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The lexical coverage of popular songs in English language teaching

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ABSTRACT

Songs are popular among language learners and a text genre that is yet to be fully exploited in language teaching. Questions arise regarding their lexical demand and vocabulary-learning opportunities they afford. Two pop song corpora were analyzed to determine the vocabulary size necessary to comprehend 95% and 98% of words in pop songs. The first corpus comprised 408 songs listed in recent US billboard charts. The second corpus consisted of 635 songs selected by teachers for language-teaching purposes. Results of an analysis using RANGE and 20 BNC word-frequency lists showed that the lexical demand of charts songs is overall clearly lower compared to other written genres but similar to spoken genres, as the most frequent 3000 word families plus proper nouns provided 95.1% coverage of tokens, and knowledge of 6000 word families plus proper nouns was necessary to reach 98.2% coverage. Teacher-selected songs have a lower lexical demand: Knowledge of the most frequent 2000 word families plus proper nouns was necessary to reach 95.5% coverage, while a vocabulary size of 4000 word families plus proper nouns provided coverage of 98.2% of words in the pedagogical corpus. Implications for the use of songs in ESL and EFL classrooms are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In Western societies, many people listen to music for several hours each day. 15- to 18-year-old US-American adolescents, for example, listen to an average of 3 h and 3 min of music on a typical day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Among the many options available to listeners, chart songs rank highly in popularity (North, Hargreaves, & Hargreaves, 2004). And the charts are typically dominated by English-language songs, even in countries where English is not the first language. In Germany, for example, eight out of the top ten chart songs in the week of July 4, 2015 were sung in English (<http://www.billboard.com/biz/charts/international>). When considering the popularity and availability of pop music in the light of English teaching and learning, pop songs can, thus, be assumed to provide a large amount of verbal input for learners on a daily basis – both in ESL and EFL settings.

Such high interest in and exposure to popular music can also be exploited inside the language classroom. In fact, working with songs is frequently favored by language learners. Green (1993), for example, found that 263 intermediate EFL learners at a University in Puerto Rico ranked song-based tasks highest in terms of enjoyableness compared to other communicative and non-communicative activities. Many language teachers equally express positive views regarding the use of pop songs as a tool to foster language acquisition in the classroom (Tegge, 2015).

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The use of songs for language teaching raises the question of how many words learners need to know to understand authentic pop songs in- and outside the classroom. While the usefulness of songs in language teaching is affected by various factors, the present study focuses on their vocabulary load, as unknown vocabulary is understood to be an important obstacle to both reading and listening comprehension (see Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Laufer, 1989; Stæhr, 2008). In addition, teachers frequently report using songs to teach vocabulary (Tegge, 2015). Consequently, it is of interest to understand how many words learners need to know to engage with pop songs and what vocabulary-learning opportunities they encounter.

Apart from songs, teachers can choose from a variety of authentic text genres to support their students' language development. Consequently, the aim of the present corpus study is to determine the lexical demand of English pop songs compared to other materials. More specifically, it provides an indication of the vocabulary size needed for comfortable comprehension of pop lyrics. Finally, the present study investigated whether songs selected by language-teaching professionals for pedagogical purposes differ from pop songs found in the recent charts in terms of their lexical demand.

2. Literature review

2.1. Lexical coverage and text comprehension

Within vocabulary research, the issue of lexical demand is frequently addressed by asking how many words in a text need to be understood for adequate or reasonable comprehension (Nation, 2006; Stæhr, 2008; Webb & Rodgers, 2009b) which does not require learners to resort to "compensatory strategies" (Laufer, 2013, p. 868) and for incidental vocabulary learning to occur (Webb & Rodgers, 2009a). Coverage of around 95%–98% of running words or tokens in a target text has been suggested (Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer, 1989; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011). In this context, the term *coverage* refers to the percentage of known words in the text. 98% coverage is widely accepted to be the optimal threshold (Laufer, 2013) for adequate comprehension of unsimplified written texts. However, while it has been repeatedly demonstrated that 98% coverage is required for optimal reading comprehension (Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010), the same threshold cannot simply be applied to listening comprehension.

Listening differs from reading in many ways, most obviously in the temporary nature of aural texts and the challenge of parallel reception and decoding. Aural texts in contrast to written input do not provide opportunities for perusal and repetition (Lund, 1991). However, spoken discourse affords extra-linguistic support to understanding. Frequently, non-verbal clues are provided, such as gestures, facial expressions and lip movements, which aid listening comprehension and make up for deficient lexical knowledge (van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). Compared to readers, listeners also tend to rely more on extra-linguistic information and knowledge, including world knowledge, topic familiarity and metacognitive processes of listening comprehension. Consequently, van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) argued that coverage necessary to comprehend written and spoken texts might differ. Based on an experimental study of listening comprehension in native and non-native speakers, they proposed 95% as an appropriate coverage target for listening comprehension of informal spoken narratives. Bonk (2000) investigated EFL-learners' comprehension of four audio-recordings of varying levels of lexical difficulty and concluded that coverage of less than 95% of tokens might still result in adequate comprehension if listeners made use of effective listening strategies. In contrast, Stæhr (2008) found that 98% coverage seemed to be a reasonable threshold.

2.2. Vocabulary knowledge and word-frequency lists

Another issue that must be addressed when assessing the lexical demand of a text or text genre is the question of how many words learners need to know to reach the threshold required for adequate or comfortable comprehension. This is often done by assessing the coverage of a text provided by word-frequency lists. In this context, *coverage* refers to the percentage of words accounted for by such word lists (Nation & Kyongho, 1995; Nation, 2004). Frequency lists sort words according to their frequency in general language use, from most to least frequent. Nation's (2004, 2006) BNC frequency lists, for example, rank English words according to their frequency, range and dispersion in the British National Corpus (BNC). Using such frequency lists to assess the vocabulary knowledge required to understand various text genres is based on the assumption that language learners acquire common words earlier than less common vocabulary. Research has shown that this is indeed the case (Nation, 2006).

The present study makes use of 20 BNC wordlists (Nation, 2004, 2006) to assess the lexical demand of song lyrics. These frequency lists, used in a number of studies on lexical coverage, consist of word families rather than individual words. That is, the lists contain headwords along with a number of family members. A vocabulary size of 3000 word families, consequently, refers to knowledge of more than 3000 individual words, as each word family can comprise several members. For the BNC wordlists, a word family is defined on the basis of the level-6 classification described in Bauer and Nation (1993), which includes inflected and derived forms. The use of the word family to measure word knowledge is based on the assumption that "inflected and regularly derived forms of a known base word can also be considered as known words if the learners are familiar with the affixes" (Hirsh & Nation, 1992, p. 692). In the present study, proper nouns are also seen as having such a small learning burden as to be counted as known (Kyongho and Nation, 1989; Hirsh & Nation, 1992). In addition, they are typically clearly recognizable due to a capitalized first letter. So-called marginal words, including interjections, exclamations and hesitation markers, are also counted as known due to their low learning burden (Nation, 2006). Finally, Nation has added

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