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## Sing If You Know It: Songs With Gestures Used To Reinforce Tier-2 And Tier-3 Content Vocabulary To Early Elementary English Learners

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SING IF YOU KNOW IT:  
SONGS WITH GESTURES USED TO REINFORCE TIER-2 AND TIER-3  
CONTENT VOCABULARY TO EARLY ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LEARNERS

by Catherine C. Ragsdale

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, MN

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*I dedicate this project to my father, who was a lover of music and bad puns.*

*It is from him I get my creativity and sense of humor which I feel is my best asset in  
the classroom.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	4
Fundamental Question.....	4
Researcher Background and Interest.....	5
Statement of Purpose.....	7
Summary.....	10
Chapter Overviews.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	12
Introduction.....	12
Teaching Content Vocabulary to English Learners.....	12
Learning Units That Use Multisensory Instruction .....	14
Using Music to Teach Language Learners.....	15
The Effects Music Has On Motivation.....	20
Teachers’ Comforts and Reservations.....	21
Further Research.....	23
The Gaps in EL Instruction that Uses Music.....	25
Summary.....	25
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology and Project Description .....	27
Introduction.....	27
Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis and Multiple Intelligences.....	28

Method.....	28
Setting/ Audience.....	28
Project Description.....	29
Timeline.....	31
Summary.....	31
CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection.....	32
Introduction.....	32
Revisiting the Literature Review.....	32
Project Description.....	33
Limitations.....	35
Implications.....	36
My Growth.....	37
Concluding Remarks.....	37
REFERENCES.....	39
APPENDIX: Grammar and Vocabulary .....	46
Song Links.....	47
Brochure Link.....	47
Video Link.....	47

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **Introduction**

#### **Fundamental Question**

Everyone knows that learning a new language is difficult. It can be tedious, discouraging and at times, quite monotonous. If you are learning English, there is the added frustration in that any rule or strategy you learn can and will most likely be broken or an exception will be added. There is a myriad of ways early elementary English Learners (ELs) learn English: pre-taught vocabulary, sentence frames, interactive strategies and vocabulary thinking maps, to name a few. All learners are different of course, so it is important to have something for every style. Also, the standards require that at an early age students recognize difficult vocabulary. In a lesson, you would typically front the new vocabulary and come back to it for assessment and hope for the best.

“Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul.” Plato, [as cited in Coreil, 2002]. Using music, with a simple melody or chant with a beat, has been proven to help kids retain technical terms while also introducing the beauty of language and building solidarity in the classroom (Coreil, 2002). The use of music also lowers the “affective filter” which means that through increased motivation, heightened self-confidence and minimized anxiety, ELs are able to acquire the optimal amount of the target language

(TL) (Krashen, 1981). This chapter introduces the positive effects gained from teaching English learners higher frequency words with multiple meanings (tier-2 vocabulary) and lower frequency words that are specific to the content (tier-3 vocabulary) through song (Hutton, 2008). I will first briefly describe my interest in the subject and typical challenges language learners face while learning tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary, all along trying to answer the question, *does teaching through song really help the retention of tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary for elementary EL students?*

### **Researcher Background and Interest**

I have been singing since I was very young. I have sung in choirs, with bands and I did a lot of musical theater in high school. I play the piano and the guitar. My father, who passed away a couple years ago, played guitar while I sang and we loved to sing together. Our favorite genre to sing was Motown. This is partly why this project is near and dear to my heart. Music was a bond we had. I still hear the Jackson Five on the radio and think fondly of how we used to get lost in a song. Anyone would agree that music is inspiring and brings people together.

I have a ten-month old nephew who can be fussy at times. However, he always calms down when music is playing or he is sung too. He especially likes a clip from *Sesame Street* that features a violinist serenading Big Bird. He is immediately entranced. It is my sister's best tool.

I have done a little professional singing as well, including singing on a couple of

commercials. I have only been teaching for four years, but I do like to incorporate music into my teaching as much as I can. In my first year of teaching, I worked in a high school. Because the kids were older, getting them to sing along with me was a little difficult. However, they loved it when I sang and they could do a *cloze* activity, that is, fill in the blanks of song lyrics. It was at this time in my career I realized I wanted to incorporate music into my teaching, in some shape or form. Although time doesn't always allow for it, as a teacher is trying to teach to all the standards, as well as differentiate for all students' needs, not to mention prepare the students the best they can for all the tests they need to take.

When I student-taught I also did a cloze lesson with a secondary, Somali newcomer class. The song I used was a pop song, by Rihanna. The students loved it. They were singing it all week. My supervisor observed the activity and she said that this would be my extra thing I could bring to teaching. I knew I wanted to use it, but was not sure how. I know it is great for engagement and, as I have recently learned, for retention as well.

When I started teaching elementary at the school I am at now, it was a turnaround school. This means it was underperforming and underwent a complete transformation that included virtually all new staff. I remember thinking prior to working there, that after teaching high school, elementary kids were going to be so easy. I was in for a rude awakening. Most of our students are impoverished, and some live in utter chaos and have



very little support. The school had lacked structure for some time and had seen a lot of turnover of teachers and administration. A lot of classes, including the ones I worked in, were essentially out of control. I had to learn quickly how to gain control of a class. For a while, there was very little teaching happening and a lot of diffusing behaviors and building relationships.

