

ENGLISH FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON UTILIZING SONGS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS TO YOUNG LEARNERS A CASE STUDY IN TRA VINH PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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Abstract – *Within English teaching and learning facilities in most schools and English language centers in Vietnam, using songs is considered to be one of the most effective techniques for improving young learners' communicative competencies in English. Although many studies have discussed the technique, few studies have mentioned teachers' perceptions regarding the employment of songs in teaching listening to young learners in the context of Vietnam. To investigate teachers' perceptions of using songs in teaching listening to young learners, this study was conducted with a mixed-method approach using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 55 teachers from an English language center in Tra Vinh Province. The results indicated positive perceptions from teachers about utilizing songs in teaching listening to young learners. The teachers tended to enjoy integrating songs in their teaching listening activities. From the findings, the paper concludes by suggesting more research within the state school context specifically targeting teaching listening skills for other grades using songs.*

Keywords: *listening skills, songs in English teaching, EFL teachers' perceptions, young learners.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching listening skills has been a major theme in Vietnamese research about linguistics or language education. For example, Duong Thuc Phuong [1] examined students' listening learning

by focusing on the impact of using videos. Another study by Tran Thanh Du [2] analyzed and evaluated the impact of storytelling on speaking and listening skills. Besides teaching listening using videos or storytelling, in the context of Vietnam, children often learn English songs to improve their listening skills in private centers. Many studies have investigated how songs can promote young learners' vocabulary acquisition [3, 4] and enhance pronunciation [5].

Learners have applied many suitable and effective methods to improve listening skills, and one of the popular ways to achieve effective listening is learning English through music. Because children become more motivated to do things that they relish, songs can be a good tool for teachers to consider for listening instruction [6]. Sevik [6] also indicated that songs can help young learners in studying a language by providing an unthreatening environment for children, so teachers are using musical techniques to improve the listening skills of their learners [7].

However, very few studies have been conducted that focus on using songs to teach listening skills to young learners in Vietnam. Thus, this study examines the teacher's perceptions of using songs for teaching listening to young learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' perceptions

Perception has been defined in various ways by scholars. Perception is considered an ability of each individual to think and understand information or the world around them through senses [8]. Hasa [9] indicated that the term "perception" relates to how someone notices something with their senses and how he or she understands or assumes about that thing. Perceptions differ from

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person to person depending on a variety of factors, including their history, knowledge, religion, education, and culture. These views imply that teachers' perceptions are professional responses of educators to what they have observed when educating, teaching, guiding, directing, training, assessing, and evaluating children of various ages along the educational pathway, and these perceptions are influenced by the personal views and sentiments of educators [10].

Young learners

Different definitions have been given for the term “young learners.” According to Ellis [11], young learners can refer to anyone under the age of eighteen, which might be a misnomer because it spans a large age range with considerable disparities in physical, emotional, social and cognitive development among children. To further define categories of young learners, Ellis [11] proposed a list of names to describe young learners based on their life stages corresponding to early years, pre-primary, and primary school learners for age ranges from two to five, six to ten, and eleven respectively. In this study, young learners are interpreted as children whose age range is from five to twelve years old.

Teaching listening to young learners

According to Ellis [12], the goal of learning is to encourage children to become aware of learning techniques, allowing them to become more effective and autonomous learners by focusing their attention not only on what they learn but also on how they learn. Children's learning is heavily reliant on making connections between what they know and what they can grasp in the speech they hear (Wells, as cited in [13]). However, they do not learn solely by listening. Learning will not necessarily occur if learners do not actively seek meaning. As a result, training learners' listening skills might help them to become better listeners as they will be more actively engaged in the listening process, increasing their chances of gaining new knowledge using the target language [14].

Previous studies

Research has indicated that songs can support language intelligence [15]. Songs, as pieces of music, benefit young learners in several ways [4]. Songs can improve the listening comprehension

and pronunciation skills of students, and past studies suggest that there is no important variation in performance between boys and girls in terms of listening comprehension and pronunciation [16]. In the same vein, Ali [17] demonstrated that numerous factors hinder the improvement of young learners' listening comprehension. However, the usage of songs aided learners in honing their listening skills. According to Ali [17], the majority of young learners loved and valued learning English through listening to songs. Furthermore, other educational studies [18] have suggested that songs can be utilized as a medium to increase student learning results.

