

Learning English through Music

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Introduction

The power of Music as a vehicle of communication has been recognized throughout the centuries even by ancient civilizations. From Plato to Zoltan Kodaly, Music has been linked to student academic achievement. The work of Howard Gardner (1983, 1993, and 1999) on Multiple Intelligences has brought to the pedagogical field a new insight and new considerations regarding individual learning styles. Gardner's theory gave new understanding on how other forms of intelligences, such as Musical intelligence besides linguistic and logical- mathematical intelligence, can be stimulated to promote student's achievement within school settings. In his study on how Music helps to accelerate language reading, Legg (2009) states that the studies of Hurtwitzs (1975), Kelley (1981), Wood (1990), and Andrew (1997) have consistently proved the strong relationship that exists between reading skills development and formal musical training among students at all school levels. Additionally, new trends in education, such as the communicative and content-based instruction approaches, created a new movement in curriculum development that encourages language instruction through meaningful content areas, academic subjects and culture. The ESL classroom setting has also being influenced by the new currents in education, yet more research in the field of ESL and academic content integration is needed. The purpose of this literature review study is to determine the benefits as well as the results of integrating Music as part of language learning by implementing effective classroom practices that incorporate both fields. The study will also explore which strategies are most helpful to attain language learning objectives through the use of Music in the classroom settings at different cognitive stages.

Second Language Learning and Bimodality

Many studies have determined that the brain structure and its hemispheres play a major role in the way we acquire information and learn languages. In her study of the brain, Leslie Hart describes that while the left side of the brain is concerned with the language functions, the right side of the brain deals with recognition of visual and rhythmic patterns. Nevertheless, both hemispheres are interconnected and share information by means of a bridge called the "corpus callosum", made of 200 million or more nerve fibers (as cited by Adkins, 1997). Don G. Campbell (1991), who has studied the musical brain, states that music allows for both hemispheres to connect via the "corpus callosum" by using the left hemisphere for language and the right to differentiate musical intonations. Although both halves still function separately, the more integrated they become by sharing information, the more effective the retention of information will be and therefore, also the learning process (as cited by Adkins, 1997). Furthermore, Frank Nuessel and Caterina Cicogna (1992) discuss in their study the application of bimodal educational application concepts created by Danesi and how they apply to Second Language Learning. Nuessel and Cicogna give examples of "bimodal instructional techniques for the second-language classroom" and recognize music as an excellent bimodal stimuli activity. More specifically, different musical styles suggest different modes and elicit certain behaviors. For example, students will listen to different suggestive pieces of music; a largo movement (solemn and slow) can produce seriousness while a presto (fast and agitated) movement can produce anxiety to the listener. Then, students would be asked to imagine a possible scenario and create a short dialogue regarding an imaginary possible situation that the piece of music has suggested to them. A role-play activity would follow as a conclusion and students can also compare their impressions.

Learning English through Music in Early childhood

The benefits of Music instruction have been evident at different levels of cognition development, from childhood to early adulthood. As Gardner wrote “the single most important thing in education is for each person to find at least one thing that he/she connects to, gets excited by, and feels motivated to spend more time with. For many children, music is that thing” (Gardner, 1992). This statement is especially evident in early childhood. Lee (2004) states in his study that music-play related activities such as music games, songs and rhymes are excellent ways of developing communicative skills in young children (as cited by Ling Yu, 2009). As children learn basic concepts of music, they can relate to simple grammar structures in the English language.

This was demonstrated in the study by Ling Yu, (2009) which showed evidence that by using contrasting musical elements and incorporating them to the creative process of composing simple songs, the students understood musical concepts as well as developed language skills. The study consisted of 7 children who were given a pre-test, a middle test and a final test evaluation as part of the empirical study. Students’ improvement was observed both in their musical and language skills, which were intrinsically correlated. The lessons were divided into different themes which involved contrasting musical elements such as fast and slow, loud and soft, high and low, stop and go as well as the understanding of the English meaning. Through repetition, kinesthetic, visual and oral aids such as CD players with different sounds and songs, use of instruments and TPR, the students improved in their understanding of the musical and English language meaning in context. Children were also able to answer simple questions from

the instructors by engaging in both musical and language expressions; the children interacted by singing using their own words and, therefore, creating simple improvised song forms.

It is interesting to note that the use of Music to infuse language acquisition is not only circumscribed to the use of songs as a form of vocabulary building activity which emphasizes repetition, but also to generating understanding of meaning by capturing contrasting musical concepts such as fast/slow, loud/soft, etc.

