

Music as a Teaching Tool in Teaching English: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Music has long been used as a pedagogical tool to teach children. According to Amin & Soh (2020), music helps with learning, arouses emotions, and enhances cognition. This systematic review synthesizes ESL music education studies. This study used qualitative systematic review. Themes are identified using data from prior investigations. English articles from January 2014 to April 2024 were chosen to highlight recent literature. We mixed music, pedagogical tools, outcomes, and ESL education keywords and synonyms with Boolean operators. This review followed PRISMA, created by Page et al. (2021), to give detailed information for technique evaluation. Music enhances outcomes, research shows. In language learning, learning atmosphere, student engagement, motivation, and participation. Music improves learning atmosphere and reduces stress, making it excellent for teaching and learning, according to study. Enjoying music boosts learning. The study reveals that music motivates and engages students. ESL teachers should use music. To meet students' tastes, teachers should choose numerous genres and music. Stakeholders should train language teachers in music integration. This systematic review found music useful for ESL instruction. Music decreases anxiety and motivates students, increasing participation.

Keywords: Music, Songs, Teaching Tool, Educational Method, Pedagogy

Introduction

Background of Research

Music has long been used as a pedagogical tool to teach children. This has been the case in most societies. McKoy & Lind (2022) reported that nearly all cultures known to have historically used music to pass on knowledge and skills. This includes linguistic knowledge and skills which have long been imparted in young ones using songs (Swaminathan & Schellenberg, 2020). It is thus not surprising that even modern education systems have routinely used music. The use of music to teach students is particularly prevalent at preschool and early elementary levels (Hodijah & Kurniawati, 2021; Mugaya, 2022). Beyond these levels, the use of music remains very variable and unstructured in most nations. This is surprising. According to Amin & Soh (2020), music possesses unique characteristics that can stimulate cognitive processes, evoke emotions, and facilitate learning. Amin & Soh (2020), meanwhile, note that music can create an environment that is highly suitable for learning and is a very

useful tool in learning new languages. In their analysis, Ludke & Morgan (2022) found that students who frequently listen to music in the second language they are trying to acquire are learning the language faster than those who do not. Additionally, empirical studies around the world have indicated that music is useful in ESL classrooms (Afriyuninda & Oktaviani, 2021; Avdiu, 2021; Batluk, 2015; Bokiev & Ismail, 2021; Hadian, 2015; Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020; Ma'rifat, 2017; Tse, 2015). The lack of widespread structured application of music to teach students is thus surprising given the state of the evidence.

Problem Statement

It is surprising that music is not being widely used in a more structured manner to teach English particularly among second language students. History indicates that music can serve as a very useful tool in this context. Additionally, the existing evidence seems to be pretty consistent that music would be very useful in this context. Amin & Soh (2020), note that in countries such as Malaysia, music is still only used as a pedagogical tool at the lowest levels of the education system with usage at higher levels remaining very variable. This is a concern given the potential benefits of music at all levels including for ESL students. Where there is a lot of evidence that is not being used properly, researchers recommend systematic reviews be used to collate the information and provide more holistic information (Khalil et al., 2021; Linnenluecke et al., 2020). This approach may be helpful in this regard rather than doing other empirical studies since a lot of research has been done on the issue. To be clear, there are other reviews that have been done on the use of music in the ESL context but there are limitations that make additional research necessary.

For instance, the review by Nguansumangk & Simasangyaporn (2020) focused specifically on songs used was done for studies spanning 30 years. While it gives a bigger picture, its temporal scope is too broad which makes it unable to provide the most up to date information. A review of over 300 studies by Eccles et al. (2021) was also too broad in its time span (over 40 years) and only focused on phonological awareness and literacy despite a myriad of benefits of music being researched. A study based on the Malaysian perspective by Amin & Soh (2020) examined the patterns of usage as well as effects which also made its scope broad. There is thus a need for more focused research that highlights the many positive outcomes of using music as a pedagogical tool in ESL classrooms. Collating information only on the effects of using music to teach English will be highly beneficial especially if it focuses on the most up to date studies. This review thus seeks to collate and present the latest evidence on the effects of using music as a pedagogical tool in the ESL context. The review will provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge regarding the use of music as a pedagogical tool in ESL contexts. This will help to identify effective strategies for integrating music into language teaching practices and inform the development of evidence-based instructional approaches. It will also highlight the areas where future researchers can focus on.

