

Teaching English Through Music: Multimodal Learning Activities for Primary School Children

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Abstract

This paper discusses an innovative approach to English language learning for children through the integration of music and songs. The author seeks to understand how music influences students' learning motivation and improves their English language skills. The theory underpinning this research is Gardner's multiple intelligences, which recognizes that each individual has different types of intelligence, including linguistic intelligence. The research also links this theory to multimodality, an approach that utilizes different media or ways of learning to enrich the educational process. Preliminary findings suggest that music can be an effective tool for promoting language skills, provided the methods used are varied and appropriate to the needs of the students.

Keywords: English, multimodality, music, Gardner.

Introduction

In 2006, the European Commission conducted a study to evaluate the level of mastery of English and French among students who had completed secondary education. The results showed that Spain ranked twelfth out of sixteen countries, signaling the low language proficiency of Spanish students (Pinem, 2019). Instead of simply teaching English as a subject, a more contextualized and practical approach needs to be implemented. English should be taught in real-life situations related to important fields such as economy, tourism and industry (Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa, 2012). A multimodal approach to English language teaching involves using different methods, media and activities that stimulate more than one type of intelligence or learning style (Hampp, 2019). For young students in Spain, it aims to make language learning more interesting as well as effective. By integrating activities such as playing, singing or interacting creatively into the daily routine, teachers can create a fun learning atmosphere (Haryati et al., 2023);(Rahayu, 2019).

This research can provide guidance on the types of activities that are practical and easy to implement, so teachers can easily adopt them to enhance students' learning experience. Language and culture are closely related because language reflects the way of thinking, habits and values of the people who use it. Therefore, effective second language (L2) learning requires a deep sociocultural understanding so that students can communicate contextually and appropriately (Wang & Yu, 2024).

One way of integrating culture into language teaching is by using authentic songs. Traditional songs can help students understand history and cultural identity, pop songs reflect modern popular culture, and children's songs provide a fun way to learn a language (Ansar, 2017). National anthems, on the other hand, introduce students to the values of patriotism and national pride. This means that using this medium, teachers can provide culturally rich learning experiences while strengthening students' language skills (Reyes-Torres et al., 2021).

Music plays an important role in human life, not only in the school environment but also in students' daily lives. Music covers various aspects, including "sociocultural, musical, psychological and spiritual dimensions". Music, as a universal art form, offers a variety of benefits for student development. Apart from being a medium for expressing emotions and creativity, music can also serve as an effective learning tool (Lim et al., 2022). Research shows that music can stimulate various aspects of students' cognitive, emotional and social development. Studies on newborns, for example, have proven that music has an important role in the formation of emotional bonds between mother and child as well as brain development (Roa-Trejo et al., 2023).

Language and music have been an important part of human life since ancient times, as seen in cave paintings depicting people dancing (Barton & Riddle, 2022). Linguistics and music are even considered key areas in all cultures. Reinforces this connection by revealing that humans have a close bond with music, which is evidenced through the discovery of bone flutes in caves in France and Germany (Silva, 2006: 25). Thus, music is traditionally connected to the way humans communicate and express themselves.

The influence of music on human brain development has been the focus of research in recent decades. Research by Jusczyk (1986) and Lecanuet et al. (1987), as referenced by Murphey (1990), has provided empirical evidence regarding the ability of the fetus to distinguish the melody and intonation of its mother's voice. These findings support the hypothesis that early exposure to music can stimulate neurodevelopment and enhance an individual's cognitive abilities. In addition, Campbell (2001) have confirmed that early music learning has a significant impact on an individual's brain and cognitive development. The differences in brain anatomy found in professional musicians compared to non-musicians suggest that

music can physically shape the structure of the brain. The increased neuronal connectivity generated by music learning not only impacts musical ability, but also various other cognitive aspects, including language ability. Language production, text comprehension and vocabulary skills are often better in individuals with a musical background. In addition, music also plays an important role in social and emotional development, and in enriching the learning experience (Failoni, 1993; Silva, 2006).

Darwin proposed the intriguing hypothesis that the communicative abilities of modern humans may be rooted in the fusion of music and language. This view is in line with the thinking of earlier philosophers such as Galilei, Rousseau and Wittgenstein who also saw a deep connection between these two disciplines. However, further research has revealed fundamental differences between language and music that need to be addressed in further studies. Marin and Perry (1999) and Peretz (2006), argue that music and language are two very different systems. They argue that the absence of pitch and rhythm in spoken language, as well as the absence of grammatical structure and semantic meaning in music, indicate that these two phenomena have fundamentally different characteristics. In addition, the researchers also highlighted music's ability to express emotions more intensely than language (Patel 2008).

