

Music: A Major Key to Second Language Acquisition

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is a strong link between music and language. When music is used as a tool in the process of acquiring a second language, classroom engagement increases and students' anxiety decreases. Studies show that song-based lesson plans are an effective medium for students to tackle traditional learning goals. However, mainstream curriculum does not adequately reflect the data nor positive testimonials. Dynamic, fruitful, and inclusive, music is an indispensable tool for learning a second language, and it should be fully integrated into the language learning classroom.

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## PREFACE

I experience the magic of song; it helps me learn my second language. As a longtime Spanish learner looking back, I've come to realize that my process has been profoundly impacted by using music as a tool. My success in using that tool has inspired me to delve into the data that underscores it.

Music-based lessons in high school and college were rare in my experiences. My success with music as a tool for learning Spanish began during my self-study when I started to explore Spanish-language songs and the many ways I could make use of them. Music gave me the privilege to foster language learning as a passion. My drive, accomplishments, and research all lead me to firmly believe that if teachers transform their curriculum to reflect the interconnectedness of music and language learning, more students will develop a healthy relationship with the process of learning a second language - in the classroom, and beyond.

There are people who address the sighful regret of their second language regression. I wonder why they've stopped learning after the academic requirements were met. Without direct instruction and regimented assignments, how does a language learner build on their skills outside of the classroom? Are mandated second language classes providing students with the tools they'd need to be successful beyond the textbook? There are also people who have had bad experiences or lack an interest in learning a second language, I get that. Yet, I advocate for an untraditional method, one so joyful that it could ignite the drive to learn a second language. I'm calling for mainstream classes to adopt song as commonplace in the curriculum, in the pursuit of cultivating lifelong language learners.

## METHODS

Scholarly articles and books are the main sources utilized in this paper. Primarily, Purchase College's, "Discovery Search," was key in finding sources. Keywords in the searches included; music, second language, acquisition, learning, classroom, anxiety, pronunciation, neuroscience, and brain. The discovery searches led to scientific articles and research, books, and even personal advocacy for the use of music in the language learning classroom. Both qualitative and quantitative research was utilized, as well as research from countries outside of the United States. Most of the sources were published in more recent years, but also considered were some older, key canonical sources. With a thorough literature review and analysis, the resources provided a wholesome overview of the topic of Music & Second Language Acquisition. A rhetorical analysis was found to be the most appropriate form of analysis for this project, in the pursuit of creating a persuasive piece advocating the thesis point: Aiding students in lowering anxiety, reaching learning goals, and increasing joy, music is an indispensable tool in a wholesome approach to language learning and it should be embraced in mainstream classrooms.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For a long time, teachers, students, and researchers alike have recognized music as a positive medium for effective language learning. When used to its fullest potential, music is an incredible tool in the classroom and beyond. Its universal power transcends learning barriers. It targets specific learning outcomes. It not only increases student engagement, but also drives success through its possibilities for incorporating multifaceted learning goals within a single song-related activity.

The aim of this review is to investigate the literature that links music and second language acquisition. It will begin by describing the roadblocks that prevent achievement and move on to the literature that shows how music both defeats those roadblocks and targets learning outcomes. Then, the interconnectedness between music and language in the brain will be examined. To finish, there will be groundwork laid out for integrating music-related activities in the language-learning classroom.

### **Why Anxiety Hurts Language Learning Potential**

Evidently, one of the most detrimental and commonly identified obstacles for students learning a second language is anxiety. Paired with low self-esteem, discomfort, and lack of confidence, students may find themselves learning through an *Affective Filter* (Lin, 2008). Conceptualized by Stephen Krashen in 1982, the *Affective Filter Hypothesis* also states that in order to achieve successful learning outcomes, it is the responsibility of the educator to offer a low-anxiety, high-reward classroom for students. Horwitz (1986) hones in on anxiety as a particular impairment for students. Horwitz identifies the negative educational implications for

students who experience classroom anxiety, such as; defaulting to simple and concrete sentence structure instead of exploring the target language; fear of learning and speaking in the target language; and failing to reach their test-taking potential. Also, Horwitz summarizes the specific feelings, physical symptoms, and behavioral patterns due to anxiety experienced by students. Simply put, the emotional and physical tolls anxiety has on students prevents learning on a cognitive level. In addition, Horwitz introduces the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a series of 33 questions that can be used as a tool to identify students who suffer from common anxious characteristics in the classroom. After establishing the detrimental effects on learning that classroom anxiety causes, Horwitz proposes a serious approach to helping students who experience it. In accepting anxiety as a learning impediment, teachers are offered specific options to help their students: “1) they can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situation; or 2) they can make the learning context less stressful” (131). In more serious cases of anxiety, the suggestion is to refer the student to therapy with a professional. In other words, classroom anxiety is a serious matter of learning (Horwitz, 1986).

