

Emerging Writers

Volume 1

Article 2

5-2018

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Hannah Helwig

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Recommended Citation

Helwig, Hannah (2018) "Language and Identity: How Music Affects Language and Communication," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol1/iss2018/2>

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Hannah Helwig

First Place

Academic Category

Emerging Writer Contest 2018

Language and Identity

How Music Affects Language and Communication

As a child, I was introduced to music at an extremely early age. From television shows to music in church and school, I was learning things through music, including words, numbers, days of the week and months of the year. As I entered pre-kindergarten, I was a phenomenal reader and writer for a child of that age and my teachers explained to my parents that the music I had been introduced to most likely played a significant role in my reading and writing abilities. As I grew older I was particularly fond of music and often found it easy to remember things if I could put them to some sort of tune or rhythm. In the sixth grade, we learned a song about the different types of rocks and to this day, I still remember the entire song. Music has had a positive impact on my education and the way I learn, which in return has affected my language and communication with others.

It turns out that I am far from alone in having music influence my language skills at a young age. Music is often introduced to children before they can even properly speak their own native language and continues with them for the rest of their lives. So it makes sense for music to contribute in shaping and having an affect on the language one speaks and how they use it to communicate with others. Often times, music is just thought to be a form of entertainment used

to occupy a quiet room, entertain on a long car ride or motivate early in the morning, but it seems it is much more than that. People don't consider how the type of music they listen to or just music in general affect their language they thought they knew so well.

The music people listen to can often affect their personal language and the way they communicate with others. Often times music can influence parts of the brain that language is either developed, learned, or interpreted in and this is something that people can not observe without extensive research (Jäncke 1). Often times since these effects cannot be observed so plainly or in a day to day lifestyle, the effects music has on people seem to go unnoticed. Because music is so influential in everyday life in this modern society, it tends to sneak up on people and affect their communication and many times they may not even realize it. Music also has many neurological effects, both similar and different, to and from those that language has. There is a very interesting relationship between language and music.

In older propositions, music and language were thought to be localized on completely different parts of the brain (Jäncke 1). This idea has recently changed due to new technologies and advancements in research of the brain and its functions. Another advancement has been made that states that “speech functions can benefit from music functions and vice versa” (Jäncke 1). Jäncke claims that due to the advances in technology, there is a new view of the neural relationship between music and language. According to Sylvain Moreno's research, researchers have found that “music can modify the brain at both functional and structural levels” and that “such neural changes can impact several domains, but one domain seems to be particularly influenced by music—namely, language” (Moreno 329). This research has begun to shed light on

the great effects that music has on all parts of the brain, but language is specifically set aside as being influenced greater by music than any other parts of the brain. Due to the significant amount of findings from the research done on neural processes in relation to music people have made statements including “Music makes you smarter” or “Music helps you to learn other languages” and science isn’t leading to any answers saying they’re wrong...(Moreno 329). Music and language skills are both considered very complex human abilities with a significant link between them (Moreno 335).

A study was done to determine whether or not prolonged music exposure would increase a child’s processing in language. One group of children was given music lessons while the other was given paint lessons and at the end of the experiment, the children who received music training showed positive effects while the children who received the paint training did not (Moreno 336). This research and the experiment performed are clear evidence that music does affect language and can, in fact have a neural affect on the brain that allows for the better and easier task at processing language.

Music is introduced to children at an extremely early age. Moms, more often than not, play music for their children or personally sing to their children while they are still in the womb. Research has shown that by doing this mother can help to “stimulate the growth of brain structures, thereby enhancing learning and development” (Parsons). According to speech therapist Andria Calicchio the ear is one of the first organs to form in the womb thus meaning babies can learn to hear very early on and this is also how they can start to learn language (Parsons). Language is a component of a child’s life that they can begin learning before they are even actually born and the music they are exposed to while still in the womb can help their

development and even enhance their learning abilities when they begin speaking their native language. But some forms of music can have a detrimental effect on their learning and language abilities.

Not all music is educational nor appropriate for youth, yet many are exposed to it at extremely early ages due to its popularity in society and among teens and adults. Music has become more and more vulgar as society has moved away from censoring things that are released to the public, and this is leading to more and more children being exposed to things that many young adults weren't exposed to at one point in time. Profanity and talk of drugs, sex, and alcohol within music can cause behavioral changes within children and teens as well. One problem with this is that "parents are often unaware of what their children are listening to due to automatic downloads and the use of headphones" (Media 1488). Music can be considered "a part of growing up" and this often causes parents to stumble on what their children should be able to listen to (Media 1488). The music youth choose to listen to plays an extremely large role in the groups they choose to identify with and the behavior they choose to partake in, causing language to be strongly influenced by as well. Studies show that children listen to certain types of music that they like because "the lyrics were a reflection of their feelings" (Media 1489). This can lead to the assumption that if a child is listening to an explicit song that uses curse words throughout it, that, in fact, that child will partake in using the same type of language. Children also, often times, don't understand what they are listening to/singing about in many of these explicit songs, due to their young age and the fact that artists will typically make innuendos to be clever and to disguise the real topic of what they are talking about. This leads to children

knowing terms that they don't need to be exposed to and knowing terms that they don't even know the meaning to.

