

Using songs to  
teach listening:  
what I've  
discovered  
through my  
research and  
practice.



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Do you use songs in class?

*How do you use songs?*

For what learning outcomes?



## Plan for today:

1. Background – my practice > research journey
2. What does existing research tells us about songs & listening in secondary school MFL?
3. A (new!) study on speaking & listening
4. What are the implications for teaching?
5. Ideas for teaching MFL listening using songs

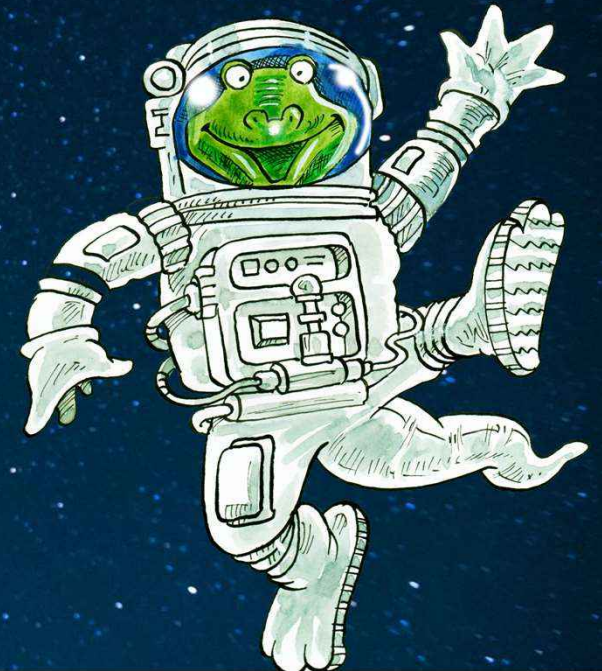


Set off on a children's  
languages adventure...

Bonjour

ciao

¡Hola!





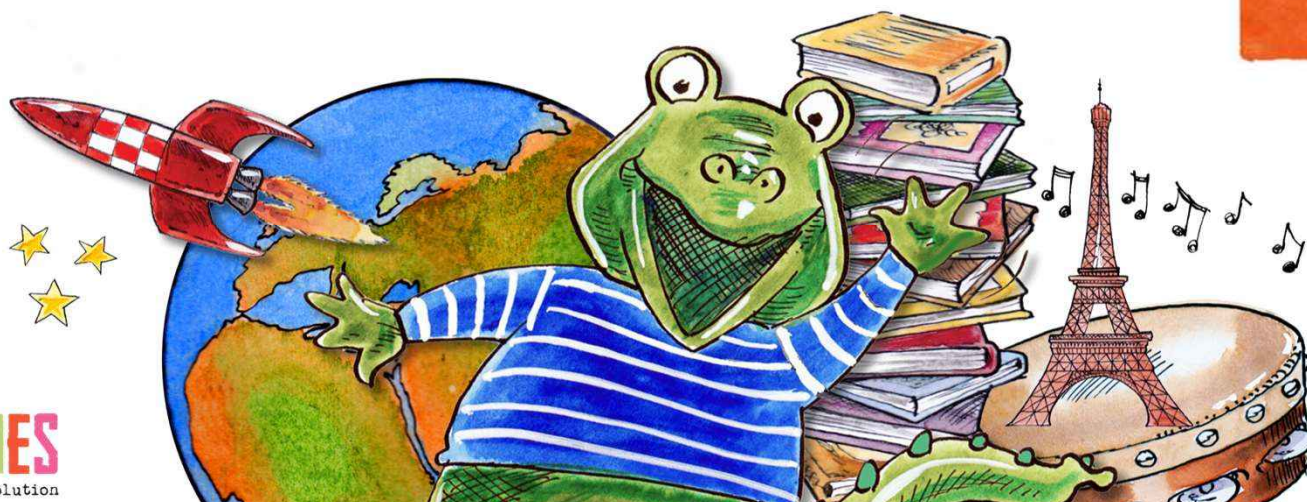






Two albums on:

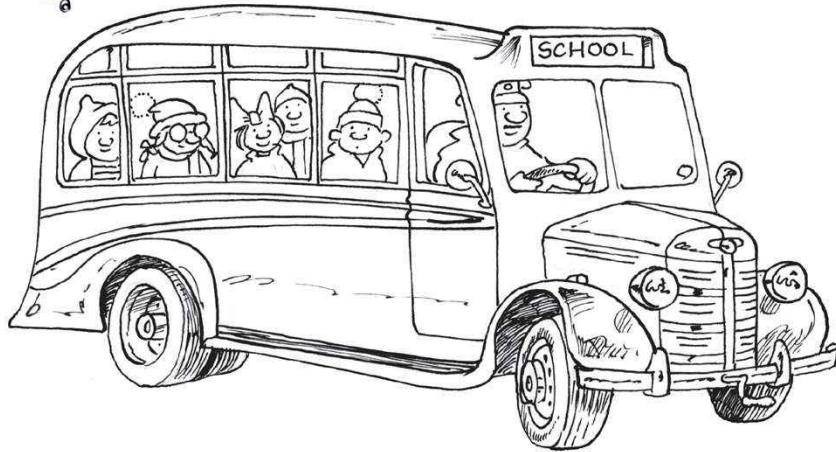
Spotify  
Amazon  
Apple  
Google, etc...