### **How Music Can Relieve Anxiety in the Language-Learning Classroom**

Though consistently identified and recognized as a concern for decades, anxiety is just more recently beginning to be addressed in pedagogical studies involving music. In a most basic study on the connection between music and language learning related anxiety, Dolean and Dolean (2014) aimed to determine whether teaching songs in the target language can reduce anxiety in the language learning classroom. First, they surveyed English language learning-related anxiety of 60 Romanian-speaking students using the FLCAS. All of the students received traditional language instruction, and thirteen high-anxiety students were chosen to take

an additional course called, “English Through Music.” In this course over one semester, the students were taught a total of 15 songs; the teacher used a guitar for music, and the beginning of each class was dedicated to reviewing all of the previously learned songs. At the end of the semester, all 60 students were again administered the FLCAS. The only group with a significant decrease in anxiety was the test group. While this study is limited by its testing methods in many ways — including the smaller class size, its focus on high-anxiety students, the varied baseline anxiety level between groups, and that the test group receiving the course in a new environment with a different teacher — it does make a casual connection between language learning anxiety and music as a means to reduce it.

A more thorough study, performed by Lin (2008) sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of a second language curriculum specially designed through the lens of the *Affective Filter Theory*. Lin developed this study in response to a gap between the literature that supports the theory and studies that actually address the theory directly by means of altered pedagogy. Lin’s paper aims to establish successful pedagogies specifically targeted at reducing students’ affective filters. Songs, films, and games were selected as the pedagogies for the one-semester testing period, based on the perceived potential to create a more comfortable and motivating learning environment. Although traditional language teaching was employed in the first three weeks of class, followed by the new curriculum, there was no control group. However, the results relied on both qualitative and quantitative methods of measuring data. The student’s TOEFL scores, taken at the beginning and the end of the course, showed a significant increase. The quantitative data showed that students’ confidence in the pedagogies grew immensely after the course. In addition, the majority of students found the new pedagogy to be relaxing, motivating, and



effective at helping them learn their second language. The qualitative data, a series of 5 in-depth interviews with randomly selected interviews, indicates unanimous support of the pedagogy and offers direct feedback on what was felt to be most successful. Out of the four selected quotes from the interviews, three were focused on the musical aspect of the course. Students reported; having Bach playing as background music lowered their level of anxiety; music motivated them to consult the dictionary to appropriately convey the intended emotion of the songs; it was easy to retain vocabulary because the words were learned in context. In these three excerpts, we begin to see just how music can positively impact students' language-learning experiences.

Music can also have a direct effect on levels of anxiety when used as a pre-class habit, as demonstrated by Yüce (2018). In their study, Yüce explores the relationship between listening to music in the target second language and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). The levels of FLCA were measured using the FLCAS, and the students that took part in this study were found to have a baseline moderate level of FLCA (neither high nor low). Through the controlled study, Yüce found that for Turkish students learning French, having a habit of listening to target-language music daily was not a major factor that affected FLCA; however, a habit of listening to foreign language music directly prior to class is indeed a factor that greatly impacted students' FLCA. In other words, listening to music in the target language is helpful in reducing FLCA, when it takes place right before entering the classroom. The research shows that just one of music's powerful uses in the language learning classroom is to alleviate anxiety and therefore lower students' *Affective Filters*, thus paving a way for achieving greater learning outcomes.

