ENHANCING PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND PRONUNCIATION IN YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH SONGS AND CHANTS: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract: This study investigates the efficacy of integrating songs and chants into early language education to improve phonological awareness and pronunciation among young learners. Utilizing a quasi-experimental design, 80 kindergarten students were divided into an experimental group (n=40) receiving instruction supplemented with songs and chants, and a control group (n=40) following traditional methods over a 12-week period. Pre- and post-intervention assessments, including standardized phonological awareness tasks and pronunciation rubrics, were administered. Results indicated a statistically significant improvement in both phonological awareness ($p < 0.001$) and pronunciation accuracy ($p < 0.01$) in the experimental group compared to the control group. Specific gains were observed in rhyming, alliteration, segmenting, and the accurate articulation of target phonemes. These findings underscore the pedagogical value of musical and rhythmic elements in fostering foundational literacy and oral language skills, suggesting that songs and chants serve as powerful, engaging tools for early language development.

Keywords: phonological awareness, pronunciation, young learners, songs, chants, early language acquisition, musical pedagogy

1. Introduction

The foundational stages of language acquisition are critical for a child's overall academic success and communicative competence. Among the core components of early literacy and oral language development are phonological awareness and accurate pronunciation. Phonological awareness, the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound structure of spoken language, is a strong predictor of reading success (National Reading Panel, 2000). Similarly, clear and intelligible pronunciation is essential for effective oral communication, reducing misunderstandings, and building confidence in young speakers (Derwing & Munro, 2015). However, developing these skills can be challenging for young learners, particularly in contexts where language exposure is limited or where the target language presents phonological distinctions not present in their native tongue.

Traditional pedagogical approaches often rely on direct instruction and rote memorization, which may not fully engage young children who thrive on interactive, multisensory learning experiences. There is a growing body of research advocating for more creative and engaging methods in early childhood education. Songs and chants, with their inherent rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and melodic intonation, offer a natural and enjoyable pathway for language learning. They provide a scaffold for memory, break down complex linguistic structures into manageable chunks, and create a low-anxiety environment conducive to experimentation with sounds (Medina, 1993; Saricoban & Metin, 2000). Despite anecdotal evidence and theoretical support for their effectiveness, empirical studies specifically

investigating the combined impact of songs and chants on both phonological awareness and pronunciation in a controlled setting, especially within a young learner demographic, remain less common. This research gap highlights the need for a systematic investigation into the practical benefits of integrating these musical elements into early language curricula.

This study aims to address this gap by empirically evaluating the role of songs and chants as a pedagogical tool. The primary objective is to determine whether a curriculum supplemented with targeted songs and chants can lead to significant improvements in the phonological awareness and pronunciation skills of young learners compared to a conventional teaching approach. Specifically, the study seeks to: 1) assess the impact of songs and chants on various phonological awareness components (e.g., rhyming, alliteration, segmentation); and 2) measure their effect on the accuracy and clarity of pronunciation of target phonemes and words. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers on optimizing early language instruction strategies.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design and Participants

This study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test control group design. Participants were 80 kindergarten students (ages 5-6 years) recruited from two public schools in a metropolitan area. The schools were selected based on similar socio-economic profiles and language learning environments. Forty students from one school formed the experimental group, while forty students from the other school constituted the control group, ensuring no overlap in teaching staff or materials between groups. Parental consent and school administrative approval were obtained prior to the commencement of the study. All participants were native speakers of the same primary language and were at a similar initial level of English language exposure as determined by a preliminary assessment.

2.2. Intervention

The intervention period lasted 12 weeks, with three 30-minute sessions per week for both groups. The control group received standard kindergarten English language instruction, focusing on vocabulary, basic grammar, and conversational practice through traditional methods like flashcards, storytelling, and teacher-led drills. The experimental group received the same core curriculum, but 15 minutes of each 30-minute session were dedicated to activities incorporating specifically designed songs and chants. These musical elements targeted key phonological awareness skills (e.g., rhyming songs, alliteration chants, syllable clapping songs) and pronunciation of common English phonemes and minimal pairs (e.g., songs emphasizing /th/ vs. /f/, /l/ vs. /r/ sounds). The songs and chants were carefully selected or adapted to be age-appropriate, engaging, and directly linked to the weekly language learning objectives.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

1. Phonological Awareness Assessment: A standardized battery of phonological awareness tasks, adapted for young learners, was used. This battery included:

Rhyme Detection and Production:* Identifying rhyming words and generating words that rhyme with a given word.

