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USING SONGS TO ENHANCE THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO BEGINNER LEARNERS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BENIN

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Abstract

Songs are valuable educational tools for learning and teaching foreign languages. This work aims to find out how songs are used to teach EFL and to identify the difficulties related to their use in teaching EFL. To carry out this study, the mixed methods design has been used and a questionnaire was administered to 20 EFL teachers in two secondary schools in Abomey-Calavi in Benin Republic. The analysis of the data has revealed that all the teachers use songs to teach their EFL classes. Most of the teachers (65%) reported that they use songs at the beginning of their lessons and the remaining teachers resort to songs at the end or during their lessons. In addition, only 55 percent of the teachers reported that they use songs to introduce their grammar lessons or to strengthen grammar lessons previously taught. The teachers also mentioned three major difficulties related to the use of songs in EFL teaching. They complained that it is difficult for them to get songs and even if they succeed in getting songs, those songs are not always relevant to the purpose of their lessons. Finally, they reported that students make many pronunciation errors while singing. Given these findings, it was recommended to sensitize teachers on the need to mainstream songs in their instructional practices and to conduct empirical investigations through classroom observations on the actual use of songs in EFL classes.

Key words: Songs; teaching; EFL; secondary school education

Résumé

Les chants sont des outils pédagogiques très utiles pour l'apprentissage et l'enseignement des langues étrangères. Le présent travail vise à déterminer comment les chants sont utilisés pour enseigner l'anglais langue étrangère et à identifier les difficultés liées à leur utilisation dans l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère. Pour mener à bien l'étude, la méthode mixte a été utilisée et un questionnaire a été administré à 20 professeurs d'anglais dans deux établissements secondaires différents situés à Abomey-Calavi. L'analyse des données a révélé que tous les professeurs se servent des chants pour enseigner leurs cours d'anglais. La plupart des professeurs (65%) ont signalé qu'ils utilisent les chants au début de leurs cours et les autres font recours aux chants à la fin ou au pendant le déroulement de leurs cours. De plus, seulement 55% des professeurs ont indiqué qu'ils utilisent les chants pour introduire leurs leçons de grammaire ou pour renforcer les cours de grammaire précédents. Les professeurs ont également fait part de trois difficultés majeures liées à l'utilisation des chants dans l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère. Ils se sont plaints du fait qu'il est difficile d'obtenir les chants et même lorsqu'ils parviennent à obtenir des chants, ces derniers ne sont pas toujours en rapport avec les objectifs des leçons. Enfin, ils ont signalé que les apprenants commettent beaucoup d'erreurs de prononciation en chantant. En tenant compte de ces recommandations, il a été recommandé de sensibiliser les enseignants sur la nécessité d'intégrer les chants dans leurs pratiques d'enseignement et de mener des investigations empiriques à travers des visites de classe sur l'utilisation réelle des chants dans l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère.

Mots clés: chants; enseignement; anglais langue étrangère; enseignement secondaire

Introduction

Learners of English in an EFL context often have difficulties learning the language and hardly participate in classroom activities. At the secondary school level, some learners even decide not to attend English classes. Some students, mainly beginners, complain that English is difficult as they quickly lose the motivation they develop at the early stages of learning the language. Sometimes, teachers also complain about their students and the fact that the latter do not learn their lessons on a regular basis.

Despite the fact that much research has been conducted on the use of songs to increase young learners' interest in the English language, the same problems raised in the above paragraph persist. Songs are yet to be effectively used in the teaching of EFL in Benin. They are mostly used for recreational or entertainment purposes. As Millington (2011) rightly stated, "More often than not, songs are used relatively ineffectively, often as activities between learning" (p. 139). Teachers often decide to teach their learners a song when they have covered much of the syllabus and want to relax. Teachers often fail to use the full potential of songs for the teaching of various skills. It is therefore important to conduct investigations on the level of use of songs in selected secondary schools to have a better idea of the problem and make suggestions to solve it.

