

Effects of Musical Activities on Children in Japan with Diverse Cultural or Lingual Backgrounds: Enhancing Children's Emotional Well-being

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Abstract

Recently, due to an increase in children from diverse cultural and lingual backgrounds in Japan, arts activities that help them to maintain stable emotions and strengthen their sense of self-esteem have become as important as linguistic education. This study aims to clarify the effects of musical activities on foreign children living in Japan. Nine children aged four to eight years attending extracurricular Japanese language classes participated in a music workshop. A questionnaire based on the mood checklist was administered before and after the workshop. The results showed that the positive mood state (pleasantness, relaxation) decreased slightly, and the negative mood state (anxiety) increased, despite eight out of nine children answering, "I really enjoyed myself." On individual examination, one of the children showed an increase in the positive mood state and a decrease in the negative mood state. Six children registered positive mood changes or maintained the highest score for positive mood or the lowest score for negative mood. The two children did not exhibit any productivity. Based on the results of the mood checklist and the children's individual situations, most of the children had some positive changes after the workshop. In conclusion, the results suggest that musical activities can positively affect children's emotions, and percussion performance can contribute to an increased positive mood with a feeling of satisfaction.

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of children with diverse cultural and lingual backgrounds in Japan. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), the number of foreign children who needed some guidance in Japanese increased by 1.4 times over 10 years between 2008 and 2018 (MEXT, 2018). This number will increase if the children have Japanese citizenship. The primary emphasis is on linguistic education for students to adapt to their school life. Notably, with basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) proposed by Cummins (1984), children who speak Japanese as a second language (JSL children) can acquire BICS of Japanese within a few years, but it takes approximately seven or eight years to acquire CALP. Although they can

communicate well using daily language, they do not necessarily have extensive lingual comprehension of the content of school subjects. This means that CALP is acquired through academic learning; therefore, the importance of the content-based approach has been emphasized in the school curriculum (Kawakami, 2004). For example, MEXT developed “JSL Curriculum in School Education,” which is used in parallel with Japanese lessons focused on sentence pattern and vocabulary after basic instruction, involving children in learning activities¹. The JSL Curriculum is not a panacea; in fact, Miyabe (2015) reported that there are some difficulties in structuring lessons utilizing the JSL Curriculum, because most teachers are not specialists in Japanese education. Therefore, she emphasized that teachers must know what type of Japanese is used in school textbooks.

Unfortunately, the method or budgetary measures for the CALP depend on districts, despite growing awareness of the need for Japanese education for JSL children in and outside schools. It is easier to develop language support systems such as multilingual support staff in schools, after-school Japanese language classes, or native language education, allocating a substantial budget in districts where many foreign children reside, whereas in districts with small budgets and less specialized staff, support for children is insufficient. Nowadays, after-school Japanese language classes are convenient daycare centers for guardians who are busy with their work or study. The issue of language education mentioned above is a high priority; however, we should realize that language education is not the only issue for JSL children. Maintaining stable emotions and strengthening their sense of self-esteem through the arts, including music, is of equal importance. For example, instrumental education programs in heterogeneous groups, including immigrant and refugee children in Germany, have a positive effect on children’s emotional and cognitive behaviors, and the program contributes to relieving their stress (BMBF, 2013). This program is set in the context of school education, but it is possible to plan musical activities as workshops for informal extracurricular education.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the effects of music activities on foreign children living in Japan. The following research questions guided this study.

1. What musical activities are appropriate in a workshop for foreign children?
2. How will the workshop affect children’s moods?
3. How will quantitative survey measure children’s moods?

Method

Participants and procedures

The participants in this study were nine children living in Higashi-Hiroshima City, ages four to eight. They were from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Egypt, and all attended after-school Japanese language classes². The research was approved by the head of the Japanese language classes and was recognized as part of the classes by the parents. Approximately 7,000 foreign residents lived in Higashi-Hiroshima City as of 2018, showing a higher population growth rate of foreign residents than in Japan as a whole. Many research institutes and universities attract foreign workers and international students, which relates to the increasing number of foreign children living in the city.

In August 2019, the researchers held a half-day workshop³ comprising two parts. In the first half, we organized the rhythm and harmony activities. The children clapped easy rhythm patterns and played chords using musical instruments. The last half was a musical performance, with rhythm and harmony. The workshop plan is described in detail below. Before and after the workshop, a questionnaire survey was conducted to check for changes in mood⁴. Furthermore, following the workshop, we asked them how much they enjoyed the workshop and how much they wanted to repeat it.