Aim and Research Question

The aim of this systematic review is to synthesize the existing research literature on the effects of using music as a pedagogical tool in the ESL context. The question that it will answer is:

RQ: What are the benefits of using music as a pedagogical tool to teach English?

Research Methodology

Methodology

This research used the qualitative systematic review approach. This approach involves collating information from other studies to come up with suitable themes. Systematic reviews can either be quantitative (such as meta-analysis) or qualitative. The reason why the qualitative approach was taken is because of the methodological variations in the studies. There were mixed methods, quantitative, and qualitative studies with diverse populations which meant that inferential statistical analysis would have been challenging. As a result, the qualitative approach was adopted.

Review Protocol

This review was guided by PRISMA, developed by Page et al. (2021) with the aim of complete reporting to allow readers to assess the appropriateness of the methods used. In addition, presenting and summarizing the characteristics of the studies contributing to a synthesis allows policymakers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to their settings. A systematic review was chosen to describe, evaluate and synthesize the current empirical studies on the outcomes of using music as a pedagogical tool. The PRISMA protocol is highly appropriate for such research especially because it has been widely used over the decades and has been found to be highly reliable in producing suitable findings.

Search Strategy

The strategy for the review followed the pattern typically used in systematic reviews. The initial step was database selection and Scopus and Web of Science were the ones chosen for this one. These two databases contain substantial amounts of educational research and have thus been widely applied in education systematic reviews. Keywords and synonyms related to music, pedagogical tools, outcomes, and ESL education were identified and combined using Boolean operators. Truncation and wildcards were employed to capture variations of search terms. The search was limited to titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure relevance. Articles published in English between January 2014 and April 2024 were included to focus on recent literature.

Conference proceedings, books, and book chapters were excluded to prioritize peer-reviewed journal articles. Duplicate records were removed to ensure the uniqueness of search results. The search parameters and inclusion and exclusion metrics of the study are highlighted in the tables below.

Table 1
Search Parameters

Database	Link	Search Parameters
Scopus	https://www.scopus.com/home.uri	Keywords: (music OR songs OR melodies OR tunes OR rhythms OR musical compositions) AND (pedagogy OR teaching tool OR educational method OR instructional strategy) AND (ESL OR "English as a Second Language" OR EFL OR "English as a Foreign Language" OR language learn* OR languag e education*) AND (effects OR impact OR outcomes OR consequences OR influence) Filters: English language, publication date range from January 2014 to April 2024, document type: articles
Web of Science	https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/basic-search	(pedagogy OR teaching tool OR educational method OR

		instructional strategy) AND (ESL OR "English as a Second Language" OR EFL OR "English as a Foreign Language" OR language learn* OR language education*) AND (effects OR impact OR outcomes OR consequences OR influence)
		Filters: English language, publication date range from January 2014 to April 2024, document types: article

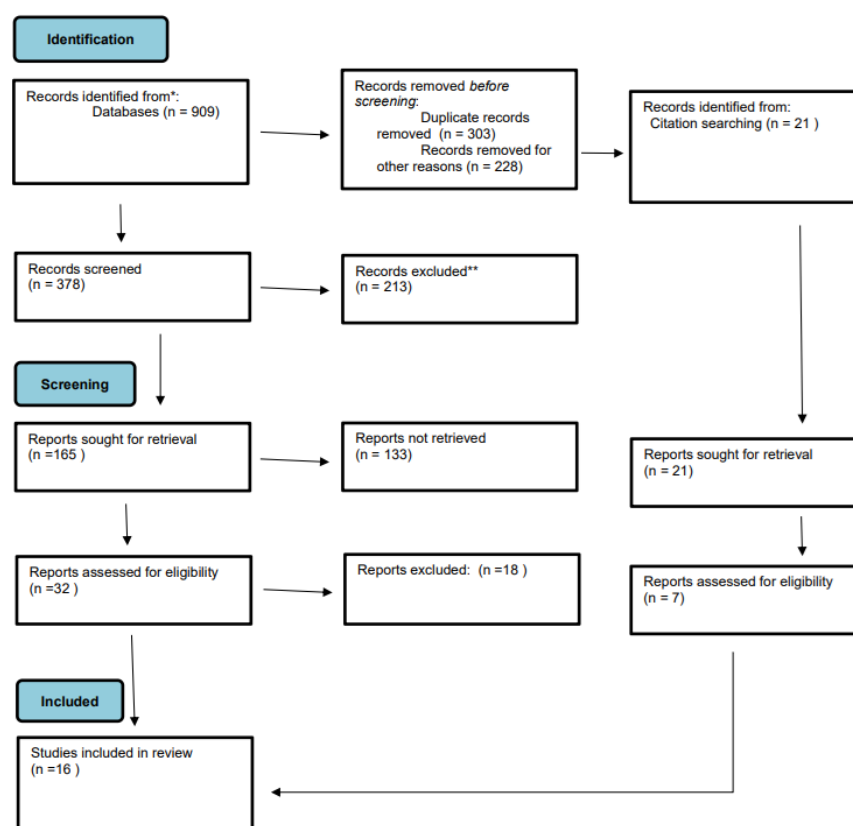
Table 2
Inclusion and Exclusion Parameters for Review