Besides helping young children learn a second language, songs can be valuable pedagogical tools [19]. Using songs as tasks are one way of helping transfer words from songs into use, and maximizing the potential of songs as teaching and learning tools. However, the difficulties faced by students in listening comprehension have also been investigated. Hidayat [20] analyzed the results from students' responses and found that they have problems with noisy classrooms, fast-paced songs, and different accents. Similarly, Hadian [21] found that in students tend to be reluctant, to give negative attention and to become less enthusiastic when they are not interested in song, and students tend to be confused and frustrated when they are given tasks that are too hard for them. Although the literature reviews various aspects relevant to learning English through song, the literature does not focus on teachers' perceptions of using song for teaching children listening skills in the context of Vietnam. Therefore, there are gaps in the literature related to teachers' perception of using songs for teaching listening skills to young learners that this study will address.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Populations, place and time of the study

Populations: In order to obtain a representative sample that ensures the credibility of generalizing the findings, the populations of this study were selected purposively. Fifty-five full-time and part-time EFL teachers at a foreign language center were invited to participate in the study. Ages, genders, and years of experience were preserved

in their confidential records for diversity. The respondents included 50 female teachers and 5 males out of 55. The participants were aged 22 to 45 and experienced from one to more than 10 years of teaching English to young learners at a language center. Besides, they have experience in teaching young learners from the age of five to 12 years old as well as applying songs in their classes.

Place and time of the study: this study was carried out in SR Foreign Language Center in Tra Vinh City, Tra Vinh Province. The study was conducted for six months, from November 2021 to April 2022.

B. Methods of data collecting and analyzing

Sampling method

The respondents of the study consisted of 55 English teachers who were selected by using random sampling technique, whereas the foreign language center were selected purposively where teachers were actively involved in teaching activities. The respondents were all native speakers of Vietnamese language. Among 55 teachers, eight were chosen to be the interviewed teachers (T2, T14, T24, T27, T39, T46, T51, T55) for their confidentiality.

Data collection

Mixed methods were used in this descriptive study. The quantitative method is questionnaire-based, and the qualitative method is a semi-structured interview to gather more descriptive data.

The first data collection instrument that was used was the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section included five questions that collected demographic information on the participants, and the second section consisted of 40 questions that targeted teacher's perceptions about utilizing songs for teaching listening to young learners.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to confirm the results of the questionnaire and to learn more about teachers' perspectives of using songs to teach listening to young learners. The interviews included eight open-ended questions which help to deepen and triangulate the results analysis of the questionnaire on teachers' perceptions.

The quantitative data from the questionnaire were coded and classified using a Microsoft Excel spread sheet during analysis. This data was then analyzed quantitatively using SPSS 20 software. As for the qualitative data, audio-video tape recordings were used. Finally, the findings were constructed based on both the questionnaire and interviews.

The study investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of the use of songs in teaching listening. Based on the purposes of the study, the following research questions were posed:

1. How do the EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of using songs in teaching listening to young learners?
2. What are EFL teachers' perceptions toward the use of songs in teaching listening skills to young learners?

IV. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study concerning teachers' perceptions about the use and benefits of songs in teaching songs to EFL young learners. The findings reveal teachers' positive perceptions about this area of study.

A. Findings from the questionnaires

To measure EFL teachers' perceptions towards using songs in teaching listening to young learners, a questionnaire was conducted. The fifty-five teachers reported their responses to the 40-item questionnaire on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Before the questionnaire was analyzed, a Scale Test was run. As can be seen in Table 1, the result indicates that the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.91, a high level of internal consistency.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.912	40

EFL teachers' perceptions towards using songs for teaching listening to young learners were analyzed by the Descriptive Statistic Test. As can be seen in Table 2, the mean score of participants' perception is 4.10, a high level of perception

according to Oxford (1990). The results showed that participants of the study held a high level of perception for utilizing songs in teaching listening to young learners.