Instruments

A questionnaire was constructed based on the Mood Checklist – Short Form 2 (MCL-S.2) developed by

Hashimoto and Murakami (2011). The original mood checklist was developed for university students and consists of three factors (pleasantness, relaxation, and anxiety); each factor has four items with difficult vocabularies. In general, quantitative surveys using psychological measures are conducted with adult participants. This suggests two difficult aspects of quantitative surveys for children: in terms of reliability, psychological measures for adults without change are difficult to employ in surveys for children; the other is that children’s answers are unreliable because of their cognitive capacity in psychological measures. Most psychological research has recruited children over the age of ten as school-age participants (e.g., Susaki & Anii 2013; Toyama 2016). We needed to develop a specific mood checklist because the participants in this study were young children aged four to eight. The change points were as follows: (1) Two items from the original four items were selected for each factor. Specifically, ‘I am energetic,’ and ‘I feel good’ in factor “Pleasantness,” ‘I am relaxing,’ and ‘I feel calm’ in factor “Relaxation,” ‘I am anxious,’ and ‘I am worried’ in factor “Anxiety” were selected. (2) Every item was translated into easy Japanese⁵ and English. Moreover, pictures that express the semantic contents of items were added so that children could understand the meaning of questions immediately. (3) Five emojis were depicted to aid participants in responding to the question instead of a five-point scale. Figure 1 shows a sample of the mood checklist for children (MCC) developed by us. In addition to the MCC, two questions (“I enjoyed myself” and “I want to do it again”) with a five-point scale of smiley faces and two questions about the most enjoyable/difficult thing by free description were asked (see Figure 2).


2 いまの きもちを おしえてください。How do you feel now?

げんき いっぱい I am energetic. 	
ゆったり (おちつく) I am relaxing. 	
ふあん (おちつかない) I am anxious. 	
よい きもち I feel good. 	
しずかな きもち I feel calm. 	
しんばい (なにか きになる) I am worried. 	

Figure 1. Sample MCC item.

Participants circled one of five smiley faces that showed current level of their feeling.

2 きょうの かんそうを おしえてください。
Please tell me how this workshop was.

(1) たのしかった。
I enjoyed myself. 

(2) いちばん たのしかったこと
What was the most enjoyable thing in this workshop?

(3) むずかしかったこと
What was the most difficult thing in this workshop?


(4) また やってみたい。
I want to do it again. 

Figure 2. Sample of questions added.

Design of Workshop

Researchers planned a set of musical activities involving rhythm, harmony, body movement, and percussion (Table 1). Each activity employed Japanese children’s song “Tenohira wo taiyô ni (Palms Up to the Sun)” from a second-grade music textbook. In the rhythm activity, four types of easy rhythm patterns were set (Figure 3) and each pattern was played together as an ensemble. In the harmony activity, a method used in music education for early children in Finland was adopted; cord names (C/G) were matched with colors/illustrations of berries (red strawberry and blue grapes) (see Figure 4). Illustrations of each berry were attached to the melody pipes that formed the chords.

The workshop plan was designed in detail through rehearsals, so that musically inexperienced participants could be involved in the activities. However, the activities were unsuccessful because of the participants’ excitement to run around in a vast space and play attractive musical instruments that they had not used before. The workshop contents were not implemented in accordance with the outlined plan. Therefore, the workshop contents were simplified because many activities would otherwise be difficult to complete.

Table 1. Outline of workshop.

Part 1: Rhythm & Harmony Activity (40 min.)
<p><i>Rhythm Activity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Walk to children’s song “Shiawase nara te wo tatakô (If You’re Happy and You Know It)” - Clap easy rhythm patterns - Clap to children’s song “Tenohira wo taiyô ni (Palms Up to the Sun)” <p><i>Harmony Activity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stand and sit by following the instruction of two chords (C and G) using the song “Palms Up to the Sun” - Play chords (C/G) with harmonic instruments: xylophone, tone chimes, melody pipes - Play the song “Palms Up to the Sun” together
Part 2: Ensemble with Rhythm & Harmony (45 min.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Choose a percussion from rhythmic instruments (bongos, jambe, cajon, frame drum, woodblock) or harmonic instruments (xylophone, tone chimes, melody pipes) - Practice playing the chosen instrument and play the song “Palms Up to the Sun” together



Figure 3. Rhythm patterns used in the workshop.

