



Playful Pedagogies: Learning Through

Songs
Dr Cate Hamilton
25th March 2026



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Plan for today:

1. My background
2. Overview of research & current thinking about songs and language learning (in three parts)
3. Ideas for incorporating a multilingual, musical approach to introducing languages in early education





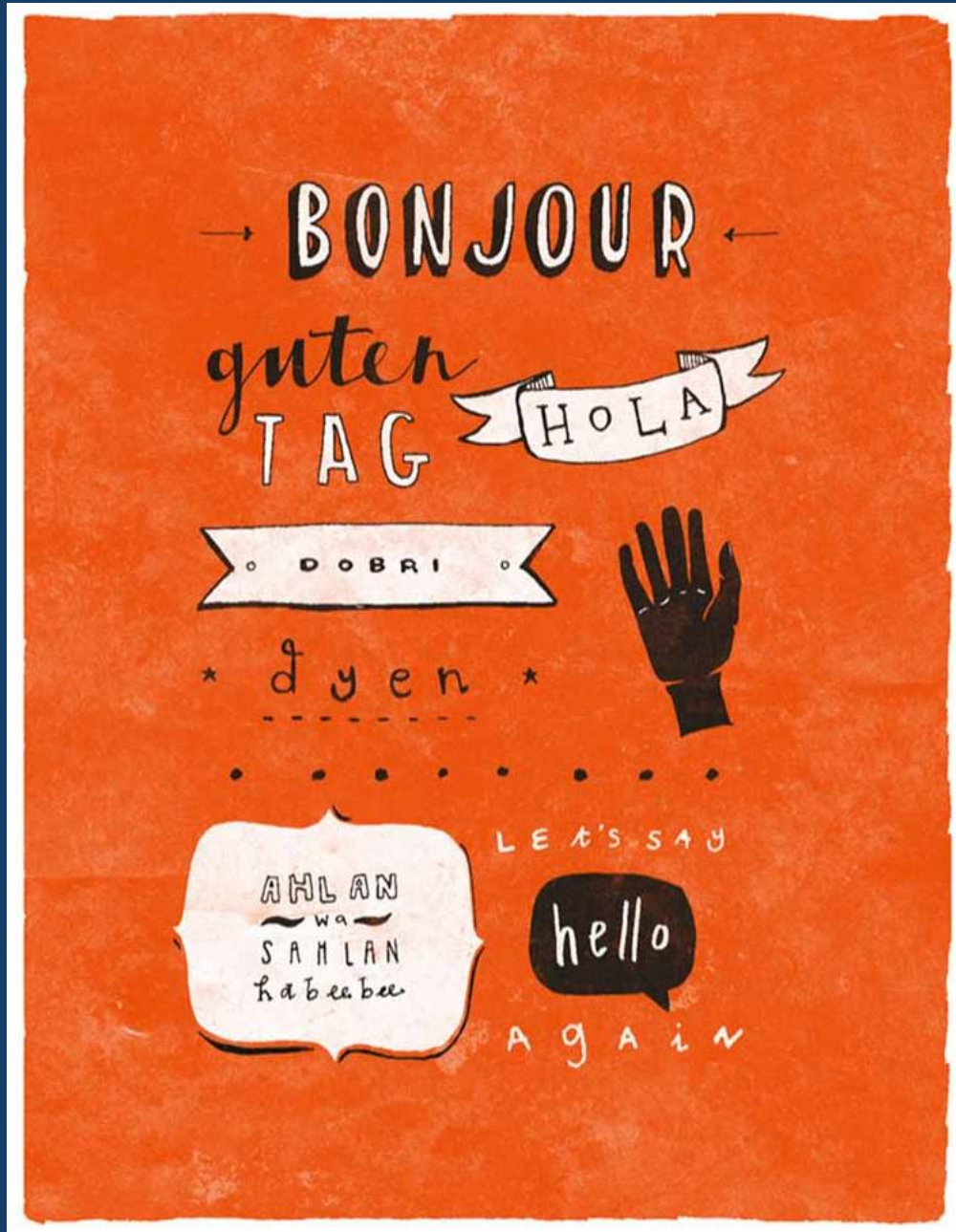
BABEL BABIES
The Little Language Revolution



Multilingualism & music

Does singing songs help children learn additional languages?

How can we research this well?



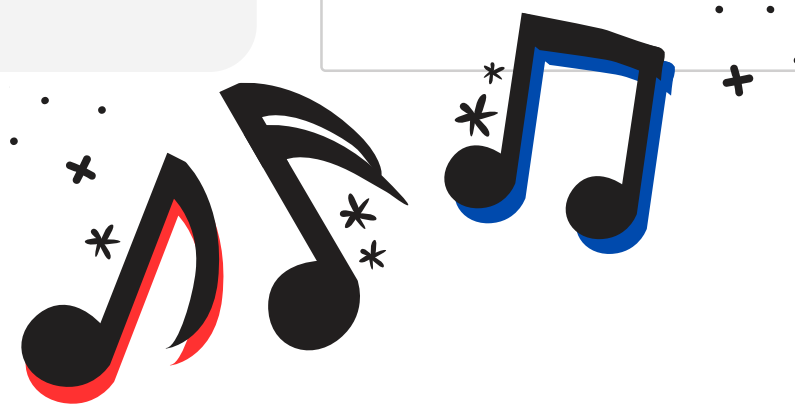
1. Folk Pedagogy? How and why do UK teachers use songs in early education?