Spotify link ^



BABEL BABIES



Die Räder vom Bus rollen hin und her  
hin und her - hin und her,  
Die Räder vom Bus rollen hin und her.  
S t u n d e n l a n g.



C'est la petite bête qui monte qui monte,  
C'est la petite bête qui monte qui monte,  
C'est la petite bête qui monte qui monte,  
Et jusqu'ou? Jusqu'au cou!

BABEL BABIES



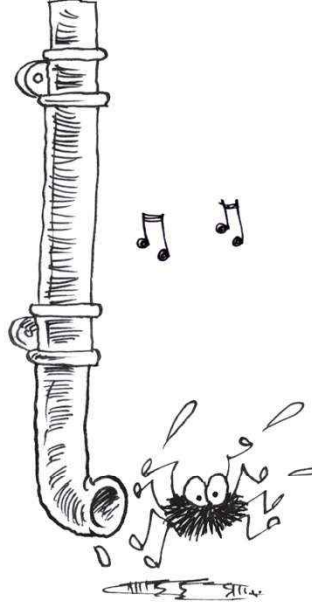


Al Incy Wincy 'Ankabut tali' 'ala-l-'amood  
Nizlit ash-shitee oo waqa' al-'ankabut  
Tal'it ash-shamas wa nashaf kul al-mai  
Wal Incy Wincy 'Ankabut tali' marra tenya

الاييسي وينسي عنكبوت طلع على العمود  
نزلت الشتي ووقع العنكبوت  
طلعت الشمس ونشف كل المي  
والاييسي وينسي عنكبوت طلع مرة ثانية

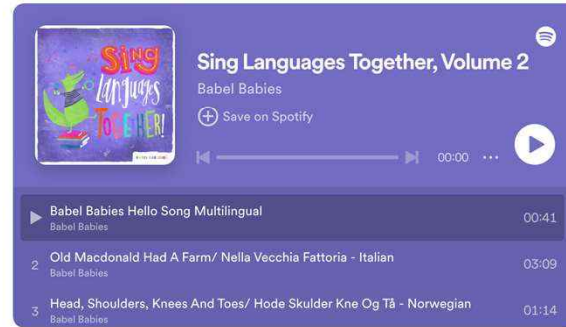
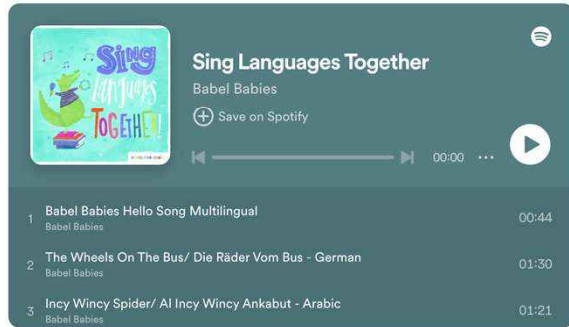


BABEL BABIES



Hode, skulder, kne og tå, kne og tå  
Hode, skulder, kne og tå, kne og tå  
Øyne, ører, kinn å klappe på  
Hode, skulder, kne og tå, kne og tå.

BABEL BABIES





# Folk pedagogy? How and why do UK teachers use songs in early education?

Scan for link to full paper >



Songs are part of the “**fabric**” of children's early education.