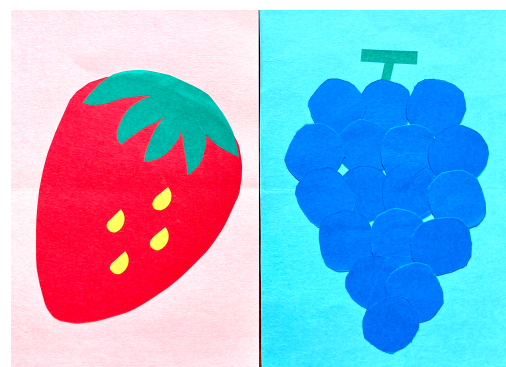


Figure 4. Cards showing chords. Strawberry shows C; grapes show G.

Results

Five points indicated a strong positive mood and one point indicated a strong negative mood on a scale of one to five with smiley faces in the MCC questionnaire. Table 2 and Figure 5 present the overall MCC results. Specifically, the mean score of “Pleasantness” decreased to 4.22, despite a high score of 4.72 before the workshop. The mean score of factor “Relaxation” increased slightly from 4.11 to 4.17, but a significant change was not noted. The scores for the item ‘I feel calm’ increased from 3.78 to 4.33, whereas that of item ‘I am relaxing’ decreased from 4.44 to 4.00. The mean score of “Anxiety” decreased from 3.89 to 3.00. These score changes indicated that the positive mood state decreased slightly and the negative mood state increased. In contrast, the answer to the question about the general impression of the workshop suggested a rising positive mood; especially “I enjoyed myself” was notably high (4.67; see Table 3).

Table 4 shows the mean MCC scores for each individual. Seven of the nine participants experienced some productive changes (shown as \rightarrow / \nearrow). Participant D showed an increase in all factors, that is, an increase in positive mood (“Pleasantness” and “Relaxation”) and a decrease in negative mood (“Anxiety”). Three participants (B, E, F) registered some positive mood changes; B and E increased in positive mood (“Pleasantness” or “Relaxation”) and F decreased in negative mood (“Anxiety”). Four participants (B, C, G, H) maintained the highest scores without any change in any factor; they showed a positive mood state. The remaining two participants (A and I) did not show any productive changes.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of MCC. (Max=5)

Factors	<i>M (SD)</i>		Items	<i>M (SD)</i>	
	Before	After		Before	After
Pleasantness	4.72 (0.48)	4.22 (0.92)	I am energetic.	4.67 (0.47)	4.22 (1.03)
			I feel good.	4.78 (0.63)	4.22 (1.03)
Relaxation	4.11 (0.52)	4.17 (0.82)	I am relaxing.	4.44 (0.68)	4.00 (1.25)
			I feel calm.	3.78 (0.92)	4.33 (1.05)
Anxiety	3.89 (1.17)	3.00 (1.43)	I am anxious.	4.11 (1.45)	2.89 (1.59)
			I am worried.	3.67 (1.56)	3.11 (1.52)

Table 3. Means of impressions after the workshop. (Max=5)

Questions	<i>M (SD)</i>
I enjoyed myself.	4.67 (0.94)
I want to do it again.	3.89 (1.59)

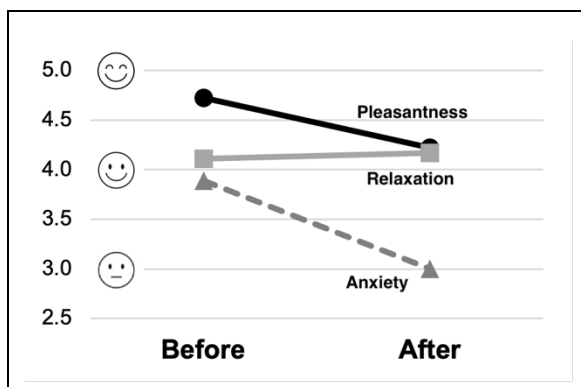


Figure 5. Mood changes in factors.

Table 4. Individual scores of MCC. (Max=5)

Participants	Pleasantness		Relaxation		Anxiety	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
A	5.00	3.50	4.50	4.00	3.00	2.00
B	5.00	→ 5.00	4.00	↗ 5.00	3.00	1.00
C	5.00	4.50	4.00	3.50	5.00	→ 5.00
D	3.50	↗ 5.00	3.50	↗ 5.00	4.00	↗ 5.00
E	4.50	3.00	3.50	↗ 5.00	5.00	3.50
F	5.00	4.50	3.50	3.00	1.50	↗ 2.50
G	5.00	→ 5.00	5.00	→ 5.00	5.00	4.00
H	5.00	→ 5.00	4.50	4.00	3.50	1.00
I	4.50	2.50	4.50	3.00	5.00	3.00

Discussion

The mean MCC scores indicated that children's positive moods were inclined to change negatively throughout the workshop. Although the research result was unexpected, it was assumed that the reasons for the result were related to individual situations. In other words, children's mood changes might depend on a particular context, such as relationships among children or between themselves and instructors at each moment, so their mood would be unpredictable. Therefore, the MCC might have some limitations in grasping children's moods precisely, as they might have difficulty showing their own mood states in accordance with psychological measures.