Selection Limits	Included	Excluded
Field	English education	Music in other subjects
Focus	Outcomes of music in English Education	Other aspects of music in
Time	From January 2014	Before January 2014
Language	English or already translated	Other languages
Type of Publishing	Journals and theses	Books,
Access	Full access	Limited access
Type of Research	Primary/empirical research	Secondary research

The process of finding the studies strictly followed the PRISMA protocol steps. The initial search in both databases was done using the highlighted keywords and parameters in table 2.1. After this, a quick look was done and duplicates were removed. This was followed by a screening of the titles and abstract leading to more studies being excluded. The most

important step was the assessment of full texts. Some studies could not be accessed for full texts and were not included because of these. Many others also failed to make the cut after assessment. Some were found to be Secondary research and others did not describe their methodologies well enough for inclusion. Ultimately, only 14 studies were found using this approach. This necessitated a need for alternative approaches and snowball strategy in which references of included studies are examined was tried out. This yielded only an additional two researches that met the criteria. Overall, a total of 16 studies were included from an initial search that yielded 909 studies across the two databases. The PRISMA Flow diagram below highlights the steps that resulted in their selection:

Table 3
PRISMA Flow Diagram For The Review



Results

Introduction

The applied methodology for this project yielded 16 studies. The studies were carried out by Bokiev et al. (2018), Kumar et al. (2022), Tse (2015), Al-Smadi (2020), Bsharat et al., (2021), Bokiev & Ismail (2021), Avdiu (2021), Lee & Lin (2015), Hadian (2015), Aguirre et al. (2016), Razak & Yunus (2016), Lestari & Hardiyanti (2020), Batluk (2015), Borland (2015), Ma’rifat (2017), and Afriyuninda & Oktaviani (2021). These studies met all the key inclusion parameters for the research hence their inclusion. A matrix extraction table was used to summarize the key elements and findings of the study and it is shown in table 3.1 below. The rest of the sections of the chapter cover the key characteristics and overall findings of this review in detail.

Table 4

Included Studies

Authors	Title	Country	Method	Population	Key Findings
Bokiev et al. (2018)	Utilizing music and Songs to promote student engagement in ESL classrooms.	Malaysia	Quantitative	ESL Teachers	Music is effective in reducing anxiety, increasing motivation, enhancing memory retention and creating a conducive environment for learning. It also addresses the issue of multiple intelligences among students.
Kumar et al. (2022)	Use of music and songs as pedagogical tools in teaching English as foreign language contexts.	Saudi Arabia	Quantitative	EFL teachers	The study found that music is an effective tool for teaching English to students without putting a lot of pressure on them. It found that it reduces learning anxiety and is very effective for the listening part of language education.
Tse (2015)	Malaysian teachers' perspectives on using songs in English language teaching.	Malaysia	Quantitative	ESL Teachers	Teachers viewed music as a potent tool for teaching young children English as it creates an enjoyable environment that is conducive for learning.
Al-Smadi (2020)	The effect of using songs on young English learners' motivation in Jordan.	Jordan	Quantitative	ESL students	The study found that students in the group exposed to music were better motivated to learn compared to the other group. Classroom attention, interest, and participation was also

