

LIVED ACADEMIC AND SPIRITUAL LIFE EXPERIENCES THROUGH SONGS OF THEOLOGY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Songs are believed to contribute to the success of students not only in their academic life (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2016; Ashtiani & Zafarghani, 2015; & Rafiee, Kassaian, & Dastjerdi, 2010) but spiritual life (White, 2014) as well. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived academic and spiritual life experiences through songs of theology students. This phenomenological study, with 35 theology students from a private university in West Indonesia as participants, generated four themes which include God's presence, God's love, self-disposition, and positive learning. It is therefore recommended that tertiary teachers employ spiritual-uplifting songs for the enhancement of both academic and spiritual life aspects of the learners.

Keywords: Songs, lived experiences, academic life, spiritual life, phenomenological study

Introduction

Elements that may improve academic performance (Castro-Huertas, & Navarro-Parra, 2013) are essential considerations whoever wants to attain success. One of these elements are songs. Songs are deemed to contribute to positive outcome in language skills (Kuswoyo, 2013; Orlova, 2003) and language fluency (Chen, 2016; Kuśnierek, 2016; Patel & Laud, 2007) for they motivate learners (Romero, Bernal, & Olivares, 2012) and make them participate in classroom activities (Aguirre, Bustinza, & Garvich, 2016). Indeed, songs influence learners' cognitive development development (Vist, 2011).

Also, songs influence learners' spiritual developments (Hendriks, 2018). Thus, songs are employed as teaching tools for their positive impact both to academic (Kuśnierek, 2016) and spiritual developments (White, 2014). Therefore, this phenomenological study takes into account the lived academic and spiritual life experiences through songs of 35 theology students.

Review of the iterature

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of theology students. The review of the literature which affirm the significance of songs to learner's life reflects on songs in the classroom, songs in the Bible, and the choice of songs that may influence both academic life and spiritual life of the learners.

Songs in a Four-Wall Room

Songs are employed as instructional strategies. Songs enhance teaching of language skills (Roslim, Azizul, & Zain (2011), and positively influence learners' vocabulary recall and retention (Shakerian, Rezaei, Murnani, & Moeinmanesh, 2016). No wonder, songs are considered to be influential in the teaching-learning processes.

Songs add variety to classroom learning experiences, lower students' stress levels, increased enjoyment, and involve students more effectively by catering for students with different learning styles (Isabel, 2015). The positive roles of songs in the classroom are substantiated in many studies (Aguirre, Bustinza, & Garvich, 2016; Alisaari & Heikkola, 2016; Ashtiani & Zafarghani, 2015; Castro-Huertas, & Navarro-Parra, 2013; Chen, 2016; Hendriks, 2018; Kuśnierek, 2016; Kuswoyo, 2013; Orlova, 2003; Patel & Laud, 2007; Romero, Bernal, & Olivares, 2012; Rafiee, Kassaian, & Dastjerdi, 2010; Roslim, Azizul, & Zain, 2011; & Shakerian, Rezaei, Murnani, & Moeinmanesh, 2016). The aforementioned studies reflect the importance of songs in the teaching-learning processes.

Songs Beyond a Four-Wall Room

Songs impact beyond a classroom (Hendriks, 2018). Songs, abundant with themes and expressions as reflected in the learners' heart (Shen, 2009) are strong stimuli that may directly *speak* to learners' emotions (Harmer, 2001). No wonder, they shape learner's peace and enjoyment of life through achievement, self-direction, benevolence, conformity, and security (Dincel, 2017). Songs affect learners' desirable character and values (Esteve-Faubel, Martin, & Junda, 2018) which have positive impact in their learning.

The Choice of Songs

Taylor (n.d.) stresses that all subjects in a Christian institution must be grounded from a Christian perspective for learners to connect everything in life and to be educated for their faith. Thus, Taylor (2001) emphasizes,

“Teachers must consciously incorporate in course requirements activities that will help prepare students to communicate God's truth. This testimony can be shared through various media-mime, speeches, articles, radio spots, posters, songs, and works of art. It can focus on health, conservation, interpersonal relationships, personal experiences, or specific moral values. The goal is to help students to develop a worldview in which they see themselves as active witnesses for God” (p. 422)

Varied songs are employed for learner's development. However, the kind of songs considered to be effective in the integration of faith and learning are spiritual

songs because they introduce and maintain Jesus (Hendriks, 2018). This is in line with White (2014) who likewise stresses out the value of spiritual songs in the classroom.

