

Improving English Skills through Songs

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1. Introduction

Many Japanese learners of English have learned “*The ABC Song*” at the beginning of learning English, for example, in English classes in junior high schools. Since some English songs including “*The ABC Song*” are introduced in English textbooks used in junior high schools, Japanese learners can learn some of these English songs if their teachers introduce them into their classes or learners themselves are interested in them. Let us observe English songs in some textbooks. We take three textbooks as examples: *New Horizon English Course* (2002), *Sunshine English Course* (2003), and *New Crown English Series* (2003). As Sekiguchi (2003) shows, these textbooks are currently used in many Japanese junior high schools: *New Horizon English Course* is adopted by 41.1%, *Sunshine English Course* is adopted by 22.6%, and *New Crown English Series* is adopted by 21.9% of junior high schools in Japan. Table 1 shows English songs introduced in these textbooks.

Table 1: English Songs in Textbooks

Textbooks	English Songs
<i>New Horizon English Course 1</i>	The ABC Song
<i>New Horizon English Course 2</i>	Silent Night, Take Me Out to the Ball Game
<i>New Horizon English Course 3</i>	Let It Be, Over the Rainbow
<i>Sunshine English Course 1</i>	Old MacDonald Had a Farm, Hello, Good-bye, Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da
<i>Sunshine English Course 2</i>	Take Me Out to the Ball Game, Thank You for the Music
<i>Sunshine English Course 3</i>	We've Only Just Begun, Last Christmas, I Need to Be in Love
<i>New Crown English Series 1</i>	Sailing, Hello, Good-bye, Every Child Has a Beautiful Name
<i>New Crown English Series 2</i>	Stand by Me, Yesterday Once More, I Just Called to Say I Love You
<i>New Crown English Series 3</i>	Take Me Home, Country Roads, Imagine, Top of the World

Since the particular English songs such as “*Imagine*” and “*We are the World*” have once been introduced as the teaching materials for ‘reading practice’, many students who used *Sunshine English Course* have learned the songs. On the other hand, the songs shown in Table 1 are introduced just as ‘songs’, and teachers can decide whether or not to use these songs in their classes. Certainly, it is not so easy for teachers to introduce songs into English classes because junior high school students are often

embarrassed and hesitate in singing aloud in classrooms as they become older. In addition, some of them think that they cannot afford to sing songs in classrooms because they have a lot of other things to learn in order to pass the entrance examinations. In fact, as Aihara (2001) shows, 35% of them learn English for the entrance examinations. Nevertheless, it is not to be denied that songs can help learners to improve their English skills. This paper attempts to consider English study using songs. By observing how the teachers actually make use of songs in their classes, showing the effectiveness of songs in English classes, and showing the attitudes of future teachers toward using songs, we will encourage teachers to make use of English songs in their classes.

2. English Classes in Junior High Schools

In this section, we will observe how junior high school teachers actually use English songs in their classes. The data are collected from Japanese students from my “Principles of English Language Teaching” class at Ibaraki University, participated in 2005. In this class, the students aim to acquire the knowledge and skill which is necessary to teach English as junior high school teachers. Since it is possible that they introduce songs into their classes in future, it is valuable for them to consider effective use of songs as teaching materials in this class. The students are from Ibaraki (64%), Fukushima (8%), Tochigi (8%), Chiba (8%), Yamagata (4%), Kyoto (4%), and Saga (4%). In this respect, we can observe the actual conditions of several areas in Japan.

We will begin by confirming how many teachers actually use songs in English classes. Figure 1 shows that most of junior high school teachers use songs in their classes. On the contrary, high school teachers rarely use songs in their classes (3%), but here we limit the discussion to English classes in junior high schools.

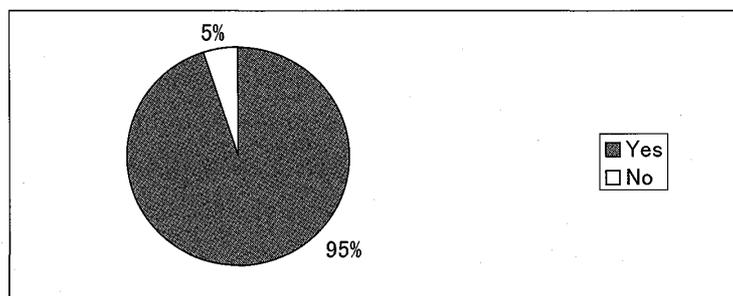


Figure 1: Did your teachers use songs in English classes?

