

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND POPULAR MUSIC: A STUDY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Sharda Acharya

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology, Rourkela – 769008 (Odisha), India
Email: sharda.acharya@gmail.com

Seemita Mohanty

Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology, Rourkela – 769008 (Odisha), India
Email: seemita@nitrkl.ac.in

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Abstract

During the last few decades sweeping changes are being seen in the lifestyle of India's urban youth, brought about by huge intrusion of digital media into their lives. One of those sweeping changes is the level of accessibility of music into their daily existence. Music today is ubiquitous, incessant, and indispensable. In this era of iPods and iPads, music is everywhere. Most radio stations are devoted to music. There are TV channels and internet sites that promote and sell music, in addition to karaoke bars, rock concerts, and the inescapable music that haunts us in restaurants, stores, gyms, and in mobiles. Most young people submit themselves to this aural stimulation ceaselessly; they listen to music while driving, walking, working, eating, and studying. Life and music are inseparable. And the languages of their choice for musical stimulation include both English and other Indian languages. Today in India, knowledge of English is considered to be highly essential for better opportunities in life, in addition to being a trendy component in the cultural ethos of the youth. In the background of this persistent aural stimulation among teenagers and young adults, the paper aims at studying the influence of English songs on young people, and to examine the extent to which English songs have been able to support English language learning among the said group. The objective is to study how new media technologies can be utilised in improving language learning, with special focus on popular English music. A survey design was employed among a representative sample of teenagers, young professionals, home-makers and graduate students, to fulfil the objectives of the study.

Key words: Language learning, popular music, English songs, youth,

INTRODUCTION

Today music is everywhere. It is effortlessly integrated into mobiles, iPods, iPhones, tablets, internet sites, TV channels, FM channels etc. We are exposed to inescapable music almost wherever we go and in whatever we do. For example, in bars and restaurants, hypermarkets, retail stores, spas, gyms, public buses, autos and taxis and even on roadsides and at construction sites. It flows on unrelentingly, enfolding everyone into its embrace, irrespective of class, caste or creed. Even though music attracts everyone, but young people are seen to be more susceptible to its influence as compared to any other age group. Most of the youngsters today are found to have submitted to constant aural stimulation while walking, driving, jogging, eating, working or studying. An affinity between language and music is also perceived when young people are seen enjoying karaoke displays where they get to hear the music and read the lyrics simultaneously.

According to Crystal (2003), popular music is one of the most important media through which people around the world have come into contact with English since the 1960s. Though the term popular music might seem self-explanatory, different definitions exist for different cultural contexts. Focusing on musical style, a popular song produced in a non-Anglo-American region might be defined as "popular" because it sounds like an Anglo-American popular song (Bennett, Shank, and Toynbee 2006). Frith (1992) contends that popular music products, regardless of musical styles, are inseparable from the technological and commercial processes involved in their production, distribution and consumption. A popular song in India would be defined as "popular" because it has gone through a similar commercial process as

any other song, in addition to being hugely popular among the masses. And the prime consumers of popular music are the young people. Today with rapid explosion of inexpensive technologies, different types of media and media-related activities have become an omnipresent feature of the leisure worlds of the young (Brown, 2008). Brown (2009) goes on to state that listening to popular music, accessed via Web 2.0 technologies, such as P2P networks and pay-per-track sites, and played-back on MP3 players, is a central, defining activity of contemporary youth consumer culture.

MUSIC AND LEARNING

The existence of the Mozart Effect, which was described for the first time by Rauscher et al. in 1993 (Cacciagfesta et al., 2010), contends that learning is enhanced with music, be it, spatial-temporal intelligence, mathematical capabilities or abstract reasoning. A wonderful fact about the human foetus is revealed by some researches that it comprehends acoustic signals in the womb and after birth the first aspect of language that babies learn is its music: its intonation, pitch, and rhythm (Mora, 2000). Newham (1995) adds a more scientific fact about the retention by stating that the primarily right hemisphere-oriented process of music making can enhance the process of language acquisition and memory which impacts on the left hemisphere. Thus songs are understood to be enhancing and stimulating memory. Hence the question that arises here is, if musical experiences are incorporated into daily life of the young people today, is there a scope of language skill development along with its other cognitive advantages? Gardner (1993) noted that the musical intelligence is the first intelligence to emerge in young learners. Perhaps it happens because music allows one to relax, even in the learning atmosphere. In a classroom environment, songs can be used to teach sounds, rhythm & stress, polite formulae, sentence patterns & syntax and vocabulary (Richards, 1969). Paquette and Rieg (2008) have contended that language lessons addressing grammar, reading fluency, and writing, among other literacy skills, can be enhanced through the medium of music.