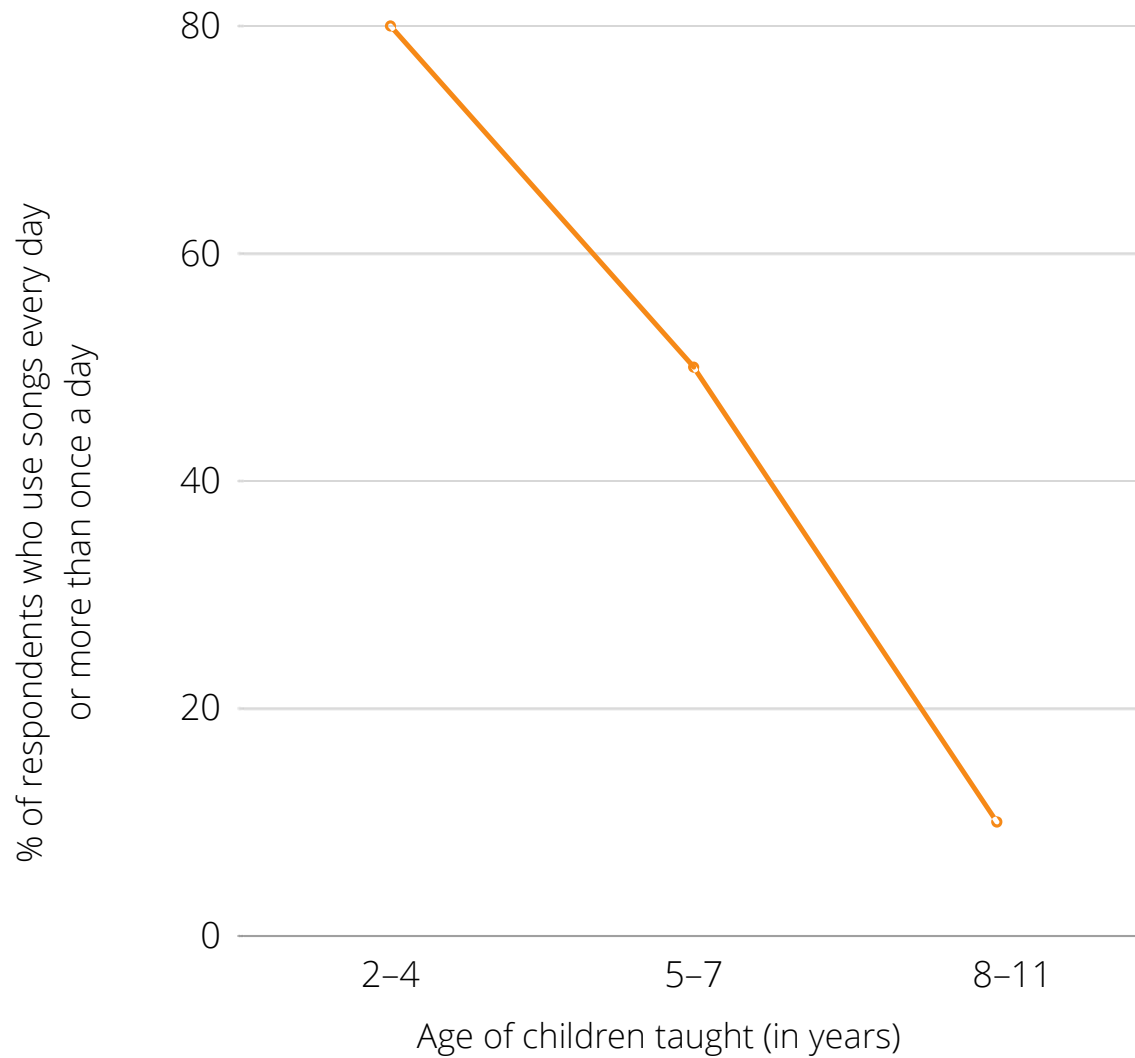
In EYFS, songs are used frequently as **stand-alone** activities, incorporated into **routines** and **rituals**, or as part of other activities. In KS1/2, songs appear less frequently but are used for **topic introduction** and **plenary**, and for signalling **transitions**.

Hamilton & Murphy (2023)

\*online survey of 103 EYFS/primary practitioners in the UK, followed by 7 semi-structured interviews

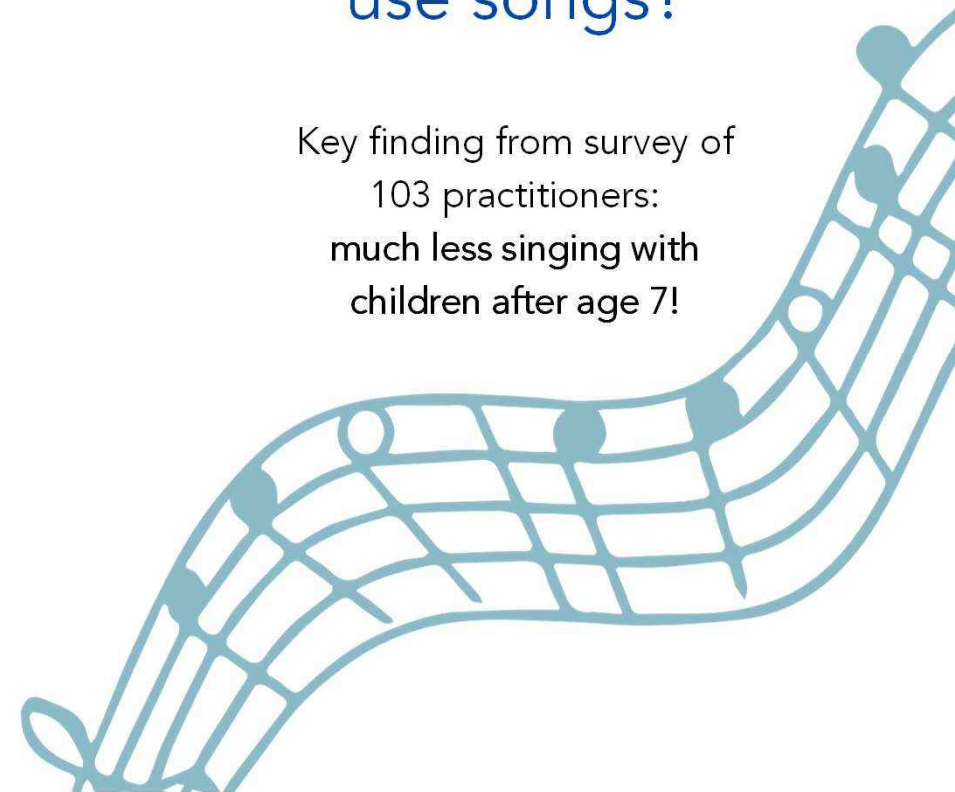


Key findings →



## How often do early education teachers use songs?

Key finding from survey of 103 practitioners:  
much less singing with children after age 7!