We will next observe how teachers make use of English songs in their classes. We can show four types of using English songs: they use songs (1) for warming up, (2) for listening practice, (3) for a change, and (4) for cross-cultural understanding. In

addition to these types, 12% of the teachers introduce songs into “elective” English classes. (Under the new *Course of Study*, the subject “English” became one of the compulsory subjects. This means that there are two types of English classes, “compulsory” English in which all students learn and “elective” English in which applicants learn. In “elective” English, teachers can teach English more creatively.)

(1) For Warming Up

Teachers use songs when they intend to warm their students up in their classes. Some teachers select some particular English songs and sing them with their students at the beginning of every class. They aim to make their classes with a good atmosphere in which students can enjoy learning English. 35% of the teachers use songs for this purpose.

(2) For Listening Practice

Teachers sometimes use songs as teaching materials for listening practice. Students listen to songs several times, fill in the blanks, and complete the lyrics. Teachers aim to make their students to listen to and understand spoken English through songs. 29% of the teachers use songs for listening practice.

(3) For a Change

Teachers sometimes use songs in their classes for a change. Students do not always enjoy learning English, especially in junior high schools. With songs, even students who do not like to learn English may feel relaxed and enjoy English itself. 29% of the teachers use songs for the refreshments.

(4) For Cross-Cultural Understanding

Teachers use songs as teaching materials for cross-cultural understanding. Some teachers introduce songs into their classes when they team-teach with assistant language teachers. Other teachers select songs suitable for annual events or seasons, for example, Christmas songs in December. They aim to introduce foreign cultures through songs. 24% of the teachers use songs for this purpose.

Let us show songs which teachers actually use in their classes. We can find many familiar hit songs sung by the Beatles, the Carpenters, Celine Dion, Simon & Garfunkel, Mariah Carey, Queen, et al: “*Top of the World*”, “*We are the World*”, “*Yesterday Once More*”, “*Let It Be*”, “*Yesterday*”, “*Sing*”, “*Last Christmas*”, “*Stand by Me*”, “*Help*”, “*I Need to Be in Love*”, “*Please Mr. Postman*”, “*Honesty*”, “*Dancing Queen*”, “*Close to You*”, “*White Christmas*”, and so on. This list shows that teachers do not content themselves with songs in textbooks.

Lastly, let us turn to the response from students. We present Figure 2 in order to confirm whether students enjoy English study using songs. We can see that 94% of the students enjoy English songs in classes. It is possible that many students are

embarrassed and hesitate in singing in classrooms, and some of them think that they cannot afford to deal with songs in classrooms. However, teachers should notice that it is also possible that many students enjoy learning English with songs.

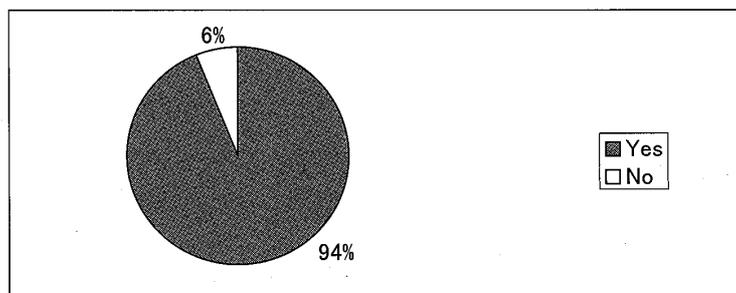


Figure 2: Did you enjoy English songs in classes?

The observations in this section lead us to the conclusion that teachers should make the best of songs when they give English lessons. In order to attain this purpose, teachers need to understand the effectiveness of songs, that is to say, what kind of the students' English skills they can improve through songs. We will consider this subject in the next section.

3. Improving English Skills through Songs

As Kumai & Timson (2006) insist that songs can help learners to learn English phonetically, linguistically, and culturally, many of us would accept the effectiveness of songs in English study. In this section, we will show that songs can help teachers to improve their learners' English skills under the following four heads: (A) Motivation, (B) English rhythm, (C) Sound changes, and (D) Cross-cultural understanding.