Farokhi & Hashemi (2012) have spoken about art forms in enhancing learning. Some of the forms that they define as arts are music, visual arts, drama, dance and literature/creative writing. So, while having access to music, whether as audience in a common experience or in developing it with others, there is always space for conversation. Music generally manifests in tune, melody, rhyme, and lyrics (Mashayekh & Hashemi, 2011). The present study concentrates on music that includes songs, with or without orchestration. Ostrand & Schroeder (1979) opine that Baroque music, with its 60 beats per minutes and its specific rhythm creates a kind of “relaxed concentration” for active learning. We enjoy a melody, by listening, humming, whistling, singing to it, or dancing along. Hence it stimulates us into tapping feet, clapping hands, nodding heads, and smiling. In such a non-threatening environment learning becomes joyful. Lems (2005) has confirmed that listening to songs is a tried-and-true method by which students can improve their listening comprehension in a different language, and when used as a guided activity its value is maximized even further. Song lyrics can easily be chanted or sung, aiding oral fluency and pronunciation. There is a huge availability of lyrics websites on the internet. In whichever form they are introduced, the words and phrases can be accessed and made use of in speech or writing. The present paper focuses on the English language learning of young people through music, with special focus on vocabulary improvement. Language acquisition occurs most effectively where there is freedom to know, to try, and to err, without the fear of penalty (Nessel and Dixon, 2008). And all three can happen while choosing and repeating unknown words from popular English songs.

Nessel and Dixon (2008), opine that students learn the English words of a favourite popular song much more readily than learning words presented in a textbook lesson. Murphey (1992)

theorizes that lyrics in pop songs boost language production as they contain high-frequency vocabulary that every learner needs to know. As the young peoples' vocabulary level expands, their confidence and interest to improvise on the existing language skills also increases. Learning through music is reinforced when they tune into their favourite songs which have a good number of vocabulary building items. This can be included under both incidental and intentional language learning. While we listen to the lyrics of an English song, we tend to remember the words that are easy to pronounce, short, and morphologically less complex. It is worthwhile to note here Lems' (2005) observation that American songs are a rich source of contemporary idioms and culture. Popular music, more particularly, deals with people's fantasies, realities, dreams and nightmares which stimulate incredible creativity and pleasure (Hansen, 2010). Thus, popular music generates interest as a mode of expression of thoughts and emotions. Topics like courtship, marriage, break-ups, death, nature, education, and gender etc. constitute the key themes of today's modern day music. Contemporary song lyrics are also affected by a broad variety of children's stories, games, toys, chants, fads, mythical heroes, and nonsense word play.

POPULAR ENGLISH SONGS SUPPORTING LANGUAGE LEARNING

One of the essentials for effective communication is comprehensibility and immediate understanding. Since English is a second language for Indians, it might so happen that the lyrics of an English song sung by a native speaker might not be intelligible to most people. Heavy orchestration and words set in extremely high and low vocal ranges curbs easy comprehension. But repeated hearing of the songs many a times also aids in rectifying this drawback, and facilitating better understanding. Nessel & Dixon (2008) first mentioned about the Language Experience Approach (LEA) as a flexible way of developing language skills based on the specific interests and needs of the student in a language classroom. There are four basic steps to the LEA: providing an experience; talking about the experience; recording the dictation; and reading the text (Cacciafesta et al., 2010). The whole process, with repetition, leads to familiarity and meaningful learning of new expressions. Music can be naturally integrated throughout all curricular areas to develop and to extend vocabulary and comprehension skills. Music can also improve listening and oral language skill development, improve attention and memory, and enhance abstract thinking (Hill-Clarke and Robinson 2003). Lozano (1979) introduced 'Suggestopedia' which signifies mental calmness in learning. It is a method of second language teaching that capitalises on relaxed states of mind for maximum retention of material. Music plays a vital part in this teaching method. Hence both of the above theories apply to the learning of language with ease and comfort. Since most of the incidental and intentional L2 learning relate to vocabulary (Hulstijn, 2003), we can infer that vocabulary is learnt as a by-product of some other activity, usually reading for comprehension (Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008; De Ridder, 2002; Gass, 1999; Huckin & Coady, 1999; Jones, 2004; Kweon & Kim, 2008.) Griffiths (2013) contends that songs can deliver unlimited resources that can be used in a language classroom.