# Songs & foreign language teaching in primary school

"...words just go in your head without thinking about it when you learn through a song."

KS2 languages teacher interviewed in Hamilton & Murphy (2023)

Songs in KS2 (age 7+) language lessons appear to buck the 'less frequent' trend of general teaching.

## Songs frequently used for teaching languages

According to a survey of 4,696 English teachers of young learners in 144 countries by Garton, Copland & Burns (2011), 67% of teachers use songs 'every lesson or often' compared to 42% using stories as frequently to teach EFL.



Valued teaching practice.  
What's the research literature like? →

# Songs useful for –

*“multiple pedagogical benefits”*

Albaladejo et al., (2018)

## FORSTER (2006)

Increased vocabulary; learning classroom routines; improved pronunciation, rhythm and intonation; memorisation of longer word strings; and laying foundations for grammatical analysis.

## PAQUETTE AND RIEG (2008)

Supporting diverse learners to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; transforming classrooms into emotionally, socially, academically thriving environments; encouraging strong social bonds; laying foundations for grammatical rules; introducing concepts and conventions of the printed word; lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1982); developing spoken automaticity; preparing students to meet authentic language through song lyrics; extending vocabulary and comprehension; enhancing cultural awareness; practising pronunciation; memorising vocabulary; motivating learners; promoting critical thinking; and promoting classroom-community cohesion.





# Evidence reviews: inconclusive

→  
Davis (2017)  
searched for  
combinations of  
“young learners”,  
“songs” and  
“music”

## 9 STUDIES FROM 8 COUNTRIES

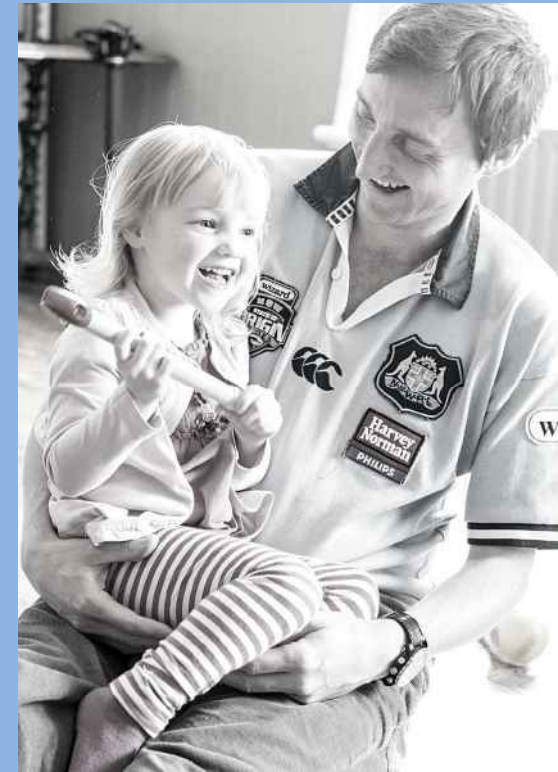
Davis' (2017) much-cited literature review for empirical, class-based studies with 3–12-year-olds worldwide. None found in UK. Main L2 = English. Only 2 studies isolated songs as independent variable (Campfield & Murphy, 2013; Davis & Fan, 2016).

## VOCABULARY

6 of the studies focused on vocabulary acquisition, with varying results. Methods & participants too varied/evidence too scant to make generalisations.

## OTHER ASPECTS

Motivation (5/9 studies) but measures unreliable.



Further reviews by Sposet (2008) and Werner (2020) do not include formal appraisal of study quality, hence study bias cannot be evaluated and firm or meaningful conclusions about songs' effectiveness as L2 pedagogy are not possible.

BACKGROUND

PHASE 1



# Systematic review of intervention research

72% (n=43) peer-reviewed journal articles  
28% (n=17) theses (n=3 master's, n=14 doctoral)

Published from 1978 – 2021 (47 since 2009).

23 countries

83% (n=50) studies published in English, followed by Korean (5), Spanish (4), and French (1)



## Low cumulative confidence

3 of 60 studies received 'low risk of bias' quality appraisals.

Evidence in many studies of:

