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## Using Popular Culture in EFL Teaching: Voices of EFL Students of a University in the Mekong Delta

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper aims to gain a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of integrating popular culture into EFL teaching at Tra Vinh University. The participants included 63 EFL students who had learned popular materials in classroom settings. The questionnaire was the only instrument focusing on some common benefits and disadvantages of using popular culture in an English classroom setting. The findings revealed that incorporating popular culture into English teaching was very beneficial, especially in terms of increasing students' enthusiasm, enhancing critical thinking, expanding social-cultural competence, boosting self-esteem for learning English, enhancing their vocabulary acquisition, facilitating their English learning, and encouraging autonomous learning in EFL teaching. In light of the study's findings, some recommendations are suggested to aid English majors and teachers in using the medium in the learning and teaching process.*

**Keywords:** Popular culture, EFL teaching, students, teachers, advantages, disadvantages

### **1. Introduction**

In today's globalized world, technological advancements have transformed Vietnam, enabling constant interaction and socialization with people worldwide. Consequently, learning English has become prevalent despite limited English-speaking communities. Traditionally, English learning in Vietnam focused on grammar translation, neglecting oral proficiency. However, technological advancements have expanded access to global popular culture. Van (2020) noted increased consumption of English-language Vietnamese media. Nguyen et al. (2021) found that Vietnamese EFL learners favor songs, YouTube, and internet resources to enhance language skills and cultural competence. Studies by Ton and Nguyen (2019), Huy et al. (2021), and Lam and Nguyen (2022) explore the benefits of comics, YouTube, and songs in English learning. Despite these benefits, a few studies examine the disadvantages or focus on bachelor-level EFL teaching. This study aims to investigate both the advantages and disadvantages of using popular culture in EFL teaching at Tra Vinh University, assessing the perceptions of both teachers and students.

### **2. Literature Review**

#### *2.1. The Definition of Popular Culture*

Popular culture can be found in all aspects of life and is defined as films, television shows, music, websites, podcasts, advertisements, and so on that we are familiar with and produce daily. Storey (2006) defined popular culture as a culture for the people, which was produced and consumed by ordinary people, as opposed to elite culture, which was produced and consumed by a privileged minority. This perspective on culture distinguished the concept of high culture, as popular culture was what remained after we separated "high culture."

Another definition defines pop culture as "Popular culture that is generally recognized by members of a society as a set of practices, beliefs, artistic output and objects that are dominant or prevalent in a society at a given point in time" (Wikipedia, 2023). In other words, it includes the practices, beliefs, or objects that people prefer in a given location and time, such as film, music, news, fashion, etc.

Maudlin and Sandlin (2015) broaden this concept by defining popular culture as not only something dominant or prevalent in a given time and place but also the way consumers engage with it and thus become producers of new negotiated meanings. As a result, pop culture can be defined as the cultural artefact or experience we view, listen to, read, feel, and consume to produce meaning.

According to Maudlin and Sandlin (2015), popular culture is distinguished into two categories: dominant popular culture and subcultural popular culture. Dominant popular culture is characterized as prevalent cultural products, behaviors and ideas that are regularly promoted and sold by influential entities like media giants, corporations, and governments, such as big-budget movies, popular songs, best-selling books, etc. On the other hand, subcultural popular culture refers to cultural practices and products from marginalized groups or communities that seek to resist or challenge

dominant popular culture and are frequently connected with underground movements, countercultures, and alternative lifestyles such as punk music, hip-hop, fan fiction, and online gaming communities. Thus, the difference between dominant and subcultural popular culture emphasizes the multiplicity of cultural products seen daily in all aspects of life.

All in all, we are heavily influenced by popular culture in terms of how we communicate, socialize, and behave every single day. It plays a significant role in the development of society, and it can be a helpful tool to connect people or a useless tool to separate them.

