

# Acquiring Vocabulary Through Story-Songs<sup>1</sup>

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It is common practice for teachers of first and second language learners to read stories to children. By engaging in this practice, teachers not only model literacy skills, but they also cultivate listening skills and promote vocabulary acquisition. One particular type of story, the "story-song" is frequently used by educators of young children. The story-song is basically a poem with a story-line woven through it. Furthermore, because it has been set to music it can be sung rather than spoken. Yet, are story-songs simply novelty items or does the melodic element make an important instructional contribution? An empirical investigation of a group of 48 third grade second language learners measured the amount of vocabulary acquisition which was produced when two variables were investigated: illustrations and music. Thus subjects either heard a story which was (1) sung and illustrated, (2) sung, but not illustrated, (3) spoken and illustrated, or (4) spoken yet not illustrated. Subjects were exposed to their respective treatments for three minutes a day for three consecutive days. Apart from being pre-tested, they were post tested immediately after their last treatment and again two weeks later. The statistical analysis revealed that the illustrated spoken and sung stories were equally effective means of supporting language acquisition. However, close examination of the descriptive data revealed a definite bias in favor of the illustrated story-song. That is, second language learners who listened to the illustrated sung stories acquired an average of 1.5 words by the end of the treatment period, while those who heard the illustrated spoken rendition of the story acquired an average of 1.0 words. This difference of .5 words grew after two weeks. At that time, the average vocabulary acquired by the illustrated story-song group was 1.75 as opposed to the illustrated spoken story group's 1.08. As expected, the effects of music were greatest with the subjects who knew the least amount of vocabulary initially. After two weeks, beginners in the music-illustration group acquired an average of 3.33 vocabulary while low proficiency level learners in the no-music-illustration group averaged 1.5 vocabulary words. Although this research was conducted on a relatively small number of subjects, it points to the positive effects which music may have upon language acquisition. More specifically, it suggests that illustrated story-songs may produce greater vo-

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cabulary acquisition than illustrated traditional spoken stories (Medina 1993).

### **Research Into Practice**

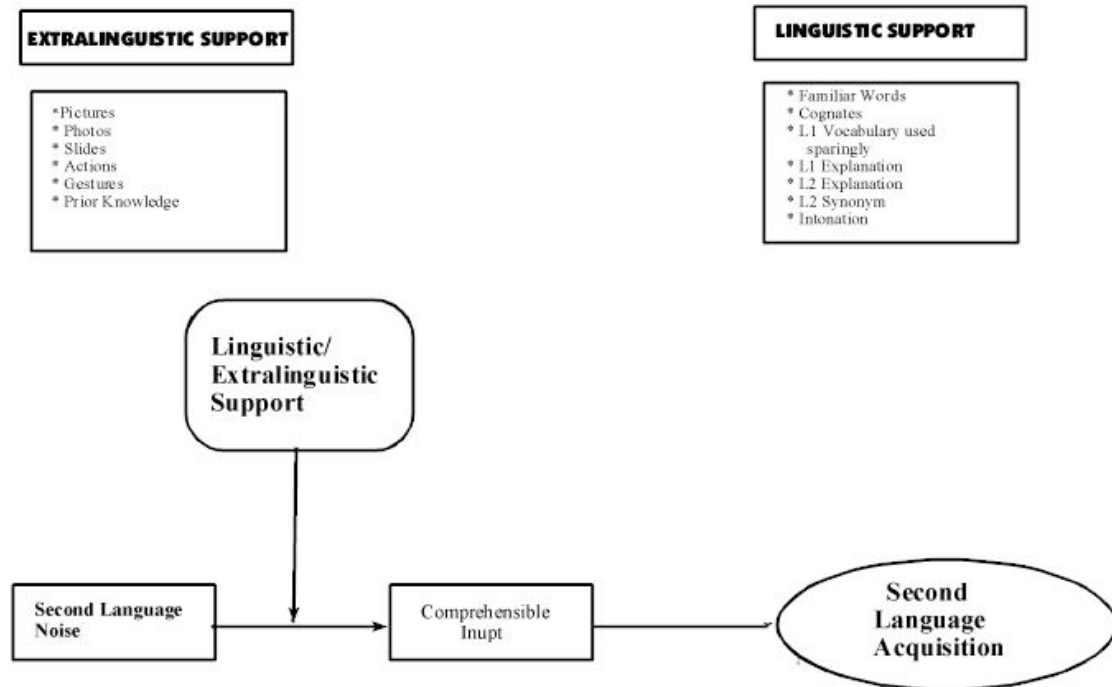
Teachers of second language learners can similarly increase the vocabularies of their learners by following some simple guidelines.