In the background of such association between music and language learning the present study sought to study the effect of English songs on Indian teenagers and young adults, and to examine the scope of popular English songs in improving their English language skills.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The study consisted of 256 respondents randomly selected from one school and one college in Rourkela. However, they were screened on the basis of completeness; rational scoring and adherence to scale and finally 200 responses (78.125%), 100 teens and 100 young adults, within the age range of 20-25 years, were considered for further analysis. All the teen

respondents belonged to grades viii, ix, x of an English medium school in Rourkela, and the young adults were undergraduate and post-graduate students of a college in Rourkela.

Measuring Instrument

A questionnaire on English Language Learning through Music (ELLTMQ) was developed by the researchers (Annexure 1). It assessed the impact of popular English music on English language learning on the teenagers and young adults in India. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items, 13 of which were rated on 5 point Likert type rating scale i.e. always, often, neutral, sometimes and never. The response on item no. 14 was based on 5 alternatives such as; 0-1hr/day, 1-2 hrs./day, 2-4 hrs./day, 4-6 hrs./day and more than 6 hrs./day, whereas, item 15 was based on two alternative responses i.e. Yes/ No. Some of the items in the questionnaire were (I6) “I learn new words from the songs that I hear”, (I7) “I like to listen to, learn and sing English songs because they make me trendy”, (I9) “I pay heed to the nativity of the English songs as that is a good resource for learning linguistic and cultural awareness”, (I11) “I feel music is a powerful stimulation in vocabulary enrichment rather than bookish learning”, (I12) “Music assists in the formation of memory and creates emotional bonds” and (I13) “Music is a teaching/learning tool.” The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the scale was found to be .64. The face validity was also established after a thorough review by other experts of the field.

Data Collection and Analysis

The respondents were requested to respond to the questionnaire by indicating their level of perception for each item in the questionnaire. Data was collected individually from each respondent of the sample. Before administering the questionnaire, the investigators personally met with the subjects and built a good rapport with them and they were requested to respond honestly to the questionnaire. The survey was conducted for about a month during December 2012. T-test results showed that there was no significant difference between the means of the two groups of people, teenagers and young adults. Further pie charts and a histogram have been prepared to represent the details of the respondents’ variation in terms of percentage of exposure to popular music, percentage of male/female respondents between the two groups and their comparative mean values, respectively.

Details of Respondents Represented Graphically

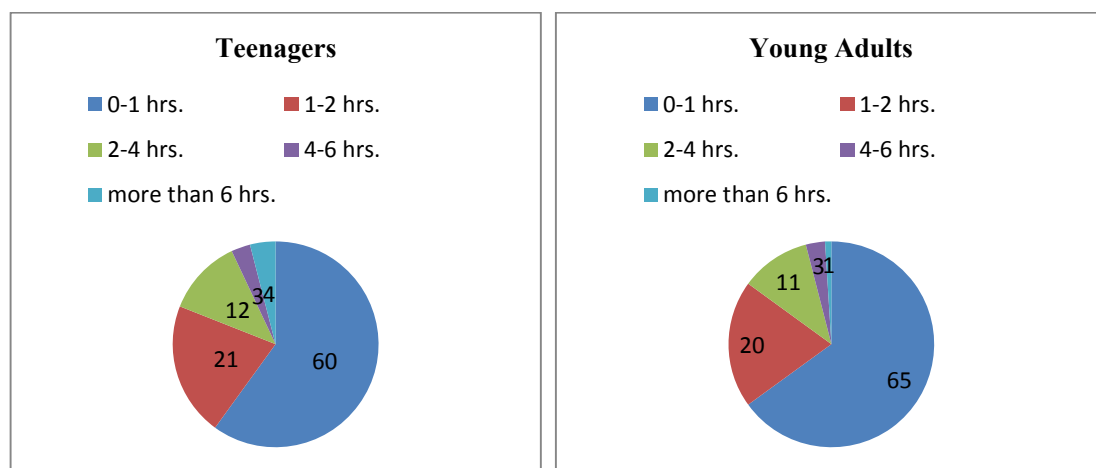


Fig 1: Exposure to Popular Music among Respondents in Percentage

It was found that most of the teenagers (60%) and young adults (65%) listen to popular English songs for less than one hour while only a small percentage of them, (4% and 1%, respectively) listen for more than 6 hours.