## How Music Targets Learning Outcomes

**Pronunciation.** The magic of music as a tool in second language acquisition does not stop at simply lowering students' anxiety. The research shows that songs can be used to target specific learning goals, such as pronunciation. One study, by Chen (2016), demonstrates this. A group of college students from a technological college in Taiwan was instructed second language (English) pronunciation through music in a course called, "English Music Appreciation." The curriculum was internet-based, where lyrics were found and YouTube was used to access songs. Over the course of one semester, the students learned 6 songs, selected for their, "agelessness and slow tempos." Course work, assignments, quizzes, and tests required the students to memorize lyrics, learn vocab, and phonetics. The course goals were ultimately reached; students' abilities and confidence in pronunciation and phonetic symbols increased, and they did, in fact, grow an appreciation for English music. Several surveys were taken throughout the duration of the course. Findings include; 77% of students liked singing, 98% preferred to listen; at the midterm mark 95% of students felt their knowledge of pronunciation rules progressed, which increased to 97% at the final; 71% preferred a teacher-oriented class, 23% preferred student-oriented, 6% preferred both; and regarding modes of working with the music, 49% preferred writing lyrics from memory, 19% singing in public, and 32% giving presentations about specific songs (Chen 2016). Furthermore, students self-reported increased confidence in pronunciation, and self-assessed better performance in that class than in other English learning classes. One of the most important findings is that positive learning outcomes are correlated with song preference. In other words, engagement matters.

**Pronunciation & Beyond: A Guiding Model for Lesson Planning.** Similarly, Castelo (2018) aligns the body of research that connects the use of songs as a tool for learning the pronunciation of a second language and further establishes a guiding model for educators. Castelo uses a literature review to organize the research and establishes that songs in the classroom naturally have infinite advantages in learning a second language. Castelo states the necessity of utilizing the fruitful source to its fullest in a series of well-planned and sequenced activities in order to reap the full benefit potential. Castelo lays out the suggested criteria for selecting songs and includes the recommended pedagogy as well. Castelo's proposed guiding model is an easy-to-follow lesson planning tool in the form of a flowchart. Everything included in the guide is research-based. Previously, there existed a great deal of research indicating the benefits of using songs to promote pronunciation teaching in the language learning classroom, however, there was no tool that aimed to help teachers implement it; Castelo found the gap and filled it by creating the guiding model of lesson planning with song. What is important here is that although Castelo directly addresses pronunciation in the guiding model, the complete and wholesome utilization of song is stressed (Castelo, 2018). In other words, multiple learning goals can — and must — be addressed within the study of a song.

**Memory and Din.** Salcedo's study (2010) aims to explore whether learning text through song versus spoken word affects immediate/delayed memory and din (when information repeats in one's head without intention). Through a quasi-experiment, Salcedo found that immediate text recall performance was better when the material was learned through song rather than the spoken word. Din was experienced significantly more in the music group, and it was also found that there was no significant difference in delayed text recall between the groups.

**Background Music and Learning Outcomes.** Kang and Williamson's study (2014) aims to investigate how the presence of background music can impact learning outcomes in second language acquisition. Previous research contradicts itself. The relationship between background music and level of success is influenced by the students' personal level of music education. It is shown that people with a higher level of musical training tend to perform better at certain language tasks involving tone & pitch. However, they face negative results while background music is present. Non-musically trained adults, on the other hand, perform better with non-demanding background music present. The study designed by Kang and Williamson involved two groups of students learning two different foreign languages (one was tonal and one was non-tonal). With a fairly small sample size of 16 students per group, the results were not very telling. The music used for the music-group was created especially for the study, but there were only 5 tracks that were to be used for the entire 2-week testing period. Other studies linking background music to learning outcomes usually utilize classical music such as Bach or Mozart. This study, "did not find any significant effect of musical abilities or training (as measured using the Gold MSI) on individuals' L2 learning" (738.) Although, there were marginal effects on recall and translation in the Chinese learning group, with no pronunciation effect.

### **Music and Language: A Look at The Brain**

Rebuschat's book (2012) is a collection of academic journal writings that explore the interrelatedness of music and language. The writings are organized into sections: Structural Comparisons, Evolution, Learning & Processing, and Neuroscience. In those, we are presented with evolution theories and laboratory research that indicate links between music and language. They are not just seen as simply two separate forms of communication. An important concept

presented is called, “resource sharing,” in which the same brain centers are activated while interpreting musical grammar as are for language syntax.