But when children are exposed to positive types of music the benefits they reap are extremely important to their development, not only of spoken language but written language as well. Research has found a “significant relationship between music and positive performances in areas such as reading comprehension, spelling, listening skills, and primary mental abilities (verbal, perceptual, numeric, spatial)” (Ciares). Children develop socially through music as well.

According to Brandt, “just as infants yearn to walk, they have an accelerated drive for language...While linguistic abilities will continue to be refined, all of the requisite skills for processing and performing speech have been acquired” (Brandt 1). This is a key component when determining how music affects language, particularly in a child's early years of development. As stated previously children begin hearing and learning language while still in the womb, and considering that most children have acquired the skills needed to perform speech by the time they are toddlers, what they are exposed to between the womb and this age is very significant and influential in their development of language and communication.

Brandt states that “spoken language is introduced to [a] child as a vocal performance and children tend to its musical features first” (Brandt 1). This is furthered by the statement he makes later on in his work that “without the ability to hear musically, we would be unable to learn language” (Brandt 1). The two claims by Brandt exemplify the significance music has on the language development of children, even before they are born. Music has proven that it can positively affect language, language development, and language acquisition.

These claims made by Brandt can be observed in the popular children’s song “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” (Taylor). While the song is seemingly simple, its lyrics and rhyme, and the fact that it is a song typically introduced before children can talk, it can have extensive impacts on important language skills. Brandt claimed that language is introduced through a vocal performance and children typically observe the musical aspects of it first—this is the case for this song. “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” introduces a simple rhythm and simple lyrics, but incorporates rhyme which can intrigue young minds. The rhythm and rhyme combined together within this song introduce two important features to children at an early age, that may seem like musical elements, but they are both extremely important to speaking and language skills as well. While rhyme is something that can later be employed in poetic styles (when children reach that point in their education), rhythm is important to have in all conversations. This song has a simple one that is easy for children of any age to follow, which allows them to easier grasp the concept of rhythm and how to use it when communicating.

Neuroscientist (and musician) Dr. Daniel Levitin performed a study on 20 subjects to examine brain functioning in relation to music and speech stimuli. The study's results showed that “the temporal manipulation signal[s] changes of the same magnitude in...both brain hemisphere[s]” (Lanir). Levitin’s study proved that “the same temporal structure manipulation in music and speech” occurred (Levitin). Since the study performed by Dr. Levitin proved that the same parts of the brain were stimulated by both music and speech, it can be said that language can be significantly impacted by music. This experiment furthers the claims made by Jäncke regarding how music affects language and how language affects music. By observing that the same regions of the brain are affected by both language and music it is easier to observe the

influences they have on one another. Some researchers examined the interaction between musical and language functions in relation to phonetic perception which deals with the listener receiving the intended message phonetically. Their studies found a “strong relationship between linguistic and musical rhythm in songs” (Jäncke 1).

Fred Zindi was able to make a point that seems to contradict the fact that music influences language and communication by focusing on subjects in Jamaica. Zindi claims that “language changes subtly whenever speakers come into contact with each other” (Zindi). He also explains an experience he had in which he was listening to a radio broadcaster who was attempting to sound Jamaican because of outside influences, and due to his attempt, Zindi was not able to fully understand the man. On a trip to Jamaica Zindi himself experienced something like this personally in which he attempted to sound like the people around him, but was quickly called out. Zindi makes the claim that “music had disinvented the Shona language” (Zindi). This “disinvention” of their language was caused by outside people hearing the music of the native musicians and attempting to mock it and sound like the musicians themselves. Those who did try it—similar to the radio broadcaster and Zindi himself were quickly called out for their failed attempt and could easily be identified as an outsider attempting to claim their native language. But the fact that the Shona woman claimed their language had been disinvented still goes to show the affect music has on language. While the music wasn’t able to effectively change the dialect and communication of those attempting to sound native, it did alter the language and allow them to be picked out by the natives who truly know the language they speak and the alterations made to it to by those who attempted to mock it.

It is evident that in some way whether neural, cognitive, fetal, or simply in everyday life, that music affects language. Music's influence can begin as early as within the womb and continues to be an influence to language throughout all stages of a person's life. Music shapes cognition, development, and communication between others in a way that no other form of art can. Music and language are continuously working hand in hand to in some way enhance the language of people and their communication between one another. The brain and the technology used to study its processes are being advanced daily to better understand the important impact that music has on language. While to many, music is an everyday form of entertainment, it is secretly shaping the language and communication on which everyone relies on to carry out their daily lives.

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