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Buzz, Summ or Vizz? Fostering Linguistic Diversity Through Music Education Practices

Sezgin Inceel

In this article, I delve into the intricate relationship between linguistic diversity and music education from various perspectives. Initially, I explore the theoretical underpinnings, and uncover the connections between music and language. Drawing on my research, I shed light on the Turkish-German viewpoint in consideration of these theories. Finally, I provide practical examples derived from group work and conclude on the importance of linguistic diversity in music education.

As a child, music was an omnipresent force in my life. Though I couldn't play any instruments, it accompanied me through every stage, whether as a listener or singing along. While excelling in most subjects at school, I encountered a significant hurdle when it came to learning English as my first foreign language. The differences between English and my mother tongue, Turkish, proved to be formidable, particularly regarding pronouns. A simple example would be that unlike Turkish, which uses a single pronoun 'o' for all genders and objects, English distinguishes between 'he', 'she' and 'it'. My grades suffered until I stumbled upon a surprising solution - 90s pop music. MTV became my constant companion, and I began singing along not with the aim of learning English, but simply because I loved music. What I didn't anticipate was the positive impact it would have on my language acquisition. Without conscious study, my English grades began to soar. I swiftly became the go-to student for English tests, and my pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar all flourished. Reflecting on this experience, I later discovered a fascinating link between music and language when I was studying for my Master's degree. Fonseca-Mora, Toscano-Fuentes and Wermke (2011) underscore these similarities, noting that rhythm and melody are core components of both, intimately tied to culture, and reliant on auditory and vocal faculties. Anthropological studies emphasize that every culture encompasses both language and music (Nettl, 2000), and posit that humans may have begun singing even before speaking (Livingstone, 1973). While it is believed that language and music abilities are rooted in different hemispheres of the brain, neuroscientific studies (Schön, Gordon & Besson, 2005; Patel, 2003; 2008; 2011) reveal a more intricate process, in which music and language can be processed in similar ways in the brain.

These parallels in learning processes offer insights suggesting that music can support language acquisition. Gordon (1997) proposes that the stages in language learning (listening, understanding, speaking, reading/writing, and learning grammatical rules) can be analogously observed in music learning. Much like in language acquisition, the process in music starts with attentive listening, followed by comprehension, and eventually, active musical expression. Although skills like reading/writing and music theory may develop later, as in language learning. This interplay between music and language becomes especially evident in educational contexts. Studies indicate that music aids in phonological awareness (Rubinson, 2010), reading proficiency (Butzlaff, 2000), vocabulary acquisition (Medina,

1993), verbal memory (Chan et al., 1998), grammar and syntax acquisition (Gordon et al., 2015), listening skills (Emery, 1991) and pronunciation (Moradi & Shahrokhi, 2014). These findings support the view that music can be a potent tool in the language acquisition process. One hypothesis shedding light on my childhood memory is the phenomenon of a 'song stuck in my head', which has its roots in another phenomenon 'din in the head'. It was initially coined by Barber (1980) to describe the involuntary mental rehearsal of a foreign language. During her visit to Eastern Europe, she observed constant inner-talk in Russian, which occasionally interfered with her command of other foreign languages. Later, Krashen (1983) hypothesized that this internal dialogue results from the stimulation of the 'Language Acquisition Device'¹. His hypothesis had two corollaries:

1. The 'Din' is set off by comprehensible input
2. This input needs to contain significant patterns.

And lastly, Murphey (1990) compared Piaget's 'egocentric language', Vygotsky's 'inner speech', and Krashen's 'din' theories, hypothesizing that the 'Song Stuck in My Head Phenomenon' (SSIMH) could be akin to musical din. According to him, songs have a remarkable ability to linger in one's mind, partially due to certain similarities with inner speech.