					higher among students who were taught using music.
Bsharat et al. (2021).	The Influence of Music and Educational Songs on EFL Students' Achievement from Their Teachers' Perspective in Jenin Region.	Palestine	Mixed methods	ESL teachers	Teachers viewed the use of songs as a very effective way of reaching English across all levels of education. The key benefits were making learning fun and increasing attention and motivation among students. However, they also reported that usage of music remains poor and unstructured.
Bokiev & Ismail (2021).	Malaysian ESL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the use of music and songs in second language teaching.	Malaysia	Qualitative	ESL teachers	The study found that teachers from all levels of education view music as a very effective tool in ESL teaching. They view music as relieving student stress, enhancing classroom atmosphere, and increasing student creativity, motivation, and learning retention.
Avdiul (2021).	Non-native English teachers' views on the use of music and songs in teaching English as a foreign language to primary school learners.	Kosovo	Qualitative	ESL teachers	The study found that teachers view music as a very useful pedagogical tool. They agreed that it enhances classroom atmosphere, reduces learning stress, and makes it easy for students to retain content. They noted that it is particularly useful for

					listening tasks.
Lee & Lin (2015).	The impact of music activities on foreign language, English learning for young children.	Taiwan	Mixed methods	Students, teachers and parents	Observations of classrooms revealed that there was a more lively and engaged atmosphere in schools where music was used. Students were more likely to participate and showed better retention at the end of the classes. Interviews with parents revealed that music is seen as very useful in enhancing learning of languages.
Hadian (2015).	The use of song lyrics in teaching listening.	Indonesia	Qualitative	ESL students	Interviews of students who had been taught music revealed that they hold positive views towards the use of lyrics to teach them. Students reported experiencing higher levels of enthusiasm and enjoyment.
Aguirre et al. (2016).	Influence of Songs in Primary School Students' Motivation for Learning English in Lima, Peru.	Peru	Mixed methods	ESL students	Observations of students revealed higher participation, enthusiasm, and enjoyment when music was used in teaching. Follow up surveys revealed higher retention and motivation among students.
Razak & Yunus (2016).	Using action songs in teaching action words to young ESL learners.	Malaysia	Mixed methods	ESL students	The 12 week phase of the study revealed that using action songs resulted in a statistically significant increase in verb vocabulary for students. Interviews revealed that students found the

					experience enjoyable and effective in helping them to learn and retain content.
Lestari & Hardiyanti (2020).	Vocabulary Learning Autonomy through Incorporation of English Songs: Indonesian EFL Students' Perspectives.	Indonesia	Qualitative	ESL students	The interviews of tertiary level ESL students showed that they found songs to be an effective way to learn vocabulary. Students felt that songs expose them to authentic word use, enhance their enjoyment while learning, and help with content retention.
Batluk (2015).	Does Listening to English Songs Motivate Students to Expand Their Extramural English?: A Case Study of Swedish Upper-Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Possible Impact of Listening to Vocal Music on Their Extramural English	Sweden	Qualitative	ESL students	Interviews revealed that English songs motivate students to take ESL seriously. Songs also make learning fun and are effective because they expose students to natural language use.
Borland. (2015).	The use of songs in the ESL/EFL classroom as a means of teaching pronunciation : A case study of Chilean university students.	Chile	Mixed methods	ESL students	The study revealed that songs enhance language learning on the aspect of pronunciation . The group that was exposed to songs performed better at the end of the study. Interviews revealed that students who had been exposed to songs found learning to be

					more enjoyable and engaging.
Ma'rifat (2017).	A case study of using songs in teaching English vocabulary to young learners	Indonesia	Qualitative	ESL students	Interviews revealed that songs are a useful tool in teaching vocabulary. Students reported higher retention and enjoyment of lessons.
Afriyuninda, E., & Oktaviani, L. (2021).	The use of English songs to improve English students' listening skills.	Indonesia	Qualitative	ESL students	The study found that listening skills were enhanced by using songs. Students reported being more engaged and enjoying classes when songs are used.

Characteristics of Included Studies

Country

In terms of nations where the studies were undertaken, there is global distribution. The 16 studies were done in 10 different countries. One notable point is the fact that an overwhelming majority of studies were done in the global east with Southeast Asia being the most well represented region. Malaysia and Indonesia lead the way with four studies apiece with every other country or region (Taiwan, Palestine, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kosovo, Peru, and Chile) each having only one study included in the pool. The bar graph below highlights the distribution of studies by country or region.