I sang a song to the kids one day to introduce our sound unit for science. The kids were immediately intrigued and kept their focus. I was wondering why I did not pull this out sooner. I have written some simple songs for my students to learn the first-grade content. I started with a simple song about families for my lower proficiency, pull-out group. *“I have a mother and a father and a sister and a brother, I have a grandma too, I have an aunt and an uncle and whole lot of cousins, how about you?”* It was engaging and helped the kids learn the familial vocabulary. I wanted to take it to the next level; I added guitar and a more intricate melody.

I began writing little songs to meet the content standards, one was for a science lesson: rock properties. Then I wrote a song about friends, which we ended up performing for the talent show. It was well received and I had the confidence I needed to keep at it. I knew that I wanted to teach with song.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The content vocabulary that early elementary students have to learn is heavy. There is a lot of high frequency and multiple meaning tier-2 and content specific tier-3 vocabulary that first graders are expected to master. Some examples include: organism,

luster, miniscule, metallic, silt and fjord. These may be difficult for native speakers, let alone ELs.

To align to the Minnesota State standards, early elementary students also have to master a number of concepts, including how to make a prediction and an observation. They also must use descriptive language. They need to know how to use a map and distinguish between different landforms (taken from the Minnesota State Standards from the Minnesota Department of Education, MDE 2010). Music has been proven to be incredibly helpful when used to teach vocabulary (Coreil, 2002).

Some researchers, including Romero (2012) have claimed that using music helps lower the affective filter, “showing confidence motivation when singing, teamwork to overcome fears, a non-threatening environment” (p.16). These researchers state that music offers a fun different way to learn English that adheres to multiple learning styles and helps with retention (Guglielmino, 1986). “It has been demonstrated that music is a trigger that improves academic skills such as vocabulary and grammar, and also develops linguistic abilities” (Jalongo & Bromley, 1984). There is no question that music is immensely helpful when paired with teaching vocabulary. However, I have searched for lessons with music aligned to the topics early elementary students need to learn and did not have great results.

That is not to say there are not a number of resources to teach English learners through music. There are many song books to teach English grammar structure, pronunciation and basic vocabulary. The majority of the songs used have simple tunes or

use well-known melodies, such as *Frere Jacques*. Of course, there are stipulations to bear in mind when preparing songs to teach English. For example, Guglielmino (1986) notes, “It is important to carefully select the songs and be sure that the lyrics are not inappropriate in conversation or that the song doesn’t contain irregular sentence patterns” (p. 20).

There are copious amounts of resources I have found specifically for high school students and adults of very low proficiency. There are also some for teaching basic vocabulary. However, I did not find a lot of resources for early elementary ELs.

I found a number of resources for teaching reading through music. These songs hit on specific reading strategies, which can be very useful. That being said, they are limited when it comes to teaching tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary.

I cried in front of my students when my father passed away a couple years ago. Their reaction was unforgettable. They were fascinated, because it was real, and coming from a person who is supposed to be authoritative and tough. They know people feel emotion, and the often do themselves, they just may not understand it completely. I taught a family song with minor chords and a little bit of a sad melody. The students loved to sing it. I do not think that because they are early elementary students they need to only sing upbeat, baby songs. They need to be given more credit for what they can understand and appreciate.

In my experience, children want to sing songs that sound like songs they would hear on the radio; that is, more catchy and complex. This makes them their own, adds to

engagement and helps even more with retention. Asher (1993) notes, “There must be an image attached to the mental representation of a word in order to retain it and use it” (as cited in Coreil, 2002 p. 102).

Of course, teaching vocabulary with music is not without its critics.

Teachers are not always comfortable using music. This can be because of intimidation and lack of confidence in their musical ability. I have noticed this to some extent in my experience. Another big roadblock is time. There is so much material teachers need to get through and so many new resources they are given that teachers often need to pick and choose what to use and what to leave out (Coreil, 2002). Using music is not natural for all teachers and not thought of as something that can be intertwined into the curriculum effortlessly. Several teachers think it takes excessive planning and is better suited for an enrichment activity (Coreil, 2002).

### **Summary**

Early elementary students are expected to master a lot of difficult technical vocabulary. This can pose obvious problems for language learners. Using music when teaching English learners can lower the affective filter by building confidence and motivation, while minimizing anxiety (Krashen, 1989). Also, singing together in the classroom creates solidarity among the students (Coreil, 2002).

Although music has been proven incredibly useful in education, it can be thought of as a burden or an extra task. Teachers can be intimidated and avoid using it, because

the resources are not accessible (Coreil, 2002.) There is a need for songs which are teacher-friendly and equips early elementary ELs with the content vocabulary they need to flourish in school. A sound curriculum would also provide gestures to go with the songs. This would offer a break from the usual lesson. Music is all encompassing and brings people together from all backgrounds. It has been demonstrated to be helpful with retention and according to Graham (2001) can also cause words to get “stuck in our heads” (p. vii).