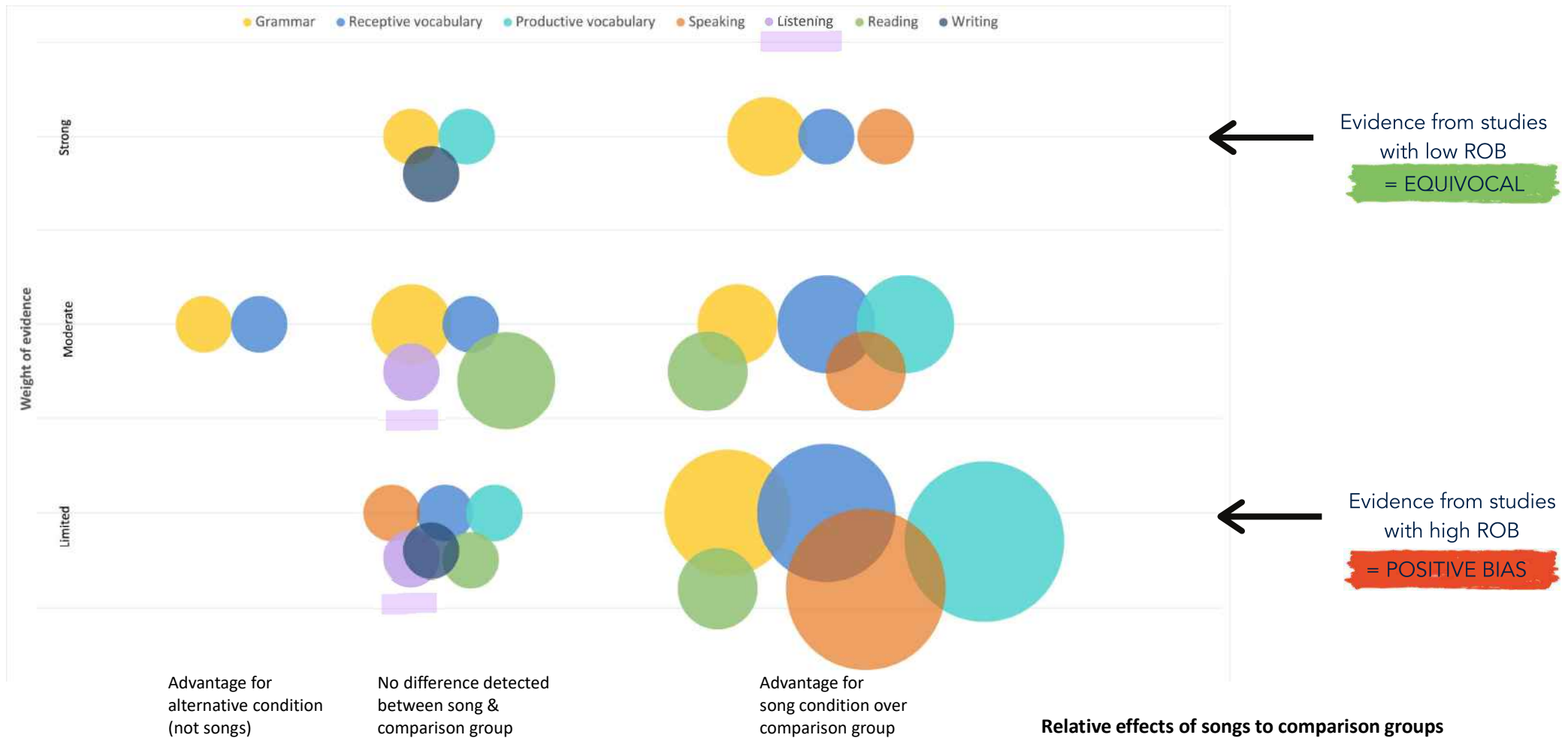
- failure to define research questions
- failure to report how data addresses research questions
- failure to use appropriate measurements, e.g., standardised or validated instruments
- failure to account for confounders in design and analysis

Scan for link to full paper >





## Reported effect of singing and weight of evidence



# Two studies include measures of listening outcomes in secondary schools

Alley (1988) – PhD, in the USA, with 47 students in their regular class groups

- 5 weeks of weekly Spanish where text was spoken in one group or sung in the other, with teacher playing guitar & singing
- End of unit test every Friday (content either sung or spoken, depending on group)
- Comprehensive end-of-treatment exam testing global listening comprehension of content from whole 5-unit course, through narrative or dialogue only (no sung presentation).

No difference between sung and spoken groups on the end-of-treatment listening exam of all content, according to the statistical tests.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR THE 5 UNITS

...distinguish between questions and statements, recognize certain interrogative words, understand certain expressions of location, recognize: certain verbs of action, expressions of personal introduction, expressions of age, expressions of nationality, vocabulary related to work and professions, and distinguish between expressions of like and dislike, series of ordinal numbers, vocabulary related to different types of businesses and the merchandise sold there, distinguish between the singular and plural endings of nouns, recognize expressions of weather, expressions of dates, expressions which describe certain seasonal activities, expressions for telling the time of day, cardinal numbers from 1-100, vocabulary items related to food and restaurants a task.

# Two studies include measures of listening outcomes in secondary schools

LeBrun (2019) – PhD, in the USA, with 142 junior high/high school students in their regular class groups

- 15 lessons.
- Song experimental group watched 1 music video per day. Captions to introduce vocab, grammar, reading & listening skills. Then followed curriculum textbook.
- Control group just followed the textbook, and used audiolingual method to listen to & repeat the material

Listening test:

10 points for yes / no questions based on a three-minute audio recording.

Example: "Circle Sí if the statement pertains to a summer activity. Circle No if it does not. The audio recording states, 'Yo voy a la playa y tomo el sol.' (I go the beach and sun tan.)"

No difference found between groups on statistical tests.



RQ: What are the effects of presenting and rehearsing linguistic input in the form of songs, chants or stories compared to:

- i) a business-as-usual control condition and
- ii) to each other

on beginner primary school French learners' performance in an elicited imitation task?

## PARTICIPANTS

Two schools in south-west England:

- One suburban (n=67)
- One inner-city (n=29)
- Total n=96

Year 3 beginner French learners aged 7–8 years



## STUDY OVERVIEW

3 EXPERIMENTAL AND 1 CONTROL GROUP (N=96, 24 PER GROUP)

1.