In addition, based on the research questions, the five-cluster items were established and discovered after teachers' responses. Table 3 shows that, according to [22], teachers' perceptions of the use of songs related to selecting songs ($M=4.27$), teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of songs related to motivation ($M=4.20$), teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of songs related to useful media ($M=4.11$), teachers' perceptions on the use of songs related to procedures of using songs ($M=4.10$), and teachers' perceptions on the use of songs related to the difficulties of using songs ($M=3.71$) achieve high levels of perceptions. As a result, this cluster group had a great influence on participants' perceptions of using songs for teaching listening to young learners.

To determine whether there was a significant difference between the teachers' perceptions towards the effectiveness of using songs and teachers' perceptions about the use of songs in teaching listening to young learners, a paired sample T-test was run and its results were presented in Table 4.

As can be seen in Table 4, a paired sample T-test was run to see if the mean score of difficulties in selecting songs ($M=4.28$) and that of the effectiveness of songs related to motivation ($M=4.20$); the mean score of the effectiveness of songs related to useful media ($M=4.12$) and the mean score of procedures of using songs ($M=4.10$) are different or not. The results showed that the two mean scores of pair one ($t= 1.24$, $df=54$, $p=0.22$) and pair two ($t=0.57$, $df=54$, $p=0.57$) were not statistically different. In other words, the perceptions about the use of selecting songs, the effectiveness of songs related to motivation; the effectiveness of songs related to the use of media, and the procedures when using songs in teaching listening to young learners are equally important to the participants of the current study.

To consider whether there was a significant difference between perceptions of the male teachers and those of the female teachers towards

the use of songs in teaching listening to young learners, an independent sample T-test was run.

Table 5 shows that the mean score of perceptions in the male group ($M=3.97$) was smaller than that in the female group ($M= 4.08$). The statistics indicate that there was no meaningful difference between teachers' perceptions of the two groups (males and females) with $p=0.51$.

B. Findings from interviews

The findings indicate that eight interviewed teachers reported positive perceptions about using songs in teaching listening to young learners. A common view was shared by some of the interviewed teachers: "I use songs in my classes in general and in teaching listening to young learners in particular." or "I use songs in all of my English classes especially songs are more important for teaching listening skills." Five themes were identified during analysis related to as the effectiveness of songs for teaching listening to young learners related to motivation, the to the use of media, to procedures, to difficulties, and to selecting songs.

Regarding the first theme of motivation, data analysis showed that participants in the research contexts shared many common perceptions. The teachers mainly indicated that songs help children feel excited while studying and listening. Some extracts can be found as follows:

"Songs make young learners get excited, wake them up. Thus, they are ready to listen." [12I01M]

"When combining music which includes melody and animation in teaching, the children feel enjoyable to listen without being afraid of listening." [437I08M]

"Studying with songs creates a lively and comfortable learning environment. There is no pressure on learners. Teachers and learners become closer." [70I02M]

In addition, regarding the second theme related to the use of media, teachers believed that songs are useful media for children to develop vocabulary, simple structures, reading skills, speaking skills, writing skills, and pronunciation. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"If the song is related to the lesson, the young learners can remember easily." [171I03U]

Table 2: EFL teachers' perceptions towards using songs in teaching listening to young learners

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perceptions from 1 (strongly negative) to 5 (strongly positive)	55	3.08	4.88	4.07	.353

Table 3: Results of Cluster Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of songs related to motivation	55	3.22	5.00	4.20	.41241
Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of songs related to useful media	55	2.75	5.00	4.11	.57877
Teachers' perceptions of the use of songs related to procedures	55	2.25	5.00	4.10	.47408
Teachers' perceptions of the use of songs related to difficulties	55	2.00	5.00	3.71	.61044
Teachers' perceptions of the use of songs related to selecting songs	55	3.00	5.00	4.27	.47207
Valid N (listwise)	55				

