Music and Language:
Songs in the Language Classroom

Introduction

Many people find learning a second language difficult and often times not accomplishable, so it might be helpful to find ways in which to aid us in acquisition. Much research has been done on how music in the language classroom can benefit students in vocabulary and memorization, 2 important factors in second language acquisition. Music also creates a fun learning environment which can lead to higher motivation from students. Incorporating music does not guarantee native-like proficiency in learners but does provide support in aspects of the language learning process.

This paper will present the following topics:

1. Musical intelligence
2. How music and language are similar
3. Why use songs in the classroom
4. What songs are appropriate
5. Most importantly, research done in effects of music on language learning

Musical Intelligence

Howard Gardner (1983) first introduced the idea of multiple intelligences in his book, *Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. His theory divides intelligence into 7 different categories, one of which is musical intelligence. Those who are musically intelligent are said to be able to think in music and rhythm, play an instrument easily, have sensitivity to sound, pitch and rhythm and appreciate all types of music genres.
The multiple intelligence theory can be compared to learning styles. Knowing both can help teachers include activities in their lessons that play on every learner’s strengths. Carefully designed music activities have the ability to tap into the four modalities: visual, auditory, emotive, and kinesthetic (Abbott, 2011). This way, every student is able to participate in learning.

Similarities between music and language

As we know, language is not combined together in a random fashion. There are rules regarding syntax and using these rules, meaningful messages are made. Much like language, music is a human universal in which perceptually discrete elements are organized into hierarchically structured sequences according to syntactic principle (Patel, 2003). Comparing language and music, we can see that letters are music notes, words are chords, and sentences are all the notes and chords in a measure which in the end, result in a predictable melody. Therefore, when one writes or speaks their thoughts, the process it quite similar to when one learns the rules of music.

Why songs are useful in the classroom

One of the reasons why songs are beneficial in the classroom is because of its language use. Songs almost always contain natural, authentic language (Lynch, 2009). Murphey (1990) notes that pop songs contain relatively simple and conversational style language. Furthermore, Abbott (2011) points out that many songs include typical conversational speech and pronunciation, making them useful for practicing linking. In short, songs provide the necessary language for everyday communication.
Vocabulary is another important aspect of language that can be derived from songs. Abbott (2011) states:

“Songs can provide meaningful contexts for teaching vocabulary because they deal with relevant topics and include forms and functions… that are being covered in the language program… Songs with metaphors and idioms be used for vocabulary practice.”

The added plus with songs is that repetition is possible without having monotonous drill practice (Claram & Gargan 1984). Students not only learn new words, but remember better because of its frequency in a song.

Memorization is an important role in the language learning process. Newham (1995–1996) suggests that the patterns produced through rhyme are known to aid memory and enhance language learning. Also, Gfeller (1983) found when various types of verbal information (e.g., multiplication tables, spelling lists) were presented simultaneously with music, memorization was enhanced. The notion connecting music and enhanced memory can be reinforced with the common knowledge that many times, people tend to remember melody and rhythm better than spoken speech.

Besides the language features of music, songs can create a fun, positive learning environment where students can feel at ease. When students are comfortable and engaged it may have the ability to raise their motivation, another factor which affects the outcome when learning a language.

Song selection
What songs are appropriate for the classroom? It is quite clear that songs with excessive slang and profanity are not appropriate in a language classroom which includes certain genres of music such as heavy metal or hip-hop. Things also to think over are a song’s tempo, difficult vocabulary, and whether or not pronunciation is fitting. Children songs, traditional/folk music, and applicable pop songs are a few music choices that would work well in any classroom. Having the students choose what songs they would like to use could also be effective. In his study, Arevalo (2008) found that songs that touch upon social issues and cultural aspects are appropriate choices for his adult learners.

Research findings

Suzanna Medina (1993) conducted a study on the effects of music upon second language vocabulary acquisition. Her subjects were 48 second graders in a Los Angeles school district whose first language was Spanish and had little knowledge of English. She divided the students in four groups: No music-illustrations (story spoken with illustrations), no music-no illustrations (story spoken without illustrations), music-illustrations (story sung with illustrations) and music-no illustrations (story sung without illustrations).

