enjoy classroom

songs, that they learn and remember vocabulary easily by means of classroom songs and classroom songs increase their motivation and self-confidence. These findings strengthen the pedagogical value of classroom songs in young learner EFL contexts.

Findings also demonstrated that young learners view classroom songs as effective in learning EFL and that classroom songs should be integrated into EFL lessons. A total of 82,17% (n=106) disagreed with the statement that learning classroom songs in English lessons is a waste of time, and only 6,98% (n=9) agreed with this statement. These findings also strengthened the argument that classroom songs should be included in the young learner EFL syllabus. The findings, however, also demonstrated that the teacher frequency of using classroom songs in EFL lessons is regarded as low by the students. A total of 95,35% (n=123) of the participants either disagreed or were undecided with the statement: “*Our teacher frequently teaches classroom songs in English lessons*”. This finding shows that the EFL teachers in the four research schools did not use songs frequently. The students stated that they knew 1,29 classroom songs on average. On the contrary, they stated that they would like to learn 4,57 classroom songs per term. These figures mean that the participants want to learn almost seven times more classroom songs per year. The findings also demonstrated that enough room was not given to classroom songs in the course books. A total of 82,17% (n=106) of the participants either disagreed or were undecided with the statement: “*There are a lot of classroom songs in our English lesson course book*”.

Under the light of the relevant literature and the findings from this study, it is possible to conclude that classroom songs are indeed necessary, effective and motivating for young learner EFL contexts, and that they should be included in young learner EFL syllabuses and used more frequently. Even though the results of this study are not generalizable due to the reasons mentioned earlier, I would like to recommend –depending on the findings of this study- that one classroom song should be taught per month in primary school EFL contexts.

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