Songs in the Bible

The Bible unfurl stories of the employment of songs. It includes (a) **a song of joy**—when Miriam lifted up her voice to the Lord after the Israelites left Egypt and had successfully crossed over the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21); (b) **a song of divine intervention**—when the Israelites sang after they were given water in the desert (Exodus 15:22-27); (c) **a song of triumph**—when Deborah, Barak, and Israel judges sang after gaining victory in battle; and when the Israelite women sang in victory after David overcame Goliath (Judges 5:1-3; 1 Samuel 18:6); (d) **a song of dedication** when the Levites sang during the Temple dedication (2 Chronicles 29: 25-29); and (e) **songs of praise and prayer** when Paul and Silas lifted their voices through songs despite in the prison cells, and when Jesus and His disciples sang during the Last Supper (Acts 16:25; Mark 14:26).

Research Questions of the Study

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived academic life experiences through songs of the theology students?
2. What are the lived spiritual life experiences through songs of the theology students?

Methodology

This section discusses the research design, the research setting, participants, and sampling. It discusses the data gathering procedures and ethical consideration. Further, it takes into account the data analysis.

Research Design

The importance of spotting on how spiritual songs may influence lived academic and spiritual life experience of English language learners gave prompt for an in-depth exploration through phenomenological study—a qualitative methodological approach. Phenomenology aims to comprehend and describe in-depth the phenomenon of the participants and to come up at the essence of the participants' lived experiences (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). It attempts to find reality of the participants' narratives of the their lived experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Given these, phenomenology assisted in the investigation of the lived experiences of the participants, that is, on how songs play on their academic and spiritual life.

Selection of Research Setting, Participants and Sampling

This phenomenological study was conducted in a Christian tertiary institution in West Java, Indonesia. It was participated by 35 theology students who vountarily consented to this study. This study employed purposive sampling with the intention of finding the best type of informants. Tongco (2007) stresses that purposive sampling is deemed to be practical, effective and efficient tool when used properly.

Data Collection

Data gathering is pivotal in research for it is meant to give significant contribution to a better comprehension of theories involved in the study (Bernard 2002). No wonder, source of data requires to be considered with sound judgement.

This study was conducted for one whole semester. A 4-minute spiritual song was played every meeting prior to class. The song served as a class devotion—to set the tone of the class sessions.

Participants (P1 to 35) shared their lived experiences by telling their stories own with the richness of their own experiences (Yin, 2011) through conversation and semi-structured interviews. Like most phenomenological studies, these means help in exploring in depth the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essentials of a study. Thus, they were taken into account. In this study, participants voluntarily participated, none was coerced (Miles, 2014).

Data Analysis

This phenomenological study which “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57) is a qualitative research (QLR). QLR concentrates on “studying the meaning of people’s lives, under real-world conditions” (Yin, 2011, p. 7). QLR focuses on “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).

Considering the need of *immersion* in a QLR, researcher entered into the participants’ world and sought participants’ perspective (Creswell, 2009). Thus, during the observations, both facial expressions and gestures were taken into account. The answers to the open-ended questions were translated. Analysis were done from codes to categories. After which, recurring categories were grouped into themes.

Findings and Discussion

From the collected data, the researcher came up with overarching themes. These themes summarized the lived academic and spiritual life experiences through songs of the 35 theology students. Four identified themes include (a) God's presence (b) God's love, (c) self-disposition, and (d) positive learning. These themes are discussed below.