### **Chapter Overviews**

In chapter one I introduced my research topic and the reason for the project. I included my own experiences and biases linked to the topic. The background of the researcher was also provided. In the second chapter I will provide a literature review relevant to teaching tier-2 and tier-3 content vocabulary to early elementary students through song. Chapter three includes a description of the project and resources. Chapter four will offer a reflection of my project: its triumphs as well as its pitfalls.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

“Music trains the brain for higher-order of thinking” (Coreil, 2002). As stated earlier, because of the content standards, early elementary students are obligated to retain complex vocabulary. This can undeniably present difficulties for ELs. Music has been proven to alleviate some of these frustrations by providing an alternative way to learn vocabulary as well as lower the EL’s affective filter (Coreil, 2002). *Can music help early elementary ELs learn and retain complex tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary?*

In this chapter, the challenges of teaching content vocabulary to ELs and methods that teachers have used to combat them, will be explored. The positive effects of teaching through multi-sensory instruction including specifically using music, will be looked at. Then it will get into the role music has played on language learners receptive skills (reading) and productive skills (speaking). After that, it will touch on the effects music has on ELs’ motivation and confidence and then explore the reservations teachers have had with teaching through song. Lastly, the gaps in teaching content vocabulary through song will be noted, as well as an overview of the project.

#### **Teaching Content Vocabulary to English Learners**

Teaching content vocabulary to ELs is difficult in that it is necessary to build a base in order for students to be able to adequately access the content. This means students

must have a basic understanding of the grammar structures and cohesive ties surrounding the content vocabulary in order to be able to master the content vocabulary. This is known as the bricks (vocabulary) and mortar (grammar) (Rothenberg, 2007, p. 200). In the content areas, vocabulary alone can be especially difficult for ELs.

It should be noted that there is a correlation between socioeconomic status and vocabulary acquisition. Hart (2003) concluded that children who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds acquire significantly less vocabulary words than children from upper class families (Hart, 2003).

### **Teaching Math Vocabulary to English Learners**

It is a misconception that math is a “universal language” because students are still introduced to difficult concepts about math that can be hard for ELs (Rothenberg, 2007). Some terms include: power, degree, domain, root and volume. These can be difficult not only because they are unfamiliar to ELs but they have multiple meanings depending on the context (Steinhardt, 2009). Greenleaf (1997) understands this and created a unit to teach measurement terminology to ELs. Greenleaf asserts the importance of slowly introducing vocabulary aligned to the lesson and has the students use it in conversation (1997). Greenleaf believes the vocabulary should be frontloaded and uses it as a backdrop to teach the unit. Greenleaf gives the students examples of the content words, which are the units for measuring weight: pounds, grams, and kilograms (1997).

### **Teaching Science Vocabulary to English Learners**

In science specifically, the vocabulary load is immense in that students are asked

to discuss the “how’s” and the “why’s” of the world around us (Rothenberg, 2007). Rothenberg maintains that complex words lead to complex ideas, which may make them significantly harder for ELs (2007). Pray and Monhardt (2009) proposed a sequence they deemed necessary for the optimal acquisition of science terminology by ELs as follows: decide on the appropriate skills and concepts the students need, narrow down specific activities, be sure to include the students' background knowledge, and appropriately assess student learning (Tissington, 2010). All students need prior knowledge and assessment; that’s a given. However, Pray and Monhardt suggest providing “stimulating environments” such as oceans, swamps or parks in science instruction to enhance learning (2009). This could be very beneficial for ELs in that they are getting to experience the concepts first hand.

### **Learning Units That Use Multisensory Instruction to Teach English Learners**

Tissington among others, believes that it is necessary for ELs to be taught content in a variety of ways, including kinesthetically (2010). In a mixed-methods study, D’Alesio (2007) found that the students lacked comprehension and better vocabulary instruction. D’Alesio first took a survey on the most popular vocabulary strategies that students use, including sounding out, chunking, using a picture and using context clues (2007). The kids were then taught vocabulary through various methods including using graphic organizers, music and movement. The color of the vocabulary lists was carefully planned. Graphs were used to measure students perceived understanding of words and their actual understanding. Interestingly, after the treatment, the students said they were



more comfortable creating a picture in their mind rather than using context clues (D'Alesio, 2007).

James Asher is the founder of Total Physical Response, (TPR) which are gestures used to reinforce vocabulary words. Asher (1993) states, "no learning happens until there is a brain switch from the left to the right" (Coreil, 2002, p. 102). This means that as important as the analytical (left brain) is, the learner must also be given the freedom to express emotion and metaphor (right brain.) If this is true, then multisensory instruction would be a necessity in language acquisition, regardless of the student's learning style.

Maiullo (2016) also uses the multisensory approach when teaching language in the classroom. He asserts that movement to music comes naturally to most learners. Maiullo also states that family members universally take on certain characteristics that can be mimicked physically. For example, a little girl skipping and an old man crouching. Maiullo recommends pairing these actions with music and has seen great success in doing so (2016).

### **Using Music to Teach Language Learners**

"It has been demonstrated that music is a trigger that improves academic skills such as vocabulary and grammar, and also develops linguistic abilities" (Jalongo & Bromley, 1984, p.144). It is not surprising that music can help with retention, and that it is often useful in education. Teachers in all areas, not specifically EL, use music in their lessons to increase engagement and offer it as another way to learn (Gardner, 1983).

### **Using Music to Teach Reading**

It has been said that early music training can help enhance a child's ability to reason (Coreil, 2002). The first language uses tones or baby coos to communicate, which sets the stage for building morphemes and phonemes (Coreil, 2002). Nordin (2016) states that the interest in the text that the student is reading is crucial, claiming that without it, the student will have no desire to read at all.