This study will benefit English teachers as it will draw their attention to problems related to the use of songs to enhance the teaching of English as a foreign language in the country. It further suggests a list of songs and which aspects of the language those songs can be used to teach. In addition to enriching teachers' repertoire of songs, the study also sheds light on the best ways to use songs to teach the four skills, grammar, vocabulary, and even pronunciation. Songs are powerful motivational tools and if teachers are aware of how to use them to teach the language, they will certainly arouse motivation in their learners because as Guillotin and Martin (2019) rightly observed, without motivation, it is difficult for EFL learners to learn effectively. As a consequence, students are going to implicitly draw tremendous advantages from the study because they are going to learn better and their performance in various aspects of the language will improve significantly.

The purpose of the study is to explore the use of songs in the process of teaching English at secondary school level. The specific objectives are to find out how songs are used to teach EFL and to identify the difficulties related to the use of songs in EFL teaching. In other words, the study addresses the following two research questions: How are songs used to teach EFL in secondary schools? What are the difficulties related to the use of songs in teaching English language in secondary schools?

Before addressing the two research questions, the relevant literature has been reviewed in order to get insights into previous studies on the topic under investigation.

1. Literature Review

This section focuses on the rationales for using songs in EFL teaching and some practical applications of the use of songs in EFL teaching.

1.1 Rationales for Using Songs in EFL Teaching

There are many reasons why songs are used in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Songs create a safe and conducive atmosphere for learning in the classroom insofar as they help to reduce affective filter. According to Jadhav (2015), "Songs are one method of achieving low affective filter and promoting language learning" (p. 78). For Shen (2009), the use of songs in the classroom "can successfully bring about affective learning through providing a harmonious classroom atmosphere, reducing students' anxiety, fostering their

interests and motivating them to learn the target language” (p. 90). Songs play important roles in the classroom when they are used as instructional media. Those roles include creating a learner-friendly atmosphere in the classroom and this atmosphere in its turn triggers motivation by enhancing students’ interest in the language.

Furthermore, songs facilitate linguistic knowledge acquisition. In his report of a study conducted by the University of Wisconsin, McGowan (2008) stated that children learn more quickly from songs than from everyday speech. In the words of Vishnevskaya and Zhou (2019), “Another advantage of using songs in an English classroom is that they include linguistic information, for instance vocabulary items, pronunciation or grammar, resulting in students’ acquiring new knowledge [without any direct intention to do so].” (p. 1810). As it appears, through songs, students can acquire grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation without any conscious effort to do so. However, for this indirect acquisition to take place, songs should be purposely selected. That is the reason why Jadhav (2015) stated that songs need to be selected bearing in mind students’ interests, their relevance and the objectives of the lesson. Another reason for using songs in the classroom is that they enable to integrate the teaching of all four language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as pronunciation (Lems, 2018). Through a single song, a teacher can teach speaking by asking students to reflect on what they have heard in the song and give presentations on their reflections. Through the same song, students can learn new vocabulary items that will be useful in understanding a text that has the same lexical field as the song. Songs are also useful for teaching English because they provide an opportunity for practice and repetition which facilitate learning (Jadhav, 2015).

In the forging, many reasons why songs are useful for teaching English have been explored. Now, some practical uses of songs in teaching EFL are presented below.

1.2 Some Practical Uses of Songs for Teaching EFL

Here, the focus is on vocabulary, grammar, listening and pronunciation.

1.2.1 Using Songs to Teach Vocabulary and Grammar

It was stated earlier that songs can be a great source of student motivation in the classroom. With this motivation, not only do learners easily remember the new words they hear in the songs but they are also eager to find out the meaning of those new words (Shen, 2009). It is also known that teachers do not select songs at random. For example, a teacher who wants to teach parts of the body to young learners can choose the song *Head, Shoulders and Toes* or *Head and Shoulders*; *I Can Sing a Rainbow* can be used to teach colors; the *Hi* song can be used to teach greetings (Millington, 2011; Shen, 2009; Le Feron, 2005).