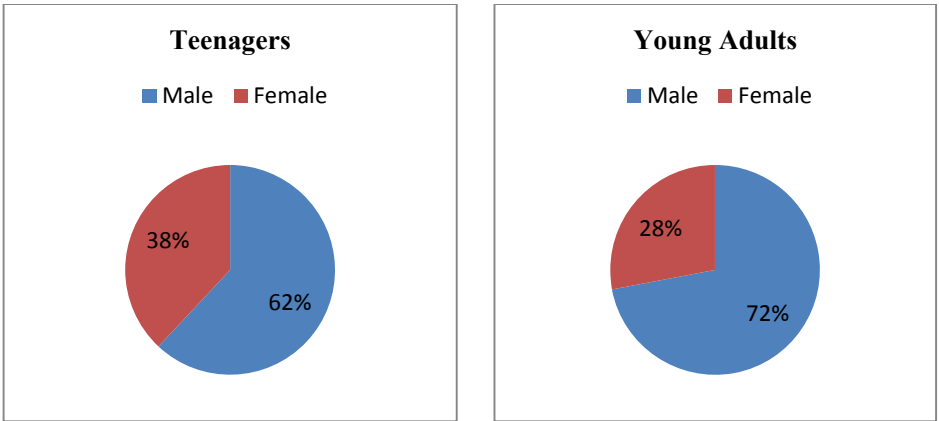


Fig 2: Total Percentage of Male/ Female Respondents

Majority of the respondents, both teenagers (62%) and young adults (72%) were male as compared to the female respondents (38% and 28%, respectively).

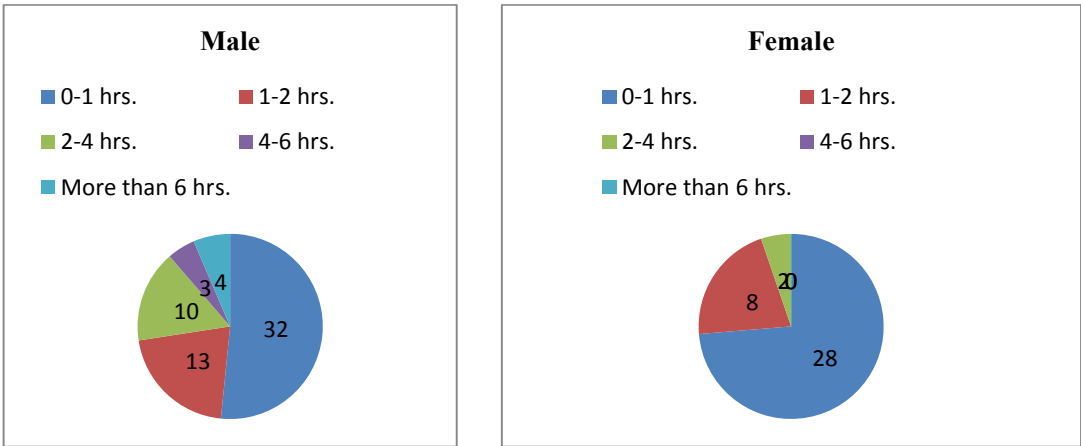


Fig 3: Exposure to Popular Music among Teenagers

In case of male teenagers majority (32) listen to English music for 0-1 hour and least (3) listen for 4-6 hours, whereas the female while being a majority (28) in listening for 0-1 hour there are none to listen to music for more than four hours a day.

