

Songs as a Resource for the Teaching of English Lexical Items to Speakers of Gĩkũyũ in a Multilingual Environment

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Abstract

Knowledge of lexical items is fundamental to the development of language proficiency. In order to appeal to young learners to comprehend the meaning of lexical items and enhance language proficiency, songs can be effective tools for the teaching of English lexical items. Songs are not just for fun; they are a valuable educational tool that aids language acquisition as well as the whole learner's physical and mental development. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate the applicability of songs as a resource for the teaching of English lexical items. The study used 12 adult respondents who had learnt English as a second language using Gĩkũyũ songs with English lexical terms. The paper explains with the use of three Gĩkũyũ / English songs, purposively sampled, to illustrate how songs were applied and can still be applied in the teaching of English lexical items. The study notes that songs employ tactile-kinesthetic activities in which language is intentionally manipulated to facilitate lexical items acquisition in a multilingual context. This paper concludes that songs are an important resource in the teaching of second languages as they make teaching and learning enjoyable and instructional. The findings of this study are significant as they add a new learning paradigm intended to provide to language instructors, learners and curriculum developers with insights into the value of songs for vocabulary acquisition.

Key Words: Songs, lexical items, language proficiency, lexical items, multilingual context

Introduction

The growth of lexical items knowledge is an essential pre-requisite for language acquisition (Beck & McKeown, 2007). As such, language teachers employ a variety of effective lexical items teaching and learning strategies to enhance their students' growth of lexical items (Atta-Alla, 2012). Mukoroli (2011), for example, notes that without some knowledge of lexical items, neither

language production nor language comprehension would be possible. Among the various learning strategies employed by teachers, songs and rhymes have been noted to be effective in the teaching of lexical items (Read, 2007), since lexical items is a skill that needs to be developed and taken seriously (Atta-Alla, 2012).

Songs, according to Griffiee (1995), are good at introducing lexical items because they provide a meaningful context for the lexical items. Not only can songs be used to teach lexical items, but according to Falioni (1993) “practically all grammar points can be found in music texts...” (p.98). Songs have, therefore, become an integral part of our language experience, and if used in cooperation with a language lesson they can be of great value. Further, language teachers can use music and songs to develop students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, lexical items, grammar, and phonological discrimination in English (Lems, 1996; Obarow, 2004). Since research in language teaching has pointed out that students’ motivation and interest are among the most important factors for the learning of a language (Bolitho et al., 2003), children learn a second language better if they have more opportunities to be exposed to it (Ara, 2009). Thus, since songs are socially engaging and fun, they can be appropriate for language teaching.

To successfully enhance learners’ lexical items knowledge and skills, second language teachers need to consider lexical items learning strategies, learning goals, and teaching techniques (Nation, 2005). Generally, integrating songs into the early childhood curriculum is one such strategy which can contribute to a linguistically rich environment in which young children are exposed to the rich lexical items, syntactic complexity, and decontextualized language contained within the English language (Harper, 2011). As reiterated later in the rationale of this paper, songs can help to promote speaking fluency (Yuliana, 2003), develop reading and writing skills (Read, 2007). With the help of mixed activities, songs can make students’ speaking abilities grow, their pronunciation get better and their awareness of the language improve (Yuliana, 2003). Songs will also improve tenses and grammatical structures (Lems, 1996). All these functions of songs will help in the enhancement of lexical items.

Although several researchers have proposed various learning strategies for acquiring English lexical items in a second language environment (Mukoroli, 2011; Atta-Alla, 2012), to date, little

research has been carried out regarding the effectiveness of using Gĩkũyũ, for example, to teach English lexical items. Gĩkũyũ is a Bantu language spoken mainly as first language in Kenya by the Agĩkũyũ, whereas English is a Germanic language used as a second language in Kenya by many of the Kenyans. Second, traditional lexical items instruction for many language teachers has involves having students look words up in a dictionary, write definitions, and use words in a sentence (Bromely, 2007). It is with this in mind that this study is cognizant of these research gaps and proposes the usage of songs in which learners are actively involved to enhance lexical items acquisition. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to demonstrate Gĩkũyũ songs can be employed to enhance the acquisition of English lexical items.

The motivation of this research to study lexical items is based on several reasons. First, lexical items occupies an important position in language learning and teaching (Atta-Alla, 2012) and lexical items instruction is essential though insufficient for eventual success in L2 acquisition (Nation, 2001). Second, according to Biemiller (2006), there is a strong link between lexical items development and later literacy development. In addition, language and music are interwoven in songs to communicate cultural reality in a very unique way (Brand, 2007). Brand (2007) also adds that songs are embedded within a culture. Therefore, songs offer students of English as a second language lessons in grasping the nature and style of a particular culture.

