

Multimodal innovations in English teaching informed by second-language acquisition theories: a case study of the musical Hamilton

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Abstract. The musical Hamilton, which blends language, music, and cultural expression, offers a fresh pathway for second-language acquisition (SLA) in secondary-school English classrooms. Grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis, this article examines how the show enhances input quality, stimulates learner motivation, and fosters cultural inquiry. Findings indicate that musicals can effectively optimize a multimodal learning environment and promote students' language comprehension and production. The paper recommends the judicious integration of such resources to diversify classroom practice and improve learning outcomes.

Keywords: secondlanguage acquisition, multimodal teaching, Affective Filter Hypothesis, Hamilton, secondary-school English instruction

1. Introduction: the need for innovation in a multimodal era

With the advance of “core literacy” education and the deepening of China's new curriculum standards, traditional English-teaching methods urgently require transformation. In junior and seniorhigh settings, heavy academic pressure, heightened language anxiety, and waning motivation often undermine learning effectiveness. How to leverage emerging media to spark students' interest and strengthen their communicative competence has therefore become a pressing concern for teachers. Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis point the way: effective language acquisition arises from naturalistic input, output, and cognitive processing rather than from mechanical drills alone.

Multimodal input—integrating auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and textual channels—allows students to construct meaning in immersive language contexts. Within this framework, the musical, which fuses music, performance, narrative, and authentic language, stands out as an ideal resource. Hamilton, acclaimed across the English-speaking world for its vibrant style, driving rhythms, and profound themes, is well suited to secondary classrooms as a means of cultivating students' overall English proficiency [1].

2. Theoretical framework: pedagogical insights from Krashen's second-language acquisition theory

2.1. Input hypothesis

Stephen Krashen argues that language learners require substantial exposure to input at the “ $i + 1$ ” level—that is, linguistic material slightly above their current proficiency. Traditional English textbooks often contain limited content and insufficient contextual richness, making it difficult to provide learners with authentic input. In contrast, while the lyrics of Hamilton are linguistically complex, they can, with appropriate instructional design, offer rich and specific contexts that support comprehension. For example, when teaching the segment “My Shot,” teachers may first introduce relevant background videos and then guide students through the lyrics, helping them acquire new vocabulary and sentence structures naturally through contextual understanding [1].

2.2. Affective filter hypothesis

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasizes that emotional factors—such as motivation, attitude, and anxiety—significantly influence whether language input is effectively internalized. Hamilton's strong rhythm and contemporary style

readily engage students, fostering identification and interest, which in turn reduces anxiety and increases active participation. For instance, after watching the “Yorktown” sequence in class, students can be encouraged to discuss themes such as “freedom” and “sacrifice.” This not only stimulates their desire to express themselves but also reinforces the emotional and linguistic connection [2].

2.3. Natural order and multimodal synergy

Krashen also posits that language is acquired in a natural order, rather than through rote memorization of grammatical rules. Musicals, with their repetition, rhyme, and emotional resonance, align well with the rhythm of natural acquisition. Through repeated listening and imitation of Hamilton’s lyrics, students can subconsciously internalize word order, verb tenses, and idiomatic expressions. Moreover, multimodal elements—such as stage performance, character movement, and scene transitions—provide visual scaffolding that aids semantic mapping and enhances long-term memory retention [1].

3. Teaching practices and strategies using Hamilton

3.1. Watch–analyze–express: a three-step teaching model

To effectively integrate Hamilton into classroom instruction, teachers can adopt a “watch–analyze–express” three-step approach: Step 1: Watch selected scenes — For example, emotionally charged and rhythmically distinct segments like “My Shot” or “Satisfied” can be used to guide students in experiencing rhythm and prosody. Step 2: Analyze language structure and cultural themes — Through close reading of lyrics, students can identify keywords, syntactic patterns, and rhetorical devices such as puns and rhyme schemes, thereby deepening their linguistic comprehension. Step 3: Expression and output tasks — Activities such as role-playing, lyric continuation, or theme-based speeches can prompt students to use newly acquired content for personalized expression, thereby boosting their productive language capacity [1].

