

The Potential Value of the Orff Approach in Children's Biliteracy Development

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Abstract. Amid the large presence of Chinese immigrants in English-speaking countries, children from these families often face challenges in developing bilingual abilities during cultural and linguistic transitions. Consequently, there is an urgent need to identify effective educational methods to support the development of biliteracy in these children. This paper examines the potential value of the Orff Approach in this context, aiming to provide an interdisciplinary framework for fostering biliteracy. Drawing on theories of bilingualism and neuroscience, the study explores how the Orff Approach—through its integration of music, movement, speech, and improvisation—creates an engaging, multisensory learning environment that supports holistic language development. Specifically, it emphasizes how embodied learning, creativity through improvisation, and cultural engagement contribute to holistic language growth in bilingual children. By promoting interaction between languages and cultures, the Orff Approach enhances learners' ability to navigate and express themselves across different linguistic contexts. The study concludes that integrating music-based pedagogies such as the Orff Approach into biliteracy education offers a powerful tool for Chinese-English bilingual learners, advancing both linguistic competence and cultural identity formation. Finally, the paper suggests that further research is needed to examine its specific effects across diverse bilingual populations and to determine how the Orff Approach can be adapted to various educational settings for maximum effectiveness.

Keywords: The Orff Approach, biliteracy, bilingual children

1. Introduction

1.1. Challenges of biliteracy in Chinese immigrant children

Children from Chinese immigrant families in English-speaking countries face distinctive challenges in ESL learning, as Mandarin and Cantonese are the most widely spoken non-English languages among Asian immigrants in the United States [1]. Developing dual linguistic systems—Chinese as the first language (L1) and English as the second language (L2)—while acquiring biliteracy is complex due to substantial linguistic and cultural differences. Supporting bilingualism and biliteracy is therefore essential not only for children's psychological adjustment but also for maintaining connections to both host and heritage cultures.

1.2. Role of music in early language development

Music has long been recognized as a powerful tool for promoting children's first language development. Daily music lessons have been shown to enhance phonological awareness in kindergarten-aged children [2]. Neuroscientific research further suggests that, during early childhood, the neural mechanisms for sound category learning in music and language partially overlap [3]. These findings indicate that music can serve as an effective means of fostering children's language development.

1.3. The Orff Approach as pedagogy

The Orff Approach, developed by Carl Orff, is a pedagogical method that integrates rhythm, movement, speech, and improvisation, offering a play-based alternative to traditional music instruction [4]. It promotes kinesthetic learning by encouraging children to use their bodies as instruments through movement, clapping, and speech. Research demonstrates that when applied in language classrooms, the Orff Approach enhances phonological awareness and early literacy skills, [5] making it a potentially valuable method for supporting literacy development in bilingual contexts.

1.4. Research objectives

Despite the well-documented benefits of music for first language development, many teachers still employ it primarily for classroom routines and transitions [6]. Besides, limited research has explored how music-based pedagogies can actively support biliteracy, underscoring the need to examine pedagogical approaches such as the Orff method. This paper investigates the role of the Orff Approach in promoting biliteracy from the perspectives of second language acquisition and neuroscience, with particular attention to its potential to foster cross-linguistic transfer and emergent literacy through embodied learning and creativity in culturally responsive classrooms.

2. Literature review

2.1. Foundations of biliterate competence: L1-L2 interactions

Biliteracy development emerges from the dynamic interaction between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). The Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis posits that strong proficiency in L1 facilitates L2 development, [7] while Cook's multi-competence theory conceptualizes bilingualism as a single, integrated system in which both languages interact [8]. Translanguaging further highlights how learners fluidly draw on all available communicative resources to construct meaning in practice [9]. Building on these ideas, concepts such as emergent literacy and transliteracies extend biliteracy to multimodal practices, underscoring the importance of context. Together, these perspectives frame biliteracy as an interconnected system of languages, multimodal practices, and social contexts.

2.2. Neuroscientific links between music and language learning

Music and language learning are closely connected through shared neural mechanisms. Research has shown that both domains rely on similar cognitive structures, including those governing syntax and rhythm, and that music training can enhance phonological awareness and decoding skills by

strengthening auditory processing, which is critical for language development [10]. The OPERA Hypothesis further proposes that music training improves speech processing networks by fostering neural plasticity under five conditions: overlap, precision, emotion, repetition, and attention [11]. These findings suggest that music not only supports cognitive processes related to language but also provides a pathway for enhancing biliteracy in bi- and multilingual contexts.