According to Ludke (2009), teachers willing to teach vocabulary through songs should select songs that contain a large number of vocabulary items currently taught. She suggested a four-step activity that consists in presenting the song, playing it, getting students to do an exercise which could be a cloze vocabulary exercise or a meaning-guessing exercise and asking students to compare their answers.

Moreover, the literature abounds on the use of songs to teach grammar. Sariçoban (2000) stated that songs “make grammar points more understandable and easier” (p. 2741). This is especially true for young and even adult learners because the entertainment that comes with songs creates a relaxed environment in the classroom. Jadhav (2015) opined that songs can be used at all stages of grammar teaching, at the beginning or at the end, during the presentation or practice phases of the teaching. Besides, songs can be used to teach a whole range of grammatical structures. For example, Katie Melua’s *If You Were a Sailor* is very useful in teaching the second conditional; *From A Distance* by Bette Midler can be used to teach the simple present tense; *Yesterday* by Beatles to teach the simple past tense; *Haven’t Met You Yet* by Michael Bubble to teach the present perfect tense.

Furthermore, *Left Outside Alone* by Anastacia can be used to teach the present perfect continuous; *Lemon Tree* to teach the present continuous, *Promises Don't Come Easy* to teach the subjunctive mood and *Where Is Thumbkin?*, *Hello, What's Your Name?*, and *Who is Wearing Red* can all be used to teach WH-questions (Jadhav, 2015; Millington, 2011; Shen, 2009). For the practical teaching of grammar through songs, teachers can design cloze exercises in which the missing words are ones that are related to the grammatical item in focus, to be done in the classroom or as homework (Jadhav, 2015; Ludke, 2009).

1.2.2 Using Songs to Teach Listening and Pronunciation

Songs provide an adequate means of teaching listening and pronunciation in an unobtrusive way. The teacher does not need to tell the students that they are going to perform a listening activity or learn pronunciation. Songs are meant to be listened to and sung and while singing, students acquire the pronunciation of many words. Songs provide students with the opportunity to listen to authentic language in which the environment where a word appears in the sentence can alter its pronunciation. Students can be asked to do gap-filling exercises after listening to the lyrics of a song (Shen, 2009). Ludke (2009) recommended that the songs to be used for listening activities should not contain too many new words or grammatical structures. She also suggested that listening comprehension activities can focus on grammar, vocabulary but most importantly, the lyrics can be used for dictation exercises.

In the same vein, Richards (2005) suggested two types of listening activities including noticing activities and restructuring activities. In the teaching of listening through songs, noticing activities can involve the identification of differences between what students can hear and a printed version of a song, checking off from a list, completion of a cloze version of the song. On the other hand, restructuring activities can include written sentence completion using expressions or words from the song and role-plays in which students use language from the song (Richards, 2005, p. 90).

With regard to pronunciation, Shen (2009) indicated by constantly listening to songs, students gradually correct their pronunciation errors and get closer to native speakers' pronunciation because listening enables them to familiarize with and internalize new words through repetition, imitation and implicit acquisition of phonological rules. In situations where the sounds of English are markedly different from the sounds of the students' first language, the use of songs for pronunciation purposes can ease the acquisition process for students (Millington, 2011).

On a general note, songs are useful in the EFL teaching and learning process and teachers need to use them very often in order to bring variety in their classrooms. For sourcing songs, a number of websites have been suggested by Lems (2018), Millington (2011) and Shen (2009) including <http://www.theteachersguide.com>; <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/>; www.aimlanguagelearning.com; lyricstraining.com; <https://childrensmusic.com>; <http://americanenglish.state.gov/culture-music-and-game-resources>; <https://theguardian.com/teacher-network>.

1.4 Difficulties Related to the Use of Songs

Although songs are valuable pedagogical tools, their use in the classroom does not always come easy. In fact, it is difficult for teachers to find and select songs that are suitable for their lessons or class because "simply singing songs will not teach learners how to communicate in another language" (Millington, 2011, p. 140). Therefore, after singing with their learners, teachers need to draw students' attention to aspects of the songs that are relevant to their lessons. The difference between songs' expressions and the rules of grammar

learnt in classrooms can lead to confusions. Richards (1969) believes that “The language, vocabulary and sentence structure of some songs can be quite different from those used in spoken English” (p. 163).