Table 4: Paired Sample T-test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	MeanSelections - MeanMotivation	.07677	.46008	.06204	-.04761	.20115	1.237	54	.221
Pair 2	MeanUsefulmedia - MeanProcedure	.03409	.44683	.06025	-.08670	.15489	.566	54	.574

Table 5: Group Statistics

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	MeanSelections - MeanMotivation	.07677	.46008	.06204	-.04761	.20115	1.237	54	.221
Pair 2	MeanUsefulmedia - MeanProcedure	.03409	.44683	.06025	-.08670	.15489	.566	54	.574

“Through songs, the learners' pronunciation and listening ability can become better because they imitate the voices in the songs.” [165I03U]

“Teaching through songs will help young learners remember the vocabulary longer. Moreover, they even learn the short structures from the songs.” [281I05U]

“Young learners also develop speaking skills through songs.” [332I06U]

“The children can practice speaking with songs. Older children even develop other skills such as reading skills and writing skills.” [339I06U]

From what has been discussed, teachers gave more details about how songs can be useful. They expressed that songs can be seen as useful media not only to develop listening skills but also to enhance other skills like reading, speaking, and

writing skills. Their students can study well with vocabulary, pronunciation, and even grammar through songs.

Furthermore, the respondents also provided the procedures when teaching with songs. From the results of the interviews, most of the participants stated that there are three stages in teaching a song. Firstly, it is useful to activate the vocabulary and to form basic sentence structures. Secondly, the teachers involve the learners and maximize interest by having them perform actions and sing along to the songs. Finally, a follow-up stage can be used for written production, gap-fill activities, oral production or games. Some extracts related to procedures of teaching with songs are as follows:

“At first, I play the music for learners to listen to the song. Then, I teach them to read the

vocabulary and the sentences. Second, I play the song to teach them to sing and follow the song step by step until they can sing the whole song. Third, I combine listening to the song and playing games such as passing the ball, listening and guessing the vocabulary” [94-107I02P]

“In the first stage, I play the song many times for children to listen to. And I introduce the main vocabulary of the song. For the kids, they can remember the song and vocabulary when the teacher shows the pictures without writing them. For older children, after teaching them the vocabulary, I let them fill in the blanks. In the second stage, the children are asked to sing and dance which helps them imagine the meaning and comprehend quickly. It is because one of the characteristics of the children is activity. In the last stage, the learners will write the vocabulary because the main purpose of the song is to teach young learners to remember vocabulary. The teacher also reviews the vocabulary by using pictures.” [451-461I08P]

As can be seen, the findings of this theme connect with the quantitative analysis which showed EFL teachers’ contentment with the feature of this platform.

In addition, when being asked about problems that teachers usually have to face while applying songs in teaching listening to young learners, many teachers indicated some difficulties such as the students’ abilities, time limitations and inappropriate song lyrics. For examples, participants stated the following:

“In my class, the student’s proficiency level is not equal which causes the difficulty in teaching listening through songs.” [41I01D]

“One of my difficulties in teaching listening to young learners is time-limited. If I spend much time teaching a song, I won’t have enough time for teaching other parts.” [44I01D]

“I feel difficult when I can’t find the appropriate song with the topic of the lesson, so songs are for entertainment purposes only.” [407I07D]

The above respondents illustrated that using songs in teaching consists of both effectiveness and difficulties that the teachers cannot avoid.

Moreover, teachers asserted that when integrating English songs into the class for young learners, songs should be carefully selected to

suit the young learners’ abilities. The simple lyrics and the familiar melody also should be considered. Moreover, it is worth noting that the vocabulary in the songs should be appropriate to the topic of the lesson. The following extracts illustrate their views:

“I usually choose the songs whose lyrics are closed to the young learners’ knowledge.” [52I01S]

“The good way to select the song for teaching listening to young learners is that song should be simple and familiar melody.” [362I06S]

“I especially choose the songs with appropriate topic” [129I02S] In summary, EFL teachers’ perceptions of the use of songs in teaching listening to young learners indicated five major themes which deepened understanding of student motivation, the use of media, procedures, teaching and learning difficulties, and song selection.