(A) Motivation

As mentioned in the previous section, learners do not always enjoy learning English, especially in junior high schools. According to Aihara (1999), junior high school students who enjoy learning English decrease from 80% to 20% during three years. Some of the reasons are obvious. Students are forced to learn English in any case whether or not they want to. In addition, as they became older, they will concentrate their attentions on learning English for entrance examinations, not on learning English as a tool for communication. It is hard for teachers to teach English in the classrooms in which 80% of the learners do not like to learn. However, doing something other than learning with textbooks, for example, listening to or singing English songs may make learners feel relaxed or enjoy English itself. Unexpectedly, English songs are close to learners because they

enjoy listening to English songs in their spare time. English songs may enliven the classroom by motivating learners with well-known popular songs they love to listen to.

(B) English Rhythm

Letters of the alphabet are strung together to form written words and sentences. Similarly, speech sounds, for example, consonants and vowels are combined to form spoken words and sentences. This means that it is not sufficient for learners to learn to identify individual sounds and words when they hope to understand ordinary colloquial English. Nema and Smillie (2005) insist that learners should focus upon English rhythm. Because individual languages follow their own characteristic patterns of stress, pitch, and rhythm, and because we have learned the patterns of our own languages implicitly or know them intuitively, learners of English need to make a conscious effort to learn the patterns of the language. By listening to and crooning English songs in which they can find ordinary colloquial English, learners will be able to be conscious of, be accustomed to, and eventually acquire English rhythm.

(C) Sound changes

The majority of Japanese learners of English are not able to understand English speeches of native speakers because they cannot perceive phonetic changes, particularly at word boundaries. In fact, as Aihara (2003) shows, sound changes interfere with Japanese learners' listening and understanding of English. Gimson & Cruttenden (1994) insist that learners should know of their existence in any case whether or not they use such forms themselves. Otherwise they will find it difficult to understand much of ordinary colloquial English. Aihara (2002) describes how consonants change their characters under the influence of their neighboring consonants, with special regard to phonetic changes at word boundaries. Such knowledge is particularly important for learners of foreign languages because they often learn the languages on a basis of isolate word forms. Listening to English songs may give learners the opportunity to get accustomed to English sound changes because they can find many examples of sound changes in songs.

(D) Cross-cultural understanding

The song's lyrics have a lot of information. This means that learners can learn a lot from songs. By listening to, reading, writing down, singing, and memorizing the lyrics of songs, they can enrich their vocabulary, learn the structure of English sentences, and especially obtain a piece of useful information to learn about

foreign people and cultures. In fact, by the grace of Christmas songs, we can learn many words about Christmas, names of nine reindeer, how to write Christmas cards, how to celebrate Christmas in foreign countries, and so on. To appreciate foreign cultures and realize the importance of our own cultures again is one of the purposes of learning English.

4. English Classes in a University

In previous section, we showed the effectiveness of songs in English study. We will next show two examples of my English classes in a university, “General English” class and “Listening” class at Ibaraki Christian University, participated in 2005. In these classes, Aihara use songs for the purpose of improving her students’ English skills on the basis of what we have seen above.

4-1 “General English” Class

The students in this class aim to improve multi-skills of English, that is to say, listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills. The textbook is *Alive Jives* (2002) by Moriguchi & Kimura. Each chapter in this book deals with a topic relevant to a popular song and covers the four basic skills. The hottest songs by some of today's popular musicians, including many 2001 Grammy Award nominees shown in Table 2 will inspire students to study and enjoy English. The class is divided into five sections shown below Table 2.

Table 2: Songs in *Alive Jives* (2002)

Chapters	Titles	Artists
1	Hello, Goodbye	The Beatles
2	Music	Madonna ★
3	I Want It That Way	Backstreet Boys
4	On My Way Home	Enya
5	Living la Vida Loca	Ricky Martin
6	I Don't Want to Miss a Thing	Aerosmith
7	What a Girl Wants	Christina Aguilera ★
8	Bye Bye Bye	'N Sync ★
9	Fashion Victim	Green Day
10	Say My Name	Destiny's Child ★
11	Reach	Gloria Estefan
12	Baby One More Time	Britney Spears ★

★ 2001 Grammy Awards nominees

(1) Listening

Students listen to a recording of the featured song for that chapter several times and write in the missing parts of the lyrics. They are also asked to answer several questions about the song such as “Do you know the song?” and “Do you like the song?” This gives them the opportunity to regard the teaching materials as close to themselves.