Furthermore, Murphey (1992) exposed some difficulties inherent to the use of songs including the fact that the use of songs can make teachers lose control of their classes and limited vocabulary in some songs. When teachers sing with their students, they can disturb adjacent classes, which means that songs need to be used sparingly and effectively. Other difficulties are related to the lack of songs and how to teach songs. Teachers often lack a good repertoire of songs and for that reason, they may shy away from the use of songs.

From a different angle, Millington (2011) stated that “some non-native English-speaking teachers may also worry about teaching the stress and timing of songs correctly, and are therefore probably more likely to only use certain songs that they feel comfortable with” (p. 137). The main difficulty here is that teachers may have a hard time mastering how to sing the songs themselves and this can lead them to use the same songs over and over again with the risk of creating boredom in their learners.

2. Methods and Procedures

To carry out this research, the mixed methods design was used. The population includes all EFL teachers in two secondary schools in Abomey-Calavi. A questionnaire was administered to a sample of seven teachers in the first school and 16 teachers in the second school. The questionnaire included 11 items about how EFL teachers use songs in EFL teaching, the importance of songs in EFL teaching as well as the difficulties teachers encounter when using songs in their EFL classes.

After getting authorization from the school administrators, the research team got in touch with the English subject coordinators commonly called *Animateur d'établissement* (AE) in French and the questionnaire was administered in February 2020 during the professional development meetings in the two schools. In the first school, the teachers asked the team to come back the following Monday. When the team went back, only four teachers turned in the questionnaire filled out. In the second school, the AE negotiated with the teachers and they all agreed to complete the questionnaire the same day. After waiting for a while in the school, the research team got back all the 16 questionnaire sheets thoroughly completed. The team expressed their gratitude to all the teachers for their promptness.

3. Findings of the Study

Here, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. Given that only four teachers turned in the questionnaire sheets, the sample is reduced to 20 teachers in total. Therefore, the response rate is 86.95 percent.

3.1 Presentation of the Findings

The first issue raised in the questionnaire is to know whether the respondents use songs in their classes or not. Figure 1 below displays their answers.

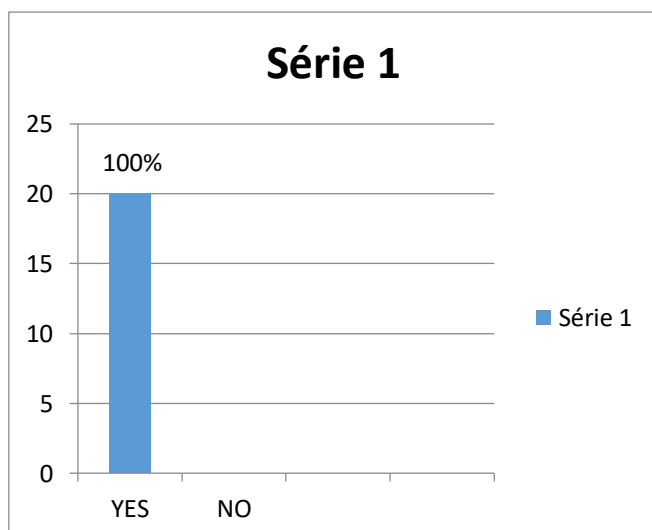


Figure 1: Use of songs during lessons

As shown in Figure 1, all the respondents reported that they use songs during their lessons. However, there are variations in the timing of the use of those songs as shown in Figure 2.