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

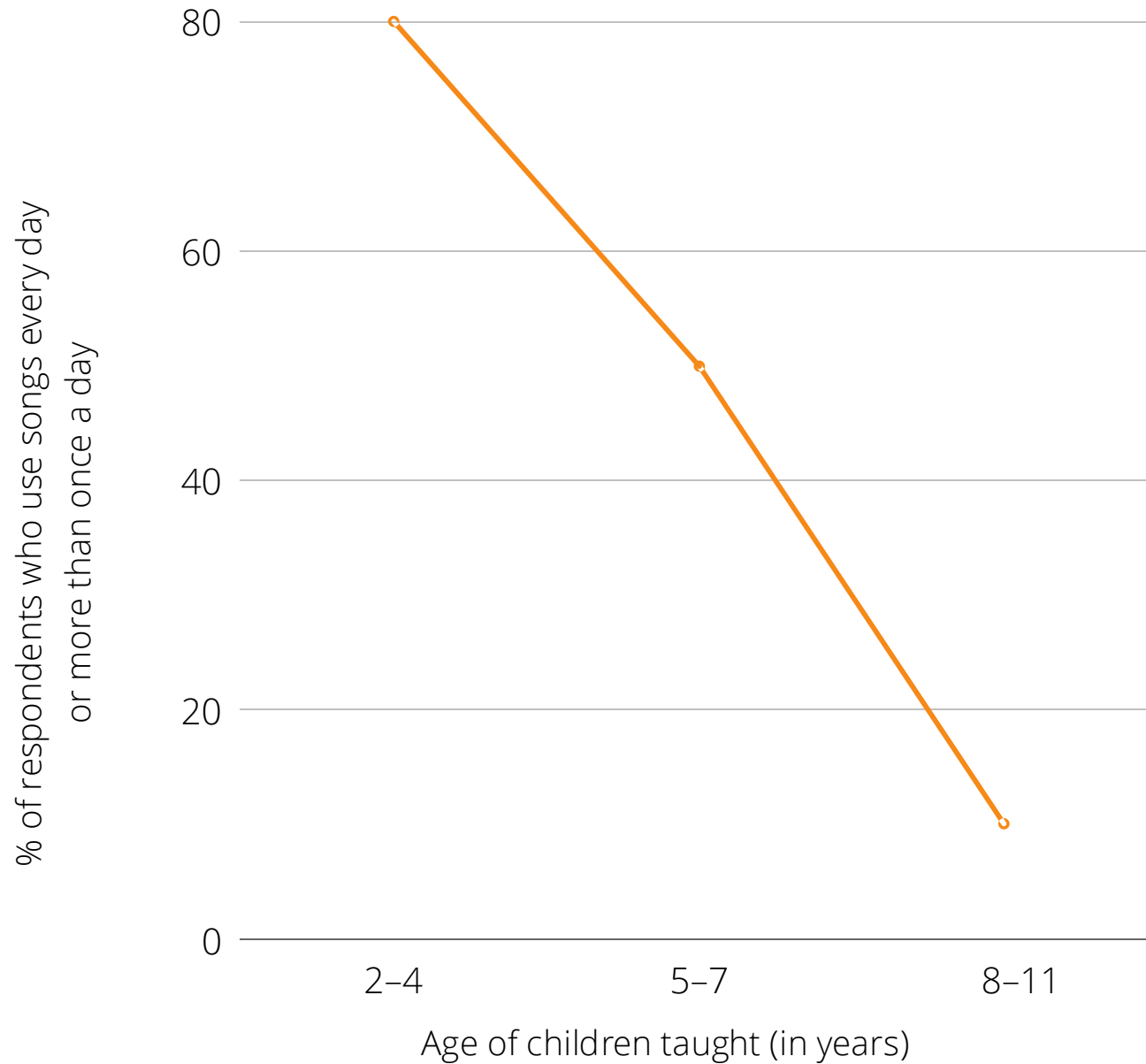
In EYFS, songs are used frequently as **stand-alone** activities, incorporated into **routines** and **rituals**, or as part of other activities. In KS1/2, songs appear less frequently but are used for **topic introduction** and **plenary**, and for signalling **transitions**.

Hamilton & Murphy (2023)