Our choice of songs as a resource for the teaching of English lexical items is because the growing body of research in language teaching confirms that songs, rhymes, and poetry can help promote language growth. Songs are the means through which cultural themes can be presented effectively (Saricoban & Metin, 2000). Griffiee (1995) is more succinct and notes, “bringing a song into the classroom entails bringing the culture of the song with it”, and songs can be used as “a way of looking at a culture and comparing with other culture” (p. 5). Songs also enhance lexical items skills, and develop students’ phonological skills (Botwinick, 1997). Second, as Read (2007) notes, the use of songs enhances children’s language learning and language acquisition. In addition, since songs are acquired though the ear, they can help to improve listening skills of the young learners (Read, 2007; Yuliana, 2003).

Research Methodology

This research adopted a survey design because the focus was on collecting Gĩkũyũ songs that have been used to highlight specific lexical features. Two sets of respondents were used in the collection of songs. The first group was made up of adults in the age bracket 40-50 years who learned English using Gĩkũyũ in rural primary schools in the 1960's to 1980's. This group was purposively sampled on the basis of what Murphey (1992, p. 55) refers as the “song-stuck-in-my-head phenomenon”. This sample could remember the songs that they used to sing in the language lessons and through which they acquired English lexical items. Our choice of young learners in this study was motivated by the fact that children learn a language very naturally if they enjoy what they are doing in the class (Ara, 2009). It has also been said that children have a natural taste for music and because of that English language teachers around the use such enjoyable and supportive means for children to improve language learning and acquisition (Ara, 2009). Similarly, Kirsch (2008), notes that the use of songs is one of the most effective language learning strategies reported by most children while Rosová (2007) notes that rhymes, songs and games can be effective methods for teaching children a foreign language (Rosová, 2007).

After four Gĩkũyũ songs were collected through tape-recording, purposive sampling was employed to select three songs that the research deemed the most appropriate for the teaching of English lexical items. In this way, the popular Gĩkũyũ songs *Ũngĩenda gũthoma* “If you want to read” and *Kĩongo, ciande, maru na ciara* “head, shoulders, knees and toes” and *Mwarimũ witũ teacher* “Teacher our teacher” were selected. Content analysis, which is within the qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 2008), guided the analysis of the song to identify the parts of the song that were relevant to the achievement of the research objective. Thus, we did a word by word, sentence by sentence analysis of the content in the song, as presented in our research findings.

Theoretical Framework

The Affective Filter Hypothesis as postulated by Krashen (1985) and which places premium on learner's motivation, attitude and emotions seems a relevant theoretical framework. Krashen (1985) argues that *affective learning* will occur when the *affective filter is weak*. When the learner is in such an affective state as highly motivated, self-confident and at ease, the filter will be weak and allow in plenty of input, which means a positive attitude toward learning and the optimum state of language learning are present. On the converse, when the filter is stronger, the learner is

haunted with low motivation, lack of self-confidence and high anxiety. Consequently, the learner is not ready for language acquisition or learning. The Affective Filter Hypothesis, therefore, postulates that an effective teacher should be capable of providing a classroom atmosphere conducive to motivating, encouraging his students and lessening the learners' anxiety. Thus, this framework is relevant to analyze songs since songs motivate young learners and imbue them with a positive attitude towards learning. This study, therefore, bases its theoretical arguments on studies by scholars such as Millington (2011), Li and Brand (2009), Brand (2007) and Milton (2008) among others who have relentlessly argued for the use of songs in language learning and teaching.

Literature Review

There is a variety of educational literature discussing the use of songs in the English as Second Language classroom (Kramer, 2001). Thus, this study classifies such research into studies on songs in Language Teaching in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Studies on songs in Language Teaching in Europe

Atta-Alla (2012), for example, reports the effects of using children's rhymes and songs on developing adult English language learners' comprehension and production lexical items skills. The study samples forty-five adult English language learners were instructed and trained in some lexical items skills through a lexical items programme based on children's rhymes and songs. The effectiveness of the training programme was measured by comparing the participants' scores on the pre-test and post-test. The results of the pre- and post-tests indicated statistically significant differences favoring the post-test. The programme proved to be effective in developing the participants' comprehension and production lexical items skills as shown by the lexical items gain scores, which were consistently higher on the post test.

Ayotte (2004), on the other hand, investigated whether listening to songs played a role in the acquisition of second language verb forms when teaching French as Second Language. The study noted that subjects who listened to songs performed with more grammatical accuracy on the immediate posttests on three verb forms – present, future, and conditional. The other experiment,

however, showed no statistical significance between language taught with music and language taught with no music.