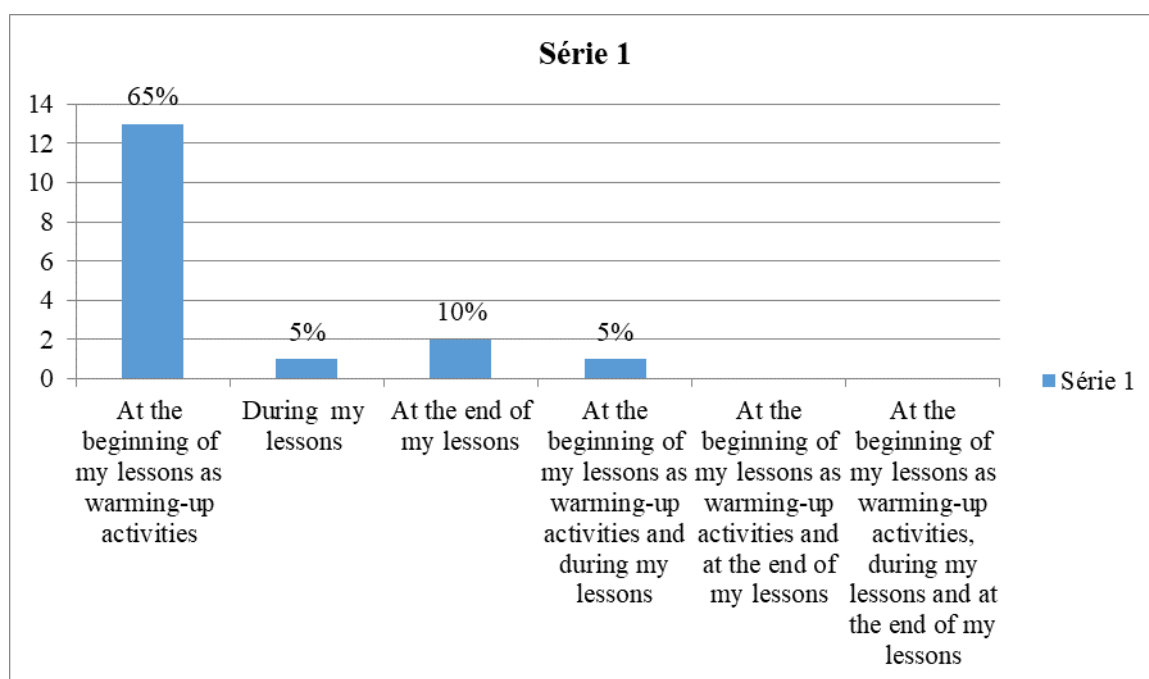


Figure 2: Timing of using songs in lessons

Figure 2 shows that most of the respondents (65%) use songs at the beginning of their lessons as warming-up activities whereas 5% of the respondents declared that they use songs during their lessons and the same percentage use songs at the beginning of their lessons as warming-up activities and during the lessons. Ten percent (10 %) of the respondents use songs at the end of their lessons. Figure 2 shows clearly that songs are used to introduce lessons and close them. Those who stated that they use songs during their lessons did not specify what they use the songs for.

With regard to the way the respondents select songs to be used, most of them reported that the songs are selected on the basis of the content of the syllabus. Here are some

illustrations of that opinion: “I choose the appropriate songs according to the topic I want to teach.”; “Songs are chosen according to the relevant sequences included in the teaching syllabus.”; “The appropriate songs are chosen according to the objective to reach in the leaning process.”

Other respondents choose songs that can motivate learners or have positive effects on learners’ motivation as it appears from the following comments: “I choose any kind of songs that can warm-up.”; “The appropriate songs are choosing by finding songs that can motivate students according to the curriculum.”; “I choose the appropriate songs based on learners’ needs.”

The respondents’ comments indicate that songs are selected on the basis of factors such as learners’ needs, the content of the syllabus, objectives of lessons to be taught and the potential of the songs to warm up students.

When the respondents were asked to write down some songs they use in their EFL classes, here are the ones some of them wrote: *Are you Sleeping?; Every day I go; John my Boy; English Alphabet song (ABCD....); If You’re Happy; Hello! Hello!; Dear Teacher; I am a child; Our teacher*

Here are some of the songs in full:

Song: Are You Sleeping?