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

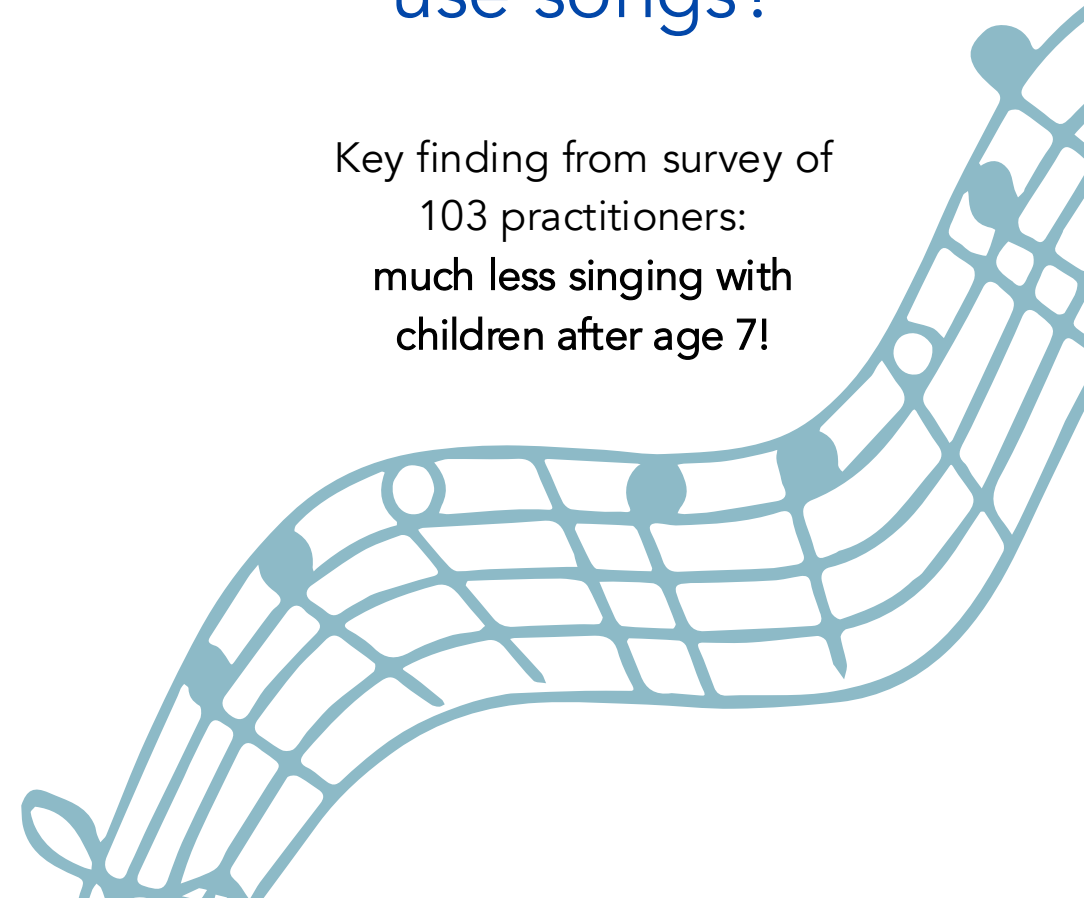


Key findings →



How often do early education teachers use songs?

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



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

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

KS2 languages teacher interviewed in
Hamilton & Murphy (2023)

Scan for link
to full paper >





Music/songs across research areas

LINGUISTIC

- Prosodic bootstrapping
- Formulaic language
- Vocabulary
- Phonology
- Evolution of language (babies/humans)

COGNITIVE

- Memory/recall
- 'Far transfer' effects*
- Automaticity

NEUROBIOLOGY

- Left/right hemisphere
- Music/language shared areas

AFFECTIVE

- Joyful environment
- Motivated pupils
- Enjoy learning languages

PEDAGOGY

- A lot of anecdotal evidence/theoretical musings
- **Where's the empirical evidence for using songs in languages classrooms?**

*Data shows one picture (i.e., **almost no effect** of music training on cognitive & academic skills **when controlling for study quality**) but the **narrative** built around music training is **distorted by cultural beliefs**.

Sala & Gobet (2020); Lin (2023)



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.

2. Systematic review of intervention research

60

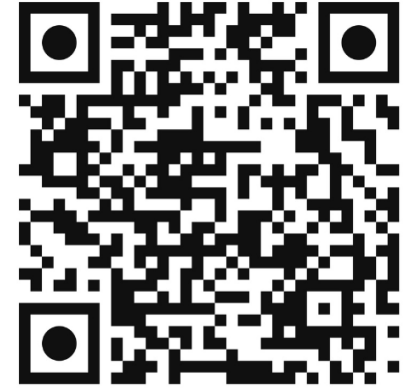
72% (n=43) peer-reviewed journal articles
28% (n=17) theses (n=3 master's, n=14 doctoral)

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)

Scan for link
to full paper
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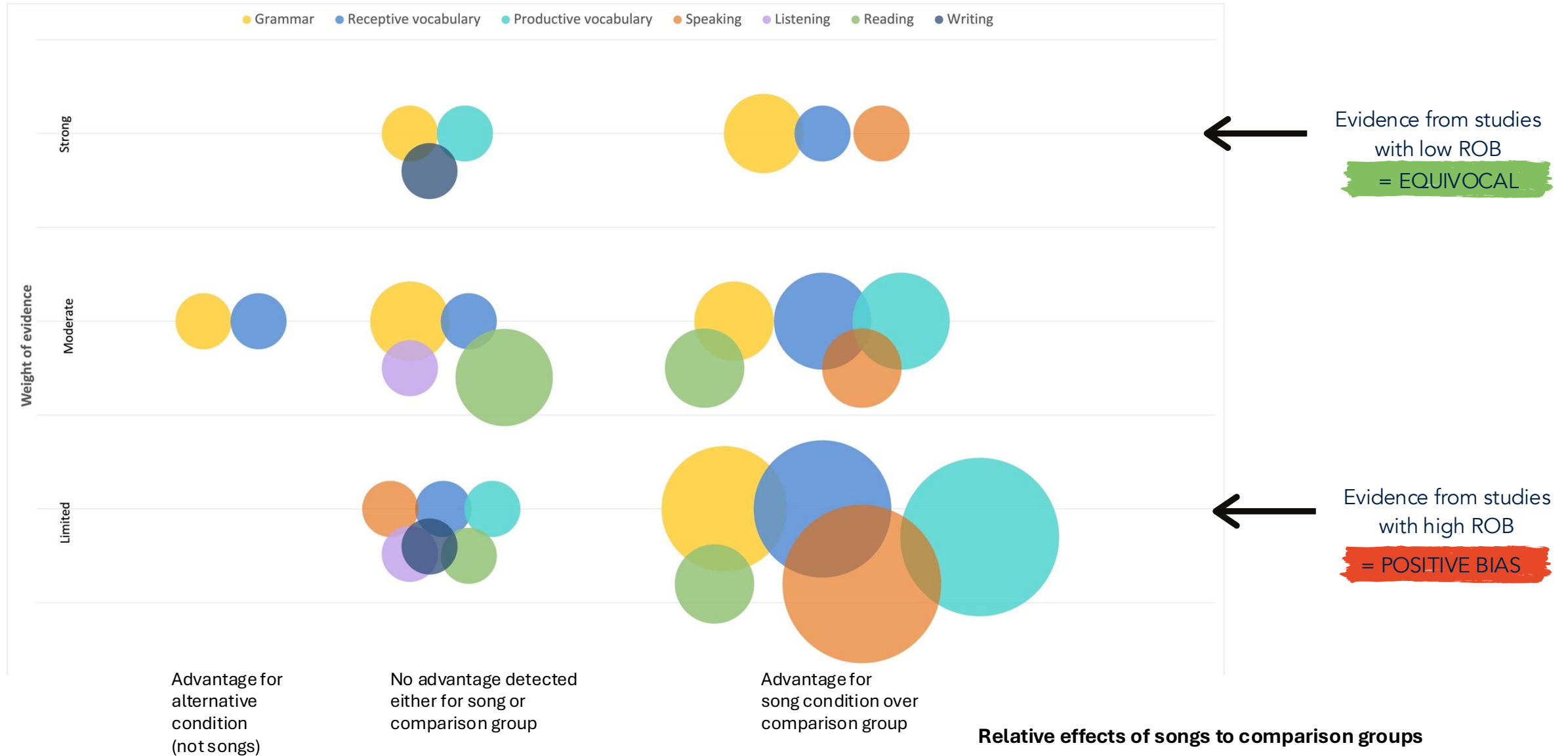
Low cumulative confidence

