Teaching English Vocabulary to Blind and Visually Impaired Children through Using English Songs and Short Stories

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ABSTRACT
Using proper tools along with having a learning atmosphere as energetic as possible will lead any teacher to a huge success in his/her teaching process regardless of the students’ type and various learning styles and abilities. The purpose of the present study is to determine the impact of using English songs in teaching English vocabularies to blind- and visually-impaired female children. In this study, eight 7 to 10-year-old blind- and visually-impaired children from Narjes BVI Complex in Tehran were selected as the participants. The sampling method was non-random availability sampling as there was no access to other BVI children. Since they did not know English at all, they were completely homogeneous regarding their English knowledge background. Six out of eight students were completely blind, and just two of them were visually-impaired. Those visually-impaired students could not see anything but shadows. For classifying them into two groups, one visually-impaired student was put in the first group and another one in the second group. The teaching instruments used in this study were English songs, short stories, and embossed flash cards while the only instrument used for evaluating their performance was teachers’ direct observation and evaluation of students’ behaviors. Also, two interviews were held to know their ideas about using songs and music in order to learn English vocabularies; one interview was held before the instruction and the other after the instruction. The students built upon their feedback toward the teaching tools and method while they claimed to prefer to listen to songs as they gave them a lot of fun in class.

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1. Introduction
There are many Blind- and Visually-Impaired (BVI) children all around the world. These BVI children can learn anything as well as sighted children but in a lower speed. Being blind does not mean anything but being different. Using song and music in BVI children English classrooms can work as a tool to accelerate their learning speed. There is a strong and powerful relationship between music and language. Listening to songs is a suitable technique for learning English vocabularies and for saving them in one’s long term memory. According to Brewer (2005), “Soft music stabilizes mental, physical, and emotional rhythms to attain a state of deep concentration and focus in which large amounts of content information can be
processed and learned” (P.2). Besides, Plato (1987) states “Music is a moral law. It gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, and a life to everything” (P.7). In this regard, Jones (2005) believes that “Much research has been devoted to the role soft music can play in developing or focusing the mind in learning English language words” (P.9). As for the computer age, it is suggested that a CD being played at a medium volume cause students to relax and de-stress. The volume should be low, and it should create a filter for unwanted noise (Gourley, 2001). Maximizing lifelong success is the goal of education”. Students with visual impairments have unique learning needs that must be addressed if they are to access the general education core curriculum and become independent, productive citizens. In other words, a special child is one who possesses some characteristics which is not common in normal people. In simple words, a special child is different from other members of the group due to deviance in either one or more aspects of life. Children who have lost their sight are around 4,000 times more likely than sighted youngsters to develop exceptional musical abilities or learning other languages. The present study seeks to find out the effectiveness of using music and songs in teaching BVI children English vocabularies.

2. Review of the Literature

The concept of being blind or visually-impaired refers to a significant loss of vision even though the person may wear corrective lenses (reference?). Based on the place where they live and the society that they share their life, they have different types of education, for example, based on what Pfeiffer (2010) represented in his research, children with visual impairments including blindness comprised less than 0.8 percent of those, ages 2 through 21, who receive special education services in Virginia. Specifically, 567 students had Visual Impairment (VI) as their primary disability, 476 as their secondary disability, and 281 as their tertiary. Carney (2003) proposed a classification for the degree of impairment on visual ability as follows:

Blindness: It ranges from being totally without sight to unreliable vision and primary reliance on other senses. A person with blindness usually uses Braille as a reading and writing medium.

Legal Blindness: It ranges from a visual acuity of 20/200 in the better eye after correction to having no usable vision or a field of vision reduced to an angle of 20 degrees. Visual acuity of 20/200 means that the individual sees at 20 feet what is normally seen at 200 feet.

Low Vision: It reduces central acuity of 20/70 or less in the better eye after correction. Most students with visual impairments have low vision. These students should be encouraged to use their residual (remaining) vision, when appropriate, using the necessary optical aids and adaptations. Students who are described as blind may have some usable vision.