2.3. Music activities in promoting biliteracy

Music activities have been widely recognized as effective tools for supporting language learning and, more specifically, biliteracy development. For example, one study used Mandopop lyrics to help a second-generation Chinese-American student improve Mandarin, resulting in significant gains in pronunciation, vocabulary, and oral proficiency [12]. Similarly, research with Spanish-speaking English learners found that music perception supported early reading abilities in both languages, enhancing phonemic awareness and word recognition [13]. In Hong Kong, early singing activities combined with book reading predicted bilingual reading proficiency in English and Chinese, strengthening phonological awareness, memory, and other foundational literacy skills [14]. Moreover, the Orff Approach—which integrates music and language learning—was shown to improve Spanish literacy among American elementary students, with participants performing better in pronunciation, literacy, and comprehension [15]. Collectively, these findings underscore the value of music as a pedagogical tool for promoting biliteracy, suggesting that its integration into bilingual classrooms can enhance acquisition and comprehension in both languages and provide a holistic approach to learning.

This section has reviewed the relevant literature across three areas: bilingual associations, neuroscientific evidence linking music and language, and empirical research on the positive effects of music activities on bilingual development. Taken together, these studies not only highlight the importance of bilingual perspectives in language acquisition but also reveal the significance of music-based methods for fostering biliteracy, thereby providing a strong foundation for exploring the role of the Orff Approach in bilingual education.

3. The Orff Approach as a tool for children's biliteracy development

The Orff Approach treats music-making as a holistic, multimodal activity, integrating singing, movement, dance, playing, speech, and listening into language learning. It fosters creativity through improvisation and composition while incorporating cultural elements that connect learners to both their own and others' musical traditions. This section examines how these features support biliteracy development through embodied engagement and creative expression in culturally meaningful contexts.

3.1. Embodied learning through movement and gesture

With its emphasis on kinesthetic involvement, the Orff Approach can promote biliteracy development by linking movement to meaning-making. Research has shown that gestures, body positioning, and peer interactions facilitate second language acquisition in elementary classrooms through collaborative sense-making [16]. Further empirical evidence highlights the embodied dimension of the Orff Approach in supporting literacy development. For example, Yuan Zhang and colleagues designed an embodied music activity program for 48 Chinese ESL learners and assessed their oral skills after the intervention, including voice imitation following auditory perception and

speech production abilities. The results demonstrated that embodied music activities positively influenced speech imitation and pronunciation, thereby supporting an embodied approach to language teaching [17]. Building on these insights, one can envision the Orff Approach being adapted for Chinese ESL children by synchronizing English rhymes with traditional Chinese movements, thereby reinforcing phonological awareness and rhythm perception in biliteracy development.

Overall, embodied movement in the Orff Approach can be understood as a core mechanism for integrating physical action with linguistic practice, thereby supporting the development of phonological awareness, speech skills, and bilingual competence within a social learning context. This perspective emphasizes how bodily engagement mediates language learning, making it more experiential, observable, and durable—particularly in multilingual classrooms.

3.2. Fostering creativity and improvisation through the Orff's Approach

Creativity plays a crucial role in biliteracy development, enabling students to use multiple linguistic and semiotic resources to communicate, interpret meaning, and express themselves in both familiar and novel contexts. Research demonstrates that creative thinking supports multilingual literacy by enhancing reading comprehension, translingual writing, and the ability to manipulate language for imaginative problem-solving [18]. Engaging in creative activities encourages learners to explore connections across languages, integrate cultural and contextual knowledge, and develop flexible strategies for understanding and producing text, thereby fostering a more holistic and adaptive approach to biliteracy. Creativity also promotes learner agency, empowering students to experiment with language forms and meanings and to take ownership of their bilingual learning experiences.

The Orff Approach offers a robust framework for cultivating creativity. Through activities such as composing rhythms, inventing new verses, improvising melodies, and experimenting with musical and verbal patterns, Orff-based lessons parallel language learning processes while significantly enhancing literacy outcomes. The emphasis on creativity encourages higher-level, open-ended thinking essential for composing new sentences, answering questions, and decoding unfamiliar words [15]. These experiences stimulate cognitive flexibility and higher-order thinking, strengthening students' ability to apply linguistic rules imaginatively. Improvisation and self-expression allow learners to connect musical creativity to language use. Consequently, the Orff Approach nurtures creative thinking while directly supporting biliteracy by enhancing multilingual competence, fostering emergent literacy skills, and building confidence in using multiple languages. By integrating music, creativity, and language, Orff-based pedagogy provides a holistic method for developing the cognitive, linguistic, and expressive capacities necessary for children to thrive in bilingual and multilingual learning environments.