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

Reported effect of singing and weight of evidence

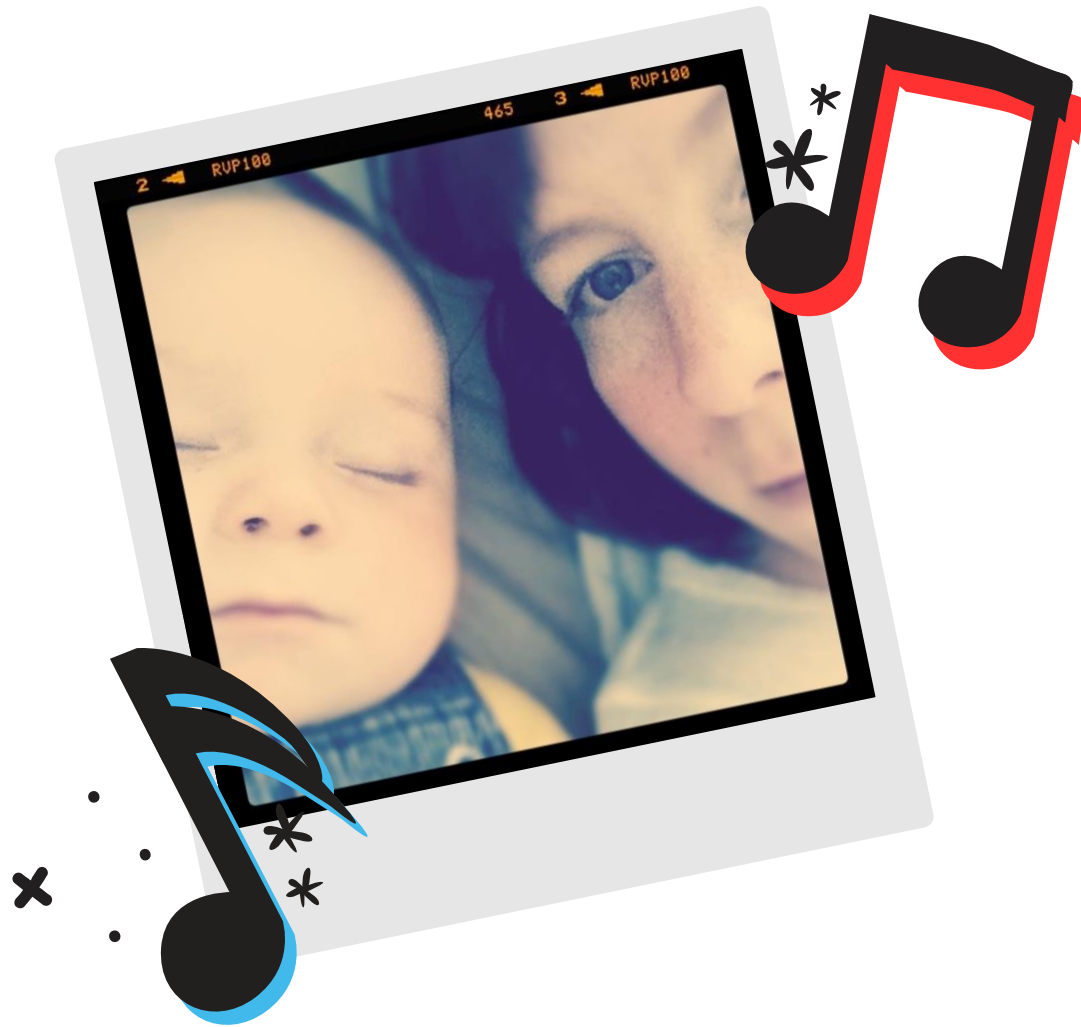


Integrating evidence from research & practice

- Songs are popular 'folk pedagogy' for FL teaching but have we gathered substantiating empirical evidence from valid/reliable studies to underpin this valued practice and causal claims that are being made?
- Basing practice solely on unanalysed intuition, rather than integrating experiential and empirical knowledge, may result in teaching becoming "merely the transmission of self-perpetuating, unsupported beliefs and prejudices."