Horn (2007) did a study on learning English as a second language. The main objective of her study was to see if music could enhance listening abilities of Grade One. She said that music was a form of language that used tones and rhythm as the media of universal language. Language development and music development have many similarities. Both are communicative modes, aurally and orally transmitted, containing phonetic, syntactic, and semantic components which are developed early in life and are socially interactive media. Horn (2007) later noted the important role of music in teaching English as a second language. Learners should have well-developed listening skills in order to be able to learn, understand, and experience music and language.

A study conducted by Xiaowei (2010) entitled strategies of learning English vocabularies from the pop songs in which vocabulary learning was investigated through English pop songs among Chinese college students. Xiaowei investigated four aspects including learning word-pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and usage. He found out that most of the students learned word pronunciation and meaning from English pop songs. Furthermore, he identified some positive and negative strategies of learning words and discussed them in relation to relevant theories and previous studies. Based on the bar graph, word spelling and word meaning had the highest place in the graph. Then, word usage was in the third place, and word spelling was placed in the lowest rank. Therefore, more than 70% of learners learned the meaning of words when listening to English songs because songs convey information via sounds, which, of course, forced the students to learn the pronunciation of words along with their meaning.

Emotions affect memory and brain function (Tunks & Giles, 2008). When a person feels content, the brain releases endorphins that enhance memory skills (Jensen, 2005). Teachers should follow some principles in order to have a happy class and happy students. BVI students’ emotion and feeling should be considered as important factors. Jensen (year?) introduced some useful and funny tips for BVI children teachers:

• Teachers should start the day with humor. Tell a funny story or share a silly picture. Laughing makes children feel secure and content.
• Teacher should sing a few songs together. Incorporate dance and movement with singing whenever possible. Children can draw, paint, or do other creative projects while listening to various types of music.

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• Teacher should sequence and pace daily activities. Children can feel overwhelmed by too much new information and unfamiliar materials. After presenting new information, give children time to practice and reflect on what they are learning.
• Teacher should help learners feel in control of their learning. Researchers tell us that keeping lessons short and relative to the topic is more compatible with the brain’s processing ability (Sousa, 2006).
• Teacher should be proactive. He should use guidance strategies that reflect the natural or logical consequences for inappropriate behavior rather than threats and punishment.
• Teacher should focus on nurture social and emotional intelligence. Children must learn to follow directions, work with others, stay on task, finish their work, and take initiative to master new information. Based on Pfeiffer (2010), a visual impairment will often impede a student’s development of visual concepts and learning of academic subjects. Special concept development and academic needs that may need to be addressed include: a) developing a good sense of body image, b) understanding concepts such as laterality, time, position, direction, size, shape, matching, and classifying, c) developing listening skills appropriate to the level of the student’s functioning including the development of auditory reception, discrimination, memory, sequencing, closure, and association skills, d) developing auditory comprehension and analysis skills appropriate to the level of the student’s functioning such as the development of the ability to understand character, understand setting, recognize feelings, recognize climax, foreshadowing, and purpose as well as distinguishing fact from opinion, e) becoming familiar with the format, and knowing how to use and reference materials in the student’s primary reading medium or media, e) being able to interpret accurately maps, charts, graphs, models, and tables, etc.

Keller (2010) believes that repeating or echoing what other people say is a stage that all children go through. He found out that it was a way of practicing speech and learning about language and communication. For blind and visually impaired children, this stage sometimes seemed to last a long time.

According to Keller (2010), “language is abstract and words stand for real people, concepts, or things. Your child understands that, he would not be able to put words together to form speech: repeating the words of others is easier for him” (P.2). Landua (1982) conducted a study on BVI children’s language learning. He mentioned that language learning occurred in a setting where the child heard some utterances, and observed some co-occurring “contexts”. These contexts were often assumed to aid the child in deciphering meaning-form mappings. Blind children had access to diminished and/or different contexts from sighted children; hence, this provided the opportunity to assess the role of context in language learning. Maximal differences should occur for language that refers to purely visual terminology, e.g. sighted verbs.