Often the default method is to “water-down” the text to make it more accessible to ELs. While it is imperative that the text is simplified for ELs, it is important to not take away from the richness of the text (Rothenberg, 2007). Second language acquisition (SLA) can work similarly in that students are building a base. Newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with no experience in the target language (TL) need to build their social and academic language simultaneously in order to be on par with their grade level peers (Herrera & Murry, 2011). It is important that the texts that ELs are learning or being taught from are relevant and connected to other lessons (Rothenberg, 2007). Also, it is important that the reading is meticulously modeled by the teacher and read with expression in their voice (Rothenberg, 2007).

Music can be an optimal resource in teaching reading to English learners. Many experts agree that combining music and reading can not only help with reading skills, but can assist students in recognizing multiple modalities in different discourses (Soto, 2011). Some scholars have paired music with reading, claiming that it is simply another asset that aids with phonemic awareness and may ignite rapid decoding skills (Standley, 2008).

Many scholars believe that the musical preference of ELs and carefully selected

texts that match the students' interest, can accelerate gains in reading (Nordin, 2016). Nordin also states that if the interest in content is high, the student will be able to read beyond their level. The reverse is also true: if the interest is low, the student may struggle with the text (2016).

### **Using Music to Practice Speaking**

In addition to aiding in reading, music has been proven to be helpful in ELs' productive skills, specifically in speaking. Perez (2010) asserted he wanted to teach his kids in a "funny" way, and he said he could do this by using music. He went on to say that if you make the class funnier you can get the kids to learn anything you want (Perez, 2010). While kids are wired to hear music and rhythm, not everyone is comfortable breaking out into song, especially adolescents. It is safe to assume that there are some students that may not like to participate in the singing and may prefer to learn in a more conventional way. It is always important to keep all learners in mind. For example, there was a study that included a group of sixth graders, which incorporated music into the lesson to practice conversation. One student, who was thought of as "high achieving" particularly did not like this method because it was unpredictable and strayed too much from the normal routine (Duarte-Romero, 2012).

Duarte composed a study using well-known songs to encourage sixth graders to speak English. Duarte affirms that music can help kids talk with confidence (2012). Before Duarte started the experiment, the teacher hand-picked a number of students with different abilities and personalities, such as "smart," "high achieving," "lazy" and

“naughty.” The author’s descriptions of these students are quite vague. One would think you could be both naughty and lazy or a mixture of a few of these qualities. It seems it would be hard to quantify the data when the profiles of the students are so arbitrary. The researcher did not go into detail about how the students performed in English. Rothenberg agrees that this is an essential piece when assessing language learners. One may say this could have helped paint a better picture of each participant prior to the study (2007).

Duarte maintained that the pronunciation of her Spanish speakers improved significantly after listening to music in English. It begs the question whether this would be true for all first languages (L1s) and not just Spanish. Spanish shares many of the same Latin roots as English. It may have strengthened the claim if students with other L1s’ successes were evaluated after listening to the English music as well.

**Using music to teach pronunciation.** Graham (2001) developed a book of *Jazz Chants* to help English learners acquire correct pronunciation and grammar structures. Graham calls rhythm the *glue* that holds the language together (2001). Graham not only includes several chants, but the grammar rules that they teach and the phonic rules they incorporate as well. For example, the /z/ sound is pulled out in “Take Off Your Shoes” (p. 8).

Language teachers still use the books today and are in agreement that chants are immensely helpful in language learning, as they have been proven very successful (Meads, 1999). It should be noted that this book is a bit dated and may not be as

appealing to a younger group. New lessons with chants are being introduced in mainstream curriculums and have been well received and celebrated by teachers in heterogeneous classes, including Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) (Deussen, 2014).

**Using music to teach stress on syllables.** Fischler (2004) said rap music is a vehicle to teach patterns of stress placement to ELs. In her book, *Stress Rulz* Fischler states that the rationale for teaching stress is that misplaced stress has a bigger impact on intelligibility than the mispronunciation of vowels and consonants (2004). Many ELs have a first language (L1) that is syllable-timed, while English is stress-timed. This can cause students to be unintelligible. Many language teachers agree on the importance of teaching stress and rhythm. Another important language piece that can be taught with music, is reduction, meaning the authentic speech that native speakers use naturally in conversation. Some examples include: “haveta” in the place of “have to” or “dunno” in the place of “don’t know.” Guglielmino (1986) understands the importance of her English learners being able to recognize reduced speech, as it is very prevalent in English, including in the phrase “I’m gonna” (1986). However, Guglielmino also believes that there should be stipulations when picking songs for English instruction. That means the melody is easy, only standard English is used, it is aligned to the reading and includes lots of repetition (Guglielmino, 1986). Guglielmino goes on to say that you should not use songs that are inappropriate for conversation or that contain irregular sentence patterns. While the rationale for this is understandable, i.e., not wanting these patterns to

be fossilized by the students, some argue it may not actually hurt the students' English. It may be appropriate and important for children to be exposed to different forms of English, including those associated with colloquial or causal usage, because they are all used frequently in conversation. This assures a more robust, well-rounded understanding of the TL and target culture (Graham, 2001).

Not only can text preference assist in engaging language learners but so can music preference (Gosselin, 2015). A study showed that Chinese college students preferred music in the languages that were closest to their own. English, of course, was one of them (Gosselin, 2015).

### **The Effects Music has on the Motivation and Confidence of ELs**

In addition to assisting with language learners' productive and receptive skills, it has been shown that music can increase motivation and confidence. According to Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, language learners need to be highly motivated, confident and have low anxiety. If these three needs are not met, the learner's emotional state can act as a filter for language acquisition and keep the student from accessing input (Krashen, 1989).