## 2.2. Related Studies

Numerous studies have been done on the advantages of incorporating popular culture into English language learning and teaching. Murray (2008) indicated that the use of popular culture acts as a catalyst for motivating EFL learners to engage in lessons. The author understood that popular culture can serve as an available and affordable English input, helping students develop socio-cultural knowledge. However, the use of popular culture in EFL learning and teaching remains debatable among researchers. As Luo (2014) mentioned, some English educators were negative or doubtful about using popular culture in the curriculum because they considered it informal and a waste of time; the writer conducted a study to explore the benefits of popular culture in learning. After surveying eighty-three first-year students of intermediate English proficiency in Taiwan, the researcher concluded that by allowing students to conduct PowerPoint presentations on self-selected English music, they increased their confidence in English proficiency and academic and vocational skills. The researchers also emphasized the significance of learners' agendas, as when students had more freedom in their choice of learning, they would be more confident in their learning.

When English studies mainly focus on formal instruction and heavily emphasize exam orientation, very little attention is paid to exploring the benefits of popular culture in EFL learning and teaching. Despite the constraints of that dominant view, Chan (2016) decided to carry out a study to answer how and why proficient learners of English in Hong Kong participated in popular culture and out-of-class activities, with an emphasis on the development of learner autonomy. After investigating six participants who were second-year university students majoring in English, the researcher concluded that when learners took ownership of their English learning according to their interests, they could increase their English skills.

Continuing to explore the benefits of pop culture in the curriculum, Bhandary (2020) pointed out that students learn English more from popular culture than from school and teachers. The author surveyed 174 participants and interviewed seven students majoring in English who were very good at language competence. The learners revealed that learning from popular culture helped them increase their language skills (speaking, reading, listening, and writing). The students also said that they became confident in the learning process because they shared their knowledge of popular culture with their friends. This can be explained by Murray (2008), who argued that popular culture was not only abundant in English resources but also in socio-cultural knowledge, in which students found the common ground to start the conversation. The other findings of Bhandary (2020) were that students became more active in the EFL learning process. Thus, the writer recommended that to make classes more student-centered, it is essential to use popular culture to attract students' interests.

Also, in the Vietnamese context, some studies were implemented to explore the benefits of using popular culture in the curriculum. Firstly, internet-based resources can be used as materials for the teaching of extensive reading skills. Dao (2014) implemented research to explore the effectiveness of using internet resources to master the English language. The study was conducted with 30 students with high intermediate language levels in a school in Vietnam. The students were employed to attend the class for 6 hours of English per week, and each lesson lasted 90 minutes. The findings of the study indicated that extensive reading using internet resources can develop reading speed and comprehension, vocabulary growth, improvements in other language skills such as listening and speaking as well as writing, and positive changes in motivation and attitude toward language learning and reading. Then, the author designed the lesson plan to use the resources effectively in teaching English.

Moreover, Huy et al. (2021) identified that YouTube can serve as a source of supplementary teaching and learning material for EFL students. The study surveyed 62 participants, who were Vietnamese students with intermediate language levels, after presenting YouTube video clips and video-related activities. The results from the post-course questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured interviews showed that the medium made the class more interesting, was relevant to course materials, was beneficial for language learning, and motivated students to study English in class as well as out of class. The findings demonstrated that YouTube can be used as a supplementary resource for language learning, which practically and theoretically informs instructors and administrators with an understanding of Vietnamese undergraduate EFLs' perceptions of using YouTube.

In addition, using songs to teach language skills was an interesting topic to investigate. Lam and Nguyen (2022), who carried out research on the use of songs in English teaching, revealed that teachers tended to enjoy integrating songs into their teaching listening activities. The study was done using a mixed-methods approach, using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 55 teachers from an English Language center in Tra Vinh Province. The findings showed that using songs in teaching English can motivate students and create a favorable environment for them to develop vocabulary, simple structures, reading skills, speaking skills, writing skills, and pronunciation. The researchers also suggested that teachers should carefully choose the songs before the lesson by considering students' abilities.