#### ***Step 1-Select a Story-Song***

Before you begin, make certain that you have selected a story-song which will produce maximum results. First, follow the same principles you would use when selecting any story for your learners. Find a story-song with a story-line which will be of interest to your learners. In Elley's (1989) investigation, not all stories resulted in the same amount of language acquisition. It is not clear at this time what characterizes such an optimal story, although interest level certainly might be a critical attribute. Also, select a song which contains an appropriate number of unfamiliar words. According to Krashen (1985), language acquisition occurs when the learner is exposed to only a few new words, what Krashen refers to as "i + 1." Acquisition will not take place if learners are inundated by an inordinate number of unfamiliar words (i.e., i + 9). Furthermore, the story-song should expose students more than once to each new vocabulary word. It is particularly helpful when the target vocabulary words are critical to the plot of the story. The contextual environment in which a new vocabulary word is found should be rich. That is, learners should be able to easily infer the meaning of key vocabulary words on the basis of the context (Elley 1989).

Stories should also be rich in a necessary requirement for language acquisition--what Krashen refers to as "extralinguistic support." As the term implies, extralinguistic support refers to non-verbal means of communicating a word's meaning (e.g., pictures, photos, actions). Meaning can also be conveyed verbally as is the case when a teacher provides a synonym or varies her intonation. This is referred to by Krashen as "linguistic support." (See Diagram 1)

In short, when selecting an appropriate story-song, both forms of support need to be tended to. Therefore, story-song books should abound with illustrations which clearly communicate the meaning of new vocabulary. It is particularly helpful when illustrations of new vocabulary words appear numerous times in the story (Elley 1989).

**Diagram 1****Relationship of Extralinguistic Support and Linguistic Support to Second Language Acquisition**

The music heard on the story-song tape cassettes should also be appealing to the students. This will increase the likelihood that learners will want to hear and sing the song once again after it has been learned in class. The melody line should be simple and uncomplicated. Complex melodies unnecessarily tax memory, forcing the students to focus attention on learning the melody rather than the lyrics. The tempo should also be moderate. If the song's cadence is too brisk, your learners will be unable to capture new vocabulary words (Medina 1993). Instead, learners will hear nothing more than musical "noise."

**Step 2-Preparing for the Story-Song**

A few preparatory measures should be taken prior to playing the story-song for your learners. Familiarizing learners with the story content prior to hearing the story-song will increase the comprehensibility of the story and ultimately the amount of vocabulary acquired. Begin by stating the topic of the story-song. Have students share their experiences on the topic in order to tap their prior knowledge. Next, briefly explain what the song is about without summarizing the entire story-line. Finally, read the story while pointing to pictures. Further support your reading with other types of comprehensible input. Elley (1989) found that using three types of "comprehensible input" produced the greatest

amount of vocabulary acquisition: (1) contextual clues, (2) illustrations, and (3) other types of comprehensible input such as pictures, synonyms, explanations (in the first or second language) while the story was being read. In order to maximize vocabulary acquisition in your learners you would be wise to similarly provide multiple forms of linguistic and extralinguistic support while reading the story.

### **Step 3-Introduce the Melody**

It is often helpful to play the instrumental version of the story-song at this point if it is available. If your tape recording does not contain a separate instrumental version, then play the sung version several days before presenting the story-song as described in Step 4. Students can listen to this music while engaging in other activities (e.g., working on an art project or while engaging in a physical education activity). By playing either the instrumental or sung versions, you will provide students with the opportunity to become familiar with the melody prior to hearing the story-song. This is a particularly important step if the genre of music is totally unfamiliar to the learners. Danlan (1975) found that learners responded differently depending upon whether the music they were exposed to was familiar or unfamiliar. Introducing the melody first makes pedagogical sense for still another reason. When humans are simultaneously exposed to several new stimuli, they experience what is referred to as "secondary task overloading." This cognitive overstimulation can prevent students from learning the skills which they are attempting to acquire. Therefore, in order to avoid this effect, it is advisable to first expose students to the melody of the story-song prior to introducing the story-song itself.

### **Step 4-Present the Story-Song**

Play the recording of the story-song while pointing to the story's illustrations. Repeat this process two to three times each day for several days. Students may wish to take turns pointing to pictures in the story-book as it is heard. In the investigation which was described earlier in this article, vocabulary acquired through music was retained in memory two weeks beyond the treatment period. That is, there was no additional exposure.

Vocabulary acquired through music increased after two weeks even though students had not heard the story-song during that time. Therefore, it stands to reason that additional exposure to a story-song will help the language acquisition process. Given this, it is advisable to play the story-song intermittently over the next month or two. Enthusiastic students will most likely ask you to play the story-song again and again. That is what typically occurs when using music in the second language classroom.

### **Step 5-Continue to Support Language Acquisition**

To add variety and further support the language acquisition process, provide different forms of comprehensible input each time the story-song is heard. One way to do this is to have students create artistic works that will be used later on during subsequent readings of the story. For example, students can create illustrations of key vocabulary items or scenes in the story. Later on, when students hear the story-song played, you can point to the students' illustrations rather than those in the storybook. Similarly, students can create puppets, costumes or masks which can be used to playact the story-song as it is being heard.

The effects of music upon human learning are not entirely understood. Yet, there is reason to believe music can be used by educators to promote second language acquisition. While additional research is needed on this topic, there is reason to believe that story-songs may result in greater vocabulary acquisition than more traditional spoken stories. Teachers can begin immediately to witness the effects of music on their second language learners. By following a few simple guidelines they can use story-songs to boost the acquisition of vocabulary in their learners.

### **References**

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