

Using Music to Support the Literacy Development of Young English Language Learners

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Abstract Integrating experiences with music in the early childhood classroom supports English language learners' literacy development (Peregoy and Boyle, Reading, writing, and learning in ESL. Pearson, Boston, 2008; Saricoban and Metin, Songs, verse and games for teaching grammar. Internet TESL J, 2000). This article describes the benefits of incorporating musical experiences into daily instruction and provides practical activities for classroom implementation, e.g., reading, writing, and singing songs for language skill development, reading fluency, and writing progress. Despite a teacher's level of aesthetic appreciation and musical training, the value of fostering creativity and enhancing literacy instruction through music is vital in today's diverse early childhood classrooms. Music can transform classrooms into positive learning environments where children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Providing children with structured and open-ended musical activities, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, and sharing the joy of creativity with each other all are foundational to bases for the growth and development of the early childhood learner.

Keywords English language learners (ELL) · English as a second language (ESL) · Music · Reading · Vocabulary · Comprehension · Fluency · Writing

Introduction

While waiting for the bus, a five-year old kindergarten student was "caught" in the rain hopping under the rain spout with his blue and yellow umbrella. When asked by his mother, "What are you doing?" the child calmly responded, "I'm listening to the music."

This anecdote supports the notion that children's music is not always like adult music (Hildebrant 1998). Regardless of the musical form and despite a teacher's level of musical training, the value of fostering creativity and enhancing literacy instruction through music is vital in today's diverse early childhood classrooms. This is particularly true for English language learners (ELLs) as they develop abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Peregoy and Boyle 2008; Saricoban and Metin 2000).

Music can transform classrooms to pleasant and positive learning environments in which children thrive emotionally, socially, and academically. Exciting musical opportunities and meaningful learning experiences can be implemented to address the needs and to give support for diverse learners through the incorporation of music and song. Providing children with structured and open-ended musical activities, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, and sharing the joy of creativity with each other are foundational bases for the growth and development of the early childhood learner.

Using Music to Enhance Students' Literacy Development

For many years, music has been used to enhance the learning power of young children (Ohman-Rodriguez

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2004). Gardner (1993) noted that the musical intelligence is the first intelligence to emerge in young learners. Many young children appear to be naturally inclined to hum or to sing a tune so it is beneficial to build upon their musical interests and enhance their literacy development simultaneously. Woodall and Zeimbroski (n.d.) agreed that music plays an important role in language and literacy development. Strong social bonds are encouraged through music and songs beginning in pre-school, and toddlers can begin to experiment with grammatical rules and various rhyming patterns in songs. A child's initial introduction to patterned text often occurs first in songs, chants, and rhymes which are repeated throughout childhood. When songs, chants, and rhymes are utilized, concepts about print become more meaningful and conventions of print are learned in context.

As noted by Schoepp (2001), much of the literature discussing the value of using songs in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms is not empirically based; however, after identifying reasons teachers and researchers provided for using music with ELLs, patterns emerge which suggest teachers' motives are theoretically grounded. These patterns include affective, cognitive, and linguistic reasons. The affective filter is one hypothesis developed by Steven Krashen (1982) who explained that for optimal learning to occur, the affective filter must be weak. A weak filter means that a positive attitude toward learning is present. Because of the casual learning environment used when singing, songs are one method for achieving a weak affective filter and promoting language learning. Cognitively, songs present opportunities for developing automaticity—knowing what to say and producing language without pauses—in the language process. The repetitive nature of many children's songs could also be of value to non-English speakers as they hear words and phrases repeated. Many songs, like folk songs, follow a repeated verse form with rhyme and have other discourse features that make them easy to follow (Saricoban and Metin 2000). Most of the language young ELLs will encounter is informal so linguistically using songs can prepare students for the genuine language they will encounter. Since music supports students' literacy development, Perego and Boyle (2008) encouraged teachers to "Sing a song a day! Songs bring levity, laughter, and beauty into your classroom" (p. 127).

Music can be naturally integrated throughout all curricular areas to develop and to extend vocabulary and comprehension skills. Music can also improve listening and oral language skill development, improve attention and memory, and enhance abstract thinking (Hill-Clarke and Robinson 2003). Additionally, music can enhance students' creativity and cultural awareness. Taking a multicultural approach to music necessitates a commitment to careful selection of materials, keeping in mind the overall goal of

multiculturalism in the classroom. It is important to talk with children about the music they listen to and sing, so they are aware that different cultural groups listen to and sing various kinds of music. Through culturally diverse music, children learn about other people's lives (Kendall 1996). Simply stated, music is important to life, as it can bring people together (Cornett 2003).