In another study, Sevik (2011) explores the views of Turkish state primary school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers about songs in teaching English to young learners. Data were collected through a questionnaire and the results showed that the Turkish EFL teachers have strong beliefs about the pedagogical value of songs and about the effectiveness of using songs in teaching EFL to young learners. However, the study also found that teachers had challenges in accessing suitable songs to use in their classes and in measuring student success when they use songs. Therefore, it was suggested that teachers should be provided with materials to use in their classes.

Studies on Songs in Language Teaching in Asia

Shen (2009) examines how English Language Teaching (ELT) can be made enjoyable and effective. The study notes that one feasible pedagogical application is to integrate English songs into ELT. Shen notes that songs possess many intrinsic merits, such as a kaleidoscope of culture, expressiveness, recitability and therapeutic functions, which render it an invaluable source for language teaching. In another study, Brand (2007) notes that song lyrics can be used in sensitizing Chinese ESL learners to the importance of effective intercultural communication. He, therefore, advocates the use of song lyrics in helping create a natural speaking environment that more closely adheres to the intercultural communication skills necessary for ESL students to understand English and to be understood by others. Huy Le (2007), a Vietnamese ESL teacher, also noted that music is highly valued by both students of English and (ESL) teachers in the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Ara (2009), on the other hand, explores the use of songs, rhymes and games in teaching English to young learners in Bangladesh. He argues that songs, rhymes and games can be very effective tools for teaching children a foreign language and suggests that they should be incorporated at the primary level English curriculum in Bangladesh.

Studies on Songs in Language Teaching in Africa

In a study undertaken in South Africa, Horn (2007) notes the positive enhancement in listening skill among 72 second language (L2) Grade one learners, who were from an English primary peri-urban school in South Africa, where English is the medium of instruction. The participants were

divided into two classes in which the control group and the experimental group had the same participants. First, a pre-test was conducted on both the groups. During the period of six month, music and movement was incorporated in the daily program for the experimental group, but not for the control one. After six month, a post-test was introduced to both groups. Her findings showed that music and movement may be successful in the early years of ESL learners' language acquisition. In addition, the study showed a positive outcome of the use of music to enhance the auditory and visual perception of the young ESL learners. Puhl (1989) undertakes a study in South Africa in which he reinforces the importance of songs and music activities in the teaching of English as a Second Language.

Findings and Discussion

We use the Gĩkũyũ songs below *Ũngĩenda gũthoma* “If you want to read” and *Kĩongo, ciande, maru na ciara* “head, shoulders, knees and toes” and *Mwarimũ witũ teacher* “Teacher our teacher” to illustrate how songs are used in the teaching of lexical items in English. The English equivalent is given in italics.

Song 1: Ũngĩenda gũthoma “If you want to read”

Gĩkũyũ

Ũngĩenda gũthoma “Primary” cukuru,
Wambĩrĩrie “nursery” ũgĩe na ũmenyo
“Teacher” nĩ mwarimũ
“Chair” nĩ gĩĩ
“Window” nĩ ndiricha
“Arm” nĩ guoko

English

*If you want to read in the primary school
start in the nursery and get wisdom and knowledge
Teacher is a teacher
Chair is a chair
Window is a window
Arm is arm*

Song 2: Kĩongo, ciande, maru na ciara “head, shoulders, knees and toes”

English

Kĩongo
Ciande
Maru na Ciara x3
Kĩongo

Gĩkũyũ

*Head,
Shoulder
Knees and toes X 3
Head,*

Ciande	<i>Shoulder,</i>
Maru na Ciara x3	<i>Knees and toes</i>
Ritho	<i>Eye,</i>
Gūtū	<i>Ear,</i>
Iniūrū	<i>Nose,</i>
Kanua	<i>Mouth</i>

Song 3: Mwarimū witū teacher “Teacher our teacher”

Mwarimū witū, <i>teacher</i>	our teacher, teacher
Nīweka ūru <i>bad</i>	you have done something wrong, wrong
Nīkwīra ciana <i>children</i>	for telling children, children
Cithiĩ mūgūnda <i>garden</i>	to go the garden, garden
Cikoine mbembe <i>maize</i>	to pluck maize, maize
Itarĩ na rūtha <i>permission</i>	without permission, permission