Are you sleeping?
Are you sleeping?
Brother John,
Brother John?
Morning bells are ringing
Morning bells are ringing
Ding ding dong
Ding ding dong

Song: If You’re Happy

If you’re happy and you know
Clap your hands (Clap, clap)
If you’re happy and you know
Clap your hands (clap, clap)
If you’re happy and you know
I really want to know
If you’re happy and you know
Clap your hands (clap, clap)

Song: I Am a Child

I am a child
I am a child
I am a student
I will grow and become a man
let me learn carefully
and be disciplined
for one day
I will be a man

Song: Our Teacher

Our teacher, our teacher
Our teacher welcome
You are welcome to our classroom
May God bless you forever
We are happy, we are happy
We are happy to see you
May God bless you
May God bless you
May God bless you forever!

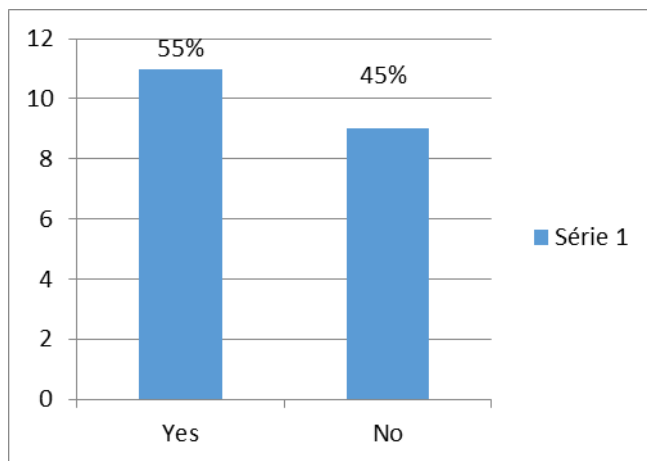


Figure 3: Use of songs in Grammar teaching

As shown in Figure 4, almost half of the respondents (55%) use songs to teach grammar whereas 45% do not. In fact, the comments from the respondents who use songs to teach grammar show that the songs are used to introduce the grammar lessons: *“I use some songs to introduce the lesson”*; *“I use a typical song before presenting the lesson”*; *“I proceed by composing my own song in which the grammatical item I want to teach is included”*

With regard to the importance of songs in EFL teaching, the respondents mentioned different roles that songs play in the teaching of EFL. For a group of respondents, songs are viewed as motivational tools: *“Songs motivate learners”*; *“Songs get students interested in the learning”*; *“They make learners like the subject”*; *“Songs attract students”*.

A second group of respondents indicated that songs generate positive feelings in learners and a learner-friendly atmosphere in the classroom, as shown in these statements: *“Songs keep students in a vivid atmosphere”*; *“They prevent classroom from annoyance”*; *“Songs relax”*; *“Songs give pleasure to learners”*.

For the third group, songs are useful in helping students memorizing notions taught: *“Songs help learners develop their rote memorization abilities”*; *“They help to memorize”*. This is all the more true since learners can learn a lot of grammar points through songs when the songs are carefully selected.

The last group of respondents think that songs help to keep students awake in the classroom. Here are some illustrative statements: *“Songs make students curious.”*; *“Songs keep students awake”*; *“Songs help teachers to warm up the sleepy students.”*

However useful songs are in teaching EFL, the respondents face some difficulties in using them. One difficulty is the lack of songs that could fit the syllabus: *“The difficulty in finding relevant songs to teach the learning sequences or situations”*; *“Lack of songs to teach lessons”*. Another difficulty is the difficulty students face with regard to the pronunciation of words: *“Students think it is difficult to pronounce some words”*; *“Too much (sic) corrections of pronunciation”*; *“Students do not correctly pronounce some words”*. The pronunciation difficulties raised here are real. When students are singing together and teachers do not pay close attention, it might be difficult to detect mispronunciations due to the high level of noise in the classroom. One respondent reported that the use of songs in EFL teaching can be time-consuming because it takes time to find the relevant songs and to plan a lesson around those songs.