These observations underscore the intricate relationship between languages and music. But what about the influence of bilingualism? Bilingualism refers to the mastery of two languages, whereas multilingualism extends beyond, encompassing proficiency in more than two languages. An examination of the definitions of bilingualism since the 1930s reveals a pivotal shift in perspective (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003). Initially, bilingualism was narrowly defined as complete mastery of two languages. However, scientific research has demonstrated that it is quite normal for bilingual individuals to have a dominant and a non-dominant language. To account for this diversity, various types and categories of bilingualism have been established. When two languages are acquired at the same time, it is known as simultaneous bilingualism. If one language is acquired after the other, it falls under sequential bilingualism, which in turn, can be early or late sequential bilingualism. In the former, the second language is acquired at a very young age, likely before commencing formal education. In the latter, the second language is learned after the commencement of formal schooling (Pearson, 2008). After examining this framework, it becomes evident that all individuals who have learned more than one language at any point in their lives, regardless of their proficiency level, fall somewhere on this bilingual/multilingual spectrum.

Given that bilingual language learning encompasses both first and second language acquisition, I argue that music could be a valuable tool for bilingual language acquisition. In recent years, there has been a surge in studies investigating the relationship between music and multilingualism. Research conducted by Moreno et al. (2014) indicates that bilingualism and music training exert distinct effects on brain networks supporting executive control of behaviour. The findings suggest that music perception may involve not only the neural network shared with language processing, but also a unique neural network.

Gardner-Chloros (2014) delves into the relationship between bilingualism/multilingualism and art. She proposes that, by influencing creativity and cognition,

¹ A Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is a theory developed by Noam Chomsky. It is a hypothetical tool in the human brain that allows children to learn and understand language quickly.

bilingualism/multilingualism can enrich artists' contributions to their works and identities. Although the study does not explicitly address how bilingual children might benefit from music, it offers insights into how a bilingual or multilingual individual can perceive the world from diverse perspectives and integrate this into their art. In another study, Schreiber (2015) scrutinizes a transcultural hip-hop artist, exploring how the artist expresses their bilingual (Serbian and English) identity through music. The study also examines the intersection of hip-hop music with migration and bilingual education. Aliagas et al. (2016) underscore that rapping in the Catalan language contributes to language and culture acquisition in an educational context. Similarly, Kelly (2013) contends that incorporating hip-hop literature in English classes, taking individual backgrounds into consideration (especially for Black, Latinx, and economically disadvantaged students), can be pivotal. Moradzadeh et al. (2015) compared monolingual musicians, bilingual musicians, non-bilingual musicians, and monolingual non-musicians in terms of task-switching and performance in dual tasks. The results demonstrate that musicians outperformed non-musicians in both paradigms. The study furnishes evidence that long-term musical education can enhance abilities related to task-switching and dual-task performance which are integral to bilingual learning.

These research endeavours led me to focus on a specific form of bilingualism that is culturally significant to me: Turkish-German bilingualism in Germany. Language challenges within this community have been a topic of discussion over the years. In the German media Turkish immigrants are often portrayed with their distinctive manner of speech, characterized by simplified syntax and morphology, and influenced by Turkish phonology (Byrd, 2010). Regrettably, this portrayal tends to reinforce stereotypes about the community and does not present the complete picture. Nevertheless, Apeltauer (2004) highlights the challenges that migrant students encounter within the German educational system. He underscores that almost a quarter of these students, due to language difficulties, fail to attain even the basic secondary school certificate, a realization that formed the basis of my research.

So where do I fit into this narrative as a researcher? My positionality is shaped by my upbringing in Istanbul and my Turkish heritage. With an academic background in music education I embarked on an inquiry investigating the intricate interplay between language and music acquisition. Subsequently, upon receiving a scholarship, I relocated to Germany where my research focus pivoted towards migration education. Within this context, a key question emerged: Can the advantages conferred by music education be effectively harnessed to facilitate bilingual language acquisition among Turkish immigrant children? This question marked the beginning of my journey, and as time went on, I refined my ideas through research, pilot interviews, and observations. The further I investigated the issue, the more I appreciated the importance of a fundamental and critical query: What transpires at home? How do parents perceive the situation? Previous research underscores a correlation between family involvement and children's academic achievements, as well as their language proficiency (Clair et al., 2012). It suggests that parents' positive attitudes and beliefs towards bilingualism play a pivotal role in their children's language learning process (De Houwer, 1999). Therefore, I sought to examine the phenomenon from the families' perspective, aiming to understand how they perceive and practice bilingualism and music education. I conducted qualitative research with a total of 15 families, consisting of 5 pilot