C. Discussion

The findings were able to answer to the research questions about teacher’ perceived effectiveness of songs and their perceptions of teaching listening with songs. Basically, EFL teachers in the research context had high perceptions of the effectiveness of using songs in their English listening classes, particularly related to supporting motivation and contributing to useful instructional media. First, the theme of motivation had the second highest mean score among the five themes (4.20) from the questionnaire results, which was compatible with the study by Hadian [21]. The author also indicated that teachers positively responded to applying songs in the class because students enjoyed the listening activity. Besides, this finding was consistent with Ali [17], who found that utilizing songs in the classroom can relax students’ minds and bodies and can make their listening more enjoyable. Second, the findings revealed that the theme useful media got a high perception of EFL teachers in the current study. The mean score (M = 4.11) for the theme useful media got third place. Teachers’ responses to the questionnaire confirmed that songs can be seen as important media for teachers to teach listening to children. Furthermore, the data analysis from interviews showed more

details about this theme. The teachers stated that using songs creates a favorable environment for children to develop vocabulary, simple structures, reading skills, speaking skills, writing skills and pronunciation. This finding is in line with those of Sevik [6] and Ali [17], who considered songs as the most effective means of developing young learners' listening skills and may encourage the teachers to engage their students in developing English listening skills.

In addition to the efficiency of using songs, the findings also shared how teachers perceive to procedures, difficulties, and song selection. As shown in the questionnaire and interview analysis, the participants suggested different procedures when teaching with songs. The theme of procedures got fourth place with $M = 4.10$. Most of the participants stated that there are three stages to teaching a song that consists of activating the vocabulary and to forming basic sentence structures, involving the learners by having them perform actions and singing along to the songs, and integrating a follow-up stage by asking students to write, fill in the gap, speak, or play games. These procedures are similar to Millington [19], who recognized that teachers used to apply three stages in teaching with songs.

The study also found that difficulties related to using English songs for teaching listening to young learners need to be discussed deeply. Although this theme had the lowest mean score, it also belongs to the high level of perception with $M = 3.71$. As presented above, teachers perceived that songs can bring a lot of advantages to their teaching, but the respondents also shared some difficulties related to using fast-paced songs, having different accents of singers, teaching to varying student abilities, having limited time, and finding suitable songs. These findings are congruous with that of Hidayat [20] and Hadian [21], who concluded that some teachers face similar problems.

Last but not least, regarding the theme of song selection, it had the highest mean score ($M = 4.27$) from the questionnaire, and the findings from both research instruments indicated that EFL teachers were particularly concerned about this theme. Especially, the responses from the interviews showed that the teachers always

choose the songs carefully before the lessons by considering the learners' abilities, discerning simple and familiar songs, and assessing the suitability of vocabulary. These findings are similar to the study of Sevik [6], who found that songs should be selected carefully and implemented purposefully. In addition, these findings also concur with Hidayat [20] who emphasized that teachers should choose appropriate songs that can assist students to learn the language and achieve learning outcomes.

V. CONCLUSION

This study found that in the context of Vietnam, EFL teachers generally perceive that using songs is an effective way to teach listening to young learners. First, teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of songs for teaching listening to young learners are related to motivation. Given the importance of perceived effects of songs, teachers need to become more aware of songs as a useful media in teaching listening to young learners. Moreover, to fulfill the English proficiency levels of young learners, teachers should be provided with chances for professional development, notably in the use of songs in various classroom contexts of teaching listening. Furthermore, teachers should find ways to select songs pertinent to the needs and interests of learners in order to enhance learners' listening ability. Schools or language center authorities should equip classrooms with facilities for teachers to make the best use of songs and create a fun and motivating learning space or atmosphere for learners to overcome difficulties. However, listening skills in general and using songs in teaching listening skills in particular are a wide and deep topics that need attention from scholars. It is recommended that follow-up activities should be considered such as more research within state school contexts in Vietnam and research specifically targeting teaching listening skills for other grades.

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