(Paran, 2017:506)





Prosodic bootstrapping

BABIES USE THE PROSODY OF LANGUAGE TO HELP THEM SEGMENT THE SPEECH STREAM, "BOOTSTRAPPING" THEIR WAY TO RECOGNISING NOUNS, VERBS, AND LESS SALIENT FUNCTION WORDS THROUGH EXPOSURE TO COMPLEX BUT PROSODICALLY PREDICTABLE INPUT.

REMOVING PROSODIC INPUT CUES = NO "LANGUAGE" RESPONSE IN BABIES' BRAINS.

PROSODY PROCESSED BEFORE PHONETIC FEATURES.

3. Randomised trial comparing relative effects of singing, chanting and stories in primary school MFL lessons on beginner French learners' oral language proficiency

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



Scan for link to
thesis >





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

1.

Song:

24 traditional
French songs with
melodies

2.

Chant:

The same French
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



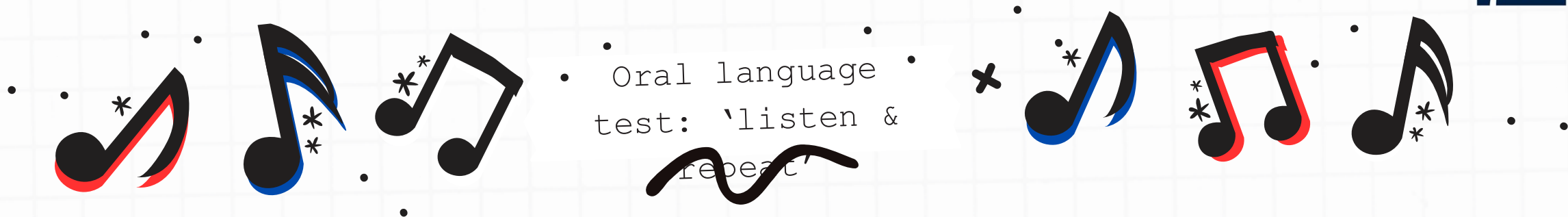
- « Dans la forêt lointaine, il était un lapin, un hibou et un coucou.
- « "Coucou. Coucou," dit le coucou du haut de son grand chêne.
- « "Promenons-nous dans les bois?"
- « "Jusqu'où?"
- « "Jusqu'au Jean Petit qui danse."
- « "Si le loup y était, il nous mangerait."
- « "Le loup n'y est pas. Il nous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



CONTROL

C'est un
lapin





Oral language
test: 'listen &
repeat'

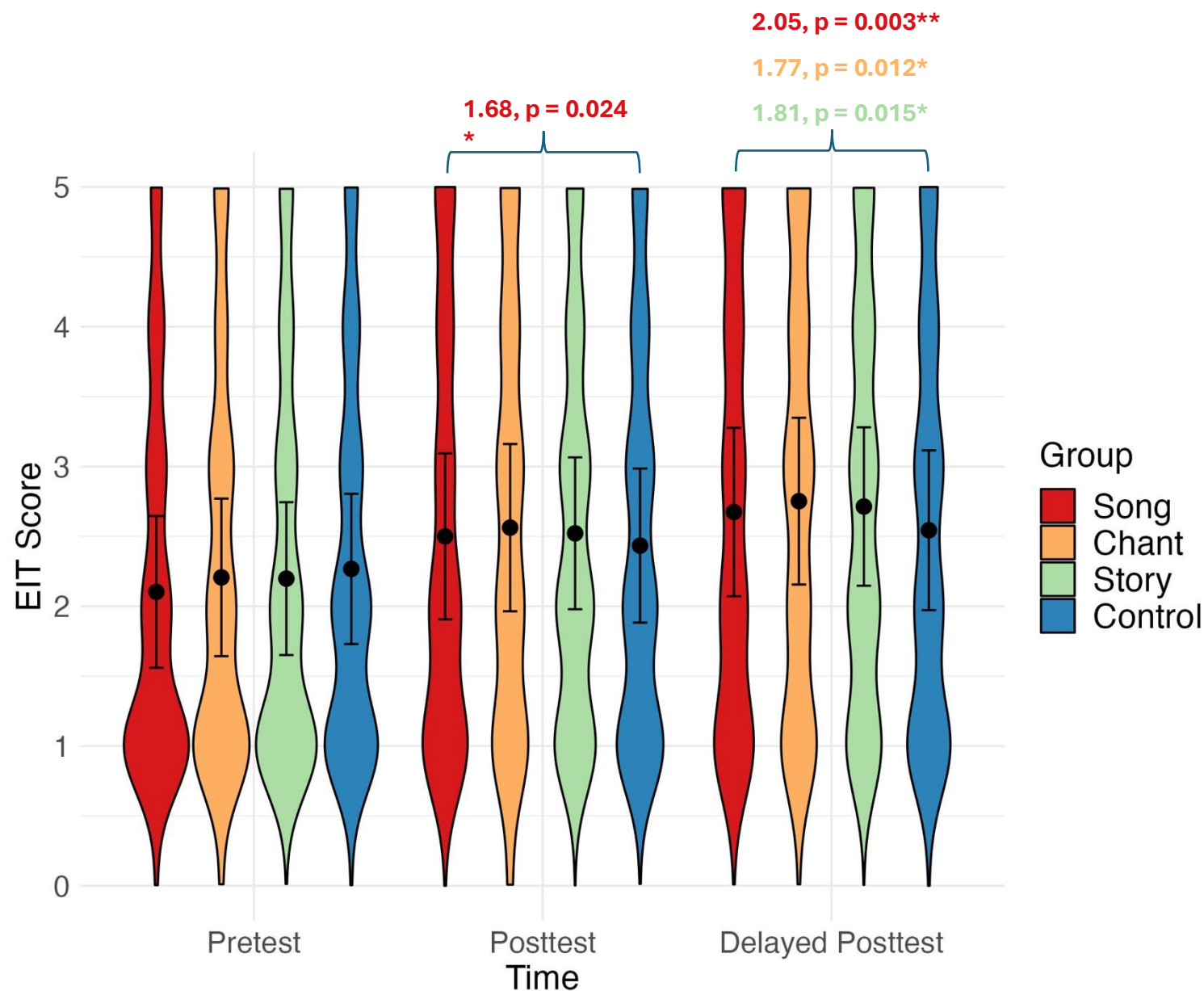
1. Pour nous
2. Que fais-tu?
3. Et puis encore
4. Il nous mangerait
5. Ton moulin va trop fort