(2) Reading

Students read a short passage providing them with the background information on the featured artists and song. After grasping the main idea, they answer several questions to check if they have comprehended what they’ve read. They are also asked to make up several questions of their own and answer questions which their classmates make up.

(3) Grammar

Students study an essential point of grammar, taken directly from the song’s lyrics. They learn the grammatical rule briefly and practice in putting the rule to use.

(4) Writing

Students write a short essay using the grammar learned in section three. This gives them the opportunity to practice, improve their English writing skill, and to express themselves creatively.

(5) Speaking

Students are asked to show and tell about their own favorite English songs to their classmates. They introduce the songs and explain why they recommend them. This task improves their speaking skill and gives them the opportunity to express themselves in English.

Since students in this class are not majoring in English, some of them do not like to learn English and are rather poor at English. However, they can continue to learn English actively with songs. English songs enliven the classroom by motivating students with well-known popular songs they love to listen to in this class.

4-2 “Listening” Class

The students in this class purpose to improve their listening skill of English. Every exercise is designed to make students listen. They learn some of the usage patterns and vocabulary words associated with the specified topic, answer several questions to check if they have comprehended what they’ve listened, dictate some short sentences, and so on. By carrying out these different listening tasks, they can enrich their vocabulary and know how to identify the important information to

understand what they have listened to.

As one of the additional listening tasks, Aihara use some English songs, “*Love*” by Nat King Cole, “*Sing*” by the Carpenters, and “*Happy Christmas*” by Yoko Ono & John Lennon. Students listen to these songs, fill in the missing parts of the lyrics, and learn about the sound changes which may cause students not to listen to and understand the lyrics. Let us take “*Sing*” as an example. Most of the students have already listened to this song, but they have only a vague memory of the lyrics. The following is the song’s lyrics and the underlined parts designate the missing parts of lyrics which students are asked to listen to and fill in.

SING

Sing, sing a song

Sing out loud

Sing out strong

Sing of good things, not bad

Sing of happy, not sad

Sing, sing a song

Make it simple to last your whole life long

Don’t worry that it’s not good enough

For anyone else to hear

Just sing, sing a song

We will observe the students’ answers and show the causes why they cannot listen to the lyrics correctly. Let us begin by observing the phrase “Sing out loud” in the second line. Many of the students write “Sing aloud” because they cannot perceive the word-final /t/ sound of ‘out [aʊt]’. They should know that the word-finally stop consonants are often dropped in ordinary colloquial English. Similarly, many of them cannot identify ‘out’ in “Sing out strong” and write “Singer strong” instead. In this case, they link the word-final /ŋ/ of ‘sing [sɪŋ]’ to the word initial /a/ of ‘out [aʊt]’, and mistake ‘sing out’ for ‘singer’. They should also know of the existence of liaison because it is often observed in spoken English. We will next consider the phrases in the fourth and fifth lines, “not bad” and “not sad” respectively. Although some of the students can relate ‘good’ to ‘bad’ and ‘happy’ to ‘sad’, many of them cannot fill in the missing parts of the phrases. It is because that the word-final /t/ of ‘not [nɒt]’ and /d/ of ‘bad [bæd]’ and ‘sad [sæd]’ are often pronounced unreleased or sometimes not pronounced in colloquial English. Let us turn to the seventh line and observe “last your whole life long” which is the phrase that most of the students cannot perceive correctly. This

phrase has three sound changes which may interfere with their listening and understanding. Firstly, we can find an example of coalescent assimilation at word boundary of 'last' and 'your'. The word-final /t/ of 'last [læst]' and word-initial /j/ of 'your [jər]' coalesce into /tʃ/, and "last your" is likely to be pronounced as [læstʃər] in colloquial speech. Secondly, we can find an example of elision in "whole life". When two identical sounds adjoin, the preceding sound is often dropped in spoken English. In this case, the word-final /l/ of 'whole [houli]' is next to the word-initial /l/ of 'life [laɪf]', and the preceding /l/ of 'whole' may be dropped. Thirdly, the word-final /ŋ/ of 'long [lɒŋ]' is often pronounced as [n]. These three sound changes make the phrase "last your whole life long" difficult to be understood by students. The phrase we observe last is "it's not good enough". Because the word-final /t/ of 'not [nɒt]' and /d/ of 'good [gʊd]' are not often pronounced, students may have difficulty in understanding this phrase.

