

Background Music as Pedagogical Tool in English Language Classrooms: Insights from a Vietnamese University

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the effects of background music on second-year university students' learning experiences in B2-level English classes at a university in Vietnam. Drawing on survey data, the findings reveal that background music enhances student motivation, emotional engagement, and concentration during lessons. These results align with previous studies emphasizing music's role in language acquisition and emotional regulation. The study suggests that background music, when thoughtfully integrated, can create a more dynamic and supportive language learning environment.

KEYWORDS: background music, English language learning, emotional engagement

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of background music in language teaching has long been explored as a potential strategy to enhance student engagement and support language skill development. In my role as a general English teacher at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, I have been experimenting with background music in various classroom activities. While background music is commonly associated with relaxation or entertainment, its pedagogical potential in language learning contexts remains an area of growing interest. To better understand its impact, I recently conducted a survey among my students about their experiences, preferences, and suggestions regarding the use of music during lessons. This paper will report the findings of the survey and offer suggestions to enhance the use of background music in English language classrooms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of background music into English language teaching (ELT) has gained increasing attention as educators explore innovative strategies to enhance learner engagement, reduce anxiety, and improve language acquisition outcomes. While the broader educational benefits of background music have been well-documented (Çoban, 2023), recent studies have begun to explore its specific impact within language learning contexts, especially for adult learners.

Several studies highlight the role of background music in vocabulary acquisition and retention. Wu and Krazem (2022) examined incidental vocabulary learning through song listening and found that repeated exposure—particularly three iterations—facilitated the acquisition of spoken forms, meanings, and grammatical contexts of unfamiliar words. Their study also reported a significant long-term retention effect, with participants maintaining word recognition gains after four weeks.

In terms of listening comprehension and pronunciation, musical input has also shown measurable benefits. A recent investigation by Zhou *et al.* (2024) in *Frontiers in Education* revealed that adult English learners experienced improved comprehension of various accents and clearer pronunciation after incorporating music into their study routines. The researchers noted that background music served not only as a cognitive stimulus but also as a motivational and affective aid, particularly among learners with lower confidence.

Conversely, the impact of background music on oral fluency and accuracy appears more nuanced. Zhang (2020) found that while background music did not statistically enhance grammatical accuracy during oral tasks, it played a role in alleviating speaking anxiety among Chinese university students. This reduction in stress potentially enabled greater verbal output and improved fluency, even if not directly improving linguistic precision.

Background music has also been studied in the context of reading comprehension. A study by Liu and Wang (2023) used eye-tracking methods to examine how background music affects reading behavior among English language learners. Their findings suggest that fast-tempo background music can facilitate reading fluency and comprehension, particularly for less complex texts. However, for more challenging passages, background music could become a distraction, emphasizing the importance of aligning music tempo with task difficulty.

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Finally, affective factors, particularly language anxiety, have emerged as a recurring theme in the literature. Zhou *et al.* (2024) emphasized that music-assisted learning reduces anxiety and promotes a more relaxed classroom environment, which is critical for adult learners who may have heightened apprehension toward language learning. Music's emotional and physiological effects can create a positive learning atmosphere, indirectly boosting performance across language skills.

Overall, the literature suggests that background music can be a valuable pedagogical tool in ELT, particularly when used strategically. Its benefits are most evident in vocabulary learning, pronunciation, and emotional engagement, though results vary depending on learner characteristics, music tempo, and the language skill being targeted. More empirical studies are needed to refine best practices and understand long-term impacts, especially in diverse adult learning environments.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Research questions

This study aims to explore student perceptions of background music during classroom activities. The research focuses on the following questions:

- (a) Do students enjoy listening to music while engaging in classroom activities?
- (b) What are students' opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of using background music in class?
- (c) What suggestions do students have for improving the use of music in the classroom?

2. Research design

The research was designed as a classroom-based intervention. A group of students participated in English lessons that incorporated background music during various classroom activities, including Reading, Writing, and Speaking. The selected songs varied in genre, popularity, mood, tempo, and language (English or Vietnamese), offering a diverse musical experience. At the end of the course, students were invited to complete a survey to share their opinions and experiences (see Appendix). The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative data, which were then categorized and analyzed to address the research questions.

3. Participants

The study was conducted with a class of 50 students enrolled in a B2-level (CEFR) General English course during the Spring semester of 2025 at a technical university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. These students were in their second or third year of study, with ages ranging from 19 to 21.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Students' preferences for background music

The results of the survey reveal a highly positive attitude toward the use of background music in the classroom. Over 97% of students reported that they enjoyed listening to music while doing classroom activities. When asked about their opinion on the playlist used during the course, nearly 88% of students described the songs as "Good and suitable", while around 10% found them "Okay". Only a very small percentage (2%) expressed negative feedback.

2. Perceived advantages and disadvantages of classroom music

Despite some drawbacks, students generally viewed background music in class more positively than negatively. The most frequently mentioned benefits were related to improved mood and concentration. Many students said that music helped them feel more "relaxed," "less stressed," and "less sleepy" during class. Others appreciated that music helped them "focus better on the tasks." On the other hand, some students noted potential disadvantages. A few mentioned that they were easily distracted, especially when the songs matched their personal taste or were too upbeat. Others felt that background music made the classroom environment slightly noisier than usual. However, these concerns were relatively minor, and overall, students tended to favor the advantages of having music in the classroom.

3. Student suggestions for improvement

Students provided a number of constructive suggestions to enhance the classroom music experience:

Song selection: Several students commented that the current playlist felt "a bit outdated" and should include more recent songs, especially popular K-pop and US-UK hits. Some students preferred more English songs to help with listening and pronunciation practice, while others suggested using more instrumental music, believing that lyrics could be distracting during certain tasks.

Technical aspects: Some students recommended adjusting the volume, especially during high-concentration activities like writing. Others pointed out that the sound system in the classroom could be improved to deliver better audio quality.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that most students responded positively to the use of background music in English classes, especially in terms of enhancing motivation and concentration. This aligns with Li and Brand (2009), who found that music can facilitate vocabulary learning and reduce anxiety in EFL contexts. Similarly, Eerola and Vuoskoski (2013) noted that music helps regulate learners'

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emotions, which can contribute to improved academic performance. These results support the idea that background music, when used appropriately, can be a valuable tool in language education.

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APPENDIX

Questions used in the survey

1. Do you like the teacher playing music during class?
2. Do you think the music used in class is suitable?
3. In your opinion, what are the BENEFITS of listening to music while doing exercises (Reading, Writing, Speaking)?
4. In your opinion, what are the DRAWBACKS of listening to music while doing exercises (Reading, Writing, Speaking)?
5. Do you have any other opinions or suggestions about using music in class?