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

Findings

All groups performed very similarly (not the same!) on the oral language outcome measure...no exponential benefit of singing, as cultural beliefs might suggest. Everyone made progress over the three measures 😊



Significance codes:
** = 0.01
* = 0.05

Group
Song
Chant
Story
Control

Reported effect of singing and weight of evidence



Implications of this research for teaching

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

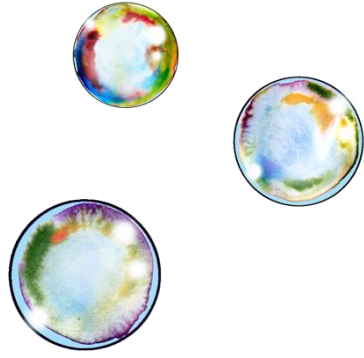
Use a mixture of pedagogies to introduce new language: it's all useful!



Scan for link to my
PhD thesis

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Some ideas from my practice



My aim was:

encouraging children's **curiosity about languages**, as foundation for later language study. Helping adults retrieve some of the **enjoyment** they reported losing as language learners at school.



Let's go on a multilingual, musical adventure!



who will you meet? amigos

amis Frindiau Друзей

友人

amiguinhos

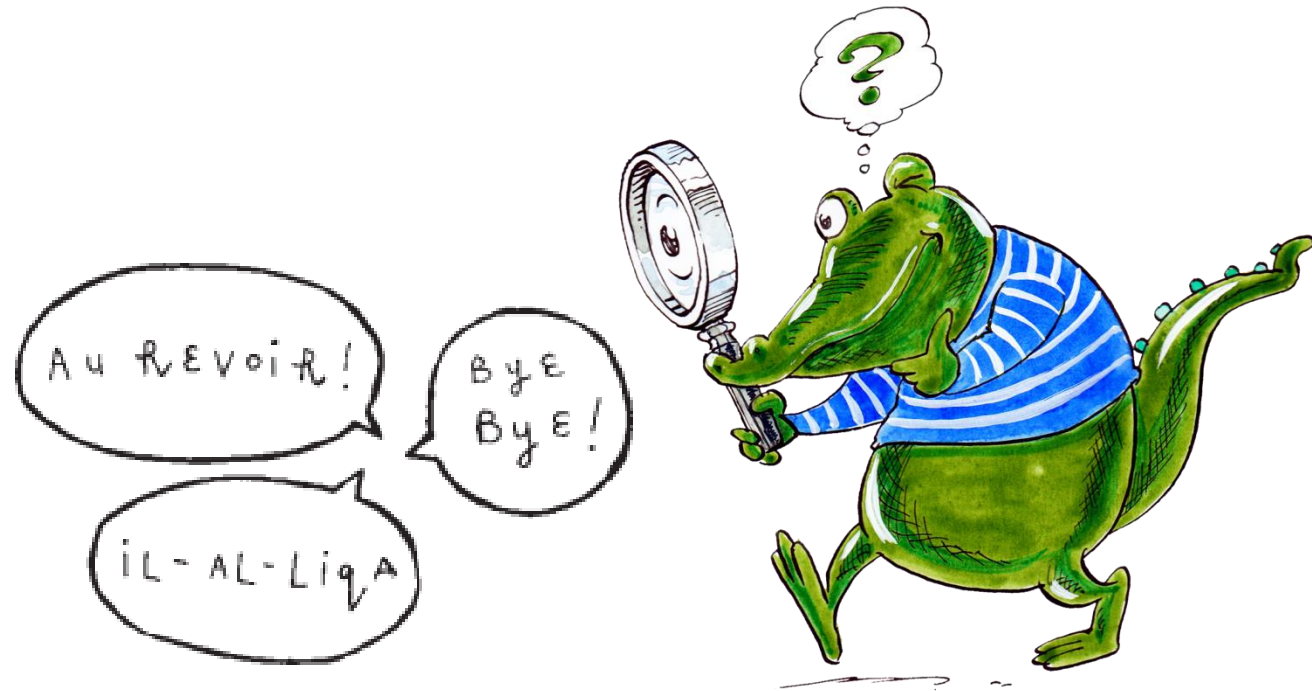
sadiq

amici

Freunde



Let's be language detectives! How many hellos can we find/sing?



Let's find connections between languages!



Добрый
День!