SONG:  
24 TRADITIONAL  
FRENCH SONGS WITH  
MELODIES

2.

CHANT:  
THE SAME SONGS  
WITHOUT MELODIES

3.

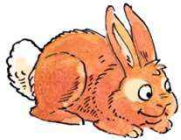
STORY:  
11-PART NARRATIVE THAT  
MATCHES THE SONGS FOR  
VOCABULARY, REPETITION  
AND GRAMMATICAL  
STRUCTURES

4.

CONTROL:  
'BUSINESS-AS-USUAL'  
FRENCH LESSONS  
(ADAPTED FROM  
PRIMARY LANGUAGES  
NETWORK MATERIALS)

## SONG

Mon petit lapin a bien du chagrin.  
Il ne saute plus, il ne danse plus.  
Saute saute saute, mon petit lapin.  
Saute saute saute, tu auras du thym.



## CHANT

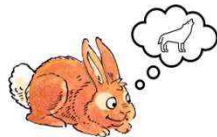
Mon petit lapin a bien du chagrin.  
Il ne saute plus, il ne danse plus.  
Saute saute saute, mon petit lapin.  
Saute saute saute, tu auras du thym.



## STORY



- » Dans la forêt lointaine, il était un lapin, un hibou et un coucou.
- » "Coucou. Coucou," dit le coucou du haut de son grand chêne.
- » "Promenons-nous dans les bois?"
- » "Jusqu'où?"
- » "Jusqu'au Jean Petit qui danse."
- » "Si le loup y était, il nous mangerait."
- » "Le loup n'y est pas. Il nous mangera pas. On y va."



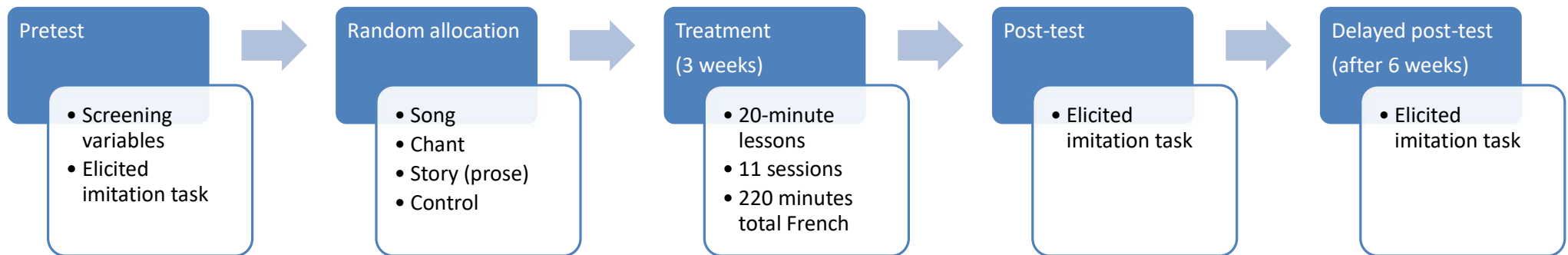
## CONTROL

C'est un  
lapin





# Experimental design: repeated measures





### SCREENING VARIABLES

1. NON-VERBAL IQ (WASI MATRIX REASONING; PEARSON, 1999)
2. ENGLISH PICTURE VOCABULARY SIZE TEST (PVST; ANTHONY & NATION, 2023)
3. CHILDREN'S RHYTHM SYNCHRONISATION TASK (C-RST; IRELAND ET AL., 2018)
4. FRENCH VOCABULARY (ÉCHELLE DE VOCABULAIRE EN IMAGES: EVIP; DUNN ET AL., 1993)
5. LANGUAGE & MUSIC BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

### MEASURES



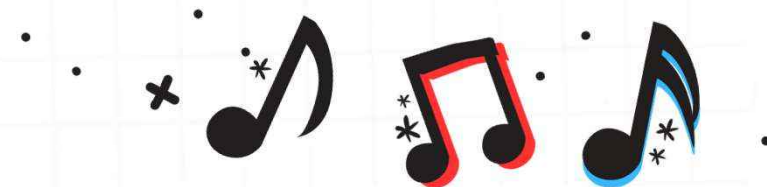
### OUTCOME

6. ELICITED IMITATION TASK:  
PRE, POST & DELAYED POST-TEST

- \* 5 PRACTICE AND 22 TEST SENTENCES
- \* STIMULI FROM 2-9 SYLLABLES LONG

SCORED 0 - 5

- \* 5 = EXACT IMITATION
- 4 = ALMOST EXACT (1 PHONEME/SMALL WORD ERROR)
- 3 = UNDERSTANDABLE (CAN GUESS CUE, 3 MINOR ERRORS MAX)
- 2 = POOR IMITATION BUT EVIDENCE OF PHRASE STRUCTURE
- 1 = NONSENSE OR SINGLE WORDS ONLY
- 0 = OMISSION