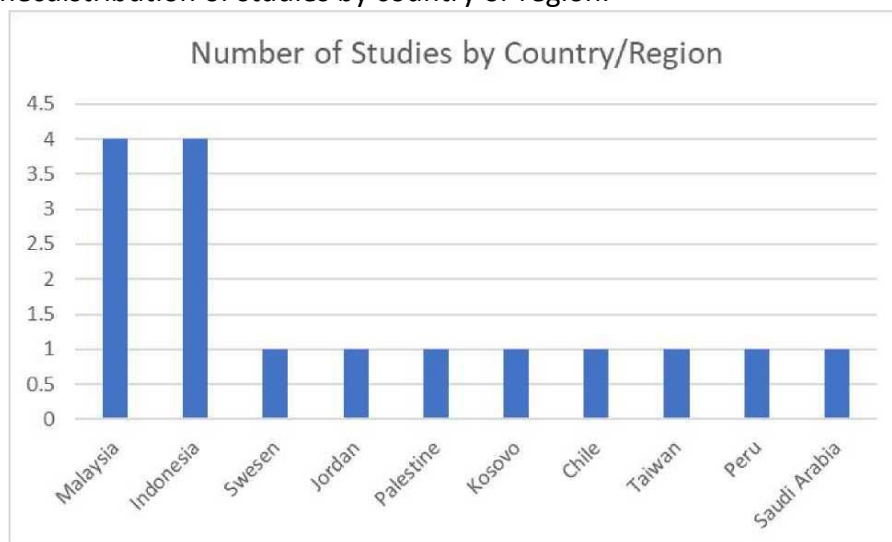


Figure 1: Distribution of the Included Studies by Country

Methodology

The included studies show high methodological diversity. The majority (8) were based on the qualitative methodology (Afriyuninda & Oktaviani, 2021; Avdiu, 2021; Batluk, 2015; Bokiev & Ismail, 2021; Hadian, 2015; Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020; Ma'rifat, 2017; Tse, 2015).

Five studies were done using the quantitative methodology (Aguirre et al., 2016; Al-Smadi, 2020;

Bokiev et al., 2018; Bsharat et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022) while the remainder used the mixed methods approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. Figure 3.2 below provides a visual overview of the studies by methodology used.

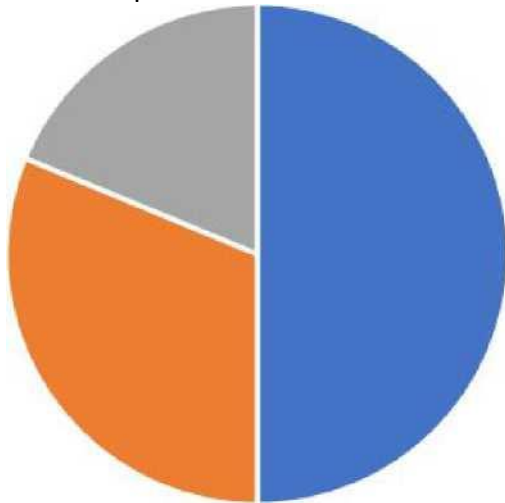


Figure 2: Profile of Studies by Methodology Used

■ Qualitative ■ Quantitative ■ Mixed Methods

Respondents

This review concerns the use of music in classrooms and it is not surprising that the respondents in the studies tended to be teachers or students. Eight studies exclusively included English language teachers as the source of their data (Avdiu, 2021; Bokiev et al., 2018; Bokiev & Ismail, 2021; Borland, 2015; Bsharat et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Razak & Yunus, 2016; Tse, 2015). Seven included ESL students exclusively (Afriyuninda & Oktaviani, 2021; Aguirre et al., 2016; Al-Smadi, 2020; Batluk, 2015; Hadian, 2015; Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020; Ma'rifat, 2017). The only study that bucked this trend was that done by Lee & Lin (2015) which included students, parents, and teachers as the respondents. This profile generally shows that most of the studies were based on views of teachers rather than direct observation or experimentation. Even for those studies that focused on students, only three included observations or interventions while the rest focused on students' views.