Guten
Tag

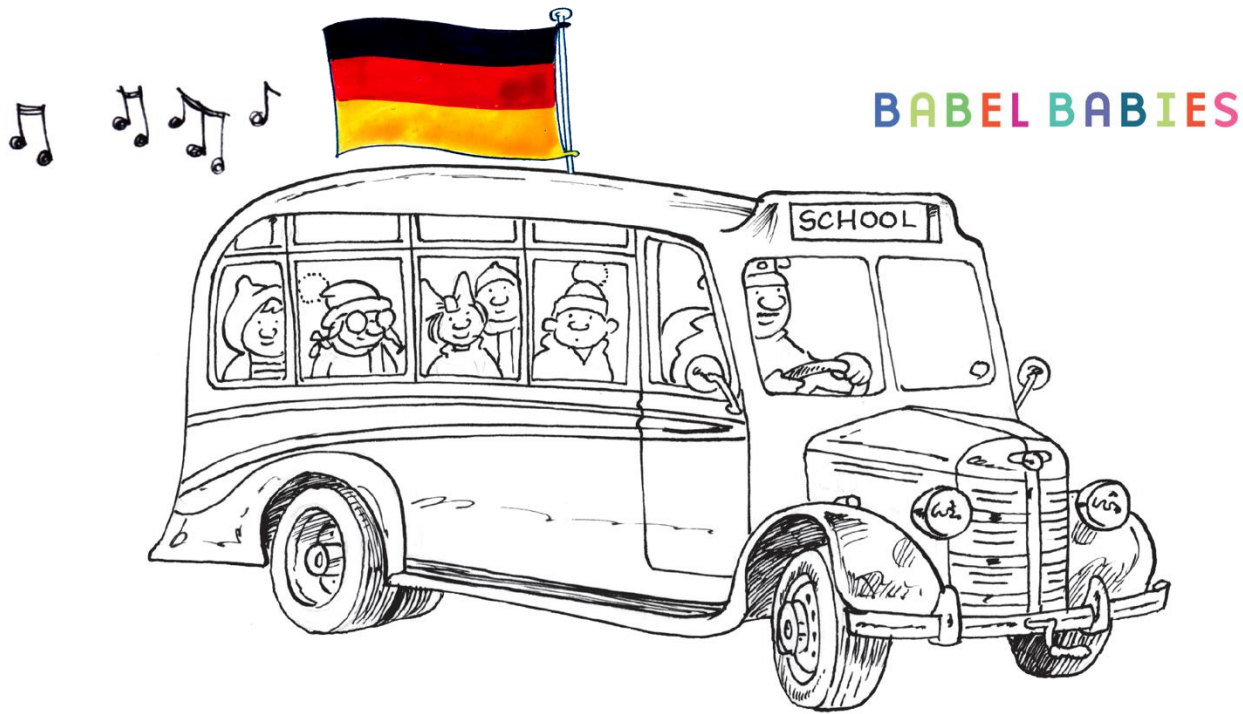
Bore
da

Wie
geht's?

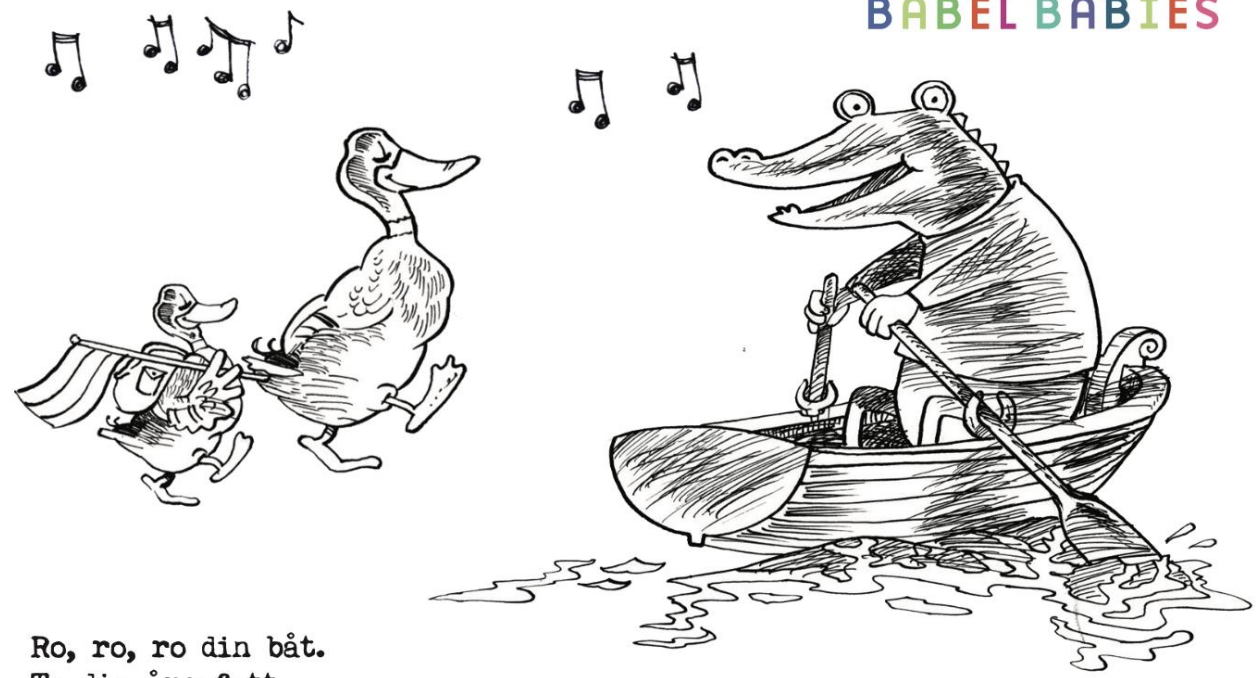


Brilla brilla piccola stella,
Quanto quanto quanto sei bella.
Sopra in cielo, piccolina,
Sembri un gioiello, bella stellina.