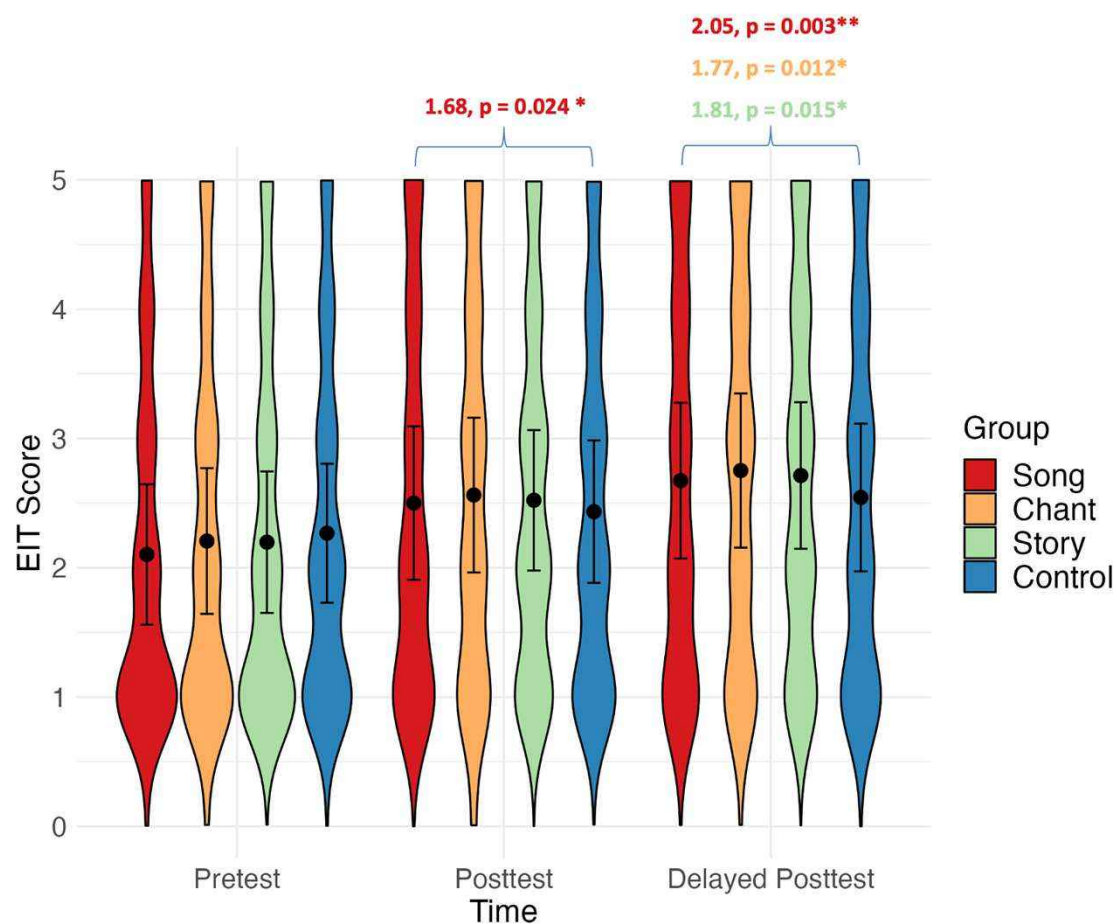
1. Pour nous
2. Que fais-tu?
3. Et puis encore
4. Il nous mangerait
5. Ton moulin va trop fort

1. Il sort sa tête
2. Il ne saute plus pas
3. Mon petit lapin bouquin
4. Ce n'est pour pas\* nous
5. Attaquons Remarquons les flots
6. Si le loup chat y était
7. Un kilomètre à pied
8. Mais ~~comme il n'y est pas~~ il n'y est pas comme
9. Du haut de son grand chêne

10. Il nous pas\* mangera
11. Savez-vous planter les ~~choux~~ roux?
12. A la mode de chez nous
13. On les plante avec les pieds nez
14. y a pas de pain chez nous chez nous pas de pain
15. Le poisson dindon n'a pas de nom
16. Il n'avait jamais navigé
17. Un éléphant se balançait
18. Pendant que le loup n'y pas\* est
19. Trois petits tours et puis s'en vont
20. Petit poisson chaton dis-moi ton nom
21. Il était un petit navire
22. Un petit poisson qui tourne en rond