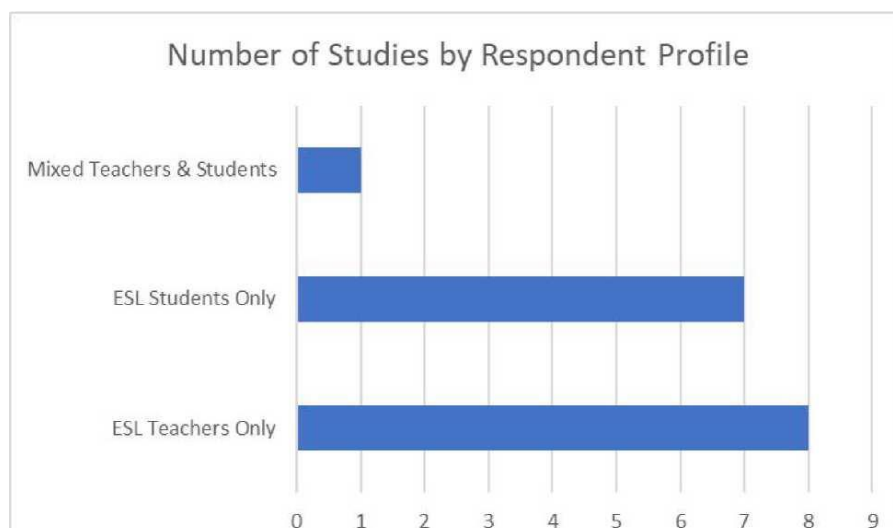


Figure 3: Number of Studies by Respondent Profile

Emergent Themes

The aim of this study was to assess the outcomes of using music as a pedagogical tool in the ESL context. The studies reveal a variety of such outcomes. Deeper analysis of the findings of individual studies shows that three themes stand out:

Music Improves Learning Atmosphere

This is an important theme that seems to be understated in the discourse on the use of music in ESL classrooms. Learning anxiety has long been identified as a major challenge in ESL education and the evidence in this research clearly shows that classroom singing can really help with this. Across the studies, researcher noted that music reduces anxiety and creates ambience with are essential for effective learning atmosphere. Some studies stand out in this regard. For example, Bokiev et al. (2018) established music is effective in lowering anxiety among ESL students resulting in a relaxed learning environment. Similarly, Avdiu (2021) found that teachers view music as a useful in improving the classroom atmosphere by reducing learning stress. Lee and Lin (2015) observed that classrooms where music activities were integrated had a more lively and engaged atmosphere. Students showed higher levels of participation and retention as a result. Overall, the view that music improves the learning atmosphere was supported across all the studies. Direct observation and interviews and surveys of teachers and students all confirmed that music makes learning easier by creating ambience, reducing stress, and engaging students.

Music Enhances Student Engagement, Participation, and Motivation

One of the most prominent themes across the included studies is the role of music in enhancing student engagement and motivation in language learning. Music has been consistently associated with increased levels of student engagement, participation, and interest in ESL/EFL classrooms. For instance, Kumar et al. (2022) found that music is an effective tool for teaching English as a foreign language without putting pressure on students which reduces learning anxiety and increases motivation. In another notable example, Al-Smadi (2020) observed that students exposed to music were better motivated to learn compared to those in the control group. They displayed higher levels of classroom attention, interest, and participation. Overall, the issue of motivation and engagement cut across all the studies. The key reason seems to be due to the fun nature of music. All studies in which

students were interviewed or surveyed reported that they found the use of music to be very enjoyable. Enjoyment is known to increase students' engagement and participation. The effects of music on engagement, motivation, and participation are one the strongest reasons why it should be used in classrooms.

Music Enhances Students Language Skills

Ultimately, all pedagogical approaches need to be based on concrete results and the evidence clearly shows that English learning is enhanced by using music. Several studies stand out in proving this point. For instance, Razak and Yunus (2016) reported that using action songs resulted in a statistically significant increase in verb vocabulary for students. Afriyuninda and Oktaviani (2021) found that listening skills were enhanced by using English songs, with students reporting higher levels of engagement and enjoyment in classes where music was integrated. Additionally, Batluk (2015) reported that exposure to songs enhanced language learning, particularly in the aspect of pronunciation, with students performing better at the end of the study.

Furthermore, Ma'rifat (2017) observed that songs are a useful tool in teaching vocabulary, leading to higher retention and enjoyment of lessons among students. These findings highlight the effectiveness of music in enhancing various language skills, ultimately contributing to improved language learning outcomes in ESL/EFL classrooms.

