

SONGS AS AUTHENTIC INPUT IN EFL CLASSROOM

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Rezumat: *Materialele didactice, cum ar fi manualele și caietele de lucru sunt considerate componente importante ale procesului de învățare. Acestea servesc drept bază pentru o mare parte din conținuturile lingvistice și tematice pe care le însușesc elevii în sala de clasă. Cu toate acestea, există numeroși cercetători care promovează necesitatea expunerii elevilor la un material didactic mai autentic. Argumentul lor principal este nevoia de a pregăti pe cei ce învață să folosească limba în situații specifice din viața reală. În acest sens, utilizarea melodiilor în predarea limbii engleze este văzută ca o sursă potențială de limbaj autentic. Beneficiile acestei practici s-au dovedit a fi numeroase, precum crearea unui mediu plăcut de învățare, creșterea motivației elevilor, dar și neapărat îmbunătățirea abilităților de ascultare și vorbire.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *engleza ca limbă străină, limbaj autentic, autenticitate, cântece.*

1. Introduction

Over the years, teaching resources have proven to be essential components of the teaching process. As a result, language instructors have always faced a continuous struggle in finding the most suitable and efficient teaching means. Using appropriate teaching tools is, therefore, a key to successful learning, not only in terms of the EFL classroom, but also in any other teaching setting. Differently put, by choosing the right means, a teacher can considerably facilitate the learning that occurs both inside and outside the classroom. One can say that it is a sort of input-output system, in which the teacher is responsible for providing the learners with appropriate “data” that would generate afterwards an effective outcome.

During the past decades, there has been a growing debate about the type of this input, and in particular, the objectives a teacher should follow while introducing it in an EFL teaching environment. As the purpose of learning a foreign language is the need to use it in real-world situations, most researchers in the field support the idea of bringing authentic language input to the EFL classroom. They think that one can increase learners’ interest, motivation and their learning success only by using genuine instances of language.

This study, thus, aims at explaining the role of authenticity in learning a foreign language, in particular, the way songs can be used as sources of authentic input and the outcome one can expect by using songs in an EFL teaching context. In addition, the paper seeks to examine the notions of input and output in regard to the language learning process.

2. The input-output model in the EFL context

Originally belonging to the field of information technologies, the notions of input and output gradually entered the register of philological sciences as well. The input concept is actually the basis of one of the most relevant language learning theories, established by the American scholar- Stephen Krashen in 1980's. According to Krashen [7], language input is a highly important factor in the process of language learning. By input, he means comprehensible language data learners should be exposed to, in order to acquire a foreign language. He argues that, in fact, there are only two "true causative variables", by means of which learning can take place [7, p. 9]. The first variable is the language input the learner receives and understands, and the second one is the strength of his/her affective filter, or, "the degree to which the acquirer is open to the input" [7]. Krashen [7] draws particular attention to the input's optimal level of difficulty, claiming that for efficient learning, the input should follow the $i + 1$ formula, where i is the current level of learner's proficiency [7, p.21]. This principle resembles, by the way, Vygotsky's¹³ zone of proximal development – a theory according to which learning takes place during human interaction in an environment where the learner receives an input that is one step beyond his/her current stage of competence.

Krashen's *monitor model*¹⁴ is quite complex and intricate, triggering the interest of many researchers over the years. Many of them adopted some of the aspects of Krashen's hypothesis, building then their own theories. For example, Ellis [5] developed a computational model of second language acquisition focused on language input (figure 1). The model illustrates the way the language input turns into an output, just as it usually occurs within the framework of a computer software.

INPUT \rightleftarrows INTAKE \rightleftarrows KNOWLEDGE \rightleftarrows OUTPUT

Figure 1: *Ellis's model [4] for second language acquisition*

Source: Ellis, R. [5]. *Second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 35

The figure shows how the input, to which the learners are exposed, is usually processed in two stages. First, the language learners comprehend some parts of the input, turning them into intake. Second, some of the intake which finds its way to the long term memory is then turned into knowledge which results in spoken or written output. What distinguishes this model from Krashen's is the relevance it gives not only to the language input, but also to its output.

Swain [14] also speaks about the importance of output in teaching a foreign language. He treated Krashen's model quite critically, particularly his input hypo-

¹³ **Lev Semionovich Vygotsky** – a Soviet psychologist, the founder of an unfinished Marxist theory of human cultural and bio-social development commonly referred to as "cultural-historical psychology", a prominent advocate for a "science of the Superman", a new psychological theory of consciousness, and leader of the Vygotsky Circle.

¹⁴ **The Monitor Model** posits five hypotheses about second language acquisition and learning: Acquisition-learning hypothesis, Natural order hypothesis, Monitor hypothesis, Input hypothesis, Affective filter hypothesis.

thesis. Swain [14] argues that „besides comprehensible input, comprehensible output can also provide the necessary data” for language learning [14, p. 4]. He states that language learning occurs when by noticing a gap in his/her linguistic knowledge of the foreign language, the language learner tries to modify his/her output. This output modification “may end in learning a new aspect of the language, which has not been acquired yet” [14]. This view sharply contrasts with Krashen’s input hypothesis where the role of comprehensible output is neglected or minimized. Besides, the learners’ language output plays a central role in helping teachers to track the learners’ progress in order to adapt the future learning materials to their real needs afterwards.