This study aims to explore the correlation between linguistic and musical systems, and its implications for children's foreign language acquisition. By referring to Patel's view that music and language have an interrelated cognitive and neurological basis, we hypothesize that the involvement of music in the language learning process can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of children's foreign language acquisition (2008: 417).

Previous research, such as that conducted by Fassbender (1996) and Pouthas (1996), has shown an innate tendency in children to respond to music. These findings support the hypothesis that infants have unique musical abilities. Trehub (2000, 2003) and Trehub and Hannon (2006) further demonstrated that children have a high sensitivity to pitch and rhythm patterns, as well as a strong preference for singing compared to speech (Patel 2008: 377). Thus, the use of nursery rhymes in English language teaching can be an effective strategy to facilitate the learning process. Music has the potential to make language learning more enjoyable and memorable. As such, the focus of learning can shift from purely linguistic aspects towards a more holistic approach, involving various modalities such as musical, visual and kinesthetic.

Studies conducted by Cunningham and Sterling (1998) and Dolgin and Adelson (1990) show that preschool children already have the ability to connect musical aspects with the emotions they evoke. These results indicate that the ability

to recognize emotions in music is one aspect of cognitive development that emerges in the early stages of child development.

Other studies have shown that music with a major mode tends to make listeners feel happy, while music with a minor mode elicits feelings of sadness (Dowling, 1999). Musical modes are defined as “different spatial excitation patterns based on diverse oscillation frequencies” (Pierce, 1999: 10). Gerardi and Gerken (1995) conducted experiments with children to test their reactions to musical modes. In this study, children were asked to show happy or sad facial expressions according to how they perceived the music. The experiment used major and minor melodies that moved up and down following the scales. The results showed that eight-year-old children could recognize melodies that felt happy or sad in the same way as adults.

Based on previous research findings showing a positive correlation between music and positive emotions, educators are increasingly encouraged to integrate musical elements such as songs and rhymes into learning activities. A conducive and pleasant learning environment, which can be created through music, can trigger students' intrinsic motivation to learn. This is in line with Krashen's hypothesis that: A positive affective state, or a weak “affective filter”, is an important prerequisite for optimal language acquisition. By creating a relaxed and fun learning atmosphere through music, teachers can help students lower their emotional barriers and open up to new learning experiences (1982: 228, cited in Paquette & Rieg 2008).

Considering the findings of Hill-Clarke and Robinson (2003), music has a significant impact on students' cognitive development. Music not only acts as a tool to enrich vocabulary and improve comprehension, but also contributes to the overall development of language skills, including oral skills, attention, memory and abstract thinking. In addition, music can also stimulate students' creativity and cultural awareness (Paquette & Rieg, 2008: 228).

Gardner (2011) suggests that musical intelligence is one of the earliest forms of intelligence to emerge in children. Research conducted by Lozanov and Gateva (1988) supports this finding by showing a positive correlation between exposure to classical or baroque music and improved academic performance. Benenson (1995) further explains that music has a significant influence on an individual's psychological state, including breathing patterns, which in turn can affect cognitive performance.

In conclusion, the use of music in second language teaching is not only a valuable tool, but also very important for creating a calm and motivating classroom atmosphere. Music can enhance both receptive (receiving information) and productive (producing language) abilities, and promote language acquisition. In this way, language teaching becomes more layered, where language input comes from various sources, making the learning process more thorough and meaningful.

Both music and language skills develop in the right hemisphere of the brain. Campbell (1998: 203) further explains that music engages both hemispheres, where creativity is activated by the right brain, while musical logic engages the left brain. Therefore, with music, language students can develop their brains as a whole, which enables them to be more effective in solving problems encountered in life and generating innovative ideas.

Romberg (2011) points out that infants use a variety of sensory channels to learn language, including listening and observing their mother's facial expressions. This leads to the concept of multimodal learning, where different types of input (such as sound and visual) are combined to support the learning process. Songs become a very effective tool in this approach, as they incorporate auditory elements (oral and aural) that help students assimilate language through different ways that enrich their learning experience. Our students will listen to songs, poems, chants and anthems; they will also watch some videos while moving to the rhythm of the music (Silva, 2006: 19-20). The teaching process should include all types of multiple intelligences to develop each aspect of students' intelligence, so that learning becomes more meaningful and suits each individual's needs.