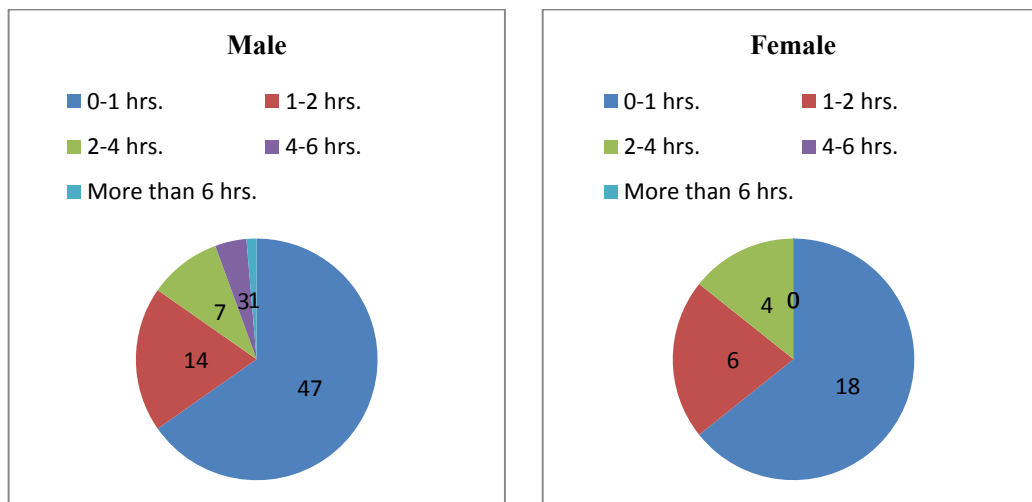


Fig 4: Exposure to Popular Music among Young Adults

In case of young male adults majority (47) listen to English music for 0-1 hour and least(1) listen for more than 6 hours, whereas the female while being a majority(18) in listening for 0-1 hour there are none to listen to music for more than four hours a day as in the case of the teens.

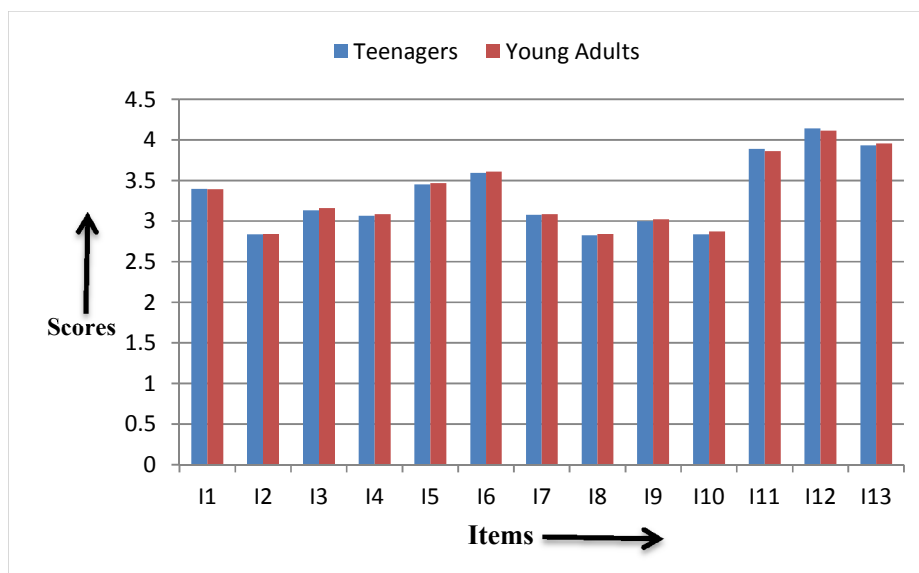


Fig.5: Comparative mean scores of individual items for teenagers and young adults

KEY FINDINGS

The mean scores of the teenagers and the young adults for the Likert scale items are 44.2 and 43.0 respectively. From this we may conclude that there is no significant difference between them regarding their language learning skills from English songs. Because of the non-significant difference also seen in the t-test it is inferred that the result obtained is only a

chance and not absolute. Factors causing it could be similar socio-cultural background, emotional attachment to music, individual freedom, availability of musical gadgets, etc.