Activities that Support Music and Literacy in the Classroom

Many different strategies can be used to add a musical component to stories and a narrative dimension to songs and musical selections (Niland 2007). Language lessons addressing grammar, reading fluency, and writing, among other literacy skills, can be enhanced through the medium of music.

Songs for Teaching Language Skills

Songs may be used for the presentation and/or practice phase of language lessons. They can be used to teach a variety of language skills, such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, and parts of speech. Prosodic features of the language—stress, rhythm, and intonation—can be presented through songs as well. For young children, the best songs, whether familiar or unfamiliar, should have an international nature, such as *Old MacDonald had a Farm*. The traditional song, *BINGO*, can be used for teaching individual letter sounds or spelling words. Motions can be added to the songs to make them more meaningful and enjoyable for the children (Ohman-Rodriguez 2004; Saricoban and Metin 2000).

Songs can be used to practice and reinforce consonant sounds. Songs for pronunciation include *Mary Had a Little Lamb* to practice on the /l/ sound or *Row, Row, Row, Your Boat* to practice the /r/ sound. Songs can also be used to help students compare how words may not look the same but are still homophonic. For example, the lyrics to *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* can help students see how words may rhyme, i.e., *are* and *star*, or *high* and *sky* (Brown 2006). Songs that can be used for teaching grammar can be found at the *Songs for Teaching* website <http://www.songsforteaching.com/eslefesol.html> and include the following:

- *Compound Words; Hands Up for Letter Sounds!; Popcorn Words; and Work Out to the Letter Sounds*, by Jack Hartmann
- *Idioms; and Let's Compare* by Ron Brown
- *The Pronoun Song; Question Words Rap; To Be; To Have; To Make Do; and The Vowel Rap*, by Etienne

- *A Good Best Friend; The “What” Song; The “When” Song; and The “Who” Song*, by Cathy Bollinger

Songs used for teaching conversational English and English vocabulary are also given at the above website and include, among others:

- *Colors; Everything Has A Shape; Put Your Hands Up in the Air; Turn Around; and What Are You Wearing?* by Hap Palmer
- *Funny Face; Hello; I’m Hungry; and Sit Down, Stand Up*, by Alain Le Lait
- *Colors All Around; The Months of the Year; and Please Say Cheese*, by Jack Hartman

Using songs in children’s native languages can be beneficial to the ELLs and English speaking students. The *Songs for Teaching* website also includes songs in languages such as French, German, and Spanish. Several of the songs can be found in more than one language. During a presentation on teaching ELLs in an elementary classroom, a graduate student shared the Spanish version of the familiar song *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes (Cabeza, Hombros, Piernas, Pies)*. The other students in the graduate class all learned the words quickly and remembered them easily. When asked how they learned and remembered the words so quickly, one very musically talented person replied, “Easy, put anything to music and I can remember it.”

Teaching New Songs

Many of the song books may be familiar to children. However, the need to teach new songs will often be necessary with ELLs. It is important to note that direct instruction is necessary when teachers actually teach new songs. As outlined by Isenberg and Jalongo (2009 in press), the following steps for teaching songs may benefit teachers and students.

1. Play the song in the background for several days so it is familiar when it is introduced to the children.
2. Teach children the chorus first while you sing the verses.
3. Sing along with a recording and have children join in when they feel most comfortable.
4. Use lined poster paper to create a song chart.
5. Create a rebus song sheet to help children remember the verses of songs.
6. Teach the song one phrase at a time. Then, combine the phrases.
7. Teach the actions to an action song first, then teach the words (or vice versa). (Isenberg and Jalongo 2009 in press, pp. 240–241).

Developing Reading Fluency through Children’s Song-Based Literature

Paired or partner reading, echo reading, choral reading, and phrasing are four instructional strategies often used to improve reading fluency (Bursuk and Damer 2007; Peregoy and Boyle 2008). These strategies can be implemented effectively with song-based literature. Paired or partner reading is when a more fluent reader reads first, and the partner repeats the text. Then, roles are reversed so that each student has a chance to be the lead reader (Bursuk and Damer 2007).

Echo reading is when one person reads one sentence of text aloud with appropriate intonation and phrasing. The second student imitates this oral reading model, and the echoing interaction continues until the student can imitate more than one sentence at a time (Bursuk and Damer 2007).

Choral reading best supports ELLs when the reading material selected is age-appropriate and at a slightly higher level than what students are able to read independently. Teachers read the selections to the students several times while showing the words to the story or poem. The students can practice through repeated readings (Peregoy and Boyle 2008).