From what we have observed above, we see that sound changes may cause learners not to listen to and understand colloquial English. It is clear that learners can improve their listening skill when they learn about sound changes. This class gives learners the opportunity to learn sound changes through English songs and eventually improve their listening skill.

5. Students' Attitudes toward Using Songs as Teaching Materials

In this section, we will observe the attitudes of future teachers toward using songs in their classes. We observe here Japanese students from my "Principles of English Language Teaching" class at Ibaraki University. Since they will possibly teach English in junior high schools or high schools and introduce some English songs into their classes in future, they need to consider effective use of songs as teaching materials. Firstly, we will observe whether they have interest in teaching English with songs. As Figure 3 shows, 98% of the students intend to use songs in their English classes.

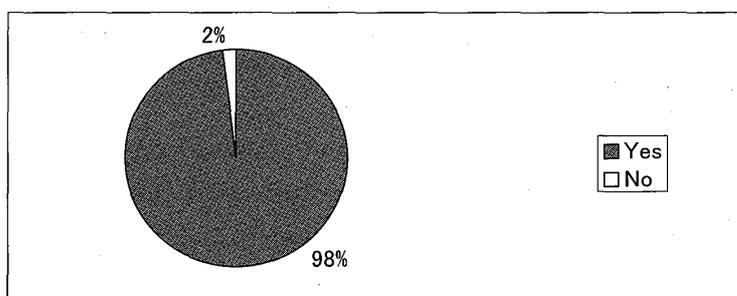


Figure 3: Do you intend to use songs in your classes?

We will show the reasons why they want to use songs in their classes. As Figure 4 shows, they ask songs for seven factors including four factors shown in the third section of this paper. Most of the students expect that songs will motivate learners to be interested in English itself and learning it (83%). About half of them think that it is useful for learners to listen to English pronunciation of native speakers (46%) and to enrich their vocabulary (42%) through songs. 38% of the students expect songs to improve their learners' listening skill. We should notice that this factor may overlap with some other factors such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and rhythm. 29% of them ask songs to help learners understand foreign cultures. Regrettably, the minority of students directs their attention to English rhythm (13%) and sound changes (9%). It may be for the reason that they do not have enough knowledge of English phonology because they are freshmen.

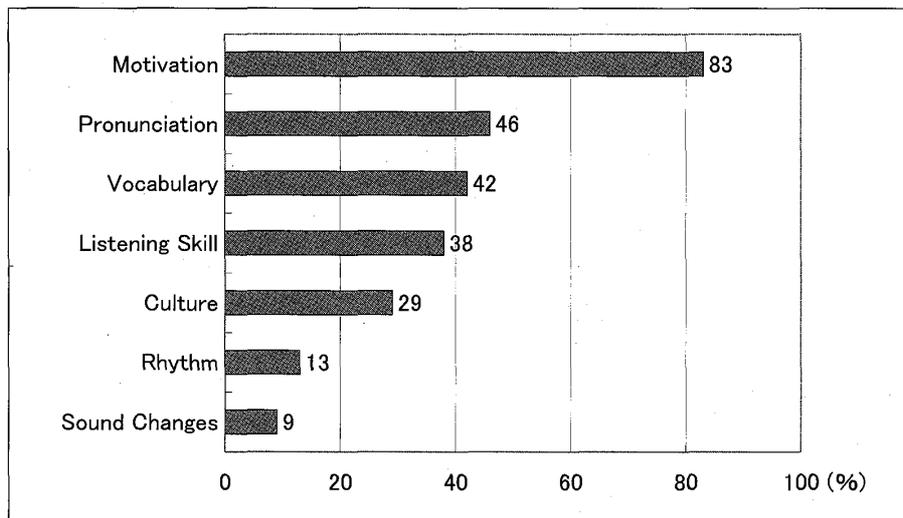


Figure 4: Why do you use song in your classes?

We need to observe how students select songs when they use them in their classes. As Figure 5 shows, they select songs according to the following seven conditions: Songs in textbooks (A), Songs in favor with teachers (B), Songs in favor with learners (C), Hit songs (D), Songs which include the relevant grammar or vocabulary (E), Seasonal songs (F), and Others (G).

