Music and Language Learning

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Preface

Language development is the most complex and most remarkable achievement of our species. Understanding the specificity of perceptual skills in infancy and their contribution to subsequent cognitive, language, perceptual and motor development is the broad aim of this axis. At birth, infants exhibit a listening bias for affectively positive vocalizations, whether speech or music, which facilitates learning in these domains. Later in the developmental process, skill at discriminating, remembering, and producing sound patterns such as the intonation patterns of speech or the melodies of music are acquired.

The research focuses on understanding the developmental processes of all aspects of language (i.e., syntax, semantics, morphology, phonology, pragmatics and discourse) across multiple learner populations, especially in bilingual and second/foreign language learners throughout the life span. In the areas of music development and processing, it has been demonstrated that age of acquisition has an effect on brain structure and similar questions are being addressed related to bilingualism. A focus on brain signatures of 'nativeness' in second language acquisition have natural counterparts in the development of musical abilities focusing attention on issues related to presence, absence or differences in critical periods for language and music skill development.

To many people across the globe, music is an important part of everyday life. In addition to its cultural importance, many studies have found that music plays a key role in early language acquisition and can also help boost language learning. Neurologists have found that musical and language processing occurs in the same area of the brain, and there appear to be parallels in how musical and linguistic syntax are processed. Hence, music can be used as a promising instructional instrument in educational contexts.

Several theoretical accounts proposed that, particularly during early language acquisition, language is rather perceived as music. For example, Koelsch (2011, p. 16) hypothesized that "the human

brain, particularly at an early age, does not treat language and music as strictly separate domains, but rather treats language as a special case of music." Brandt et al. (2012, p. 5) denoted "that music has a privileged status that enables us to acquire not only the musical conventions of our native culture, but also enables us to learn our native language." In addition, music and language share a number of similarities. Both are based on acoustic information, involving a limited number of categorical elements or classes (phonemes and tones) that are organized in structured sequences according to specific regularities. These regularities are acquired using similar learning mechanisms (McMullen and Saffran, 2004). There are indicators for common evolutionary origins. Electrophysiological evidence suggests shared cognitive resources and similar underlying neural substrates for processing semantics, syntax, and prosody.

The benefits of using music as a tool for second language acquisition are extensive. First and foremost, songs teach linguistic elements, such as vocabulary, grammar and syntax. Through learning lyrics, students' vocabulary can quickly become more advanced, and singing phrases can lead to better vocabulary recall. Songs can also prove helpful in learning paralinguistic and extra linguistic elements, including accents and tones, helping to improve pronunciation and comprehension of the language.

Most importantly, music helps connect students with new cultures and opens up a whole new world, just one of the reasons why songs are an important element of teaching world languages. There are an infinite number of songs that discuss culturally relevant topics, such as human relations, ethics, customs, history and humor, as well as regional and cultural differences. These songs can help teach language and culture simultaneously.

This book has been an enquiry to shed light on the cognitive similarities between language acquisition and music learning, and the possible help that music presence can bring about regarding second/foreign language acquisition. First, the impact of music on brain's processing ability has been described, then, the role of music

at early mental development is focused on. Thirdly, music has been defined and portrayed in different cultures around the globe, then, the structural similarities of language and music have been tapped on and the possible positive impacts of employing music for language teaching and learning purposes have been elaborated.

However a sudden shift to use music for pedagogical purposes is not that easy and needs some cultural, pedagogical foundations which should be set in advance. Employing music is a cheap and theoretically promising technique for improving language teaching and learning that may soften the stressful context of classrooms and makes language learning a fun.

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Table of Contents