While some studies mainly explored the benefits of using popular culture in EFL teaching and learning, a few focused on discovering the drawbacks of popular culture along with investigating its benefits. Rets (2016) concluded that although popular culture serves as a stronger engagement in language acquisition, it is critical to solving the issues in

popular culture. The author implemented two subsequent interdisciplinary studies on popular culture, in which he analyzed 2000 neologisms that appeared in English recently in the first study and investigated 50 participants who were instructors of the university teaching language department in the second study. The author argued that some disadvantages of popular culture are that it is less sophisticated to develop advanced knowledge, it lacks human sympathy, it contains ideas connected with violence and strong taboos that can cause disputes in class, it involves the dominant use of slang such as offensive and swearing vocabulary, and it also conveys stereotypes. Therefore, the author pointed out that those concerns should be taken into account before implementing them in the classroom. Along with considering its drawbacks, he also found out the benefits of popular culture, as it makes students more active and responsive in class, contributes to the development of socio-cultural knowledge, and bridging the generation gap between students and teachers.

If we consider the study of Rets (2016) as a guideline to draw the big picture of popular culture in English teaching, then Visco (2020) can be considered a detailed look at the comparison between teacher perceptions and student perceptions of the use of popular culture in a classroom setting. In the study, Rets (2016) employed a qualitative case study in which they surveyed eight students and five teachers, interviewed them individually and in groups, and conducted class observation. The findings showed that both teachers and students feared using inappropriate materials from popular culture against their own culture. Other findings also clearly described that teachers lacked support from the school to find the material and that students lacked the approval to use the popular culture from their parents. However, the author also found it useful to implement the class setting when popular culture can connect students with teachers and teachers with students. Both teachers and students reported that they felt connected to the lesson because popular culture made it easy to understand and relate to their lives.

In conclusion, a variety of researchers have investigated the use of popular culture in EFL teaching. The results of the recent studies support the conclusion that using popular culture in EFL teaching and learning is beneficial. However, it is necessary to analyze and consider this carefully to avoid drawbacks.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed the descriptive research method in conjunction with quantitative methodologies. There have been many kinds of research studies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed techniques, so choosing a suitable methodology is critical for each researcher (Asenahabi, 2019). The research sought to use the SPSS output Cronbach's Alpha to assess the reliability of the survey research. The research focused on eighty participants (N = 80), of whom there were sixty-three students and seventeen teachers. The students were randomly selected from first-year to fourth-year, so they shared diverse characteristics or perspectives to guarantee a broad range of viewpoints or experiences about the use of popular culture in EFL teaching.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1. Findings

##### 4.1.1. Questionnaire Reliability

| Reliability Statistics |             |
|------------------------|-------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha       | No of Items |
| .801                   | 16          |

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Test

It can be seen from table 1 that Cronbach's Alpha value was .801 for the overall 16 items, which indicates the questionnaire was sufficiently reliable.

##### 4.1.2. Students' Perceptions

| A. Benefits                                                                                                                   | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------|
| 1. Students can become more enthusiastic about studying English when music is used in lessons.                                | 4.44 | .87            |
| 2. Presentations based on pop culture can enhance students' critical thinking skills.                                         | 4.33 | .78            |
| 3. Using podcasts in teaching can increase students' social-cultural competence.                                              | 4.25 | .96            |
| 4. Being allowed access to some pop cultural materials makes students more confident since they can follow the latest trends. | 4.24 | .85            |
| 5. Using popular culture in teaching can bridge the generation gap between teachers and students.                             | 4.06 | 1.01           |

Table 2: Key Findings of Students' Perceptions of the Advantages of Using Popular Culture in EFL Teaching

In general, quantitative findings from table 2 demonstrate that using popular culture in EFL teaching was very beneficial according to student perceptions. Remarkably, utilizing music in an English classroom setting was believed to help students become more enthusiastic about learning English, which possessed the highest mean score ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $ST = 0.87$ ). In addition, students reported that making presentations based on pop culture can enhance their critical thinking skills with a high mean score ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $ST = 0.78$ ). Other outstanding findings were that using podcasts in teaching can increase students' social-cultural competence with mean score ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $ST = 0.96$ ) and boost their self-esteem by accessing pop materials and staying up to date with the latest trends ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $ST = 0.85$ ). However, when asked about the potential of using popular culture to bridge the generation gap between teachers and students, the item received the lowest mean score ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $ST = 1.01$ ). To sum up, using popular culture has numerous benefits in terms of increasing students' enthusiasm, enhancing critical thinking, expanding social-cultural competence, and boosting self-esteem for learning English.