## Violin plots of group elicited imitation task scores over time



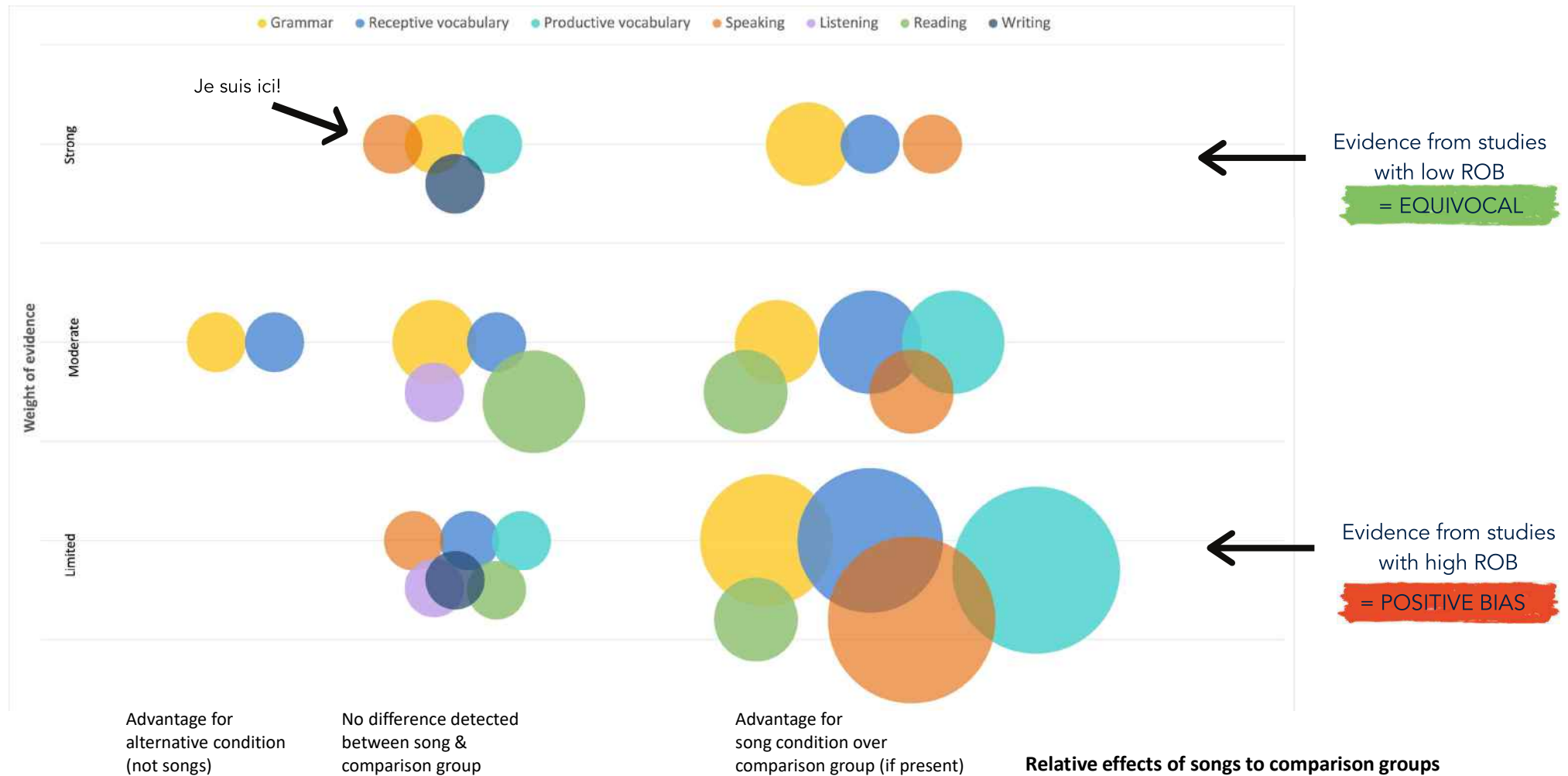
n = 94

**Everyone improved, on average.**

**Singing group outcomes are comparable (but not identical) to those learning through chanting or reciting stories.**

**The control group are there as a test of the experimental method, not of the teaching method. They had no prior access to the test materials in their input.**

## How does this change the overall picture of research literature?



# Implications of this study for teaching

Group singing, chanting or reading stories aloud were **all effective** for helping 7–8-year-old beginner learners improve their ability to listen to and repeat spoken French.

Some teachers enjoy singing, and now know children are learning new language as they sing.

Reciting chants and rhymes or reading stories aloud (the children need to listen and repeat) are also effective on this measure of progress in oral French.

Use a mixture of pedagogies to introduce new language: it's all useful!





# How can we use songs for listening in MFL?

We have little to no research evidence to claim songs are *more effective* than other methods but...some new evidence from primary school that listening to and repeating songs aloud helps with oral language development. Plus, songs can be super fun and motivating. So, here goes!

- Introducing vocabulary orally and in new contexts
- Authentic source of pronunciation – traditional songs respect music rhythm and speech rhythm so good for hearing intonation
- Hearing different voices and accents
- Provide lyrics and listen to develop awareness of what words look like written down (phonics!)
- Listen to song and reconstruct the text (cut into strips – put lyrics in order)
- Listen for comprehension – what is the singer saying in the chorus? Work out the message.
- Multiple choice questions
- Gap-filling (add the vocabulary, or focus on a grammatical feature)
- Grammar tallying – e.g. how many times does Edith Piaf use a negative in *Je ne regrette rien*?

# Resources

- The Ideal Teacher has a list of 45 songs for GCSE French:

<https://theidealteacher.com/french-songs-for-gcse-french-classrooms>

- And here are ten more French songs (lesson plans not free, & mostly cloze lyrics exercises):

<https://lalibrelanguagelearning.com/10-easy-french-songs-for-beginners/>

- Frau Bastow MFL has ideas for GCSE German songs (originally shared by Eva Lamb):

<https://www.fraubastowmfl.co.uk/post/the-harmonious-approach-using-songs-for-teaching-languages>

- I have not found a free one for GCSE Spanish, but this list is aimed at A1–B1 range:

<https://letsspeakspanish.com/blog/easy-spanish-songs/>

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