Phrasing is another instructional technique which promotes fluency for ELL students. With this technique, either the teacher or student draws scallops or line segments under phrases that should be read together. Many literature selections are also accompanied with a CD which enables children to view pictures, see text, and hear lyrics. A lovely example is John Denver’s (2003), *Sunshine on My Shoulders*. This particular storybook lends itself to the phrasing technique. The phrasing technique can also be used with many of the free songs located at the *Music for Little People* website http://www.musicforlittlepeople.com/Audio_Recordings/Downloads/Free_Downloads.

Using song-based literature is motivational and actively engages students in the reading process. By using popular musical lyrics, the techniques of paired or partner reading, echo reading, choral reading, and phrasing can be implemented easily within daily classroom instruction. A myriad of popular songs are printed in the format of colorful and inviting trade books. Song picture books also support emergent literacy by building on familiarity and enjoyment, providing repetition, expanding vocabulary and teaching story structures, promoting critical thinking, and fostering creative expression (Jalongo and Ribblett 1997). Song picture books can be especially useful for ELLs because they demonstrate the link between the kinesthetic, pictorial representations of the concepts of the songs, and print (Isenberg and Jalongo 2009, in press). Table 1 identifies and provides brief summaries of examples of

Table 1 Examples of children's song-based literature selections

| Author/year | Title | Brief summary |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Beaumont (2005) | <i>I ain't gonna paint no more!</i> | A wildly artistic baby paints itself to the tune of a popular old Dust Bowl ballad |
| Carle (1993) | <i>Today is Monday</i> | Story teaches the days of the week, along with various foods |
| Cabrera (2005) | <i>If you're happy and you know it</i> | A variety of zoo animals encourage children to express their happiness through voice and movement |
| Canyon (2003) | <i>John Denver's sunshine on my shoulders</i> | Heartwarming story about sunshine, emotions, and friendships |
| Garriel (2004) | <i>I know a shy fellow who swallowed a cello</i> | Delightful, sequential story about a musician who swallows musical instruments |
| Katz (2004) | <i>I'm still here in the bathtub brand new silly dilly songs</i> | Follow-up edition to the original, <i>Take Me Out of the Bathtub and Other Silly Dilly Songs</i> , provide even more fun-filled reading and singing opportunities |
| Katz (2001) | <i>Take me out of the bathtub and other silly dilly songs</i> | Funny poems sung to familiar tunes are provided in this comedic, poetic book |
| Lansky (2003) | <i>Mary had a little jam and other silly rhymes</i> | By adding modern terminology to old-fashioned nursery rhymes, this story is very appealing to young learners |
| Provenson, & Provenson, (1978) | <i>A peaceable kingdom: the Shaker abecedarius</i> | Echoing the familiar <i>Alphabet Song</i> , this charming song book identifies strange and unusual animal names, i.e., angleworm, ocelot, and xanthos |
| Schwartz (1999) | <i>Old MacDonald</i> | The vowels, a/e/i/o/u, and onomatopoeia are strongly reinforced with this timeless tale |
| Taback (1997) | <i>There was an old lady who swallowed a fly</i> | Comedic, sequential story of an old lady who swallows animals found on a farm |
| Westcott (1989) | <i>Skip to my lou</i> | As children read and sing this song, fun-filled dancing is bound to occur |

children's song-based literature selections that can be used in diverse early childhood classrooms to support ELLs.

Improving Students' Writing Skills with Song

Teachers can use music to improve children's writing skills in many ways. First, students can write new words for old songs (Isenberg and Jalongo 2009, in press; Hildebrandt 1998). The popular song written and recorded by Roland LaPrise (1950) entitled, the *Hokey Pokey*, has been enjoyed by many active children for decades. However, children may find Dennis Westphall's (2004) version, the *Hokey Pokeysaurus*, equally, if not more, entertaining. Comparing and contrasting newer song versions with older ones serve as excellent writing models and motivators for novice writers. Listening to song parodies is an excellent way to demonstrate how others have taken older songs and have made them originals. After teacher modeling, students will be prepared to write and to sing their unique song parodies.

Making literature connections with songs is another way to improve students' writing skills. After using trade books, teachers often provide writing time for students to independently respond in personal journals. Affording numerous writing opportunities for ELLs are very important, and the daily inclusion of personal response journals can be very advantageous to developing writers (Tompkins 2009). *A Peaceable Kingdom: The Shaker Abecedarius*, written and illustrated by Alice Provenson and Martin Provenson (1978), is a charming alphabet song parody

book which is sung to the familiar tune of *The Alphabet Song*, written by Charles Bradlee in 1835. This particular book lists unusual and strange animal names such as angleworm, ocelot, and xanthos. A teacher may find it advantageous to show the printed song text and to sing it simultaneously as a motivating activity prior to reading *Chrysanthemum*, by Henkes (1992). This particular book stimulates discussion about the importance of being kind to others, regardless of one's name. While reading and studying content information about dinosaurs, teachers may want to include Westphall's (2004) *ABCosaurus*. This particular song lists all of the dinosaurs' names in alphabetical order, and could serve as a model for creating alphabet books about other studied subjects, too. Students may also enjoy writing songs with a partner or in small groups, as they read and write in multiple content areas. Songs can be used and written to help students learn and reinforce content information.