Focusing on two children who did not have a productive change, the first was less motivated to join the work because the instructor told them to handle the instruments carefully, and the second became irritable because of hunger. Although their active involvement in musical activities decreased temporarily, they seemed to have maintained their will to join a circle of friends, but merely observed the others from a distance.

After the workshop, every child was tired of 90-minutes of activities, being full of energy, and running around inside the venue. Regarding the question "I enjoyed myself," the mean score was high; eight of nine children answered '5' on the five-point smiley face scale that means "I really enjoyed myself." Furthermore, the mean score for the question "I want to do it again" was high. It can be said that the activities themselves had a positive impact on the children.

The information mentioned above implies that children's negative moods might not be directly connected to musical activities because the workshop was a joyful event during summer holidays, unlike serious music lessons. In fact, this musical event was the first experience of children in after-school Japanese classes. Simultaneously, it is suggested that the qualitative observation of each child might be more important than the quantitative measurement. When children feel a negative mood, it could be caused by their own factors, apart from music. Therefore, music activities have a high potential to support children's emotional well-being, especially foreign children with JSL.

Conclusion

Music workshops have the potential to have a positive effect on children's emotions. In a workshop, percussion performance can contribute to increasing positive mood with a feeling of satisfaction, because it can produce sound more easily than any other musical instrument and involves body movement. Furthermore, percussion is geared toward their wants and needs to engage in physical activity or move to music, encouraging children to try new things that are different from their daily tasks.

For further practice, the following aspects should be considered. First, building cooperative relationships between children to support musical activities is highly important. Music activities took the form of collaborative work for all participants, similar to school music lessons. The after-school Japanese language classes that the participants attended may not emphasize working with others, as observed in the children's behavior during the workshop. However, music has the power to help people engage with others. To maximize the effects of musical activities, we should consider how foreign children can enhance their awareness of cooperative activities. Second, a formative assessment of children's work, focusing on their musicality, motivation, and skills, is more important in forming a music workshop. In the workshop we implemented, the main aim was to elicit children's enjoyable feelings, but there was implicit goal setting from instructors, as they wanted children to perform musically. Therefore, we need to maintain the right balance between in-musical goals, such as acquiring musical sense/skills, and extra-musical goals, such as enhancing social skills and self-confidence when planning activities. Third, simpler content and shorter activity times are more suitable for children to concentrate on activities. A sustainable program consisting of a series of activities within an hour is recommended instead of a single half-day program. Finally, there is potential for reconsideration of assessment instruments to measure young children's moods, although the individual observation method is an effective way to capture their activity and situation in progress. A large number of samples should be collected through continuous implementation of music workshops.

The importance of children with diverse cultural and lingual backgrounds working together is to strengthen the relationship among social minorities in a place outside school and enhance their self-esteem or self-confidence through music, without linguistics. We hope that a music workshop associated with a Japanese language class is a functional place for foreign children.

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Notes

1. The JSL curriculum has the following educational features: (1) to acquire learning abilities through interaction using Japanese, (2) to promote understanding based on concrete or firsthand experiences in activities, and (3) to combine children's Japanese skills and their cognitive development.

See MEXT website. https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/clarinet/003/001/008/001.htm

2. Japanese language classes are held twice a week, during which foreign children under the age of 18 do their homework or study Japanese with student volunteers from Hiroshima University.

3. The workshop was organized based on a request from the manager of a multicultural society in the city. The main purpose of the workshop was to provide children attending the Japanese class with an enjoyable time during summer holidays.

4. Researchers and parents helped younger children answer the questionnaire.

5. "Easy Japanese" is devised to convey information to foreign residents. It is valid for young children, the elderly, and disabled persons by being changed from normal Japanese to easily understandable vocabulary. See the handbook on easy Japanese by Shizuoka Prefecture. <https://www.pref.shizuoka.jp/kenmin/km-160/documents/yasanichitebiki.pdf>

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