

# Language Acquisition through Folk Songs in an Elementary Classroom Setting: A Case Study

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## Purpose

The purpose of the project is to examine how children from French and American cultures learn folk songs from their native and foreign cultures.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How much time it takes for a group of students to learn previously unlearned folk songs in both their native language and foreign language?

More specifically:

- a. How much time it will take to learn new American folk songs for 5-8 year old American children?
  - b. How much time .... new French folk songs for American children?
  - c. How much time... new American Folk songs for French children?
  - d. How much time.... new French folk songs for French children?
2. What are the affective outcomes of learning new folk songs (such as acceptance/ rejection, joy/indifference, like/ dislike, engage/ disengage)
  3. How are children's behavior while learning songs in their maternal and nonmaternal languages?

## Participants:

In June I travelled to Aix-en-Provence, France to complete a placement for the UW-Whitewater Early Childhood Education program. I worked with and taught two classrooms of students, age 5-10. With the classroom of ten students 5-8 years old, I taught them the ten French and American songs for my research project. Their school week was M,T,TH,F with one hour twice a week for music or English class where I taught and recorded them learning each song. I collected data from ten American children the same age range in Madison, Wisconsin, USA during a one week intensive music summer school with one hour a day dedicated to French and American folk songs.

## Materials:

Each song was paired with one of the other language, based on topic, meter, rhythm, or difficulty. The songs were taught aurally or with the aid of a song booklet where the students could follow along and read the lyrics as they sang: *Le Coq est Mort*, *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, *Alouette*, *Old McDonald*, *Frère Jacques*, *Head Shoulders Knees and Toes*, *Le Bon Roi Dagobert*, *She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain*, *Au Claire de la Lune*, *Teddy Bear*

## Method:

The study was designed using a Mixed Methods approach to research. According to Creswell and Plano Clark's (2007) designations data was collected and analyzed utilizing a Triangulation Design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, and each was analyzed. The results of the analyses were used for the final interpretation in which both forms of data informed the conclusions and directions for future research. Field notes were compiled largely related to my observations of the processes of learning folk songs from two different cultures. This included observations of the student's participation, excitement, attention span, feedback, and collected and analyzed data.

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Songs learned Aurally: *Le Coq est Mort*, *Alouette*, *Frère Jacques*, *Head Shoulders Knees and Toes*, *Old McDonald*

Songs learned with booklet: *Le Bon Roi Dagobert*, *Au Claire de la Lune*, *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, *She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain*, *Teddy Bear*

If the students previously knew the song, the lesson was shorter, about 8-12 minutes. For example, both French and American students knew *Frère Jacques* so the lesson was about 9 minutes. If the students did not know the song, the lesson was about 20-25 minutes. To assess learning of American and French songs I used a variation of "Learning a Song" rubric, developed by author of leading music assessment textbook Timothy Brophy (2000). This mixed method approach is very common for case studies in an educational setting as behavior in children and their ability to learn are closely related which are evident in both quantitative and qualitative data.

## Results

For both French and American songs, all 8 year olds in the study became proficient in at least 8 of 10 songs during the lesson. If given 1-2 more 20 minutes lessons on the song, I believe they would have mastered the two more challenging songs. The 7 year olds had similar results but for the hardest of their nonmaternal songs, they would have needed at least two, probably three more 20 minute lessons to master it (*She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain*, or *Le Bon Roi Dagobert*). For the 5 and 6 year olds, they were able to learn their native language's songs within the single lesson, but for the nonnative songs they hadn't previously heard, they were able to learn the melody proficiently or almost proficiently, but they were unable to pronounce or remember most of the lyrics.

In regard to qualitative data, both French and American children were more engaged and had overall better behavior (following directions, participating, not causing distractions for themselves or classmates, etc.) during the American song lessons. For the American children, they were more engaged because they knew the songs well and wanted to go through them quickly in order to move on to other activities. The French children seemed more engaged during the American songs because they often complained or disengaged during the French songs because they "already knew them" or they were "boring" to them.

## Conclusions

I found that children learn and react to their maternal and non-maternal language songs in very similar ways even with language, cultural, and nationality differences. The most distinct differences were between age groups (e.g. the 5 year old children performed and learned at a different level than their 8 year old classmates in both countries). 5-6 year old children need two to five short lessons focusing on a single song (40-100 minutes of instruction) to reach mastery whereas 7-8 year old children only need one to three (20-60). Many children enjoyed learning new songs in their nonmaternal language even if they could not reach mastery. In learning new songs in their maternal language, all children seemed indifferent. However, when asked which songs they would like to sing, the French children mostly asked for maternal language songs whereas the American children asked for a variety of maternal and nonmaternal.