God's Presence

The more the participants realized the wonderful presence of God through the song. *"I am spiritually lifted up"* (Folder 1, p. 2) and *"I become closer to Him by prioritizing Him in my life"* (Folder 1, p. 4). With His presence in me, *"I learned to fully surrender to Him"* (Folder 2, p. 5) *"with strength and certainty that He will help me"* (Folder 5, p. 3). Thus, *"I have to put Him first in everything"* (Folder 6, p. 11), *"continue to be faithful to Him"* (Folder 1, p. 7) for *"without Him life is difficult"* (Folder 7, p. 10).

Further, participants noted that their spirituality has further developed. A strengthened faith due to the integration of faith and learning made them more believed of the existence of God. One commented, *"I do not fully understand each word because the lyrics are written in English, yet I got the essence of the song"* (Folder 4, p. 12). This is supported by Stygles (2014) statement that song lyrics are stepping stone to meaning making. Further, P34 commented, *"The song really impressed me one day. I cried in the class especially that I was struggling with a problem in my life that time. I know that God is always with me and that He is working for me"* (Folder 6, p. 11)

God's Love and Character

Participants realized more the bountiful love of God and what are His traits and character. *"God is forgiving and that He is calling me"* (Folder 1, p. 6). Given this character of Him, *"He takes care of me and enables me to successfully do my daily activities by taking care of me"* (Folder 2, p. 5). P29 stresses that God *"Being the Source of love and strength, I am able to do my task for God is good despite my weaknesses"*

Because of God's great love and His wonderful character, *"I will love Him more in whatever I do"* (Folder 4, p. 6). P26 rejoices that *"I am really blessed and more motivated to be like Him." I will love Him more and forever"*

Self-disposition

Spiritual song promotes a better being. *"It does not only energize me but calms my nerves and eliminates the feeling of fear as I prepare myself to learn the English"*

lessons” (Folder 4, p. 7) for it “sets my mind, heart, and my mood” (Folder 3, p. 3). There were several participants who stressed that the song was soothing—“*The spiritual song relaxes me and make more receptive to the lessons for it takes my burden away.*” P18 commented that “*it does not only lessen my loss of hope in learning such a difficult foreign language but rather boost my self-esteem making me more focus.*” Proverbs 17:22 says, “*A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.*”

Positive Learning

Spiritual song provides positive impact towards English language learning by giving learners a better outlook for negative issues are either minimized or eliminated. “*I am more motivated to learn. I myself could say that there are really good changes in me in terms of learning the English language*” (Folder 8, p. 6). In other words, learners learn lessons better. P10 says “*I improve my pronunciation and vocabulary*” (Folder 5, p. 7) and “*memorability*” (Folder 1, p. 5). It is true that learners learn vocabulary and pronunciation through songs (Mai & Mai, 2018) and memorability (Chen, 2016; Isabel, 2015).

Conclusion

Insights were gleaned from the collected data which was participated by 35 theology students from a private institution in West Java, Indonesia. The participants who shared their lived academic and spiritual life experiences through a spiritual song revealed that such selection played prior to class as a devotion has enhanced their academic and spiritual life. While the realization of God’s presence has lifted them in many aspects of their personal walk with God through surrendering to Him, the realization of God’s love and His character sustains them with more blessings and motivation.

Spiritual song does not only help learners in their spiritual life but academic life as well. While it helps learners to have a very good positive self-disposition, it eventually leads to a positive learning because of the impact the song brings to oneself. Thus this phenomenological study highlights pedagogical insights of employing spiritual songs as an instructional strategy for enhancing both spiritual and academic life experiences.

Pedagogical Implications

The lived academic and spiritual life experiences of students can be enhanced through spiritual song as an instructional strategy which can be listened to prior to class activities. It is imperative for teachers to have the right choice of songs to introduce learners closer to the feet of Jesus. By having the right choice of songs, learners’ whole beings are set to be more receptive for the day’s lessons.

Christian educators need to see the value of pursuing instructional strategies that may help develop learners in different powers for White (1990) strongly emphasizes that “True education means more than pursuing a certain course of study. It has to do with the whole person, and the whole period of existence to human beings. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the **spiritual powers** (p. 1). No wonder, teachers are required to think and focused on ways towards the development and employent of Christian integrational strategies (Taylor, 2012)—a fusion both for spiritual and academic developments of learners.

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