**DISCUSSION
AND CONCLUSION**

Discussion of Findings

Characteristics of Studies

Only 16 studies were ultimately included in this review from the two databases. While there are hundreds of studies, most of them do not focus on the effects of using music while others are outside the ten year period that was the concern of the study. A few things stand out in the included studies. Most of them were done in the global east and with only one study (done in Sweden) being from a western country. The fact that Malaysia and Indonesia were highly represented probably indicates the algorithmic nature of the search engines in the databases which consider the area from where the search is done. The high number of qualitative research was surprising given that most ESL studies tend to be quantitative. This suggests that most of the findings are not readily generalizable. Additionally, while surveys and interviews are acceptable, there is a notable lack of higher quality research with more direct evidence. Other systematic reviews have noted this problem (Eccles et al., 2021; Nguansumangk & Simasangyaporn, 2020). For instance, longitudinal studies where students are exposed to music in the ESL context for long periods, experimental studies with randomization and control groups, and studies based on direct observations are limited in the included pool. This helps to explain why quantitative studies are so few. These issues should be addressed in future research.

Core Findings

The aim of this research was to assess the outcomes of using music in the classroom to teach English. The findings are sufficient to meet this aim and answer the research question of the review. The collected evidence indicates that using music results in positive outcomes. This is particularly true in three areas: learning atmosphere, student engagement, motivation and participation, and language learning. First, the research is clear that music creates

ambience and reduces learning stress, generating an environment that is very suitable for teaching and learning. The enjoyment value of music also contributes to the good learning atmosphere. Evidence from the included research is also consistent in showing that music enhances participation, engagement, and motivation for students. Studies based on direct observation, interviews and surveys of teachers, and interviews and surveys of students all affirm this finding. Finally, the evidence shows that English proficiency is also raised by music. Studies where comparisons have been done have shown that music increases listening skills and vocabulary for students.

The findings of this research are sound as they align with what others have established. For instance, Nguansumangk & Simasangyaporn (2020) did a systematic review of songs used in ESL that focused on specific songs in 44 studies done over a more than 30 year period. It revealed that the primary purposes of song usage in ESL classrooms was to enhance motivation, listening skills, and learning atmosphere. Amin & Soh (2020) also performed a wide ranging review that looked into patterns and outcomes of music usage in ESL context. The review found that reported effects in prior studies include enhanced classroom participation, stress relief for students, and improvements in language skills. Eccles et al. (2021) conducted a review of over 300 studies done between 1975 and 2021 to assess the impact of music on phonological awareness and early literacy. The study found that music has a significant positive impact on both aspects.

Recommendations for Practice

- Educators should consider integrating music into ESL curriculum as a pedagogical tool.
- Teachers should diversify the selection of music genres and songs to cater to the diverse interests and preferences of students.
- Stakeholders should provide professional development and training opportunities for educators on effective strategies for integrating music into language teaching practices.
- Educators should incorporate music systematically into lesson planning.
- They should also implement regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of music integration in ESL classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to acknowledge here that while the included studies are suitable, there is still a lot of room for more research with higher methodological rigor. As such, future researchers should:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of using music as a teaching tool in ESL contexts on language learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement.
- Conduct experimental studies with randomized control groups to provide more rigorous evidence on the causal relationship between music integration and language learning outcomes.
- Carry out comparative studies to compare the effectiveness of different types of music genres, songs, and teaching methodologies in ESL classrooms.
- Do more research at tertiary and secondary school levels since there are very few ones in this context.

Conclusion

This systematic review has demonstrated the effectiveness of using music as a pedagogical tool in ESL contexts. The findings indicate that music enhances the learning atmosphere by reducing anxiety and increasing motivation, leading to improved student engagement and participation. Furthermore, music has been shown to enhance various language skills, including listening, vocabulary acquisition, and pronunciation. While the evidence is promising, it also highlights the need for further research, particularly in areas such as longitudinal studies, experimental research with control groups, and comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts. There is still a very clear need for more high quality research. Overall, research focusing on the views of teachers and students need to be deduced in favor of more rigorous research focusing on performance differences between students and observations in classes. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies in particular would be useful in advancing the literature.

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