Songs 1, 2 and 3 presented above can be employed in the teaching of English lexical items since most learners find it difficult to understand the different lexical items in the language. In the song *ũngĩenda gũthoma* “If you want to read” above, five lexical items “primary”, “nursery”, “teacher”, “chair,” “window” and “arm” are introduced to the learner. In the song ‘*Mwarimū witū, teacher*’ the lexical items “teacher”, “bad”, “children”, “garden”, “maize” and “permission” are introduced to the learners. The learners will, therefore, find it easier to understand the English lexical items having been introduced to them in the song. The learners can keep on referring to the song when not sure of the meaning of a particular word in English. The lexical items in the song are authentic, simple, natural and used in meaningful school domain context. That is, the song is presented in themes which are very familiar to young children such as “primary”, “nursery”, “teacher”, “chair,” “window”, “arm”, “bad”, “garden”, “maize” and “permission”. This is consistent with previous research which has found that lexical items should be presented in simple and meaning context (Read, 2007; Yuliana, 2003).

In Song 2, *Kĩongo, ciande, maru na ciara* “head, shoulders, knees and toes”, learners can dramatize the song to put more emphasis on English lexical items. The rhythm of the second song serves to evoke wonderful images of body parts. The rhythm and physical action involved in the second

song provide fun drills of lexical items for parts of the body. The second song, for example, combines tactile-kinesthetic activities in which language is intentionally explored, manipulated, and experimented within the context of nursery rhymes. This song also involves lots of repetition which is very effective in children's language class as young learners love to repeat and mimic words and sounds. Therefore, through this kind of activity learners naturally pick up the lexical items with its accurate sound, words and sentences. The second song involves repetitive actions that are orally based and simple enough for children to understand what is expected of them. Since the words in the song are repeated several times, and part of a child's linguistics may be formed when the song is learned by heart, this combination makes the song memorable.

In Song 3, the English lexical items are introduced in a different way from song one and two. The English word is presented after the Gikūyū word without the word '*ni*' 'means'. The learner is expected to infer the meaning of the English words from the context. The repetition of the lexical item in the two languages is meant to ease the understanding of the meaning. The use of an everyday activity, going to the garden also enhances the learning and makes it fun.

The findings of this study are in consonance with a plethora of educational literature looking at the use of songs in the ESL classroom. Millington's (2011), for example, argues that songs can help learners improve their listening skills, pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax. Millington's (2011) also argues that songs reflect culture and increase students' overall enjoyment of learning a second language. In addition, Li and Brand (2009) posit that songs "with their repeated lyrics and rhythms is a possible tool for enhancing learning / memory of vocabulary development and other language competencies such as grammatical structures and pronunciation, especially for ESL students" (p.7). Similarly, Brand (2007) opines that song lyrics are embedded within a culture, its values, symbols, and beliefs. Thus, exposure to song lyrics, not only teaches vocabulary, grammar, rhythmic speech, phrases, and meanings, but a song, as a sort of ambassador of a culture, offers ESL students lessons in grasping the nature and style of a particular culture (Brand, 2007).

In another study, Milton (2008) assigned outside classroom tasks to students and found that students enjoyed the songs enormously and acquired a sizeable vocabulary. Therefore, the thrust of the argument of this paper which is also buttressed by the above literature is that songs are

pedagogical tools and instruments of imparting culture. Songs are a useful learning resource that will help in bridging two cultures: English and African. This trend speaks to the emerging trends in language learning in Africa where the resources in the African indigenous languages can be utilized not only for sustainability of the African culture but also to facilitate successful learning of a second language in a meaningful and enjoyable way. Such methodology will certainly bring connection between two cultures.

Recommendations

The findings of this paper indicate that the use of songs has implications in the teaching of lexis in English. The study, therefore, recommends that teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and assessment specialists to work together and ensure that the use of songs in teaching of English becomes the norm in a second language classroom since it makes the learning of lexical items enjoyable and meaningful (Atta-Alla, 2012).

Second, the study recommends that teachers of English as a Second Language should undergo in-service programmes to train them on the use of songs as a methodology of teaching English since many teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about the impact of songs. Many teacher training programmes do not train in the use of songs in language teaching (Jensen, 2000). According to Sharpe (2001), the planning of the primary modern foreign language curriculum should consider the use oral methods such as songs in language teaching and learning.

Conclusions

From the findings of this paper, we note that songs are important because they make learning second languages enjoyable. This finding implies that teachers of languages should utilize songs in their classrooms for maximum enjoyment and acquisition of lexical items. Moreover, songs increase memorability. As Murphey (1992, p.121) puts it: “The music ties words and motion together and increases memorability.” He refers to this impact as the “song-stuck-in-my-head phenomenon” (p. 55). Songs that combine tactile-kinesthetic activities make learning of lexical items fun and instructional. This study, therefore, strengthens previous research findings about the role of songs in teaching English to young learners.

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