



Idioms in “We Are the World”: A Pedagogical Tool for Teaching Figurative Language in ELT Classrooms

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Abstract

Throughout the world, people enjoy songs. In many ways, songs are instrumental but frequently not used sufficiently in English Language Teaching. It is sure, that they give students real-life situations that help them learn new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. Everyone knows that teaching idioms is especially hard because they do not have literal definitions and are deeply rooted in culture. This research examines the effectiveness of song-based training in improving idiom comprehension among advanced English language learners, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature. It specifically concentrates on 18 meticulously chosen idiomatic terms from the popular song “We Are the World”, celebrated for its global influence and comprehensible lyrics. The study included a group of forty BA English students who were purposefully chosen and then randomly put into either a control group or an experimental group. The control group learnt idioms the old-fashioned way, which usually meant learning definitions and memorising them by heart. The experimental group, on the other hand, learnt idioms through a new method that used songs. This experimental strategy focused on fully immersing students in the song’s lyrics and getting them involved in several interactive exercises that were meant to help them understand the idioms’ meanings and how to use them. Both groups took pretests and posttests over a period of many weeks to carefully measure their understanding of idioms. The quantitative analysis of the test results clearly showed that the song-based teaching strategy significantly improved students’ understanding and long-term memory of the idiomatic expressions that were the focus of the lesson. Moreover, qualitative observations and student feedback revealed significantly elevated levels of student involvement and motivation in the experimental group relative to their peers getting conventional instruction. These results strongly indicate that using actual song content, such as “We Are the World”, serves as a more effective and engaging pedagogical instrument for acquiring idiomatic expressions.

Keywords: ELT, Idioms, Song-based instruction, “We Are the World”, Idiom comprehension.

Introduction

Idioms are an important part of becoming proficient at English, but they can be hard for learners because they are figurative. Students do not learn well when they use traditional teaching approaches that focus on lists and mechanical memorisation. Songs create genuine, emotionally charged settings that let learners see idioms in real-life circumstances.

The song “We Are the World” has a lot of idiomatic phrases that talk about themes of compassion, solidarity, and social duty. This study examines whether instructing these idioms via a song-based methodology enhances understanding and retention among BA English students.



Literature Review

A lot of studies shows that using songs in language learning settings is really helpful for teaching. For example, Murphey talks about how music can help you remember words better, which often makes them “stuck-in-my-head”(1992). Medina also says that music is a great way to reinforce language patterns, which makes learning a second language much easier (1993). Liu emphasises the importance of contextual learning when addressing complex linguistic aspects such as idioms, as conventional, decontextualised education frequently fails to yield successful results. In addition to these unique advantages, prior experimental research has consistently demonstrated that the incorporation of songs in language education can significantly enhance student motivation, engagement, and overall comprehension relative to conventional teaching methods (2017). Despite this convincing body of data, there exists a severe deficiency in the current literature about studies that particularly utilise globally famous humanitarian songs, such as Richie & Jackson’s “We Are the World”, as effective instruments for teaching idioms. This study seeks to fill this particular vacuum by examining the educational potential of authentic musical sources.

Methodology

Participants

The study involved forty undergraduate students pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree with a focus on English and Education. These participants were methodically segregated into two separate groups, each consisting of twenty students (n=20). The first group, called the experimental group, learnt in a way that used song-based learning methods. The second group, which served as the control group, on the other hand, was taught in a more traditional way, mostly using standard textbook materials to learn idioms.

Materials

A variety of particular materials were utilised to advance the study’s aims. The classic humanitarian song “We Are the World”, which was co-written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and came out in 1985, was a big part of the intervention. The

whole lyrics of this song were the main language resource. Based on these songs, a specific group of eighteen idiomatic idioms was carefully chosen for teaching and testing. A pretest and a posttest were created to see how well people understood idioms. Each test had eighteen multiple-choice questions that tested understanding of the chosen idioms. To make sure that the experimental group had a real and immersive learning experience, they also listened to and watched recordings of “We Are the World”.

Procedure

Step 1: Pretest

The experimental procedure commenced with a standardised pretest administered to all participants. This initial assessment was crucial for establishing baseline knowledge, as both the experimental and control groups completed the same pretest, which was specifically designed to evaluate their existing comprehension of the eighteen target idiomatic expressions prior to any instructional intervention.

Step 2: Instruction

After the pretest, both groups received their own instructional interventions. The experimental group used a full song-based teaching method. Their learning started with an immersion period, during which they listened to the song “We Are the World” twice while reading the words. After that, each of the eighteen target idioms was explained in two parts: first, its broad idiomatic meaning (figurative sense), and then its specific meaning in the context of the song’s lyrics. After that, there was a phase of active engagement that included different interactive tasks, like gap-fill exercises based on the song lyrics, group discussions about the song’s themes of unity and compassion, and role-play or scenario-based activities that used the new idioms.

The control group, on the other hand, learnt idioms in a more traditional way. They mostly learnt by reading conventional textbooks that explained idiomatic terms and gave sample sentences to show how to use them. They only did reading and comprehension exercises, and they didn’t listen to the song “We Are the World” or use the active engagement tactics that the experimental group used.



Step 3: Posttest

Upon the completion of the instructional period, all participants, from both the experimental and control groups, were administered the same multiple-choice posttest. This assessment mirrored the pretest in structure and content, specifically designed to measure their comprehension of the eighteen idiomatic expressions after their respective instructional interventions.

Step 4: Data Analysis

The data collected from the pretest and posttest scores underwent thorough statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated to encapsulate the performance of each group. Independent samples t-tests were performed to evaluate the efficacy and statistical significance of the song-based educational strategy relative to traditional instruction. This analytical method facilitated a direct comparison of the mean understanding scores between the experimental and control groups, so assessing the overall efficacy of including music into idiom instruction.