3. Benefits of using authentic input in EFL classroom

Authentic input refers to the exposure learners have to language in use, which is usually produced by a native speaker “for a real audience, conveying a real message” [6]. It is clear then, that the authentic language input comes in contrast to the one used in the EFL classes, where learners learn predominantly from contrived materials. In this regard, the language presented to students in textbooks has been long recognised as a poor representation of the real thing, or as stated by Crystal & Davy [4] – “far away from that real, informal kind of English which is used very much more than any other during a normal speaking lifetime”.

Even though many attempts have been made lately to redress the situation, there are still plentiful gaps between the amount of genuine input used in the EFL classrooms and the one specifically designed for teaching purposes. In this regard, Gilmore [6] claims that, after so much research done in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, now more than ever, has come the time for a fundamental change in the way foreign language teachers design their teaching materials. Even if he does not use the term "authentic input," he refers indirectly to it by employing the notion of "discourse", which is nothing but genuine units of language used in a particular social context:

“Awareness of discourse and a willingness to take on board what a language-as-discourse view implies can only make us better and more efficient syllabus designers, task designers, dialogue writers, materials adaptors and evaluators of everything we do and handle in the classroom. Above all, the approach we have advocated enables us to be more faithful to what language is and what people use it for. The moment one starts to think of language as discourse, the entire landscape changes, usually, forever. [6, pp. 98-99]

Considering the advantages of the authentic input, Adam et al. [1] state that its significance comes not only from a pedagogical perspective, but also from a psychological one. They claim that by using authentic input in EFL classroom, students become more confident, interested and motivated, since they see a point in what they learn. Accordingly, learners realize that they can “survive” in a real-life communication situation, as the input they have benefited from “is of use to them in real, concrete, veridical situations as compared to the sterile, abstract ones presented in textbooks” [1]. The same idea is shared by Bahrani & Tam [3], explaining that authentic language helps learners “to notice the immediate relevance of what they do in the classroom to what they need to do in the real-world communication.” [3, p. 70]

Many other researchers have realized the role of authentic input in EFL setting. Taking into consideration some empirical studies it becomes obvious that the effect of authentic input on learners' achievement is exclusively positive. Thus, besides the advantages listed above, one can also highlight the input's contribution to the development of the four basic learner's skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. For instance, Otte [12] conducted a study on the effect of aural authentic texts on listening comprehension skills involving a number of students in the USA. He noticed that apart from increasing their motivation, authentic materials developed the students' listening comprehension skills as well. In addition, various scholars have confirmed the positive implication of authentic input in developing reading skills after learners have been introduced to new authentic vocabulary and expressions.

Rashid & Majid [13] bring into light another researcher – Harmer who claims that after exposing the learners to authentic input, they started to produce better language and to acquire it faster. Another important advantage to be considered is the cultural information the authentic input brings to the learners' attention, immersing him/her, undoubtedly, in the cultural context of the target language.

4. Songs as a source of authentic input for EFL learners

There are several sources of authentic input to be used in the classroom, such as TV shows, movies, news, cartoons, radio, newspapers, songs, etc. As far as songs are concerned, it is necessary to distinguish authentic songs from instructional ones. Authentic songs are composed and written for the music industry. Being usually created by musicians and lyricists, these songs aim to entertain the public and become hits. They do not follow any educational or teaching purposes, unlike instructional songs, which are written with the purpose of being included in a language textbook, or a site used by learners of a new language. Authentic songs can belong to any musical genre. These songs are available on the internet, radio and public media. Most of the young people are into popular music; accordingly, authentic songs constitute a pleasant aspect of their lives.

As pointed by Metaxa [10] learning a foreign language can be quite stressful, so that creating an environment, which has minimal stress, turns into a very important task for an EFL teacher. In this respect, it was proven that a song's melody can reduce anxiety and lower inhibition in foreign language learners. Thus, learning a new concept or new vocabulary through songs is less threatening than a lecture or a written passage. In this respect, Jackson M. F. and Joyce D. M. claim that group singing "can lower the walls between people, decrease competitive instincts and build cooperation in its place" [10]. Richard-Amato P. A. adds that songs can be very motivating "since most lyrics are often meaningful to the learners when compared to long reading passages or lectures" [10, pp. 45-46].