Over the half of the students want to use seasonal songs (59%) and hit songs (53%) because these songs are likely to be familiar to themselves and their learners. 47% of them select their own favorite songs because it is easy for them to deal with the songs as teaching materials. 35% of them select the songs introduced in textbooks, their learners' favorites, and the songs which include the relevant words and grammar to their lessons. For example, when they teach the present perfect, they may use "Happy Xmas" by Yoko Ono & John Lennon. When they teach greetings, they may use

"Hello, Goodbye" by the Beatles. 12% of the students select easy songs for their learners to listen to and understand.

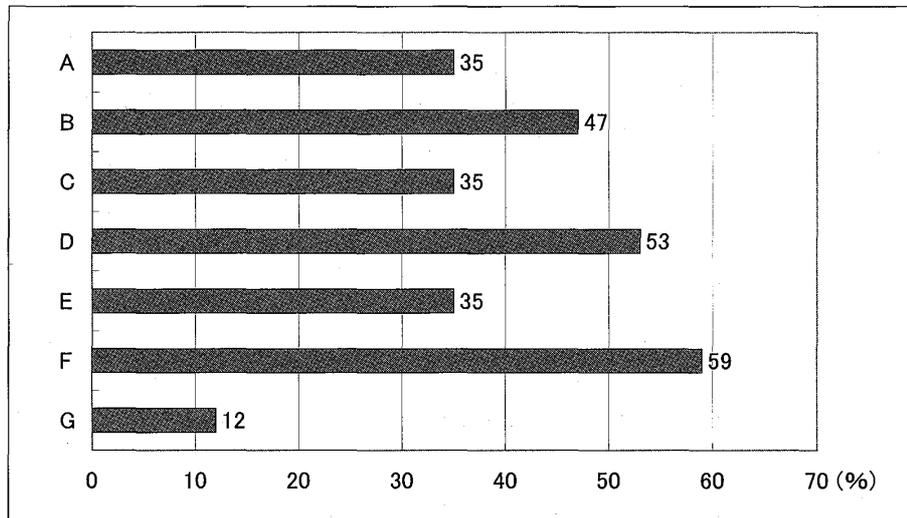


Figure 5: How do you select songs?

Lastly, we will show some songs which the students recommend to use in their classes in alphabetical order: "All You Need is Love" (the Beatles), "A Whole New World" (Peabo Bryson & Regina Bell), "Close to You" (the Carpenters), "Dancing Queen (ABBA)", "From Me to You" (the Beatles), "Happy Christmas" (Yoko Ono & John Lennon), "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing" (Aerosmith), "In My Life" (the Beatles), "I Need to Be in Love" (the Carpenters), "I Want it That Way" (Backstreet Boys), "Last Christmas" (Wham), "Let It Be" (the Beatles), "Miss You More" (BB Mak), "My Heart Will Go on" (Celine Dion), "Saccharine Smile" (DONOTS), "Sing" (the Carpenters), "The Winner Takes It All" (ABBA), "This is Halloween" (Danny Elfman), "Top of the World" (the Carpenters), "Whatever" (oasis), "Who Knows" (Avril Lavigne), and "You are the Sunshine of My Life" (Stevie Wonder).

From what we have observed in this section, we can see that my students take a positive attitude toward introducing English songs into their classes. They are expected to motivate their learners to enjoy English and to improve their English skill by making use of songs effectively.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to consider English study using songs. Firstly, we observed how junior high school teachers make use of songs in their classes. We see that 95% of the teachers use songs in their classes for warming up, for listening practice, for a change, and for cross-cultural understanding. We next showed the

effectiveness of songs in English classes and then two examples of my classes participated in a university. In these classes, songs are used for the purpose of improving students' English skills. Lastly, we observed the attitudes of university students toward using songs as teaching materials. We see that 98% of them want to use songs in their future classes. Since it is clear that songs can motivate learners to be interested in English and can help them improve their English skills, teachers are expected to make use of songs in their classes more and more.

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歌による英語スキルの育成

相原和恵

本論では、歌を教材に使っての英語スキルの育成について考察する。まず、大学生を対象としたアンケート調査から、現場（中学校）の英語教師がどのように歌を活用しているかを観察する。次に、英語学習に歌を導入することの利点を示し、その観点から歌を教材として使用した授業例を紹介する。更に、英語教師志望の大学生の歌の導入に対する姿勢を示す。