### **How Music Can Be Used in the Classroom**

The research demonstrates that music is a powerful tool in the classroom, but how can teachers implement it? Lems (2005) promotes the use of music as a language learning tool in the second language classroom. She sets the context by citing research that indicates specific positive effects of music in second language acquisition and indicates that the body of research is growing into new fields such as neuroscience. However, Lems is not a researcher; she is a teacher, describing music as universally appealing and therefore a perfect tool for all students. Having the experience of integrating music in her classroom for decades, Lems offers almost a dozen specific classroom activities in tandem with their learning objectives. Lems is impassioned by her personal experiences as a teacher of English as a second language using music in the classroom. It is a blend of research and personal experience that leads to her advocacy for music in the second language curriculum. While Lems cites research pointing to the positive impact music can have on second language acquisition, she recognizes the incomplete research and the gap between existing research and curriculum. Despite those gaps, she still calls for educators to have faith in music as a tool.

In contrast to music-specific guidelines, there are also general lesson-planning guidelines offered by Freeman & Freeman (2009). Though aimed to aid teachers with non-native speakers in a classroom of their second language, they provide an assessment of Cummins’ theoretical framework, and propose practical usage of “Cummins’ quadrants.” These quadrants are formed

by two axes; the y-axis rates cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding, and the x-axis rates from context embedded to context reduced. Freeman and Freeman advocate for using the quadrants as a lesson-planning guide, and content situated in context embedded and cognitively demanding as the critical frame of learning material and activities. This book is truly aimed at educators who have non-native speaking students in an immersive setting. Objectively, their goal is to aid teachers in providing an adequate and equitable education to immigrant students who are learning the common language. However, the information and guidelines proposed by Freeman and Freeman can easily be used as a framework for lesson planning for using songs in the second-language classroom. By aiming to use context-embedded, cognitively-demanding material, teachers have a better frame of reference in selecting their musical classroom activities.

## **Conclusion**

At this point in time, there is adequate scientific and testimonial evidence that demonstrates the positive effects music can have on the process of learning a second language. Though many second language classes integrate the use of music in the curriculum, there is still much room to engage language learners on a deeper level through music. Research indicates that music can help students overcome learning barriers and directly address learning goals, all while increasing the overall enjoyability of learning a second language. In addition, there are ample suggestions and guidelines developed by researchers and teachers alike. With all of the fruitful information regarding how music is a tool for language acquisition, it should be used to its greatest potential in the classroom and beyond. Yet, the body of research surrounding music and second language acquisition is still growing.

## ANALYSIS

For a long time, music has indeed been implemented in the language-learning classroom. However, it is not enough to occasionally include music in the lesson plans. The growing body of research that connects music and language learning implies a clear message: music is an incredible tool in the process of learning a second language, and it should be used to its fullest potential. Aiding students in lowering anxiety, reaching learning goals, and increasing joy, music is an indispensable tool in a wholesome approach to language learning and it should be embraced in mainstream classrooms.

It wasn't always understood just how or why music works so well in helping people learn a second language. Language teacher Kristin Lems, however, has known that it does work, and it works astoundingly well (Lems 2005). She took to writing a call to action in her piece, "Music Works: Music for Adult English Language Learners." Published in 2005 in the periodical, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Lems' article explores research findings, provides sample activities, and shares her impassioned personal reflections on employing music in the language-learning classroom. She knows the power of music; she had consistently seen how it affects the personalities of students. Remarking on one, in particular, she remembers, "I've watched a tough Ukrainian mechanic with dirty fingernails transformed into a compelling, soulful singer before his astonished classmates" (Lems 13). Lems concludes her piece with an acknowledgment of the gap between research and curriculum. She notes that although the evidence is compelling and the testimonies are strong, the change in policy lags far behind. For

Kristin Lems, the time has come to introduce music-based language classes into the mainstream curriculum.

### **Inherent Potentiality: Music's Core Qualities**

When its inherent qualities are examined, music's multi-functionalism as a tool for language learning begins to present itself clearly. In his study addressing lyrical content of pop songs, Tim Murphey found certain characteristics to be common (1992). The corpus of this analysis included all of the words of the top 50 tunes from a recent year, with a total count of 13,161 words. Murphey's findings highlight several traits that those particular songs have to offer. Though there is room for more exploration of lyrical content — perhaps using current samples or samples from different cultures — this study illustrates qualities that define music.

Firstly, the songs' word-per-minute had averaged at about half the rate of ordinary speech. Clocking in at 75.49 words-per-minute, this rate also had also reflected the frequency of pauses included in songs (Murphey, 1992). With both of those findings in mind, it can be said that the person listening to the songs has more time to actively listen and more time to process the words of the lyrics. This directly addresses an area of difficulty common for students learning a second language: listening comprehension. Often times, the normal rate of speech is too fast for a student to keep up comfortably. In offering a slower rate of words-per-minute and time for the brain to cognitively catch up to the ears, songs provide a somewhat slow-motion listening experience to students.