participants and 10 main participants. The primary methods employed to gather data were interviews and observations. The following are some key findings from my research (Inceel, 2018):

Music and Emotions: At least six participants differentiated between Turkish music and German (or Western) music asserting that Turkish music was more closely associated with emotions. Interestingly, some participants viewed this association positively, while others perceived it negatively and I observed that those who identified more strongly with their Turkish heritage viewed the emotional impact of Turkish music positively, while those who identified more with German culture found Turkish music to be too emotional.

Idealism: Four participants exhibited signs of an idealized approach when defining bilingualism. They refrained from categorizing their children as bilingual, even though the children demonstrated proficiency in both languages. These parents seemed to emphasize the importance of exceptional language skills and were less inclined to appreciate incremental progress.

Difficulties: Participants grappled with a range of internal, external, and day-to-day obstacles throughout their children's bilingual learning process. Internally, these included individual language proficiency, communication hurdles, and familial dynamics. Externally, challenges encompassed navigating the education system and sourcing resources. Everyday life difficulties manifested as limited exposure to Turkish and struggles during language-related activities such as reading sessions.

Music for the Non-Dominant Language: at least three participants predominantly associated music with one language when discussing its benefits. Despite my attempts to highlight that my focus was on bilingual language development, these participants primarily perceived music as a means to enhance the weaker language.

Baby Steps: half of the participants provided examples of how they or their children acquired vocabulary through music. Three participants mentioned that their children's pronunciation improved through singing. For instance, one participant shared that her child's Turkish pronunciation saw marked improvement when he sang. Similarly, another participant noted that her comprehension of German became more proficient through music.

At the conclusion of the interviews, after discussing the relationship between music and language, I provided the participants with a CD that featured children's songs in both German and Turkish. I used Volker Rosin and Belgin Öztekin's album, *Arkadaşlar Elele / Lasst Uns Freunde Sein* (2006) which included two versions of each song, one in German and the other in Turkish. The critical aspect here was that the songs presented the same vocabulary in two languages, and I wanted to gauge how motivated my participants were to use these bilingual songs. All participants, except for one, agreed to take the CD. Nine out of ten participants displayed heightened interest in the benefits of music education for language acquisition. However, I'd like to draw attention to the comments made by two participants regarding the bilingual songs. They expressed that they didn't feel a strong connection with

German songs, perhaps because the German way of life didn't align with their lifestyle. This was the moment when I began to consider that simply translating songs from German into Turkish and expecting them to be beneficial for bilingual education might not suffice. While such translations are valuable and certainly have their place, they need to be complemented by a consideration of cultural norms. This insight led to my next project in which I adopted a different approach. Instead of translating songs, I focused on thematic elements and curated songs in different languages for each theme. This way, children could learn specific vocabulary related to a given theme, and which held cultural significance.

