Guitars in the Classroom's AMIGO Project: Integrating Music in ELL Classrooms

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One misconception of music integration is that music has some direct impact on a learner's *level* of intelligence. The research does not support the popular myth that "music makes you smarter." This research explores the notion that music improves our cognitive functioning. Simply put, an underlying hypothesis of this study is that music cannot increase students' intelligence, but it may impact how effectively students utilize the intelligence they bring to their academic endeavors. This study specifically examines the impact of music integration on reading skills among more than 600 elementary school English Language Learners (ELLs).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Generally speaking, the research thus far on music and academic achievement falls primarily into three areas as identified by Črnčec, Wilson, and Prior (2006). The first is the Mozart-effect research, the research that asks whether purposeful exposure to music affects later task completion. The second is the effect of music instruction on other areas of functioning, that is, whether students who also study a musical instrument are at some inherent academic advantage. Finally, studies have looked at whether background music can have a beneficial effect on students. As one example, Kern, Wolery, and Aldridge (2007) showed that a teacher singing a background song during morning routines positively impacts young students with autism.

There remain two areas of limited exploration up to now. First, there are few music integration programs that are designed exclusively with ELL child populations in mind. Second, there are few studies to evaluate these programs. This paper focuses on this particular area of need.

This pilot study investigates the following research question:

1. Do student scores on the dimensions of reading sub-tests differ between those with AMIGO integration and those without?

METHOD

This paper summarizes the analysis of test score data from 623 children in a California public school system, who were assessed in January 2009 and again in April 2009. Students in California use the Houghton Mifflin Reading California Edition Curriculum and were tested using the California Summative Tests (CSA, hereafter), which are correlated to the curriculum in use. For this analysis, the students were grouped according to whether or not their teachers had integrated the AMIGO curriculum while participating in the Beginning level training course consisting of six, one hour music integration trainings designed for teachers with no prior musical experience.

Test Score Comparison of Student Participants: Grade 1

Student scores for AMIGO participants increased in every instance, with two significant exceptions. Phonetic awareness performance decreased among the AMIGO group, while non-AMIGO students showed only a negligible increase. Because the AMIGO group began with a higher than expected score in this area, the subsequent decline might be due to natural score correction.

In the Reading Comprehension sub-test, both groups scored lower than would be expected. These decreases may be due to the curricular sequence. For example, it is possible that students received more test-specific instruction immediately prior to the January test. Given the short time window of this test comparison - only three months - it is very difficult to draw any specific conclusions about the reasons for the decreased performance.

SIGNIFICANT AREAS OF PROGRESS FOR GRADE 1 AMIGO PARTICIPANTS

Students participating in AMIGO scored significantly higher than would be expected in every category except those noted above and Sentence Structure. Although AMIGO students performed better in the sentence structure post-test, the increases in other areas were within

expected values. In summary, AMIGO participants made better than expected progress in the following areas:

- Decoding & Word Recognition
- Vocabulary & Concept Development
- Grammar, Capitalization, & Punctuation
- Spelling
- Listening
- Total Reading Assessment Score

Students without the AMIGO experience made some similar strides. Students without music integration made significant improvements in the following areas:

- Decoding & Word Recognition
- Grammar, Capitalization, & Punctuation
- Spelling
- Total Reading Assessment Score

The AMIGO group, therefore, appears to have had some advantage in the areas of vocabulary development and listening.

SIGNIFICANT AREAS OF PROGRESS FOR GRADE 2-5 AMIGO PARTICIPANTS

Students participating in the AMIGO program had small but significant score improvements in six areas:

- Decoding and Word Recognition
- Reading Comprehension
- Writing Skills
- Spelling
- Listening
- Total Reading Assessment Score

Students without music integration made similarly made small but significant improvements in the following areas:

- Decoding and Word Recognition
- Writing Skills
- Spelling
- Listening

The Grade 2-5 AMIGO groups appear to have had some advantage in the Reading Comprehension subtest as well as in the overall test score.

Summary and Recommendations

Jessica Baron, Executive Director, Guitars in the Classroom

There is sufficient preliminary evidence that the AMIGO program's Beginner level training course is having a focused, positive impact on some areas of student performance on the California English Language Development Test, specifically vocabulary development, listening, and—in the higher grades—reading comprehension. These findings may be the product of specific music integration techniques and activities that teachers in this study learned and implemented as part of their Level 1 coursework. All song forms employed by GITC feature musical and lyrical repetition that teach students new words and phrases in the context of larger messages that specifically convey academic content across the academic spectrum.

It goes to reason that ELL students who listen to, read, practice, discuss, refine, and collectively sing academically infused songs might demonstrate statistically significant gains in both vocabulary and reading comprehension. For example, improved student vocabulary scores may be the direct result of vocabulary expanding activities such as listening to, practicing, and memorizing new vocabulary embedded in repetitive song lyrics through "call and response" instruction in which students listen to their teacher sing song lines as prompts, and then respond collectively by singing the corresponding musical phrases. In this way, song-based instruction

becomes a creative form of oral language practice, a component of ELL education known to build vocabulary and language fluency and to be deficient in many ELL classrooms.

Through learning and practicing language-rich, content based songs, some students may be increasing the amount of time and effort they spend listening. And perhaps they are motivated to listen better because the music engages their senses and stimulates their active involvement in the learning process; the songs introduce them to new words, high frequency words, literary phrases, and important facts and concepts related to gaining knowledge in areas of academic study. The rewards for this listening could arrive in the form of peer approval, an increased sense of engagement and belonging, and improved test scores.

It is interesting to consider that the significant gains in reading comprehension for students in grades 2-5 may result, not only from the acquisition of new vocabulary, but from the reading practice students receive while learning and singing the lyrics in mutli-versed songs. While most will be able to remember a brief, catchy chorus and will be able to sing it from memory, verses typically offer more detail, more enriched language, and performing them accurately requires the students to read along while singing. Innate social pressure to read and pronounce the lyrics correctly in order to be a valuable member of the classroom “choir” can be a strong motivation to students acquiring English as a second language to learn quickly! The live music making in the classroom can act as an automatic feedback loop; success brings applause, errors necessitate more practice!

It may also be possible that the sequential logic and meaning of these song lyrics may help students organize their thoughts and draw inferences. Perhaps these higher cognitive processes, particularly when experienced in the context of an enjoyable activity such as singing, help students develop reading comprehension that can be generalized to other forms of reading.

Further study is currently underway to determine the effects of year-long music integration training in which teachers have received two or more levels of instruction and

students have the benefit of that instruction and music integration over a longer period of time. It is possible that students in AMIGO classrooms will demonstrate gains in other skill areas leading to English Language Proficiency in Academic English, as well as their knowledge of specific academic subject matter that has been directly addressed through song-based instruction. An example of this kind of gain is Spelling. Students who learned spelling rules and sight words through singing songs that reinforced their ability to spell correctly may be the ones who showed gains in the current study.