Additionally, the experience of listening to a song is further simplified when the actual word choices are considered. Murphey found that the words within the corpus were very



repetitious; according to the data, each word was repeated on average of three times. However, it had also been found that a full quarter of all the words in the corpus consisted entirely of just ten words. To be clear: 3,290 words of the 13,161 word corpus had been the words, you, I, me, my, the, to, a, and, gonna, and love (Murphey, 1992). Thus, those song lyrics are heavily padded with common, rudimentary words. It is wonderful to consider this with language learners in mind. Though unfamiliar vocabulary might exist within the lyrics, they may be situated within a context of familiarity. With sufficient background knowledge, students may be able to deduce the meaning of new words using the context they are already able to interpret. The repetitive nature of songs, referring to both words in general and lyrical phrases, can provide students space to learn the meaning of vocabulary in a completely organic and intuitive way.

An additional set of findings from Murphey's study alludes to the psychological scope of listening to music. The vast majority of the songs had included, "you," and, "I," statements. Furthermore, songs rarely had specified a setting (such as a point in time or geographical place). In other words, songs are somewhat vague. It isn't necessarily explicit when or where they take place, or who is involved. What this means is that students can apply context to the content on an individual basis - by having so many blanks to fill in, they can insert their own memories and imagination and craft their own meaning in between the lines. Indeed, "It is precisely this lack of referents that allows songs to happen whenever and wherever they are heard. For this listener, the song text, if received as relevant, takes on meaning in and for that context" (Murphey 773).

Songs are written by people, often based on their experiences. For a listener to personally identify with lyrics is to relate the song to their own world. It becomes part of their being. The vagueness that permeates pop songs is the skeleton that a listener can fill with context between

the bones. In the way of carving space for creating individualized meaning, music is a tool that empowers learners to engage with their second language with their experiences and their imaginations. Without a personal attachment to language, words are sterile.

Before even being played in a classroom, songs naturally have intrinsic implications of the potential to help students at every skill level meet learning goals in a second language. As the rate of speed and the words in any given song vary from one to the next, music can be selected as necessary to cater to all stages of language learning. At the least, listeners can personally connect to music with their mind's eye — that is, internalize the language.

### **The Proof is in the... Putting it to Use in the Classroom**

The potential of music as a tool in second language acquisition does not end at the sole content it presents to the listener. With the thoughtful implementation of music-based lesson plans, teachers can actively address learning goals. Whereas a traditional model of language teaching might offer students mechanical drills to memorize vocabulary and grammar structure, a music-based model would offer song-based activities to reach the same goals. However, music isn't just a tool to target specific outcomes. It is a wholesome tool indeed, with the power to engage multiple goals at once.

There are four main skills that are recognized in regard to language: listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. There are also micro skills within those categories, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. A carefully designed music-based lesson plan can serve as a medium to develop many language skills within the same activity. For example, teachers can play a song for their students, then have them write the lyrics that they

hear (they can work together as a class afterward to help each other with any missed or mistaken lyrics), then they can sing the song together. Within that one activity, students work on their listening, writing, and speaking skills. The teacher could also have students infer definitions of new vocabulary or review grammar structure within the lyrics. There are infinite opportunities in lesson planning.

## CONCLUSION

It is no wonder that so many students give up on their second language after completing the mandated requirements. We can't expect students to move on to self-study using the traditional academic methods used in language classes. We must prepare them for self-study by providing them with methods they can be excited about using on their own. Like anything else, language needs upkeep in order to retain it. What is the point of requiring students to learn a second language if we don't provide them with the tools they need in cultivating their skills?

Music is an absolutely ideal tool for use in the language learning classroom. It is dynamic, universal, and inclusive. Utilizing music for language acquisition can transform learner engagement and success. It is a lifelong tool, applicable to any skill level. The variety of genre and lyrical difficulty within music as a whole is immense, offering an entry point from any walk of life. The criteria of what is deemed academically appropriate need to change, and we need to embrace the use of music in the second language classroom.

For many students, the future of their second language is forgotten. The future of the second language classroom is music.

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