In concluding my research, it became evident that despite certain parents holding positive beliefs regarding bilingual language acquisition and music education, there exists a lack of accessible resources and materials (such as workshops, seminars, literature, etc.). This deficit hinders their capacity to enhance their theoretical understanding, often leading to self-imposed pressure or a sense of inadequacy in practical application. These findings spurred me to delve deeper into the research outcomes following the completion of my PhD. As a response, I established a platform named "music4words," which offers free online resources in the form of blogs, videos, seminars, workshops, and podcasts on this subject matter. I also initiated music projects in Munich, Germany, where I currently live. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when confinement to homes and adaptation to online education were paramount, I began receiving numerous invitations from organizations, schools, and universities both within and outside of Germany to conduct online teaching sessions. I seized this opportunity to disseminate this message further. Notably, I observed that the experiences shared by participants in my research resonated with many individuals, who expressed that they had encountered similar pressures before gaining access to this knowledge. One particular group I worked with presented a unique challenge. It was a 10-week course in a community music setting, involving children of varying ages, mostly elementary school students. Some spoke German, some Turkish, some both, and some only English. I needed to find a way to quickly create music with the group while simultaneously fostering connections among the participants to establish a cohesive group dynamic. In line with the recommendations from my own research, I was not particularly inclined towards "translated bilingual/multilingual" songs, and there weren't many available in three languages anyway. So, I decided to adopt a thematic approach and selected an animal theme for each week. The animal theme held particular intrigue for me in the context of multilingualism. Even though we may envision or express how animals produce sounds differently, they don't change their language depending on the country or language being spoken. For example, a bee's sound is represented as "buzz" in English, "summ" in German, and "vız" in Turkish. However, in reality, bees always produce the same sound; we simply perceive it differently. I used this as a starting point in my group by imitating animal sounds in the same way and explaining how they are named in three languages. Subsequently, I sought out well-known children's songs about the selected animal in three languages, incorporating the respective animal sounds. In this manner, they not only learned well-known children's or folk songs in various languages, but also acquired the pertinent vocabulary associated with each theme, a nuance that can vary from one culture to another. For instance, songs about mountains in Germany may focus on climbing and hiking, whereas I observed that they symbolized different sentiments in Turkish songs, like feelings of *Sehnsucht*, which is a German term encompassing a profound, often

inexplicable longing or yearning for something. Later, I designed games around the songs that encouraged the children to repeat the sounds (similar to the 'Song Stuck in My Head' phenomenon). Over the weeks, I observed that the children were able to replicate the sounds and associate them with the correct language, even if they didn't speak or understand that language. I expanded on this idea by exploring different themes and games.

In today's world of complex social and political challenges, the importance of multilingualism may be growing. Educators find themselves in a pressing situation, one that demands a profound understanding of the reciprocal learning dynamics between music and languages, particularly in the context of bilingualism and multilingualism. The cultivation of multilingualism is not merely an imperative within the realm of language education; it is also an essential driver of overarching concepts like diversity, inclusivity, and participation. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline (2015) various focal points for sustainability. For instance, Goals 5 and 10, which address 'Quality Education' and 'Reduced Inequalities', emphasize the importance of equitable educational opportunities, especially for individuals in vulnerable situations and those with migrant status. In such instances, the promotion of linguistic diversity emerges as a pivotal means of reaching a wider audience, thus contributing to equality and, consequently, sustainability. According to the insights of Higgins & Willingham (2017), diversity, inclusivity, and participation lie at the core of community music that aims at uniting people through shared musical practices. Central to this notion is the concept of cultural democracy, which envisions the establishment of an egalitarian and diverse society through the extension of democratic principles to all social interactions. As outlined by Graves (2005), cultural democracy theory posits that our society encompasses not a singular culture but a mosaic of diverse cultures, with culture being an innate aspect that requires no acquisition. By integrating the principles of cultural democracy into the practices of community music, we guard against reducing these practices to a single musical style, language, or cultural tradition. Instead, it evolves into a collective endeavour in which participants can express their individuality in unique ways. Within the framework of cultural democracy, no music genre claims superiority over another, and each culture holds equal value. In this context, it becomes imperative to reevaluate the concept of multilingualism. Language, as a cornerstone of cultural exchange, plays a pivotal role. Many countries across the globe boast not only official languages but also a rich tapestry of additional languages. Celebrating this linguistic diversity resonates with the principles of diversity and inclusivity championed by Higgins and Willingham (2017). It is paramount that music educators harness the boundless potential of music and music education to foster a society where every individual can freely express their identity without encountering discrimination based on their spoken languages.

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