Despite these difficulties, the respondents use songs for other purposes. They use songs for entertainment, relaxation, warming up and for class vividness as illustrated in these comments: *“We use songs for amusement”*; *“I also use songs to make the teaching vivid”*;

“For relaxation if I notice students are tired during the course”; “I also use songs to entertain students”; “Songs are used for entertainment, as you know, students like leisure”.

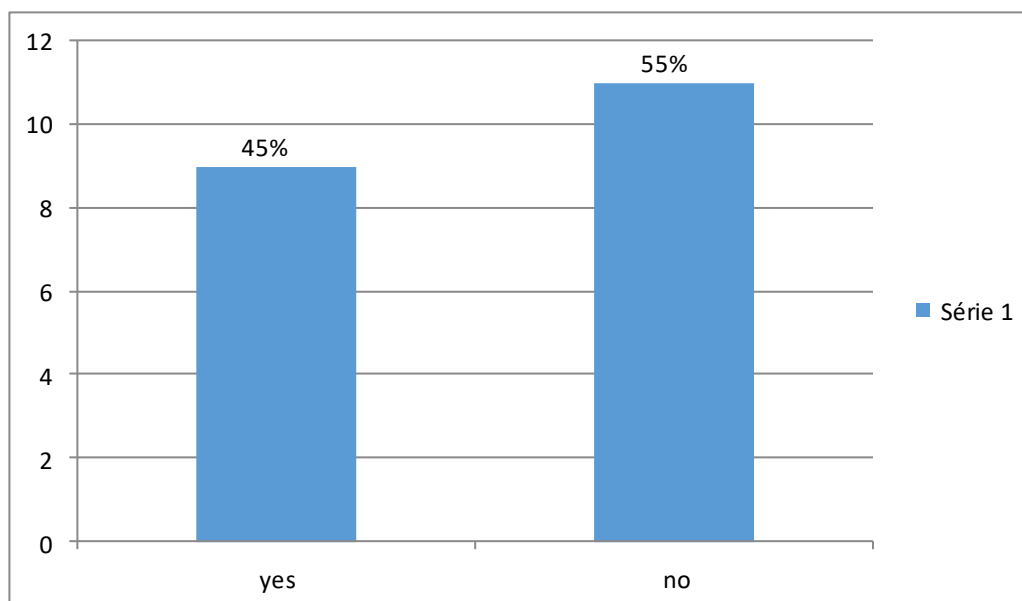


Figure 4: Ease in getting songs

As shown in Figure 5, more than half of the respondents (55%) reported that it is not easy for them to get songs whereas 45% reported that it is easy.

The respondents explained the reasons why it is difficult for them to get songs or not. Those who stated that it is difficult for them to get songs provided the following explanations: *“It is not easy because some songs are too long”; “It is not easy because all songs are not good for teaching”; “Difficult because of the lack of appropriate songs”; “Not easy because songs that we find are not sometimes related to the syllabus and students’ level”.* The major reason can be summarized as irrelevance of available songs to the syllabus and students’ level.

For the teachers who find it easy to get songs, here are the sources they pointed out: *“It is easy because during teachers training session we used to learn song”; “It is easy to get songs since everything is possible with internet”; “I compose my own songs”; “I get songs via Internet”; “I copy them from colleagues”.* These comments show that songs are obtained during trainings, from colleagues and through the internet.

3.2 Discussion of the Findings

This discussion looks into the way songs are used to teach EFL and some difficulties related to their use in EFL teaching. All of the participating EFL teachers reported that they use songs in their classroom for EFL teaching even though they do so at different periods during their lessons. Furthermore, most of the respondents (65%) stated that they sing with their students at the beginning of their lessons for warming up. Others resort to songs at the end of their lessons while some sing with their learners at the beginning and during their lessons whereas some use songs only during their lessons. What is noteworthy here is that the respondents are aware that songs can be used to warmup students, that is to create a positive atmosphere that is *“more conducive to learning”* (Lems, 2018, p. 15). That is the reason why the respondents pointed out that the songs they select for teaching are songs likely to warm students up and to motivate them. A quick analysis of the songs written down by the respondents reveals that those songs can adequately fulfill these two purposes.