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.



Ro, ro, ro din båt.
Ta din åre fatt.
Vuggende, vuggende, vuggende, vuggende
over Kattegatt.

For well-known English tunes:

can we sing along even without knowing
all the word-for-word translations?

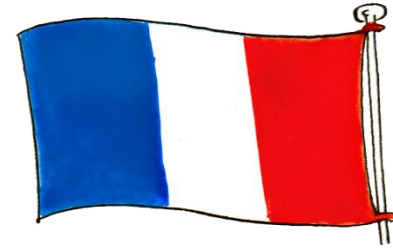
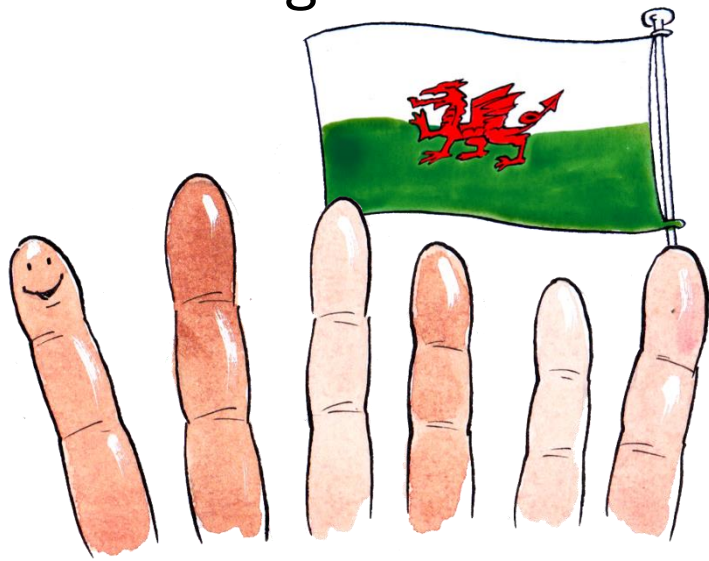
Does adding the actions, parachute play, help?



Explore some traditional tunes but make it **tangible** and **physical**.

This is a tickling song! French for tickle is pronounced 'gilly'!

Or do the 'Ten fingers dancing' Welsh song...



Traditional French 'comptine'

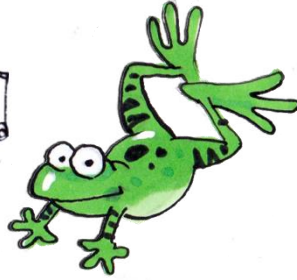


C'est la petite bête qui monte qui monte,
C'est la petite bête qui monte qui monte,
C'est la petite bête qui monte qui monte,
Et jusqu'ou? Jusqu'au cou!

BABEL BABIES

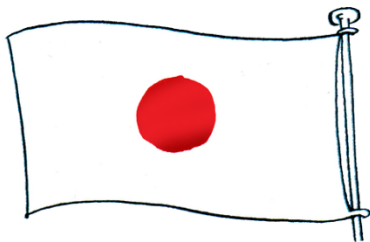


BABEL BABIES



Kaeru no uta ga
Kikoete kuru yo
gwa gwa gwa gwa
gero gero gero gero
gwa gwa gwa.

かえるの うたが
きこえて くるよ
グワ グワ グワ グワ
ゲロ ゲロ ゲロ ゲロ
グワ グワ グワ



Explore different writing
systems and mark marking
inspired by Japanese



Link to spring theme: go
out pond dipping and sing
a song to the frogs in
Japanese & English!

Can you hear the froggy song?
Would you like to sing along?
Gwa gwa gwa gwa
Gero gero gero gero
Gwa gwa gwa



Animal songs & animal noises!



- Old Macdonald in Italian
- Arabic chick song
- Russian horse-riding song
- Italian horse-riding song
- Norwegian Ba Ba Black Sheep
- Spanish snail song
- Arabic Incy Wincy
- Japanese frog song



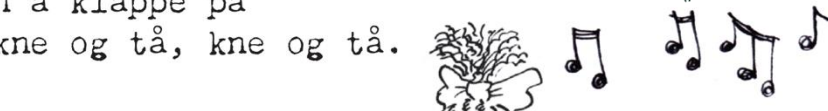
Festivals & songs!



- French *Jingle Bells*
- Spanish *Silent Night*
- German *Christmas Tree*
- French *London's Burning*



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.



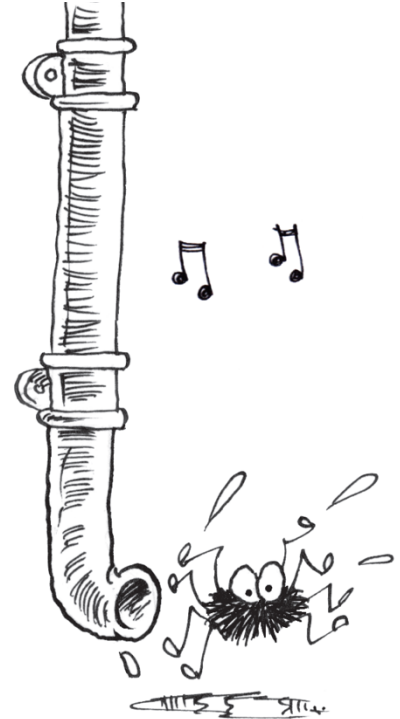
Challenge:
can you recognize these
songs and sing along?

Listen on **Spotify!**



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 تانية





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