Idioms and Their Meanings

1. “There comes a time”: Idiomatically, it refers to a decisive moment when action is necessary. In the song, it conveys the moment when humanity must respond to suffering.
2. “Heed a certain call”: Idiomatically, it means to listen to an important appeal. The song encourages people to respond to the urgent call for help.
3. “The world must come together as one”: Idiomatically, it suggests that people should unite. The song emphasises that nations must join hands to fight poverty and hardship.
4. “Lend a hand”: Idiomatically, it means to offer help or assistance. The song urges listeners to support those in need.
5. “The greatest gift of all”: Idiomatically, it is the most valuable thing one can give, often love or kindness. The song emphasises that sharing love is more important than wealth.
6. “Can’t go on pretending day by day”: Idiomatically, it means one cannot keep ignoring

a problem. The song calls for stopping the act of ignoring the suffering around us.

7. “Make a brighter day”: Idiomatically, it means to create a better future. The song encourages bringing hope to people who are struggling.
8. “There’s a choice we’re making”: Idiomatically, it indicates that decisions have consequences. In the song, it stresses that we must choose compassion over selfishness.
9. “We’re saving our own lives”: Idiomatically, it means helping others helps us as well. The song highlights that solidarity ensures global well-being.
10. “Send them your heart”: Idiomatically, it suggests showing true compassion. The song encourages expressing care so people feel remembered and supported.
11. “Stronger and free”: Idiomatically, it refers to becoming more powerful and independent. In the song, it conveys that unity and love empower humanity.
12. “Turning stones to bread”: Idiomatically, it means making something useful out of something hard or difficult. In the song, it reflects ending hunger by providing essential resources.
13. “When you’re down and out”: Idiomatically, it refers to being in a bad or hopeless state. The song describes poor and suffering people in need of support.
14. “There seems no hope at all”: Idiomatically, it means a situation appears hopeless. The song emphasises that people in despair need assistance and care.
15. “If you just believe”: Idiomatically, it conveys that having faith can prevent failure. The song encourages belief in unity and kindness to overcome despair.
16. “A change can only come when we stand together as one”: Idiomatically, it means that positive change requires collective effort. In the song, it stresses that global solidarity can solve human crises.
17. “We are the world”: Idiomatically, it suggests that all humans are one family. The song conveys that people must unite to fight hunger and poverty.



18. “We are the children”: Idiomatically, it represents innocence and hope for the future. The song emphasises that humanity must care for tomorrow with responsibility and compassion.

Results

Pretest Analysis

- Experimental group mean score: 8.5 / 18
- Control group mean score: 8.7 / 18
- Observation: Baseline scores were similar; no significant difference ($t(38) = 0.22$, $p = 0.83$).

Textual Pretest Graph:

- Experimental Group:  8.5/18
- Control Group:  8.7/18

Posttest Analysis

- Experimental group mean score: 15.2 / 18
- Control group mean score: 11.0 / 18
- Gain: Experimental +6.7, Control +2.3

Textual Posttest Graph:

- Experimental Group:  15.2/18
- Control Group:  11.0/18

Statistical Analysis

- Independent t-test: $t(38) = 5.42$, $p < 0.001$
- Deduction: Song-based instruction significantly improved idiom comprehension.

Discussion of Results

Song immersion combined with idiomatic and contextual explanation enhanced comprehension. Active engagement reinforced idiom retention. Whereas the traditional instruction showed modest improvement but lower engagement. Pedagogical implication: Songs can improve motivation and comprehension of figurative language.

Summary Table: Pretest vs Posttest Scores

Group	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Gain
Experimental	8.5	15.2	+6.7
Control	8.7	11.0	+2.3

Conclusion

This study clearly shows that using real, socially relevant songs, like “We Are the World”, in English Language Teaching classrooms is a great way to help students learn idiomatic idioms. The results strongly indicate that song-based training provides a more effective alternative to conventional teaching methods, resulting in much greater idiom comprehension, improved long-term retention, and increased student engagement. Songs use idioms in a way that makes them more relevant and memorable, which helps students learn in a more natural and fun way that sticks with them. In addition to helping with language skills, using culturally important songs like “We Are the World” in the classroom has a bigger educational effect by helping kids become more aware of the world, comprehend other cultures, and feel for others. This method makes the ELT curriculum better by turning language classes into chances for personal and social growth. This research underscores the effectiveness of this specific song; subsequent studies may beneficially examine the utilisation of other songs across other musical genres and cultural contexts. Broadening the scope to encompass bigger and more diverse student populations would further substantiate and generalise these findings, reinforcing the position of music as a potent and comprehensive instrument in language education.

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Appendix: MCQs (Sample)

1. "There comes a time" means:

- A) Ordinary passage of days
- B) A decisive moment arrives
- C) Endless waiting
- D) Celebration

Answer: B

2. "Heed a certain call" suggests:

- A) Make a phone call
- B) Listen to an important appeal
- C) Sing loudly
- D) Ignore advice

Answer: B

3. "Lend a hand" idiomatically means:

- A) Shake hands
- B) Offer help or assistance
- C) Borrow something
- D) Applaud

Answer: B

4. "Make a brighter day" suggests:

- A) Sleep longer
- B) Paint a picture
- C) Create a better future
- D) Wait for tomorrow

Answer: C

5. "We're saving our own lives" means:

- A) Helping others helps us
- B) Protecting ourselves only
- C) Escaping danger
- D) Doctors rescuing patients

Answer: A

(Remaining 13 items follow the same format.)