Furthermore, 55 percent of the respondents reported that they use songs to teach grammar and 45 percent indicated that they do not resort to songs for grammar teaching. As mentioned in the literature review, songs hold a high potential for teaching grammar. If such a large percentage of respondents do not use songs for teaching grammar, whatever the levels they teach, it means that they are missing out a very useful and practical pedagogical tool. In the opinion of Millington (2011), songs enable to avoid monotony in the classroom while Sariçoban (2000) believes that songs facilitate the understanding of grammar points. In addition, songs are useful tools in teaching grammar communicatively. The respondents who do not use songs in teaching grammar certainly continue using traditional methods such as grammar translation which are no longer adapted to the competency-based approach to teaching that is currently in use in Benin.

It should also be noted that even the respondents who reported using songs for teaching grammar stated that songs are used to introduce grammar lessons or to strengthen previous lessons. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the extent to which songs constitute the backbones of the instructional procedures used by those teachers. Consequently, it can be inferred that something important is missing in the way grammar is taught in the investigated schools.

From a different perspective, there are some difficulties related to the use of songs in EFL classes. Only 45 percent of the respondents reported that it is easy for them to find songs to be used during their lessons. They get those songs from colleagues, from the internet and during trainings. A sizable percentage of the respondents stated that it is difficult for them to find songs. In this era of technological development, getting songs should not be a problem at all because the two schools investigated are in the South of Benin where internet connectivity is widespread. Even if it is not possible to obtain songs from colleagues or during trainings, there are innumerable websites that contain both the recordings and lyrics of thousands of songs that teachers can download and use for educational purposes. Some of those websites are <http://www.theteachersguide.com>; <http://americanenglish.state.gov/culture-music-and-game-resources>; <https://theguardian.com/teacher-network>.

Apart from the difficulties in the above paragraph, the respondents also reported that they find it difficult to get relevant songs. This difficulty can be easily overcome through the internet if teachers plan their lessons ahead of time. Using songs to teach EFL lessons adds diversity to teachers' ways of teaching but there is an extra work of learning to sing the songs and tailoring their contents to the lessons to be taught. That is the reason why only advance lesson planning can facilitate an effective mainstreaming of songs in the process of teaching EFL.

Conclusion

This study has been to explore how songs are used in the process of teaching English at secondary school level in Benin. Thanks to the study, it has been found out that all the respondents reported that they use songs in their EFL classes but at varying stages during their lessons even though most of them indicated that they sing with their students at the beginning of their lessons. The songs used in the classrooms are selected on the basis of learners' needs, the content of the syllabus and the objectives of the lessons.

In addition, 55 percent of the respondents reported that they use songs to teach grammar and the remaining one stated that they do not. Those who use songs to teach grammar select songs that are likely to create a learner-friendly atmosphere in the classroom and positive feelings in the learners. In terms of difficulties related to the use of songs for teaching EFL, 55 percent of the respondents indicated that it is not easy for them to get songs whereas 45 percent reported that they easily get songs through the internet, from friends and during their trainings. Even if it is easy to get songs, another difficulty is how to get songs that

are relevant to the lessons to be taught. The last difficulty mentioned by the respondents is that when students are singing, they make a lot of pronunciation errors.

The aforementioned findings call for a number of actions. The first one is the sensitization of teachers on the urgent need to mainstream songs into their instructional practices, mainly the teaching of grammar, to limit the recourse to traditional methods. Secondly, teacher advisors and inspectors should train teachers on the use of songs for EFL teaching and take advantage of those trainings to teach the teachers many songs on various topics.

In terms of further research, empirical investigations in the form of classroom observations need to be conducted to find out how and to what extent songs are used by some teachers in their daily EFL instructional practices.

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