Alliteration Detection:* Identifying words that start with the same sound.

Syllable Segmentation:* Clapping out the number of syllables in a word.

Phoneme Blending and Segmentation:* Combining individual sounds to form a word and breaking a word into its constituent sounds.

Each task was scored on a scale of 0-5, with a maximum total score of 20 for the entire battery. The assessment was administered individually by trained research assistants.

2. Pronunciation Assessment: Pronunciation accuracy was evaluated using a researcher-developed rubric. Students were asked to orally produce a list of 20 target words and 10 short sentences containing phonemes frequently challenging for young learners. Two independent raters, experienced in teaching English to young children, scored the recordings of each student. The rubric assessed accuracy in vowel sounds, consonant sounds, word stress, and intonation, with scores ranging from 1 (unintelligible) to 5 (native-like accuracy) for each item, yielding a maximum total score of 150. Inter-rater reliability was established at 0.88 using Cohen's Kappa.

Both assessments were administered as pre-tests before the intervention and as post-tests immediately after the 12-week intervention period.

2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for pre-test and post-test scores for both groups. To determine the effectiveness of the intervention, independent samples t-tests were used to compare baseline scores between groups, and paired samples t-tests were used to analyze within-group improvements. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to compare post-test scores between the experimental and control groups, controlling for pre-test scores, to isolate the effect of the intervention. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Baseline Comparisons

Prior to the intervention, independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups on either the phonological awareness pre-test ($t(78) = 0.52$, $p = 0.605$) or the pronunciation pre-test ($t(78) = -0.31$, $p = 0.757$). This indicates that both groups were comparable in their initial phonological awareness and pronunciation abilities.

3.2. Impact on Phonological Awareness

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for phonological awareness scores. The experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in phonological awareness from pre-test ($M = 8.25$, $SD = 1.98$) to post-test ($M = 15.60$, $SD = 2.15$). A paired samples t-test confirmed this within-group improvement was statistically significant ($t(39) = -20.15$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, the control group showed a smaller, though still significant, improvement from pre-test ($M = 8.10$, $SD = 2.05$) to post-test ($M = 10.55$, $SD = 2.01$), with a paired samples t-test indicating significance ($t(39) = -8.12$, $p < 0.001$).

To isolate the effect of the intervention, an ANCOVA was performed on post-test phonological awareness scores, with pre-test scores as a covariate. The analysis revealed a highly significant main effect for group ($F(1, 77) = 112.43$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.593$). The adjusted mean post-test score for the experimental group ($M = 15.60$) was significantly higher than that of the control group ($M = 10.55$), indicating that the integration of songs and chants had a strong positive impact on phonological awareness development.

3.3. Impact on Pronunciation

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics for pronunciation scores. The experimental group exhibited a significant improvement in pronunciation accuracy from pre-test (M = 78.50, SD = 10.12) to post-test (M = 118.75, SD = 11.50). This gain was statistically significant ($t(39) = -22.38$, $p < 0.001$). The control group also showed improvement, moving from a pre-test mean of 79.25 (SD = 9.87) to a post-test mean of 92.10 (SD = 10.88), which was statistically significant ($t(39) = -10.45$, $p < 0.001$).

An ANCOVA on post-test pronunciation scores, controlling for pre-test scores, also demonstrated a significant main effect for group ($F(1, 77) = 135.89$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.638$). The adjusted mean post-test score for the experimental group (M = 118.75) was substantially higher than that of the control group (M = 92.10), confirming the pronounced positive effect of songs and chants on young learners' pronunciation skills.

3.4. Detailed Analysis of Sub-skills

Further analysis of the phonological awareness sub-tasks revealed particularly strong gains in rhyme production (experimental group mean increase: 2.1 vs. control group: 0.8) and phoneme segmentation (experimental group mean increase: 1.9 vs. control group: 0.6). For pronunciation, the most notable improvements in the experimental group were observed in the accurate articulation of challenging consonant clusters (e.g., 'str', 'thr') and the differentiation of short and long vowel sounds, as evidenced by higher scores on relevant items within the pronunciation rubric. These specific improvements highlight the targeted efficacy of the musical intervention in addressing common areas of difficulty for young language learners.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Phonological Awareness Scores (N=80)