Many experts agree that music can lower the affective filter by easing anxiety while increasing motivation and confidence (Krashen, 1989). One teacher built a unit around the idea that using music formed a nest in the classroom, that is, created a safe space for ELs who felt confident (Coreil, 2002). In addition to keeping Krashen's affective filter hypothesis in mind when developing their unit, Coreil also included the

theories from Krashen's input hypothesis:  $I+1$ . This theory states that students should be taught at their level and a little above in order to be pushed to reach their maximum potential (Krashen, 1989). In doing this, Coreil believes the students are taking risks and pushing themselves to reach the next level of competency (Coreil, 2002).

Duarte-Romero (2012) agrees that using music lowers the affective filter. It is stated that the sixth-grade Spanish speaking students were able to remember the pronunciation that was first modeled in the song, which made them more confident when reciting it (p.17). Fischler (2004) shares this opinion, in believing that learning is optimized by the solidarity gained by using rap in class, and lowering the affective filter (p. 2).

Bartle, Moi, Murphy and Murphy (Edwards, 1997) claim that popular music can lower the affective filter because it usually contains simple, effective language. Low anxiety is proven to be conducive to SLA whether the anxiety is from the classroom or if it is personal (Budden, 2015).

Another study used the multiple intelligences theory as a theoretical framework and rationale for integrating music into a math unit (Capraro, 2011). Gardner claims that through multiple intelligences students can access learning in different ways, including: musically, spatially and kinesthetically (Capraro, 2011). It was concluded that using music had given pre-service teachers a positive attitude about teaching mathematics (Capraro, 2011).

### **Teachers Comforts and Reservations Around Incorporating Music in Teaching**

Mainstream teachers have caught on that music is helpful in education overall, not only when teaching English learners. Vocabulary, especially, is easily taught, reinforced and expanded through song (Guglielmino, 1986). Neurologically speaking, the right brain is said to be used for melody, while the left houses the lyrics of the song. Music acts as a bridge for the two and may be more accessible for students who primarily use their right brain (Guglielmino, 1986).

There is an abundance of resources for teachers to teach vocabulary, grammar structures and basic concepts through song and rhyme. That being said, not all experiences that teachers have had with using music have been positive. Several teachers have said there are so many standards to get through that there simply is not time to include music (Lin, 2013). However, the same teachers agreed that with the little integration of music they have done, they could see the positive effects it had on teaching phonological awareness and grammar (Lin, 2013). Also, teachers who are not musical, or are overwhelmed with having to cover the standards or prepare for state tests, may not see the value or need for music in their instruction. Harbon (2008) stated that the Chinese students she worked with were taught that education should follow the traditional, teacher-centered, authoritarian model. Also, in Chinese culture, education is highly valued, as Confucius believed to achieve the highest purpose of life is through a personal commitment to learning (Harbon, 2008). That being said, Harbon challenged the students to get in touch with their emotions while learning through music. Harbon said it was very successful and well received by the students (Harbon, 2008).



### Further Research

Music is an obvious choice in that it mitigates some of these issues when teaching ELs. Music and language are found in the same part of the brain (Lin, 2013). Lin also believes that the recurring pop beat in music helps students develop their own internal timing of the language (2013).

One study looked specifically at the effects of having Japanese adult English learners listen to western classic music (Chambers, 2014). Interestingly, the researcher learned that just having the students exposed to the classical music helped with their conversational English. This puts another spin on the theory that *music helps with EL* because now lyrics have been taken out of the equation completely (Chambers, 2014).

Even when considering the reverse case, that is, English speakers learning a foreign language that is taught through music, the effects have been proven to be positive (Failoni, 1993). In a study conducted by Failoni (1993) it was found that the students were not only able to learn about the country's history and culture through the music but all four language modalities, that is, speaking, listening, reading and writing. The importance of Gardner's multiple intelligence theory was also underscored by Failoni, in that if someone can master musical intelligence, it can be transferred to other areas (Failoni,1993).

Another mixed-methods study assessed how well music helped Peruvian elementary students acquire motivation to learn English. The music used in this study

also helped the students gain a better familiarity with the target culture (Aguierre, Bustinza & Garvich, 2016). The authors stated that multiple skills were acquired by using music, including the retention of information, involuntary mental exercise, grammar and pronunciation (Aguierre et al., 2016). Additionally, music may cause learning to become more automatic and unconscious.

Another study examined Taiwanese adult ELs that were asked to listen to songs, read their lyrics, look up definitions of the words and study their meanings (Beasley & Chuang, 2005). Their age, gender, academic standing and English proficiency were all taken into account. The researchers alluded to the fact that using music alone does not really affect the learning of English. This claim is not fully justifiable based on this specific study, because the study only looked at using music and using music and lyric reading. Between the two, of course, the latter would yield more successful results. However, including a control group that was not using any music would have strengthened the claim.

Another study was more comprehensive; it looked at the effects of singing paired with receptive vocabulary skills for elementary ELs (Schunk, 1999). Schunk used three groups for the study. One group used sung text paired with signs, another group used sung text only and the last group, (control group) used spoken text only. Predictably, both of the groups with sung texts helped increase vocabulary retention, with the the group using signs being even more so (Schunk, 1999). This further helps support the claim that TPR is an effective tool when teaching English.

