

# Researcher hits high note with language study

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Students singing as a way to learn a second language

Fernanda Ferreira's family emigrated from Portugal to Canada when she was very young. There, like most Canadian children, she learned French in school.

Her family's immigrant experience and discovering linguist Noam Chomsky as an undergraduate ignited the USC [psychology professor's passion](#) for research and understanding how [language](#) works.

In a recent project, Ferreira helped a doctoral student confirm the common belief that singing in a [foreign language](#) can help a person learn

and speak the language. Ferreira worked with student Karen Ludke and fellow researcher Katie Overy, both from the University of Edinburgh where Ferreira taught before joining USC's College of Arts and Sciences' faculty in 2010. Their findings are in the latest issue of the journal *Memory & Cognition*.

Ferreira says it is the first study to provide scientific evidence that singing can help a person's ability to learn a foreign language.

"It's an important finding. Learning a language can be difficult, and yet with increasing internationalization and globalization, it is becoming more and more important for people to be able to communicate in more than one language," Ferreira says. "Anything we can figure out about how to make language learning easier is potentially very useful."

To do the study, Ferreira says they randomly assigned 60 adults to one of three groups: speaking, rhythmic speaking and singing. Each group was given 20 short "listen and repeat" phrases in Hungarian, a language chosen because of its unfamiliarity to the participants and because of its distinct differences from better known Romance (Spanish or French) or Germanic (German or Dutch) languages.

Ferreira says the group who learned the phrases through singing significantly outperformed the other groups and was twice as successful as the speaking group, demonstrating the link between music, [memory](#) and language learning.

She said the finding surprised her more than her colleagues who teach and conduct research in Edinburgh's music college.

"As an experimental psychologist, I was a bit more skeptical," says Ferreira who added the rhythmic speaking to differentiate between singing and rhythm, a feature of singing that isn't unique to music. "Our

finding that the singing condition resulted in superior performance on language learning even relative to the rhythmic speaking condition really nailed the claim that singing is uniquely beneficial."

Ferreira says she recalls learning a lot of French songs in grades five through 12 and likes the idea that her recent finding may affirm what her teachers knew—[singing](#) can help you learn a language.

"I find language fascinating. We're the only animal with this extraordinary ability, so if we could understand how language came about and how it works, we'd know a lot about our species," says Ferreira, a psycholinguist who is conducting collaborative research through the College of Arts and Sciences' new Institute for Mind and Brain.

**More information:** [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23860945](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23860945)

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