From a teaching perspective, we must recognize that our classrooms are diverse, with each student having a different learning style. Each student has unique educational needs, which are influenced by various personal and social factors that must be met. We need to appreciate that every individual is different, so we must understand these differences. Therefore, teachers should adapt their approach to the personal and social characteristics of each student and choose appropriate teaching methods for such diversity. To support our research and teaching objectives, we adopt the Theory of Multiple Intelligences proposed by Howard Gardner.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach to explore the use of music in teaching English to primary school students. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and analysis of students' performance and learning outcomes. The study focused on fourth and fifth-grade students selected purposively from a primary school in Jakarta. Observations were conducted over four weeks, during which teaching sessions were documented, and interviews were held with teachers to gain insights into their experiences. The collected data were thematically analyzed to identify patterns related to the students' motivation and improvement in English language skills, providing a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of music-based learning activities.

Results and Discussion

In addition to learning English in the classroom, our activity design also aims to increase students' independence. Therefore, we provide strategies that allow students to continue learning outside of school (Pinter, 2006). One of the strategies proposed is using songs as a learning technique, which can be utilized for learning outside the classroom. Some other techniques include listening to the radio, watching television, reading books, magazines and newspapers, searching for information on the Internet, living in another country, joining a language exchange program (tandem), talking to strangers without fear of making mistakes, singing songs and other activities. All these activities stimulate different aspects of human intelligence, which is the focus of this article, as we believe that foreign language learning is global and multimodal (Muñoz Luna, 2010).

Several studies have shown that children are able to recognize emotions expressed in music, and this ability continues to develop during school (Cunningham & Sterling, 1998; Dolgin & Adelson, 1990). Another study revealed that music in the major mode tends to make listeners feel happy, while music in the minor mode often elicits feelings of sadness (Dowling, 1999). Based on these findings, we chose songs, rhymes and chants to create an atmosphere of happiness and emotional well-being for children. This aims to create a positive and joyful classroom environment, which can support the learning process effectively.

Through the use of songs in learning, students have successfully developed multiple intelligences. They have honed their linguistic and musical intelligence by interacting with language, tone and rhythm. In addition, learning activities involving images and movement have stimulated the development of visual-spatial and kinesthetic intelligence. Furthermore, through group work and cross-cultural learning, students have enhanced their interpersonal intelligence. Finally, singing activities have facilitated the exploration of emotions and the development of self-awareness, thus stimulating the growth of intrapersonal intelligence.

In selecting songs for this teaching program, we consider the age, interests, needs of the students, the difficulty of the lyrics, and the learning objectives. We use different types of songs, including authentic songs, adapted songs, action songs, chants, nursery rhymes and national anthems. This approach covers all stages of classroom teaching as well as students' diverse learning styles and preferences. Our results show significant improvements in students' speaking ability when they use songs in language learning, especially if the songs are associated with physical, visual or interpersonal activities. This multimodal learning approach creates a meaningful learning experience and provides a consistent positive impact in the foreign language classroom.

In addition, it is important to consider the methods that will be used to evaluate students. The use of songs and music can help make the evaluation process

easier and more enjoyable throughout the year. By using songs and music, evaluation moments that would normally cause anxiety can be turned into a positive and enjoyable experience. We plan to evaluate student effort and progress through formative evaluations on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

Conclusion

In the era of a globalized society, mastering more than one language has become an important necessity for communication. English, after Mandarin, is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Therefore, it has become a lingua franca. With globalization, it is important for us to help students master English in order to communicate with other countries, especially through speaking skills, which is a crucial aspect in cross-cultural interaction. Learning a second language also broadens our horizons, making us more interested in people from other cultures, their traditions, lifestyles, cuisine and so on. We learn to appreciate different ways of life. Songs, chants, rhymes and anthems can introduce students to the characteristics of English-speaking countries and help them become more tolerant of the differences.

Students' ability to communicate in another language also depends on developing skills in their mother tongue. By comparing the mother tongue and the second language, students can find similarities and differences, while understanding that each language has its own unique rules. Before reaching what is referred to as the critical period (Lenneberg, 1967), students have a flexible brain ability to learn as much of the second language as possible. In this case, songs become a rich source of linguistic input, delivered in a fun and interactive way. In addition, the use of music in the classroom can enhance basic learning skills, such as theoretical reasoning, practical skills, personal attitude development and emotional engagement. With music, teachers have a variety of opportunities to create effective and meaningful learning experiences in the classroom.

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