3.2. Integration of multimodal resources and educational technology

To build an immersive language environment, instructors should make flexible use of various instructional tools and digital resources:

- Use live performance recordings to help students understand language through synchronized viewing of subtitles, visuals, and music;
- Employ multimedia slide decks that integrate lyrics, vocabulary explanations, and cultural background information to create a structured knowledge web;
- Utilize intelligent platforms such as dubbing apps and speech recognition tools to enhance students’ pronunciation and mimicry skills [3].

For instance, when teaching the song “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” teachers may assign students to read the lyrics in groups and discuss the theme of “who gets to write history,” supported by character biographies and a timeline of events. This approach fosters interdisciplinary thinking and extends language use across contexts.

3.3. Cultural inquiry and identity construction

Hamilton tells the story of an immigrant youth who achieves upward mobility through language and perseverance, resonating with students’ intrinsic desires for fairness, dreams, and self-actualization. Teachers can guide discussions on themes such as the “American Dream,” immigrant culture, and the writing of mainstream history to provoke intercultural and critical reflection. For example, while studying the character of Eliza, students may explore questions like “Who has the authority to tell history?” and “How are women’s voices constructed?”—questions that foster diverse perspectives and cultural empathy [2].

4. Integration with domestic practice: case studies of musical theatre in Chinese classrooms

In China, some educators have begun experimenting with the application of musical theatre in secondary English classrooms, exploring localized approaches. Wu Yuefang, for example, proposed offering a course titled English Musical Theatre in foreign language schools, emphasizing integrated language application through singing, script performance, and story adaptation. The course blends language with literature and humanities education [3].

Li Xinglong’s research, based on the “Embodied Culture Approach,” implemented a teaching model using an original musical *My Heart is Flying*. Through participatory creation and immersive performance, students were encouraged to coin words and construct sentences in context, achieving natural language output in performance settings [4].

Ma Jiawei introduced a school musical production project into a junior high music class and observed significant improvements in students' English expression, teamwork, and self-confidence. She suggested developing integrated curricula combining "English + Arts + Experiential Practice" to expand the scope of language education [5].

5. Optimization pathways: toward a systematic model of musical theatre instruction

5.1. Modular curriculum design

It is recommended that musical theatre instruction be modularized and incorporated into elective courses, extension modules, or theme-based projects. A closed-loop instructional sequence—appreciation → imitation → adaptation → creation—can be established to structure learning progression.

5.2. Teacher training and professional learning communities

At present, most secondary school English teachers lack experience in teaching with musicals. Therefore, regional teacher training programs should include special topics such as "art-integrated pedagogy" and "multimodal input theory." Schools are also encouraged to form interschool alliances—such as "English Musical Theatre Teaching Networks"—to collaboratively develop scripts, conduct lesson studies, and share teaching resources.

5.3. Reconstructing the evaluation system

Traditional assessments often fail to capture the outcomes of multimodal instruction. A multidimensional evaluation model combining formative and performance-based assessment is needed. Suggested methods include student work exhibitions, language use journals, oral performance rubrics, and peer/cooperative evaluations, which collectively promote students' language proficiency, expressive ability, and aesthetic literacy in an integrated manner.

6. Conclusion

The musical Hamilton brings renewed vitality to English language instruction through its fusion of multimodal expression and cultural education. Under the guidance of Krashen's second-language acquisition theory, musicals not only diversify channels of language input but also enhance students' emotional engagement, cultural inquiry, and creative expression. Effectively incorporating Hamilton into secondary classrooms contributes to improving students' comprehensive language competence and embodies the educational philosophy of fostering both knowledge and humanistic values. Looking forward, the sustained development of multimodal language teaching will depend on optimized curriculum design, professional teacher development, resource construction, and policy support—collectively forming a new paradigm for high-quality English education.

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