

Enhancing English Vocabulary Acquisition in Early Childhood through Music: A Qualitative Case Study in a Bilingual School in Brazil.

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative case study exploring the effectiveness of music-based activities in fostering English vocabulary acquisition among three-year-old learners in a Brazilian bilingual preschool. Grounded in Krashen's (1981) input and affective filter hypotheses, as well as Gardner's (1994) theory of multiple intelligences, the study investigated the impact of two structured song-based interventions implemented over a five-month period. Data were collected through classroom observations, teacher reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews with three early childhood educators. The findings suggest that the daily integration of music not only supported vocabulary retention and recall but also reduced learners' affective barriers and increased classroom engagement. Additionally, the spontaneous use of target lexical chunks during unstructured play and conversation indicated meaningful internalization. The study contributes to the growing body of research on early bilingual education by highlighting the pedagogical value of music as a developmentally appropriate and affectively supportive strategy.

Keywords: music-assisted learning; vocabulary acquisition; early childhood education; bilingual preschool; qualitative research.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, English has become the dominant global *lingua franca*, playing a crucial role in education, international communication, and the job market. As a result, the demand for early English language instruction has grown significantly, particularly in non-English-speaking countries like Brazil, where bilingual education is gaining visibility in both private and public sectors.

This rise in early English education has prompted educators and researchers to explore innovative, developmentally appropriate methods for teaching young children. Among these, music has emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool, especially suited to early childhood learners due to its rhythmic, repetitive, and emotionally engaging nature. Songs help children internalize new sounds and structures while promoting enjoyment, routine, and social connection—key factors in the language acquisition process.

Young children are naturally drawn to melody and movement, and when used intentionally, music can reduce anxiety, increase motivation, and support memory retention. These

qualities align with Krashen's (1981) theory of *comprehensible input* and his *affective filter hypothesis*, which emphasizes the importance of low-stress, meaningful input for second language acquisition. Additionally, Gardner's (1994) theory of multiple intelligences highlights the relevance of musical intelligence in early learning environments, reinforcing the value of integrating music into pedagogical strategies.

Despite the growing interest in music-based approaches to language learning, few empirical studies have investigated how structured musical routines impact vocabulary development among preschool-aged learners in bilingual settings. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how daily song-based routines influence English vocabulary acquisition among three-year-old children in a Brazilian bilingual preschool.

By shedding light on how musical experiences contribute to early language development, this research offers meaningful insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers interested in enhancing bilingual education through playful, culturally responsive, and evidence-based practices.

2. Literature Review

Current research underscores the significant cognitive and affective benefits of incorporating music into second language (L2) learning environments, particularly in early childhood settings. Krashen's (1981) *Input Hypothesis* posits that learners acquire language most effectively when exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level of competence, known as "i+1." Complementing this, his *Affective Filter Hypothesis* highlights the importance of reducing emotional barriers—such as anxiety or lack of motivation—to allow optimal language acquisition to occur.

Gardner's (1994) theory of multiple intelligences introduces the concept of *musical intelligence*, which recognizes learners' natural sensitivity to rhythm, pitch, and sound. This perspective suggests that musical activities can serve as powerful mediators in internalizing linguistic content, especially for young children who are more responsive to sensory and kinesthetic stimuli.

Empirical studies support the pedagogical value of music in L2 instruction. Murphey (1998) and Schoepp (2001), for instance, demonstrated that songs promote repetition, chunk learning, and the development of automaticity in vocabulary acquisition. Songs also offer rich, contextualized input that reinforces phonological patterns, prosody, and syntactic

structures in an engaging and memorable format. These features make music-based instruction especially relevant for preschool-aged learners, whose cognitive development is closely tied to play, movement, and affective engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the nuanced effects of music-based routines on English vocabulary acquisition in a real-life early childhood education setting. This approach was chosen to capture the richness of classroom interactions and the contextual dynamics influencing language development.

3.2 Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in a private bilingual preschool located in Belém, Brazil. Participants included two groups of three-year-old children (N = 31) enrolled in the Toddler 2 program. Additionally, three early childhood educators participated by providing complementary insights through narrative questionnaires. All participants were part of an ongoing bilingual curriculum that integrates English and Portuguese in daily instruction.

3.3 Intervention and Data Collection

Over a five-month period, two English-language songs—one focusing on emotions and the other on requesting water—were integrated into the children’s daily classroom routines. These songs were selected for their relevance to the children’s developmental stage and communicative needs. Data collection methods included researcher field notes, teacher reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews with the participating educators. Observational data were coded and thematically analyzed to identify instances of vocabulary uptake, levels of student engagement, and spontaneous use of the target language in natural classroom interactions.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed that the participating children demonstrated rapid acquisition of the target lexical chunks introduced through the musical routines, such as “*I’m happy*” and “*Do you want water? Yes, I do.*” These expressions were not only retained but also transferred to novel communicative contexts, including spontaneous use during free play and peer interactions.

Teachers consistently reported increased student enthusiasm during English language activities and a noticeable reduction in speaking-related anxiety. The use of music created a predictable and emotionally safe environment that encouraged verbal participation, even among initially reluctant speakers.

Several pedagogical elements were identified as key to the effectiveness of the intervention. Repetition embedded in the songs supported memorization and pronunciation. Gestures and facial expressions used alongside the lyrics enhanced comprehension, while visual aids—such as emotion cards and water bottles—helped scaffold meaning and contextualize the vocabulary. Collectively, these strategies contributed to the meaningful internalization of language and to the development of more confident language use among the young learners.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study align with Krashen's (1981) theoretical framework, particularly the notions of *comprehensible input* and the *affective filter hypothesis*. The music-based routines offered repeated, meaningful language input in a low-anxiety environment, which facilitated spontaneous use of English by young learners. These conditions supported the natural acquisition of vocabulary, reinforcing the idea that affective support plays a critical role in early second language development.

Furthermore, the success of the intervention can be interpreted through Gardner's (1994) concept of *musical intelligence*, which posits that some learners process information more effectively through rhythm, melody, and auditory patterns. The structured use of songs in this study appeared to activate these capacities, enabling children to internalize and retrieve lexical chunks more readily.

The combination of music, movement, and visual cues provided multimodal input that engaged multiple senses, reinforcing vocabulary acquisition through embodied learning. This supports previous research suggesting that music not only enhances retention but also promotes motivation and positive attitudes toward language learning. In this context, music served not merely as a decorative classroom element but as a central, developmentally appropriate tool for meaningful L2 learning in early childhood education.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study reinforces the potential of music-based routines as an effective and developmentally appropriate strategy for supporting English vocabulary acquisition in early childhood bilingual education. The integration of songs into daily classroom practices not only facilitated the internalization and spontaneous use of target lexical items, but also contributed to lowering affective barriers and enhancing learners' motivation and engagement.

These findings suggest that early childhood educators should consider incorporating age-appropriate songs, gestures, and visual supports into their language instruction. When thoughtfully selected and consistently applied, these elements can create meaningful learning opportunities that align with young children's cognitive and emotional development.

While the results are promising, further research is recommended to explore the long-term retention of vocabulary learned through musical interventions, as well as comparative studies across different age groups and linguistic contexts. Quantitative approaches could also complement these findings and offer a broader understanding of music's role in early language development.

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