

Music, Learning and Language

Our school is well known for its strong bilingual education, but did you know that the school has also perhaps the largest school music program in the country?

With around 30 teachers of music, a 130-piece traditional orchestra, a variety of bands and ensembles, and a policy that all children will learn to play at least one musical instrument, it is clear that we regard music as an essential part of a child's education. But why?

We all know the benefits of music as an *accomplishment*. If you can master an instrument, you can entertain your family and friends and yourself. You might find employment as a musician. You are always welcome socially. And you can appreciate and enjoy listening to music so much more fully as a result of knowing the "language" of music.

For music, like language, is a form of communication. It has techniques of communicating emotion and conveying a sense of presence through non-verbal means. It has

formal organization, like the language of written discourse. In this sense, our school provides not just a bilingual, but a "trilingual" education – Thai, English and Music.

Music, as a communicative activity, has often been linked to language learning, in two ways. First, language learning is greatly assisted by music. Children learn songs and chants to aid vocabulary development, pronunciation and the rhythm of the second language. Singing together, clapping in time and performing actions to music - this not only helps students to speak and understand language better, it helps them to sustain a reasonably demanding task (such as singing a song from memory in time with others) for an extended time and with great enjoyment. People remember and enjoy repeating the songs they learned at school even into old age. And they remember the songs and tunes because music and singing aids memorization, a very valuable skill in learning (as long as we don't overemphasize it).

Second, playing and listening music is thought to develop *cognitive abilities and dispositions* that support other forms of learning and intellectual activity as well, including the

learning of language. And one does not have to have already attained mastery in order to benefit.

I have heard parents say that their musically inclined children are more likely to succeed at language than those without interest or ability in music. This is anecdotal, but I've always believed there is a connection between musical competence and language competence. With this in mind I set out recently to find what research had to tell us about the question: *Does the learning of music help the learning of language?* Notice that I am not asking whether learning language *through* music is helpful – everyone agrees on that – but whether the learning of music *for its own sake*, as an independent activity, helps the learning of language (and other things).

A brief survey of internet sites has produced the following information.

1. Children's experiences with music build vocabulary and listening skills.
2. In singing and moving to music, developing brains are fully engaged and stimulated.

3. New learning and memory have been found to benefit from music. (One study showed that music helped young children remember their addresses and phone numbers!)
4. Sensitivity to stress, rhythm and pitch – essential to development of native-like accent in a foreign language – is developed through music.
5. Phonological awareness and reading ability have been shown to benefit from development of musical skills.
6. Rote memorization and verbal learning generally benefit from learning music.
7. One famous study (the Mozart study, University of Southern California at Irvine 1995) found that listening to a Mozart sonata (K. 448) enhanced *spatial-temporal reasoning* – the ability to maintain, transform and relate complex mental images, even in the absence of external input or feedback.
8. Additional music lessons at a Swiss school (1998) were given to some children in place of other subjects. These children subsequently performed as well as their peers in all areas, and *slightly better in language and reading skills*.

9. Two years of piano lessons have been shown to significantly improve verbal, quantitative and spatial abilities of 10 – 11 year-olds in Montreal, Canada (1997).
10. A similar study in Los Angeles (1997), where pre-school children had two years of keyboard training, found great improvement in the children's spatial-temporal reasoning.
11. Understanding music requires use of both right- and left-brain functions and improves both language and spatial ability.

There is still much to learn about the possible connections between children's musical development and linguistic development. One project currently under way at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire seeks to answer the question: *Will the individual who had received early and sustained exposure to musical training as a child, be able to learn a second language as a young adult more easily than his/her age-matched (monolingual) peers with no early-life musical training?*

Still, without the benefit of research, I would suggest that most parents believe that a musical education is not just for social and cultural accomplishment (important as these are), but that it has a valuable role in cognitive development as well. Am I right? Maybe that is something we can ask our parents.

Music pervades the atmosphere of our school. From the moment children come to school in the morning, through sung prayer, performances on assembly and on special occasions, concerts and recitals, competitions and eistedfods, singing along with our "edutainers", to classroom singing and chanting and formal music lessons, music is an essential part of our school's life. We believe it has all the benefits mentioned above. Not only that, music is an essential and beautiful part of Thai culture. Music can capture the essence of being Thai, as we saw in the film, *Home Rong*. We are proud to contribute to that tradition through our music program.