### **The Gaps in EL Instruction That Uses Music**

As the above discussion indicates, there is no question that music helps with retention, lowers the affective filter and enhances language learning. There are limited resources for teachers to teach content vocabulary through song to early elementary students, even though it has been proven incredibly successful. It has been stated that simplicity and not having a melody too complicated is important because it can take away from the focus of learning the vocabulary. However, children also want to sing songs that have intricate melodies and high and low notes. It makes the students feel proud that they can sing more challenging songs and such songs get stuck in their heads. They can be songs that they sing specifically for science time; their own songs. Music can also be used intermittently to reinforce something being taught. It does not need to be a stand-alone lesson.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the many ways researchers, linguists and language teachers have found music to be an effective teaching tool was explored. The tier-2 and tier-3 content language that early elementary students need to master was examined and how music can assist with that. Other multisensory learning tools in the classroom were reviewed, including the musical preferences of students and how this may affect their learning. The effects of using music in SLA were noted and a careful review of the benefits of using music to teach oral language as well as reading were provided. In addition, multiple studies that claimed music paired with teaching English can lower the affective filter,

were explored. The importance of the multiple intelligence theory was reiterated and the reservations some teachers have with teaching through music were also considered.

In the next chapter, first the the need for learning units that offer songs for early elementary students that teach tier-2 and tier-3 content vocabulary, will be reiterated. Then there will be details about the students the project is based on and a preview of the songs that will be created. There will also be the research paradigm that was used to create the project described in the chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Methodology and Project Description

#### Introduction

The overarching question I am investigating is as follows: *does teaching through song really help the retention of tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary for elementary EL students?*

I have a Spanish speaking class that I push into to teach EL. There is a huge range of students, from newcomer all the way to World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) level 4. I do a bit of translating for the students who are just being exposed to English for the first time. At times, I have trouble keeping their attention, as their English is so limited. I use lots of visuals, modeling and interactive activities in my teaching. However, the only time I really was able to get total buy-in from my newcomers was when I taught a song with gestures. One day, when I was reviewing science vocabulary, I used a motion to simulate tentacles on a snail (arms extended with balled up fists, rotating). Immediately, one of the newcomers, who never speaks up, shouted out “tens-u-cul!” Both the classroom teacher and I were elated. I have another student who is often withdrawn, but whenever we use actions and sing, her face lights up. I have also heard the students singing the songs in the hallway. My first-hand experience with multi-sensory approaches leads me to believe that these methods truly work.

In this chapter, I will include the research paradigm and the rationale for using it in this project. I will also include the method I am using to create and to teach the songs. A detailed description of the intended audience will follow, along with the timeline.

Finally, the project will be reviewed in detail.

### **Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Multiple Intelligences**

Based on the research outlined above, in particular Krashen's affective-filter hypothesis which states that language learners need to have low anxiety, high motivation and self-confidence in order to reach optimal acquisition of the target language, I have concluded that using music to tackle the tier-2 and tier-3 content vocabulary for early elementary students, is a sound approach (Krashen, 1981). I also included Gardner's multiple intelligences theory in my reasoning, which states that there is a myriad of ways intelligence can be measured including musically, showing sensitivity to sound and rhythm and being taught through music (Gardner, 1983). The research summarized in chapter two suggests that even if the learner is more traditional and is used to conventional instruction, they can still benefit from being taught with music in some way.

### **Method**

This project will take the form of songs, which are intended to supplement the content curriculum and to be taught intermittently. It will include downloadable songs that the kids can sing along to. It will have a TPR element (Asher, 1993) and a brochure for teachers, which models the gestures that they can teach the kids to nail down specific vocabulary words. Lastly, it will include a short video of how the gestures can be used with the songs.

### **Setting/Audience**

The teachers this unit is intended for are early elementary teachers who have ELs

(specifically 1<sup>st</sup> grade) with a wide range of language abilities. The students I work with are mostly Spanish speaking but also include other L1 groups such as, Somali, Oromo and Mandarin. The students' WIDA levels are 1-5. The school is an urban K-5 elementary school in South Minneapolis. The school is 99% free and reduced lunch with a huge EL population of about 68%. One of the first-grade classes is a Dual Developmental Language (DDL) class taught mostly in Spanish while science and social studies are taught in English. The other two classes are taught all day in English and include students with L1s other than Spanish.

The concepts in my project are general enough that they can be used across districts, even if the science curriculum is not exactly the same. The learning unit reinforces the tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary by teaching it to the students through songs and gestures.

### **Project Description**

The songs are intended to be taught intermittently in order to reinforce academic language that the students need to know to access the content. They do not have to follow a particular order but should be implemented at the teacher's discretion of the appropriate time to enhance learning. For instance, all students will need to know how to distinguish between the past, present and future and use the appropriate tenses. The *Past Present and Future* song is a good hook and closure to a lesson during a unit teaching the vocabulary having to do with time. *In the PAST, I was a baby..in the PRESENT I am in school...in the FUTURE I will do anything I want to!* They first learn the academic language: *Past,*

*present and future* while using the corresponding gestures and the correct grammar. The students that have gaps in English will still be able to participate in this at the beginning and end of class, using the new words, making the gestures and will be able to recognize the words “past” “present” and “future” receptively.

The *Past Present and Future* song is something the teacher can open or close with throughout the unit to reinforce the vocabulary. I believe it is mundane to only have the students repeat sentences and, in my experience, doing so does not reach every kid. Because EL is taught all in English, the students who have low proficiency tend to tune out. The songs and gestures draw those kids back in.