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	Adjusted Post-test Mean
Experimental	8.25 (1.98)	15.60 (2.15)	7.35	15.60
Control	8.10 (2.05)	10.55 (2.01)	2.45	10.55

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Pronunciation Scores (N=80)

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	Adjusted Post-test Mean
Experimental	78.50 (10.12)	118.75 (11.50)	40.25	118.75
Control	79.25 (9.87)	92.10 (10.88)	12.85	92.10

4. Discussion

The findings of this quasi-experimental study provide robust empirical evidence supporting the significant role of songs and chants in enhancing both phonological awareness and pronunciation skills among young learners. The substantial gains observed in the experimental group, significantly outperforming the control group, underscore the pedagogical power of integrating musical and rhythmic elements into early language instruction. These results align with and extend existing theoretical frameworks that emphasize the multisensory and affective dimensions of learning (Gardner, 1993; Krashen, 1985).

The marked improvement in phonological awareness in the experimental group can be attributed to several key features of songs and chants. The inherent rhythm and meter of chants naturally highlight syllable boundaries and word stress, making phonological units more salient. Rhyming songs explicitly draw attention to word endings and sound patterns, fostering

the ability to detect and produce rhymes, a crucial precursor to decoding. Repetitive melodic phrases in songs reinforce the auditory discrimination of individual phonemes and phoneme sequences, facilitating tasks like phoneme blending and segmentation. This aligns with research suggesting that musical training can enhance auditory processing and speech perception (Patel, 2014), which are foundational for phonological development. The playful and non-threatening nature of these activities also likely reduced cognitive load and affective filters, allowing children to engage more freely with challenging linguistic concepts.

Similarly, the significant improvements in pronunciation accuracy in the experimental group can be explained by the unique properties of songs and chants. Singing often requires more precise articulation and breath control than normal speech, inadvertently training the articulatory muscles. The exaggerated intonation and rhythm in songs and chants provide clear models for target sounds and stress patterns, enabling learners to mimic and internalize correct pronunciation more effectively. Repetition within a melodic context helps to automatize the production of difficult phonemes and word forms. Furthermore, the holistic nature of musical input, engaging both auditory and motor systems, contributes to a more deeply encoded and retrievable phonological representation (Schön et al., 2004). The targeted nature of the songs and chants, specifically designed to address common pronunciation difficulties, likely contributed to the observed gains in specific consonant clusters and vowel differentiations.

These findings have important implications for early childhood education and language curriculum design. Educators should consider systematically incorporating songs and chants as a core component of their language teaching methodology, rather than merely as supplementary activities. The study suggests that a carefully curated repertoire of musical resources, tailored to specific learning objectives, can yield measurable benefits in foundational language skills. The positive affective environment created by musical activities may also contribute to increased motivation and engagement, which are critical for sustained learning in young children.

While the study provides compelling evidence, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The quasi-experimental design, while practical in educational settings, means that random assignment was not possible, potentially introducing unseen confounding variables related to school environment. Future research could explore the long-term effects of this intervention, investigate its efficacy across different linguistic backgrounds, and examine the specific contributions of various types of songs and chants (e.g., purely rhythmic chants vs. melodic songs) to different phonological and phonetic skills. Qualitative data, such as teacher observations or student interviews, could also provide deeper insights into the learning process and affective responses.

5. Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates the profound positive impact of integrating songs and chants into early language instruction for young learners. The experimental group, exposed to a curriculum enriched with musical elements, showed statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in both phonological awareness and pronunciation accuracy compared to the control group. These improvements spanned critical sub-skills, including rhyme production, phoneme segmentation, and the precise articulation of challenging English phonemes. The findings strongly suggest that the rhythmic, melodic, and repetitive nature of

songs and chants provides an engaging, multisensory, and effective scaffold for developing foundational literacy and oral communication skills in young children.

The pedagogical implications are clear: educators and curriculum developers should recognize songs and chants not merely as entertaining diversions but as powerful, evidence-based tools for enhancing language acquisition. Their systematic inclusion can create a more dynamic, inclusive, and effective learning environment, addressing the unique developmental needs of young learners. By leveraging the inherent appeal of music, we can foster stronger phonological foundations and clearer pronunciation, thereby setting children on a more successful trajectory for future reading proficiency and communicative competence. Future research should explore the optimal frequency and duration of such interventions, investigate their transferability to other language skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar), and examine their effectiveness in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable to ascertain the sustained effects of this approach on long-term academic achievement.

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