3.3. Cultural engagement as resources for biliteracy

Developing biliteracy requires pedagogical approaches that actively engage learners' cultural and linguistic resources, recognizing that language learning is inseparable from students' lived experiences and social contexts. Research shows that bilingual literacy instruction reflecting children's cultural backgrounds strengthens bilingual competence, enhances motivation, and supports identity formation, underscoring the strong connection between cultural engagement and biliteracy development [19]. In practice, culturally responsive teaching encourages learners to draw on familiar traditions, stories, and social practices, thereby linking language learning to their lived experiences and fostering deeper understanding and proficiency in both languages. Such approaches

also promote learner engagement and agency, enabling students to take an active role in applying their linguistic and cultural knowledge within meaningful contexts.

The Orff Approach directly addresses this need by embedding cultural resources into music-based instruction. Its collaborative music-making activities and inclusive design allow learners from diverse backgrounds to engage creatively while fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom community. Performances and group activities further connect students with peers and local communities, reinforcing both social interaction and cultural identity. Incorporating culturally relevant music—whether through songs, movement, or familiar musical styles—enables learners to express themselves effectively, expand vocabulary, and strengthen comprehension. For example, Yang demonstrated that integrating Mandopop lyrics not only deepened cultural understanding but also enhanced language skills, creating meaningful connections between learners' cultural experiences and language acquisition [12]. These findings illustrate how music can serve as both a linguistic and cultural bridge in biliteracy development. In this way, the Orff Approach offers a culturally responsive framework that integrates music and language learning, supporting both linguistic growth and cultural identity formation.

Taken together, the Orff Approach demonstrates considerable potential for promoting biliteracy development through embodied learning, creativity, and cultural engagement. Embodied movement integrates physical action with language practice, supporting bilingual competence in multilingual classrooms. Creativity fosters multilingual literacy by encouraging improvisation, rhythm composition, and other open-ended tasks that enhance cognitive flexibility and biliteracy skills. Finally, cultural engagement situates biliteracy learning within meaningful contexts, with the Orff Approach strengthening both linguistic proficiency and cultural identity through collaborative music-making and culturally responsive pedagogy.

4. Educational implications and conclusion

4.1. Implications for caregivers

The Orff Approach provides caregivers with a dynamic framework to support biliteracy at home. By integrating music, movement, and storytelling, caregivers can create engaging bilingual learning experiences. Singing bilingual songs or engaging in rhythmic games fosters creativity and strengthens linguistic connections, making language learning joyful. Simple activities such as clapping rhythms or telling stories in two languages nurture biliteracy. This approach helps children build confidence in using multiple languages, promoting cognitive flexibility and emotional engagement while honoring their cultural identities.

4.2. Implication for classroom teachers

Schools can enrich biliteracy programs by integrating the Orff Approach into their curricula through music, movement, and drama. Aligned with translanguaging pedagogy, this approach enables students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires through bilingual songs and culturally relevant skits, fostering both fluency and cultural pride. Its emphasis on improvisation encourages language experimentation and builds confidence in language use. Professional development opportunities can equip teachers to combine Orff techniques with biliteracy goals, creating interactive and engaging classrooms.

4.3. Implications for policymakers

Policymakers should consider the Orff Approach as a valuable tool for promoting biliteracy in schools. Its integration with transliteracy aligns with inclusive policies that recognize and value linguistic and cultural diversity. By funding programs that incorporate music and movement into biliteracy curricula, policymakers can support equitable education. Prioritizing teacher training and culturally responsive frameworks will further ensure effective implementation. Continued research into the impact of Orff-based strategies can strengthen the evidence base for broader adoption, providing support for policies that nurture creativity, bilingualism, and holistic learning.

4.4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the potential of the Orff Approach in promoting biliteracy development, drawing on perspectives from second language acquisition and neuroscience. It has highlighted how the Orff Approach's features of embodied learning, creativity, and cultural engagement foster learner participation and enhance literacy skills in both languages. While the Orff Approach shows significant promise in supporting biliteracy and holistic language development, further empirical research is required. Future studies could employ controlled experiments to examine its effects on phonological awareness, reading, and writing—particularly among Chinese–English learners—and conduct cross-regional comparisons to explore sociolinguistic influences.

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