Songs and Language Acquisition

Many studies have sustained the benefits of songs and song lyrics to enhance language teaching, yet few studies have analyzed the effectiveness of implementing songs as a tool for language learning. Accordingly, the study by Li, X., & Brand, M. (2009) main purpose was to determine the effect that the usage of songs as well as song lyrics have on vocabulary acquisition, language practice as well as comprehension. The study was carried out at a prestigious university in the Republic of China, and included thirty five students of law attending ESL English classes. Two groups of ESL students were examined; one receiving intensive implementation of music during their lessons while the other group received music interaction only fifty percent of the time. Both groups of students were exposed to pop songs to increase listening and reading comprehension, pronunciation as well as grammatical structure of the language. Through the flow and the beat of the songs, the students were able to become familiar with the language cadence and words modulations. The analysis of the lyrics helped the students understand grammatical aspects such as verb tenses, meaning and vocabulary acquisition. The results of the study showed that those students that have received intensive music exposure

showed significant improvement in their post test scores as well as their disposition towards learning the target language.

Another study by Bersley, R., & Chuang, Y. (2008), examines the influence that song listening repetition, song likeability and song understandability have on learning perceptions and learning outcomes of “Taiwanese EFL learners” involved in “web-based” music study. A music web program was created for the experiment called *Learning English through Listening to Music*, which presented a variety of songs from different styles, tempos and musical genres. The results determined that the variables with the higher correlation were “song likeability and song understandability”. Furthermore, song likeability also generated greater satisfaction with the online learning method. On the contrary, song repetition did not produce a strong correlation. Yet, one can also infer that the more we like a song, the more we want to listen to it, causing an increase in learning through listening repetition. The study also determines that there was not a strong correlation between the variables and vocabulary acquisition or learning outcomes except for the “song understandability” variable. In conclusion, the study by Bersley, R., & Chuang, Y. recommends following certain criteria when choosing songs for ESL teaching and learning purposes such as choosing songs that the students like, songs that are understandable and do not contain difficult idioms, with proper diction and repetitive phrases. Songs should also contain “culturally relevant topics” and be appropriate for the students’ level of proficiency.

Multiple Intelligences and Learning for Understanding Study

New models of teaching and learning which include the use of musical intelligence eliciting positive results are being explored also at the tertiary level. In his article, René Díaz-Lefebvre (2006) discusses the case study conducted by the psychology department from Glendale Community College. The GCC pilot project ventured into innovative and creative ways of teaching and conducting assessments which departed from the old pedagogical models that emphasized testing students based only on linguistic and logical mathematical intelligence parameters. The new educational paradigm incorporated Gardner's multiple intelligences theory and the Learning for Understanding concept through creative forms of learning that produced real understanding. Students participating in the MI/LfU project were given creative learning options in addition to their paper and pencil tests in order to demonstrate core subject understanding. René Díaz-Lefebvre (2006) explains that, rapidly, the project extended to other core subjects challenging both students and teachers to get outside their "comfort zone" and explore other forms of demonstrating mastery and understanding of meaning. Among their creative learning choices, students could choose to present a role-play, a drama or musical performance, a sculpture, a painting, or a dance creation, among others, to demonstrate competence in Chemistry, Algebra, Anthropology, Spanish or any other academic area. The criteria to assess students' proficiency included the following five areas: creativity/imagination; demonstration/performance; organization/format; reflection/metacognition and evidence of understanding.

In 2000, and after more than 3400 students had participated in the study, GCC recognized MI/LfU as an official college program even implementing their assessment innovations (René Díaz-Lefebvre, 2006). Moreover, the results of a survey carried out in 2004 demonstrated that

34% of students returned to the program, showed increased motivation and student satisfaction, and a higher prolonged retention of academic concepts. Today, many other colleges in the county are implementing the MI/LfU model in their campuses (Rene Díaz-Lefebvre, 2006).

Conclusion

This literature review has intended to demonstrate how researchers have found strong evidence that link Music to language acquisition. The literature review also examines how ESL practitioners endorse the use of Music strategies for language teaching and learning at all levels of cognitive attainment, from Kindergarten to College ESL instruction. This is evidence to the fact that Music a “Universal Language” that reaches all ages. Furthermore, Music is the most abstract art form. Music is the ultimate non verbal form of communication because when we listen to Music, we can feel, see and imagine without uttering one word. It might seem contradicting with the purpose of language learning which involves words, sounds and phrases. Yet, the language of Music can unfold patterns through rhythms, tempos and dynamics that can strongly influence and connect to language acquisition. Most of the studies in the present Literature review connect Music to language from a linguistic and pedagogical perspective, using Music as a vehicle and not as a final destination. In conclusion, it is evident that there is a need to develop research emerging from a musicological point of view, carried out by scholars from the musical field and that can connect in depth language structures with musical forms. Chomsky’s language acquisition device (LAD) theory can also be transferred to the idea of a musical blue print that can innate the learning of languages. Researches can also discover that not only we can learn languages through Music but that the study of Music can also be a vehicle to language learning.

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