An additional method in which to promote writing through music is for children to create song illustrations that visually represent their aesthetic interpretations of the song. After students listen to a song, they can draw or paint a pictorial representation of what that song meant to them or an illustration that answers statements such as, *This tune makes me feel* or *Now, I can see...* (Hill-Clarke and Robinson 2003). Either independently or with classmates, students can also compose stories that are inspired through song. The language experience approach (LEA) can be implemented effectively to model this writing process and

to build upon the shared musical experience (Tompkins 2009). There are four basic steps to an LEA: provide an experience; talk about the experience; record the dictation; and read the text (p. 131). This particular instructional approach is very effective for ELLs, as students' vocabulary and comprehension skills are supported by the classroom teacher and/or peers through sharing common, learning experiences (Peregoy and Boyle 2008). In addition to drawing, painting, and writing songs, creativity can be fostered through the construction of musical instruments.

Creating Musical Instruments

An interesting way for children to enjoy music is to make it. After exploring a variety of instruments from other countries, such as Tibetan bells, gongs, gourds, bongo drums, *kalimbas* (African thumb pianos), castanets, and conch shells (Kirmani 2007) and reading books about other cultures, children can create their own instruments using the instruments from other cultures as models (Kendall 1996). Children may want to create their own instruments or the teacher can have directions for making various instruments for the students to read and to follow. Motivation and creative thinking can evolve when students are given opportunities to create instruments. Children can compare and contrast sounds and generate innovative patterns and rhythms (Kirmani 2007).

Often, teachers establish music play centers with materials which empower children to imaginatively design musical devices (Kemple et al. 2004). These materials can include, but are not limited to, paper plates, small pebbles, coffee cans, paper towel rolls, and streamers. Music play centers also lend themselves to assisting children with their oral communication skills, as they explain what sounds the instruments make, explain the steps to making the instruments, and compare and contrast their instruments with others. When students use different materials, different sounds will transpire. Teachers should encourage students to see the potential for any materials to become musical instruments (Hildebrant 1998; Moore 2000, Palmer 2001). Examples of easily constructed crafts include balloon maracas and drums (Ohman-Rodriguez 2004). To make balloon maracas, students fill balloons with different materials such as rice, beans, pasta, or feathers, inflate them, and shake them. Students can listen and discuss the differences in the sounds. Drums can be easily constructed using different sizes of cans and stretched balloons for the tops. Because music can be created, performed, and shared with raw materials, instruments can be accessible to all children, thereby fostering creative and aesthetic growth opportunities to all young learners (Rivkin 2006).

Exposing Children to Multiple Musical Genres

Exposing children to different kinds of music is beneficial. This can be done in a variety of ways, i.e., taking field trips to concerts, operas, or ballets, or inviting musical guests and experts to visit the classroom and perform. Again, the language experience approach could be utilized to reflect upon and evaluate the music-related experiences. Hill-Clarke and Robinson (2003) suggested a *Let's Dance to that Tune* day. Children listen to and research various genres of music and assign groups to create dance routines that represent interpretations of the music. Palmer (2001) added the idea of teaching students ways to say "hello" in different languages through song. Songs promote a sense of unity, especially with a diverse group of children (Peregoy and Boyle 2008).

Encouraging students to share songs in their native language is beneficial in establishing a classroom community. When using songs, Peregoy and Boyle (2008) recommended providing cues such as pictures, pantomime, or gestures and posting the lyrics accompanied by pictures or rebus symbols to convey meaning. They also suggested allowing students to share songs in their native languages by bringing recordings or singing the songs in class.

Conclusion

Integrating music into children's everyday activities promotes literacy development, particularly with ELLs. Music is a way for children to experience rich language in a pleasing way (Woodall & Ziembski, n.d). Whether children listen to the "music" of the rain, popular children's songs, or make their own musical compositions, important skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking are developed. In an early childhood classroom, a musically, literacy-rich environment will generate interest, encourage creativity, and set the stage for a positive learning environment. Plato once said, "Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything" (Wordsworth Dictionary of Musical Quotations 1991, p.45).

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