In the Contemporary Music Approach (CMA) methodology begun by Anton (1990), song is used as a memory prompter. Anton found out that music is one of the most effective memory aids available to us, especially for recalling grammatical structures. He revealed that the CMA method of teaching various grammatical structures of the language through different styles may accompany any textbooks. With CMA, different styles of music and rhythms are correlated with the various grammar lessons because a certain beat reminds students of the song, and the song in turn reminds them of the grammar. He concluded that this approach was a way of combining singing and psychology with language learning worked effectively. The CMA used a step-by-step approach to combine active and nonverbal processes of the right hemisphere of the brain with verbal and logic-based processes governed by the left hemisphere to reduce inhibitions and allow the student to learn and remember certain grammatical features. As a result of his research, he showed that in a survey of students taking the CMA approach, 98% felt it helped them learn Spanish and 92% played the songs for family and friends.

In another study, Pérez-Pereira and Castro (1991) investigated imitations, repetitions, routines, and the child’s analysis of language: insights from the blind. A blind child and her sighted twin sister were recorded at home once a month from two and half to three and half. Their Imitations, Repetitions and Routines (IRR speech) were analyzed with respect to three dimensions (type, faithfulness to the model, and function). The result showed that these productions facilitated language development. The blind girl used routines and modified imitations and repetitions more frequently than her sighted sister, and her use of modified repetitions was increased during the study. She also seemed to use IRR speech for a longer period in her development. Both children frequently used these forms as a means of maintaining conversation and fulfilling their intentions. Both children, especially the blind girl, analyzed language and learned to use these utterances in the appropriate circumstances with a clear pragmatic function through introducing modifications (varying some element, or expanding the model). Such behavior is typical of holistic language processing and acquisition. Besides, Montagnino (2001) studied physical education and recreation for blind and visually impaired students. In his study, he worked with a group of blind children in a kinder garden. He used different techniques like using movement as a mode for learning, involving the student in a physically active way, allowing the visually-impaired child to be near enough to see or touch when demonstrations were given, providing a fun and safe environment, being aware of flying
objects, and using special equipment like auditory devices. Along with these activities, Montagnino (2001) worked through other different types of activities in order to testify BVI children’s concentration. These activities included the less difficult to the more difficult skills, limiting playing space, slowing down the actions, using larger or smaller playing objects, inserting some boundaries, using throwing and catching activities, striking, and hitting and running. Finally, he concluded that you will be able to take advantage of any residual vision that each student might have through these activities and making yourself knowing the exact amount of BVI children abilities and disabilities as well. In addition, each one of these activities had a strong effect on empowering BVI children’s listening skill which played a crucial role on their concentrating. Furthermore, Li and Brand (2010) investigated the effect of pop song on learning vocabulary in China. Their study investigated the strategies used by college students in China in 2010 when learning vocabulary from pop songs. There were altogether 100 college students of different majors selected from a university in Ningbo as the subjects of the study. They were in contact with the researcher via the Internet. Li and Brand administered some questionnaires 23 items in order to find the effect of pop songs on learning vocabulary. The first five questions intended to give information about how students learn vocabulary from English songs. Then, four different aspects of learning vocabulary from pop songs, namely learning pronunciation, learning spelling, learning meaning, and learning usage were analyzed. Finally, some useful implications were obtained from using pop songs for learning vocabularies. The results revealed that they learned word pronunciation, meaning, and stress pattern more than other aspects of words by imitating the singers along with using songs texts in Braille and touching the words.

Langton (2011) investigated teaching English to visually-impaired children. A group of visually-impaired Primary school children were participated in her study. They were homogeneous and in the same level of vision impairment. She enhanced common listening and speaking activities through comprehension and grammar questions related to listening exercises. Langton also used realia, raised line drawings or tactile pictures, and asked the students to tell her something about the object or image; she relied heavily on verbal activities. Grammar was taught through touch and movement and she made Cuisenaire rods tactile by gluing on textured material such as nubby fabric, rubber or sandpaper. Finally, teachers, who generally relied on printed materials to teach vocabulary and grammar to sighted students, may find it challenging to teach vision impaired ESL students. Since it is possible to learn a language by hearing and speaking, there are still plenty of activities that can help vision impaired students to learn English. There are methods for teaching vision impaired ESL students. Some of them are speaking activities, adapted and enhanced listening, and tactile and kinesthetic teaching method.

