

A Musical Approach to Shared Reading: The Effects upon English Vocabulary Acquisition in an Arabic Environment

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Abstract

The notion of music enhancing language learning is increasingly common in the bilingual classroom. Yet, little is known about the effects of music on second language vocabulary acquisition. This article investigates the potential impact of a musical approach to Shared Reading on the English vocabulary acquisition of bilingual learners. Subjects were one hundred and fifty Grade One Arabic/English speakers, of mainly Kuwaiti nationality. Six intact classes were divided equally into two groups, Treatment and Contrast. The No-Music group subjects (Contrast) shared stories without the benefit of Music while the Music subjects (Treatment) heard a sung version of the same stories and simultaneously viewed the printed text. Quantitative results indicated statistically significant differences between the groups, having music and not having music. Implications for the use of music in Shared Reading instruction in the second language classroom are discussed and further research is recommended.

Review of Related Literature

Music and Verbal learning

Music is a powerful force that can be used to great effect in a learning setting (Bucko & Elliott, 1997). The literature abounds with positive statements regarding the efficacy of music as a vehicle for bilingual acquisition (Medina, 1990; Jensen, 1996). Although the effects of music upon English vocabulary acquisition have not been thoroughly investigated, there is empirical support for music as an aid to other forms of verbal learning.

In the psychological research, music and its subcomponent, rhythm, have been shown to benefit the rote memorization process. When various types of verbal information (e.g. multiplication tables, spelling lists) have been presented simultaneously with music, memorization has been enhanced (Douglas & Willatts, 1994; Chong & Gan, 1997). Such research on the effectiveness of music has indicated that its retentive aspects can be maximized when the targeted verbal information carries meaning (Glazner, 1976; Koppelman & Imig, 1995). Music, however, is not limited to benefiting the rote memorization process. It has proven beneficial when the objective has been to retain the meaning of verbal information (Fitzgerald, 1994). This, in fact is the case when vocabulary is acquired: It is the word's semantic properties, which must be retained in memory. Music can focus the mind on the new words and promote learning through an interactive process (Wolf, 1992).

The Incidental Acquisition of Vocabulary

The acquisition of vocabulary has been the concern of second language researchers for many years. According to Krashen, (1989) vocabulary may be acquired incidentally through sharing stories. As Nagy and Herman (1987) note, this acquisition of vocabulary takes place before the child can read and without explicit instruction of any kind. Moreover, even after the child begins school, he/she continues to acquire vocabulary, which has not been learned formally. Of the 3,000 words, which the average child acquires each year, only a portion are learned as a result of instruction received at school (Medina, 1990). Thus, Nagy and Herman have argued that the remainder of the vocabulary must be learned incidentally from a variety of sources including, but not limited to such sources as television and parents.

Krashen's input hypothesis (1989) posits that new unfamiliar vocabulary is acquired when its significance is made clear to the learner. Meaning is conveyed by providing extra linguistic support such as actions. This in turn results in what Krashen refers to as