To test the amount of vocabulary gained, the students were asked to circle the appropriate picture to the spoken target words. They took two post-tests, once just after the four day exposure and again a week and a half later. Medina found that the overall results of the study were not significantly different in the music groups and no-music groups. However, when each group’s scores were examined, the results are clear. The music-illustrations group had the most vocabulary gain in the first post-test with an average of 1.75 words and maintained their vocabulary a week and a half later when they took the second post-test. Unlike this group, the no
music-no illustrations group had scores of less than 1 and this was true in the later post-test. Medina (1993) states that while the effects of illustrations were seemingly quite powerful, it was the addition of music which appeared to boost the positive effects of the illustrations.

In more recent study, Robert Legg (2009) wanted to discover if he could accelerate his students’ French vocabulary acquisition by including music in his teaching method. The learners are twelve to thirteen year olds learning French in a UK secondary school. He divided the students into two groups, the experimental “music” group and the control “non-music” group. The pretests and posttests used here had the students write the correct French word next to its English equivalent and were given “marks” if it was correct; The more marks, the higher the score. The non-music group started learning the new words in the poem through regular instruction such as the teacher reading the poem, students writing down definitions and translations, questioning and word games. The music group, instead of word games, had the same poem turned into a short musical piece which every student in the group had learned.

According to Legg’s posttest results, the music group scored an average of 42.15 marks compared to the non-music groups’ mean of 34.59 marks. While the non-music group had an average percent increase of 39.9% from their pretest to posttest scores the music group had an increase of 52.8%. Leggs (2009) concluded that the pupils in the Music group learned the past tense words and phrases of *Le weekend dernier* more securely… this in turn enabled them to translate the English phrases in French with greater success (*Le weekend dernier* being the poem used in the study).

The critical period is something to consider when the subjects of such studies are children. The critical period hypothesis (CPH) suggests that we are biologically programmed to learn
certain things at specific times in life. After this period, acquiring these skills become impossible (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In regards to second language acquisition, the CPH implies that older learners have a harder time learning a second language than younger ones. To see if these results can hold true for all learners, it is important to look at older learners, those who have passed their critical period.

Li and Brand (2009) explored the effects that music has on vocabulary acquisition, language usage, and meaning for mainland Chinese ESL learners. The subjects in this case are 35 adult graduate students with an average age of 23 attending a university in China. The students were divided into three groups: Group 1 (all music) – music was used exclusively in teaching target English language skills, Group 2 (half music) – music was used half the time, and Group 3 (no music) – no music was used. Pretests, posttests and a delayed posttest were administered consisting of multiple choice, sentence completion, and fill-in-the-blank questions.

The results of the immediate posttest showed that all three groups, regardless of what kind of instruction they received, made improvements in their English abilities. However, the all music groups scored significantly higher than the others with the no music group coming in second and the half music group last. In the delayed posttest, the results were quite similar to the immediate posttest. Li and Brand (2009) concluded that an ESL classroom that is intensively music/song based appears to be highly effective in the teaching of English, both in terms of achievement and attitudes.

While most research done in regards to music and language learning focuses on vocabulary acquisition, Arevalo (2010) drew attention to music as a tool for listening comprehension. His class size varied between 8-20 students, all adults. To gauge the learner’s
listening comprehension, he prepared lessons that included music and interviewed each student after the 16 week program. After his study, he determined that music was the most suitable type of material to develop listening comprehension.

In addition to this, he also arrived at many other conclusions that link back to why songs should be used in the classroom. His findings include:

1. songs in the classroom motivates the students to attend lessons and pay attention in class.
2. Through songs, students become familiar with the pronunciation of native speakers.
3. Songs facilitate the learning of a language in interesting and effective ways.
4. Repetition presented in songs will activate the students to get a lot of pattern drills automatically without realizing it.

Conclusion

Music is a valuable tool in the language classroom because of its language use, power to enhance memory, and constant repetition. The findings from the studies above show the immediate and long-term results songs and music have in the language classroom. Including music in our teaching methods improve learners’ vocabulary and memorization. In addition, music is quite accommodating; it can be incorporated into listening, speaking, reading and writing activities in all languages and adapted for all ages and levels (Failoni, 1993). Also take notice of the uncontrollable variables in these studies such as learner differences. Although present but could not be prevented, the results of each case appear to be similar in nature proving how effective music can be in the classroom setting.
Despite the many research done in this field, further studies need to be done in terms of the learners themselves. Compare to the amount of research conducted on child learners, not much research has been done on older learners/adults who have passed their critical period. Along with older learners, future studies should involve a larger amount of subjects to come to an unanimous significance in the overall results.
References