Welsh (2011) did a research on trading place a visual region in brain that blind people used for learning language. The main objective was to identify and discover those regions of blind people’s brain that remained untouched. These regions responded to sounds, specifically to spoken words. What they did not know was whether the visual cortex was actually participating in language processing or was working in other ways like forming long-term memories. To this end, Welsh watched the brain activity of congenitally blind people while listened to various different spoken sounds including sentences, jabberwocky (sentences made with non-words like flop), lists of words, and sentences played backwards. After hearing each stimulus, the participants were tested with a word and asked if it was something they had just heard to not. The results revealed that by using magnetic stimulation to turn down the activity of the classic language regions, researchers should be able to see if the visual cortex can perform as a language center independently.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Eight 7 to 10-year-old blind- and visually-impaired female children from Narjes BVI Complex in Tehran were selected as the participants. The sampling method was non-random availability sampling since there was no access to other BVI children. The students came from different cities but studied in Tehran. They were completely homogeneous regarding their English knowledge background as they did not know English at all. Six out of eight students were completely blind, and just two of them were visually-impaired. Those visually-impaired students could not see anything but shadows. For classifying them into two groups, one visually-impaired student was put in the first group and another one in the second group.

3.2. Materials and Instruments

Suitable instruments and materials are needed to teach effectively. Teaching English to sighted children is completely different from teaching English to visually-impaired or blind students. Having lots of colorful flash cards, books, movies, and posters opens a joyful world in front of their curious eyes. But, this is not the case with BVI children. The instruments that teachers use for BVI children should be compatible with their disabilities and abilities. The present study did not use books or Braille texts for the main focus of this study was to investigate the effect of listening to English songs on teaching English vocabularies. Instead of texts, embossed flash cards and auditory instruments like CDs playing different English songs were used.
Other instruments used in the present study to collect data were two semi-structural interviews consisting of ten main questions as the base. They were held one at the beginning and one at the end of the instruction. Questions posed first were to raise student’s motivations in learning English, and the last ones were used to know their feelings and opinions about learning English vocabularies via songs. Yet, another instrument to collect the data was the direct observation of the participants’ performance during the course.

3.3. Data Analysis
The behavior of the students was directly observed to collect data and to reveal the effect of using music on learning English vocabularies. The students’ performances and their abilities were observed and recorded meticulously for comparing each group’s performance and finding out the effect of using English songs in order to learn English vocabularies. Moreover, the students’ responses to the interview questions were recorded for further interpretations.

4. Results and Discussion
The main aim of the present study was to find whether immersion of English songs would lead to English vocabulary learning for BVI children or not and what BVI children’s attitude is toward them. BVI children are more able than what sighted people can imagine. Based on the blind and visually impaired special life style, they have a special learning style, too. This is related to their speed of learning, attention, and their learning outcome. With regard to the main objective of this study, the following two research questions are proposed and investigated:

1) Do songs help the BVI children with their vocabulary achievement?
2) What are the BVI children’s opinions on the use of songs in learning English vocabularies?