The amount of authenticity a song implies is extremely high. Apart from bearing relevant material for learning English, such as vocabulary elements and grammar-applied rules, authentic songs fulfil a variety of other roles such as providing the learners with aural awareness, voluminous cultural information and ge-

neral knowledge. The songwriter Don Schiltz emphasizes the importance of music appreciation across the curriculum:

“I’ll tell you about a class I had...music appreciation. I didn’t really think of it as a class. I thought of it as the period where we went and sang songs. We were learning that English precisely presents a writer’s thoughts and feelings, that songs are a form of communication. We were learning history through the songs of the nation. It was better than any other history class in my life. We were learning math, discovering the relationships between parts, and that composition followed mathematical rules. And, we were learning to listen; if you don’t listen you can’t learn. This music appreciation connected my entire studies. [10]

Songs represent a hundred percent of an authentic input, as they have always been important forms of human communication and a huge part of one’s culture and society, in particular historical situations. With the help of authentic songs, teachers can introduce almost every topic being it greetings, colours, seasons, love, war or fashion. With authentic songs, language instructors can also integrate grammar into the lesson almost unnoticed. It allows the learners to repeat the previously learned grammar, to deduce new grammar rules and to turn then, this input, into new language knowledge. Songs are particularly well suited as audio texts, since they are valuable authentic listening material. After listening to a song and working with its structure and content, learners can write their own stanzas, adding their own personal details or altering the song entirely. Besides, a song can be easily transformed into role-playing, for example, allowing the learners to apply the output they have already gained in real life situations. [11, pp. 6-17]

5. Choosing songs for EFL classes

A teacher who would like to bring a song into his EFL classroom should take into consideration various aspects. Differently put, selecting a suitable song which will provide the learners with some valuable input, implies compliance with several rules and criteria.

In this respect, Lems [8] comes with some useful suggestions. His first recommendation is to choose a song which lyrics should be “clear and loud, not submerged in the instrumental music”. The second piece of advice concerns the songs’ vocabulary load, since the song should be “appropriate to the proficiency level of the learners” [8]. To illustrate this idea, he brings the example of Led Zeppelin’s song called “Stairway to Heaven”. He claims that this song has vivid imagery and possibilities for multiple interpretations, which might be successful with an advanced-level class. With other learners, however, it could turn into an unsuccessful learning experience, because of its fast rhythm, obscure references, and lack of repetition. According to the third suggestion, songs “should be pre-screened for potentially problematic content, such as references to violent acts or inappropriate religious allusions”. [8, pp. 4-5]

Griffiee D. T. recommends using short, slow songs for beginning-level learners and discusses activities such as creating song word puzzles, drawing a song, or showing related pictures [8, p.5]. With higher levels, he suggests using songs that tell stories, moving toward longer, fast songs that have fewer high frequency vocabulary items.

It is obvious that we need to keep in mind certain things when putting a song into an EFL teaching context. First of all, teachers should think about their purpose of using the song during the lesson, carefully examining what it is they want their class to learn out of it. Taking into account Krashen's theory, and not only, language instructors have to think about the language proficiency level of their class, which would determine not only which songs to be used, but also what other activities such as games or written exercises the teacher will use to develop the lesson. The learners' age and their cultural background are also worth considering while choosing the songs. That is why teachers should let the learners choose a song themselves. Finally, the teacher should take care of the technical part, which assures the channel through which songs become accessible for the learners in the classroom.

6. Song-based tasks and activities

As mentioned above, a song, apart from all the benefits it brings in the EFL classroom, remains to be an important authentic audio material. Consequently, various tasks can be designed by the teacher to be used before, during and after the listening phase.

Pre-listening activities are intended to activate learner's background knowledge, this being a key stage, according to Lopera [9], in the process of working with a song. He states, "much of the meaning understood from the text, is not really actually in the text itself, but in the one who receives the input, in the background or schematic knowledge of this subject" [9, p. 140]. He continues by explaining that the process of turning the input into intake are similar in reading and listening, the only difference being only the channel the information comes through. The role of the teacher, consequently, is to become a bridge between the students' previously acquired schemata and the new input coming from the song. Pre-listening tasks are intended, therefore, to prepare the learner for the upcoming work with the song. These include different prediction-based tasks, learners usually trying to guess the song's topic, drawing of associations, etc.

Once the learners have activated and built some background knowledge, the teacher proceeds with while-listening activities. During this stage, learners come into direct contact with the audio input, by listening to it. As for while-listening tasks, learners could have to sequence the events in the song, match the image with the expression, cross out expressions already mentioned, make true or false exercises, etc.

In order to verify and expend the knowledge acquired while working with the song, learners should do some after-listening tasks. For instance, they could discuss the theme of the song, share their own experiences related to the song, reflect and argue on the issues they have listened to in the song. [9, pp. 140-143]

7. Conclusion

To conclude, one must say that various factors influence language learning in an EFL setting. However, the learners' exposure to authentic language input has proven to be an indispensable tool, because of several reasons: it meets the learners' needs, offers the chance to become truly competent in a foreign language, increases learners' motivation and insures the much needed mental comfort and confidence for better

language learning. A concrete example of such a language input is the use of authentic songs, which are not specifically created to be used for pedagogical purposes. The teacher should carefully choose the songs to be used in the classroom so that they would help him/her realize the set learning objectives, on the one hand, and so that they can provide a valuable vocabulary, grammar and cultural input, on the other.

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