Another example of a way to implement a song into teaching the content vocabulary is when teaching rock properties in science. Again, all students need to learn how to list properties. Right after teaching the new words: texture, rough and smooth, the song can be taught that reinforces the vocab. *What’s the texture of your rock? What’s the texture of your r-o-o-o-o c-k, r-o-o-o-o c-k?* The kids can stand up and do the gestures with the song. *My rock is smooth, my rock is rough.*

In the first grade at my school, each class has 18 kids. One has lower English learners (WIDA levels 2/3 ) and one has higher students (WIDA levels 4/5). Neither of these classes have newcomers. A simple way this learning unit can be assessed is by teaching the unit using the songs and gestures to one class, while omitting the extra multisensory tools with the other class. I think it is important to include multiple levels of students in both groups for a fair comparison.



At the end, one could check for understanding of the vocabulary and see which class was able to master the vocabulary. This could be assessed by doing check-ins with the students.

### **Timeline**

I plan to first review the first-grade Minnesota State science and social studies standards as well as Minnesota English Language Development (ELD) standards and decide on the best topics and concepts to include. I have already written some of the songs and will continue to add to them to best align them to meet the standards. I will begin working on a brochure that includes the gestures that go with the songs and how to best teach them. I will then record my songs so they are downloadable and accessible to teachers. I will also include a video of how to teach the gestures with the songs.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I described my project idea, the intended audience, the method used and a typical timeline. The songs and brochure will hopefully be accessible to all teachers of early elementary students as they are self-explanatory and cover topics that all students must master as they go through school. The next chapter will be a reflection of how I intend to complete the project and answer the question, *does teaching through song really help the retention of tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary for elementary EL students?*

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **Reflection**

#### **Introduction**

*Does teaching through song help the retention of tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary for elementary EL students?* As I have explored in my literature review and demonstrated when teaching the songs to my students, music is an invaluable tool in teaching language learners. The combination of visuals, gestures and songs help the ELs and native speakers nail down the tough vocabulary they need to master. Not only are these strategies useful for retention, but they are highly engaging and accessible to all teachers.

In this chapter I will revisit the research that helped me build the framework for my project. I will also give a detailed description of the project and discuss the implications and limitations. Last, I will discuss my future goals and how this project can be replicated or expanded by others.

#### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

I found a plethora of useful resources for teaching ELs through song. Including a number of unit plans, curricula and song books that experts have deemed useful for teaching ELs through music. One I found particularly conducive to language learning was the Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) (Deussen, 2014). I have seen these strategies implemented at my school and have found them very useful, specifically the chants. I also frequently utilize GLAD's 10/2 model, that is, ten minutes of teacher

talk, and two minutes to allow students to process (Deussen, 2014). Also, although a bit dated, I found Graham's *Jazz Chants* to be a great supplement to teaching ELs as well. Before each chant, Graham specified exactly which language function and grammar rule the chant was reinforcing (Graham, 2001). I followed a similar scheme to write my songs, intentionally reinforcing the grammar rules ELs need to master to be proficient and intelligible in English.

I have also taken into account Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis which states that if English learners have low anxiety along with high motivation and self-confidence, they can reach optimal language acquisition (Krashen, 1989).

Coreil (2002) states that music has a way of creating solidarity in the classroom and engages all learners. Because the majority of my students are Spanish speakers, I decided to have a couple verses of "I Love My Family" in Spanish, to help the students' feel comfort by using their L1.

Gardner's multiple intelligences theory was also utilized when composing my project. It is stated that students can display multiple forms of intelligences including spatial and kinesthetic (Capraro, 2011). I have also noted the reservations teachers have when teaching through song, including time management and intimidation (Lin, 2013). This is why I have tried my best to make my songs accessible to all teachers.

### **Project Description**

This project includes four downloadable song files, that I composed and recorded, which are aligned to MN early elementary content standards, specifically first grade. The

songs reinforce the tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary that students need to master to be successful in school. There is one song specifically for newcomers, “I Love my Family,” which familiarizes students with familial words. This song also has lyrics in Spanish. There is a song “My Rock,” that teaches descriptive language including words about size, luster and texture. In “Past, Present and Future,” as the name suggests the students are introduced to the vocabulary having to do with time and using tense appropriately. The final song, “I Wanna Be a Frog,” goes through the life cycle of a frog. All of these songs (except for the family song) include corresponding gestures that reinforce the vocabulary.

I included a brochure that goes with the songs, which gives a general rationale for teaching music and gestures to ELs. It also has a page for each song with lyrics and photographs of me acting out the appropriate gestures.

I also included a page of additional resources for teachers who would like to find more ways to use music as a vehicle to teach ELs. These are resources I have found incredibly useful and effective in teaching ELs. *Jazz Chants* is one of the resources I included in the brochure. I was introduced to *Jazz Chants* by my professor. I also used some of the chants in a pullout group my first and second year teaching. The students thought they were really fun and I saw incredible growth in their fluency and confidence when speaking. Another resource I included for teachers is Guided Language Acquisition Design Strategies (GLAD). GLAD offers an array of useful techniques to support ELs in the mainstream classroom. At the school I work at now, we use these strategies consistently so that all students can access the content. These strategies include: the ratio

of teacher/student talk, chants to use for classroom management and ideas for intricate anchor charts aligned to the subject matter. The last resource I included was *Stress Rulz*, a book with raps that help ELs perfect their pronunciation. The first year I taught, I worked with the author of this book and saw it used first hand. The students were incredibly engaged and always requested to do the raps. I still use one of them in particular, pretty regularly to distinguish between numbers, for example: sixTEEN vs. SIXty.