Item 12 (Music assists in the formation of memory and creates emotional bonds) has got the highest score i.e. more than 4 (Fig.5). This leads us to infer that music is always high on emotional quotient. Most people feel emotionally involved with those songs that affect their mental state. And songs with a particularly striking music, rhythm and tone assist in long-term memory building. Both the groups of young people have agreed in notion with this generally held idea that is true for any age group. Further, Item 6 (I learn new words from the songs that I hear), and Item 11 (I feel music is a powerful stimulation in vocabulary enrichment rather than bookish learning), and Item 13 (Music is a teaching/learning tool) have mean scores higher than 3.5 out of 5 (Fig.5). This indicates that both teenagers and young adults accept that they learn new words from the songs they hear; music can be an entertaining way to learn vocabulary, and that it can be used as an additional tool in the teaching and learning of a language. Item 7 (I like to listen to, learn and sing English songs because they make me trendy) has a score slightly higher than 3 which shows that teenagers and young adults enjoy being looked upon as fashionable people who listen to English songs.

Item 9 (I pay heed to the nativity of the English songs as that is a good resource for learning linguistic and cultural awareness) hasn't exceeded 3. This indicates that the nativity of the English songs does not matter much to them. To the question, whether they have learnt any slang words from the songs that they listen to, 49% of the teenagers said "yes" and 51% of them said "No". For the young adults, 70% have said "Yes" while 30% have said "No". The reason why such a marked difference is seen in the response between the two groups could be that the teenagers either find it difficult to pick out the slang words, or they are scared of using it in their daily conversation because of retribution from their parents and seniors. On the contrary the latter group seem quite comfortable using English slang in comparison to the former group, as they are away from parental supervision and are pretty much on their own.

Item 2 (I can identify the genres of music i.e. rock, punk, metal, jazz, etc.), Item 8 (I prefer listening to karaoke, as along with the music, the lyrics are displayed on the video screen), and Item 10 (I feel English songs should be a part of our curriculum) have scores less than 3. It may be understood from this that young people are more interested to solely access English songs rather than have any background knowledge of the music genres. In addition they might not always want a sub-title for the video songs as they would like to train their ears to comprehend the lyrics at ease with repetition. And their apprehension to include English songs in regular curriculum might be because they do not want the entertainment value of listening to music to get diluted in any way with its association with studies and examinations. They would rather prefer that learning happens incidentally, free of any kind of academic compulsions, instead of being thrust upon them as a part of a fixed syllabus. This is inferred in relation to Item 13 (Music is a teaching/learning tool) which has a high score of more than 3.5 out of 5.

CONCLUSION

Hence it may be concluded that the language learning process for both the teenagers and the young adults is almost at the same pace. Both teenagers and young adults confirm that they learn new words from the songs that they hear. They feel that music stimulates vocabulary enrichment more than textbook learning. Also they strongly accept that music helps in memory building. It is found that most of the young adults have learnt slang along with music as compared to the teenagers. However both of the groups feel that vocabulary can be improved with music, provided that there is adequate effort taken on the part of the listener.

Nativity of the song is also not given much importance by the respondents. Above all, they have unanimously asserted that music can be a teaching/learning tool, but it should not be a part of a fixed academic curriculum as it can take away the entertainment quotient, as well as the novelty factor. Even then we can say that, some aspect of music can still be a part of the English curriculum in schools and colleges as it holds the potential to be used as an effective language learning tool.

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ANNEXURE-1

Questionnaire (ELLTMQ)

1.	I am fond of English songs	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
2.	I can identify the genres of music i.e. rock, punk, metal, jazz, etc.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
3.	I sing the English songs that I hear	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
4.	I can easily comprehend the words uttered while listening to them.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
5.	I download the lyrics of the songs that I like.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
6.	I learn new words from the songs that I hear.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
7.	I like to listen to, learn and sing English songs because they make me trendy.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
8.	I prefer listening to karaoke, as along with the music, the lyrics are displayed on the video screen.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
9.	I pay heed to the nativity of the English songs as that is a good resource for learning linguistic and cultural awareness.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
10.	I feel English songs should be a part of our curriculum.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
11.	I feel music is a powerful stimulation in vocabulary enrichment rather than bookish learning.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
12.	Music assists in the formation of memory and creates emotional bonds.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
13.	Music is a teaching/learning tool.	Always	Often	Neutral	Sometime	Never
14.	I listen to English music for about	0-1 hr./day	1-2 hrs./day	2-4 hrs./day	4-6 hrs./day	More than 6 hrs./day
15.	I have learnt some English slang from the English songs.	Yes		No		