| <b>B. Drawbacks</b>                                                                                                                                    | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. Deviation</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Using popular culture in teaching can cause disagreement or disputes in the classroom.                                                                 | 4.06        | 2.81                  |
| Using popular culture in teaching is not suitable because popular culture materials may contain ideas connected with violence or strong social taboos. | 3.87        | 1.22                  |
| Using popular culture in teaching limits students' exposure to other kinds of academic texts.                                                          | 3.76        | 1.17                  |

*Table 3: Key Findings of Students' Perceptions of the Disadvantages of Using Popular Culture in EFL Teaching*

However, descriptive statistics from table 3 also shows drawbacks identified by the students. Firstly, a relative number of students argued that using popular culture in teaching could lead to disagreements or disputes among students, receiving the highest mean score ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $ST = 2.81$ ). In addition, some students felt that popular culture materials might include ideas connected with violence or strong social taboos, as they had the mean score ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $ST = 1.22$ ). Furthermore, using popular culture was perceived to limit students' exposure to other forms of academic texts with a mean score ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $ST = 1.17$ ). In conclusion, using popular culture had certain disadvantages as it led to disagreements among students, contained ideas related to violence or strong social taboos, and limited students' exposure to other kinds of academic texts in EFL learning.

#### 4.2. Discussions

According to students' perceptions, the findings demonstrated that using popular culture in EFL teaching was very beneficial. Based on the students' attitudes, the results indicated several key findings regarding the use of popular culture in English classroom settings, such as increasing students' enthusiasm, enhancing critical thinking, expanding social-cultural competence, and boosting self-esteem for learning English. However, students revealed that using popular culture materials had certain drawbacks, such as leading to disagreements among students, containing ideas related to violence or strong social taboos, and limiting students' exposure to other kinds of academic texts in EFL learning, while teachers did not clearly indicate the main disadvantages of using popular culture in EFL teaching.

The perceptions of popular culture usage in classroom settings were found to be quite similar in many ways. Using popular culture materials to engage students in the lessons is something important to focus on. This finding was found to align with a study by Murray (2008), who indicated that the use of popular culture acts as a catalyst for motivating EFL learners to engage in lessons. This demonstrates the significance of using popular culture in EFL teaching since the medium can serve as a universal environment that is often enjoyable and relatable to learners.

In addition, the perception that popular culture boosts students' confidence in learning was voiced by students. The findings were based on research implemented by Luo (2014), who found that students increased their confidence in their English proficiency when allowed to conduct PowerPoint presentations on self-selected English music. It can be explained that popular culture materials create a sense of relevance and familiarity for the students, making them feel comfortable engaging in the lessons.

Furthermore, the item about the use of news to expand students' vocabulary was found to be consistent with Dao (2014), who identified that the use of internet-based resources such as digital news can develop students' vocabulary acquisition. The author discovered that pop culture could provide learners with cultural artefacts to immerse themselves in English-speaking environments.

In terms of drawbacks, students perceived that using pop culture could lead to disagreement in the classroom, which aligned with Rets (2016). The author explained that the use of pop culture can cause disputes in class because of the cultural context that may be against students' own cultures. Therefore, the choice of pop materials should be carefully considered in light of students' backgrounds and cultures to incorporate them effectively.

#### 5. Conclusion

All in all, the purpose of this paper is to explore the advantages and disadvantages of using popular culture in EFL teaching according to students' perceptions. The findings showed that incorporating popular culture into English teaching was very beneficial, especially in terms of increasing students' enthusiasm, enhancing critical thinking, expanding social-

cultural competence, boosting self-esteem for learning English, enhancing their vocabulary acquisition, facilitating their English learning, and encouraging autonomous learning in EFL teaching. However, according to students' perceptions, some drawbacks should be taken into account, such as leading to disagreements among students, containing ideas related to violence or strong social taboos, and limiting students' exposure to other kinds of academic texts in EFL learning.

This study provides evidence that utilizing popular culture in English classroom settings can create an active, innovative, effective, and enjoyable learning environment where students have a more active and responsive role in the learning process. Hopefully, there will be more research aiming to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating popular culture in active classroom settings in order to build a deeper understanding of the medium in learning English.

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