In addition to that, I included a short video that shows how to teach the gestures in the songs, as it is difficult to accurately represent a motion with a photograph.

### **Limitations**

As I completed my project I realized that there were a few setbacks. First, not all of the vocabulary was on the same level. There was quite a range. Some of the words I am reinforcing in my songs are way more basic and more appropriate for newcomers (i.e. mother, father, etc.) While others, (i.e. luster, miniscule, etc.) can be taught to all students, including native speakers of English. That being said, the teacher would need to use discretion when deciding what to teach. I also discovered that not all songs work with using gestures. For example, it is easy to make a gesture for a word that describes size, like “miniscule,” while it is harder to do that with family words, like “sister” or “cousin.” That being said, there are some songs (specifically, “I Love My Family”) that do not have the added support of gestures. The teacher may decide to add actions to these

words. Another thing that I realized while completing this project is that the songs may not be suitable for older students. They may find the songs and actions childish.

### **Implications**

*So, does teaching through song help the retention of tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary for elementary EL students?* I pondered this while I completed my project and found that incorporating song and actions into teaching English has positive effects for all early elementary students. The students do not have to be musically inclined to get the benefits from learning through song. Using my songs with the gestures as a supplement to teaching English, helps the students gain confidence, decreases their anxiety and increases motivation (Krashen, 1989). Using actions is incredibly helpful with retention of vocabulary, as Asher (1993) has proven and I have witnessed with my students.

Teachers need to feel comfortable when using music so that they can realistically implement it. Most teachers have seen the benefits but still have reservations as it can be intimidating for someone who is not musically inclined (Lin, 2013). I feel the song tracks, brochure and video will alleviate some of these preoccupations, as they lay out how to use the resources.

I think it is also important to note that even though I have experience singing and may be more comfortable creating songs, anyone can do it. The most important piece is that the song or chant is something the students can remember and reinforces the vocabulary. The melody or complexity of the song is not important at all. I've seen teachers make them up on the spot and they were very successful.

If I were to explore a different aspect of this idea I may ask *what supports do teachers need to appropriately use music as a teaching tool?* I would be interested in surveying teachers and asking them what their biggest reservations are with intertwining music into teaching and what could be used to alleviate this.

### **My Growth**

I have grown a lot while completing this project. I have explored many different theories and projects aligned to teaching English learners through music. I would like to continue to write songs for English learners and maybe include a piece of how students could take a part in the song writing. I would also like to tailor some songs to older students. If someone else were to do a similar project, I would suggest they gear it towards higher grades and more proficient speakers. Someone could peruse the standards for the specific grade and come up with appropriate songs and chants.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Teaching tier-2 and tier-3 vocabulary through song and gestures is incredibly beneficial for language learners. It increases retention, keeps students engaged and is something all teachers can implement into their instruction.

The Hamline School of Education Conceptual Framework includes a few bullets that are relevant to my project and teaching. One is: *Building Communities of Teachers and Learners*, specifically “creating physically and psychologically welcoming environments that foster self-worth.” I feel that using songs and gestures as a way of teaching ELs provides a welcoming environment for all learners, where they feel

comfortable and confident. Or, as Coreil (2002) so eloquently put it, “it creates a nest in the classroom.”

Additionally the framework includes *Promoting Equity in Schools and Society*, specifically, “utilizing social and cultural backgrounds and a variety of ways individuals learn to enhance teaching and learning.” I feel that in using a multisensory approach, I am adhering to multiple learning styles. I hope that teachers can implement these songs into their teaching and in turn spark creativity and passion for learning language in their students and in themselves.



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## APPENDIX

**Grammar and Vocabulary****Your Rock**

Descriptive language: luster, sparkly, dull, shiny, metallic, size, miniscule, huge, tiny,  
texture, rough, smooth, bumpy,  
Pronouns, wh-questions, contractions, articles, copula to be, present tense, comparatives

**Past, Present and Future**

simple past tense, simple present tense, future tense, modals

**I Wanna Be a Frog**

Life cycle of a frog, sequencing words, contractions, reduced speech

**I Love My Family**

familial vocabulary, conjunctions (and /but), present tense copula (to be)



## Links

### **My Rock**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6FDeU8612QLUDY5T3JpbVAwVWc/view?usp=sharing>

### **Past, Present and Future**

<https://drive.google.com/a/hamline.edu/file/d/0B6FDeU8612QLWkpEWXRMaVRtbVE/view?usp=sharing>

### **I Wanna Be a Frog**

<https://drive.google.com/a/hamline.edu/file/d/0B6FDeU8612QLWINZd0w0Ti1WeTQ/view?usp=sharing>

### **I Love My Family**

<https://drive.google.com/a/hamline.edu/file/d/0B6FDeU8612QLMHk3cGJyaXFKXzg/view?usp=sharing>

### **Brochure**

<https://drive.google.com/a/hamline.edu/file/d/0B6FDeU8612QLQXVXdK13cjd3b2s/view?usp=sharing>

### **Video with Gestures**

<https://drive.google.com/a/hamline.edu/file/d/0B6FDeU8612QLSkZaalhUMGNQbnM/view?usp=sharing>