

A Positive Transfer of Music Literacy to English Acquisition for College Music Majors

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Abstract: English plays an important role in promoting English language application and cross-cultural communication for college music majors. The similarities between music and English provide an effective way for college music majors to learn English well. Music literacy can be transferred to English learning and promote college music majors to acquire English positively in listening, speaking and reading.

Keywords: music literacy, English acquisition, positive transfer

Introduction

The *College English Teaching Guide* argued that “college English is designed to cultivate students’ ability to use English accurately, enhance their awareness of cross-cultural communication, develop their self-learning ability, and improve their comprehensive cultural qualities, so that they can use English effectively in their studies, lives, and future work, and meet the needs of national, social, school, and personal development.”^[3] For college music majors, college English courses not only enhance their abilities of using English as a tool, such as listening, speaking, and reading, but also cultivate their cultural literacy, as well as comprehensive development.

As a public compulsory course for college music majors, the current situation of learning English in universities is not optimistic. Firstly, college students majoring in music are not interested in English, let alone enthusiastic about learning English. Secondly, college music majors spend most of their time studying music courses, and their time spent in English learning is so limited that they cannot meet their expectations of learning English. Finally, their overall English level in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation is relatively low, which seriously affects and restricts their cultural learning and their improvement in personal comprehensive qualities. Actually, the reason for this is that college students majoring in music have not discovered the similarities and commonalities between music and English, and they have not realized the music literacy acquired in their music learning can be transferred positively to English learning to help them grasp the English language much more easily and successfully.

English and music have similar intrinsic characteristics such as pitch, intensity, duration, tone and pause. Qian Guanlian pointed out that “it is because there are two basic elements of music in phonetics — melody and rhythm — that musical beauty is expressed”.^[2] Therefore, music is the foundation for the formation of a language, and the mechanism of music acquisition is the foundation for language acquisition. English, as a phonetic system composed of vowels and consonants, long and short vowels, stressed and unstressed syllables, inherently possesses the musical beauty of rhythm and melody. The unique professional qualities of music majors, such as sensation, discrimination, memory, change, and expression of rhythm, pitch, and melody, can serve as prerequisites and superior conditions for promoting English learning, promoting the positive transfer of music literacy to English acquisition.

Music literacy refers to the receptive and productive music abilities of college music majors. English phonetic ability includes receptive English segmental ability, productive English segmental ability, receptive suprasegmental English ability, and productive suprasegmental English ability. The receptive music ability is the ability to distinguish the similarities and differences in tones and

rhythms of musical phrases. Productive music ability refers to the ability to imitate pitch and rhythm patterns. Pei Zhengwei believed that “musical ability has a positive impact on improving English pronunciation ability”^[1]. In English teaching, utilizing the music skills, or music literacy, college music majors can enhance their ability to master English phonetics (phonetics, word stress), especially the ability to input and output in suprasegmental English abilities (sentence stress, intonation, and liaison), which can get twice the result with half the effort and achieve a positive transfer of music professional literacy to English acquisition.

1. Positive transfer of music professional literacy to spoken English

Music literacy can enhance the English segmental ability of college music majors. In the phonetic learning process, taking advantage of their familiarity with articulatory organs, places of the tongue, and mouth shapes, students can learn to distinguish, imitate and master the authentic and standard phonetics from English phonetic teaching videos, laying a firm foundation for vocabulary reading. In the process of reading words, utilizing the musical expertise in pitch, intensity and duration, college music students can master the characteristics of words such as stressed vowels, unstressed consonants, strong stressed syllables, weak unstressed syllables, long vowels, and short vowels. Especially for polysyllabic words, college music majors can accurately read words with distinct rhythms based on their understanding of the strong and weak rhythms in a bar of the music score.

In addition, musical literacy can also improve suprasegmental English ability for college music majors. After mastering phonetics and reading words, students can further master language rules such as consonant-vowel liaison, consonant-consonant liaison (sound overlap, loss of explosion, assimilation), and vowel-vowel liaison. When it comes to unstressed syllables, the long vowels become short vowels in unstressed syllables in polysyllabic words. And the vowels in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words become the central vowel /ə/. Besides, students master the language rules such as contraction of phrases containing auxiliary verbs. After mastering these language rules, students can be introduced to classic English songs, such as Huawei’s classic video *Dream It Possible*, analyze and explain language rules such as the weak forms and contraction in lyrics, then they can better grasp English language rules while experiencing the beauty of musical rhythms and melodies.

College music majors master the grammatical and logical stresses in sentences when it comes to sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation. Grammatical stress means that the content words should be stressed, while the functional or grammatical words should be unstressed in sentences. Logical stress means specific words or phrases should be stressed based on the expressive needs in specific contexts. In terms of sentence rhythms, English is a language composed of sense groups. A sense group is a relatively complete semantic, grammatical, and phonetic unit. Each sense group has a focus, which is the word that includes the most important information in the sense group. Like the isochronous bars of the music score, all the sense groups are read with the same length of time, or with the same duration of time. With the mastery of isochronous bars and the relationship between strong and weak beats within a bar, college music majors can promote their ability to perceive and imitate the rhythm in the English language. Then, English videos introducing excellent traditional Chinese culture, such as *Hello, China*, *Amazing China*, and *Seasons of China*, help students to feel the beautiful musical melodies, appreciate China’s excellent culture, and enhance their sense of rhythm in English. In addition, by selecting relevant movies, documentaries, and popular science films, students can dub classic lines while absorbing the profound ideas of classic art works, achieving a positive transfer of musical literacy to suprasegmental English phonetic ability.

2. Positive transfer of music literacy to listening and reading comprehension

The mastery of English language rules such as phonetics, words, stress, intonation, and sense groups by college music students can enhance their ability to understand English songs, conversations, speeches, and lectures. English songs can not only alleviate college music majors’ anxiety about learning English, but also stimulate their interest in learning English. Students majoring in music can not only utilize the rhyme to acquire new words, but also can understand the theme of songs while experiencing the melody. When listening to English conversations and passages, it’s available for them to use important signals such as intonation to grasp the important information of the conversation and understand the core content of the listening materials. Therefore, college students majoring in music can achieve a positive transfer of music literacy to English listening comprehension by taking advantage of the commonality between isochronous music bars and isochronous English sense groups, as well as the focus of sense groups.

The mastery of the sense group and its focus in English language by college music majors can help students better understand English articles. In order to express thoughts and feelings, the sentences in college English articles can be simple, coordinate,

compound. The complexity of sentence structures increases the difficulty and pressure for college music majors to understand articles. However, written reading materials are also composed of various sense groups, and all semantic groups have logical relationships with each other. After mastering the rules for dividing long and complex sentences into sense groups, complex sentences are segmented and integrated into sense groups, which help students achieve an overall understanding. In short, mastering sense groups can greatly promote college music majors' reading ability.

3. Conclusion

In short, the similarities and commonalities between English and music in terms of rhythm enable college music majors to utilize their musical literacy to promote their mastery of language rules such as English phonetics, stress, liaison, contraction, weak forms, and sense groups, enhancing their sense of rhythm in English language, as well as the comprehensive application level of English language in listening, speaking, and reading.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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