Spending time with blind- and visually-impaired children opens one’s eyes toward a new world. Regarding the collected data, the first members had a wonderful experience of learning English vocabularies in a happy and exciting atmosphere. Learning English vocabularies through listening to songs means playing a game is more than passing a course. They were laughing and clapping hands during the class time and in a completely stress-free atmosphere. They had positive attitudes, and fast language learning was completely crystal clear. They also built upon their feedback on their own learning and held that inserting the technique of listening to English songs worked well. Based on what was observed in the second group, listening to stories that were read aloud was wonderful just for a few sessions, and it became a little boring after that. Putting emphasis on listening to songs and soft music as well as empowered BVI children’s imagination power led them to have a wonderful learning experience. Sometimes through listening to songs, they found the chance, hiding their disabilities, and doing whatever they could not do in a real world situations and daily activities. In line with the present study, Bishop (1991) did a study as an English teacher on teaching English to BVI children. A group of students which some visually-impaired children were among other sighted ones. He intended to represent an introductory guidebook to help early childhood teachers understand what a visual impairment was, how a visual impairment affected early development, and why early intervention was so critical to these children. In this regard, Bishop worked a lot on the visually-impaired children’s listening abilities and emphasized listening skills being mastered in following directions, listening for details in a story, or simply to improve receptive language. He tried to integrate listening activities which appeared to be very much like standard nursery school/kindergarten activities. Visually-impaired children needed many of the same kinds of tasks and experiences, but may needed more of them, and more emphasis on the concrete (sensory) aspects of them. The result showed that through passing among some activities and using some additional things like listening games, listening for details in stories read to him/her, singing songs (especially songs with actions), using rhythm band instruments, listening for sounds in the environment (e.g., birds, traffic, airplanes, voices, motors) and following directions (beginning with simple one-step and progressing to more difficult two-step), BVI children could easily get what sighted children got in a shorter time. With regard to focusing on listening and singing songs in BVI children classrooms, Millan and Pearson (2005) argued that the inclusion of special education students made us better teachers by forcing and thinking creatively, working collaboratively, and planning extensively every day. They studied teaching English to the BVI children in not only classroom but also a classroom that used two languages as its primary modes of instruction. BVI children’s listening skills was put in the center of their concentration. Teachers asked the students to concentrate on different sounds that they heard around themselves. They concluded that just through having a pair of sharp ears, they could improve their understanding on what happened around them. Listening to different sources of sounds like songs, sounds that came from the playground or other peers whispering sound would increase their listening abilities and helped them to be able to match those sounds with their right references around themselves. In line of the present study, Shtokolova (2011) also investigated teaching English to BVI children through using different English songs which were selected from English Time books. English-Time is one of the best multi-media programs for children to learn.
English. English-Time is a 10-level program and includes videos, books, CD-ROMs, online tests and more. Although English Time products do not have any BVI specific products, the structure of using these tools was manipulated to be more appropriate for them to cope with. The BVI children listened carefully and followed the speed of songs rhythms through clapping hands. The aim of the study was to develop a framework through which students with visual limitations could better access the English language learning opportunities. The results indicated that using English songs were useful only for BVI children. Besides, they could learn the name of different objects, days of the week, toys, animals, and numbers very soon through using songs as the main tool of teaching English.

Shtokolova (2012) did also another research on distance learning for blind- and visually-impaired people in the USA. The results showed that designed correctly, distance learning options created learning opportunities for students with visual disabilities materials were merged with songs. The results of the present study also support Dutta’s (2013) findings that did a study on the BVI children’s learning affective factors. The aim was to understand BVI children’s abilities and disabilities, and to work on different areas which led to gain a big success. What sighted children’s learning was constantly reinforced by were colors, shapes, people and landscapes. Therefore, naturally, these gave them a wealth of information subconsciously. While learners with visual impairment had reduced opportunities for incidental learning, it was important to include as much multi-sensory learning in the classroom as possible such as touching, smelling or hearing. During Dutta’s study, some Braille texts, larger print or bolder colors, and assistive technology such as audio-visual devices or software in his classrooms were used as materials. The results showed that he might be inclined subconsciously to have different expectations of academic achievement for learners with visual impairment but there was no direct correlation between visual impairment and intelligence. Most learners with visual impairment have the same range of intelligence and abilities as their sighted peers, just with additional barriers. Dutta took the advantage of inclusive education in which means disabled and non-disabled young people learned together in ordinary school provision with appropriate networks of support. They should have access to the same information at the same time and, if possible, in the same way to participate in and enjoy mainstream settings to the best of their abilities. He further emphasized the important role of inserting singing songs and working on their listening skill; working with BVI children is different from sighted children.

5. Conclusion

The present study sought to answer the research questions whether using English song could lead to better English vocabulary learning compared to listening to teacher’s reading the materials. It was also an attempt to find what BVI children’s perceptions was toward this method. Based on the obtained results, the following conclusions were drawn: a) as the result of the direct observation and the participants’ responses to the teacher’s questions at the end of the instructions in the interview, the effect of using English songs along with embossed flashcards on BVI children’s vocabularies learning process was positive; b) the BVI children had a positive feedback toward using English songs instead of using Brailled texts or listening to teacher’s reading out the materials; c) class observation revealed that listening to songs and sensing with other peers led them to be more active than before. Even shy children who did not like to say a single word at the beginning of the instruction seemed to be so excited in singing the song chorally or individually and were volunteer in answering questions; d) it was found that the BVI children were encouraged cooperating with their peers in doing different class activities like guessing the name of flashcards or remembering the rest of the missing verses through singing it chorally. Generally, the students were in favor of listening to English songs while they were toughing embossed flashcards and singing them chorally as it made them happy.
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