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How To Speak Chinese in Five Easy (Music) Lessons...

I knew there was a reason I should've taken those damned piano lessons my parents wanted me to take when I was a kid...

This from today's New York Times, on the match between musicality and mandarin...

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Skilled Ear for Music May Help Language

By ERIC NAGOURNEY

Anyone who has tried to learn Chinese can attest to how hard it is to master the tones required to speak and understand it. And anyone who has tried to learn to play the violin or other instruments can report similar challenges. Now researchers have found that people with musical training have an easier time learning Chinese.

Writing in the online edition of Nature Neuroscience, researchers from Northwestern University say that both skills draw on parts of the brain that help people detect changes in pitch.

One of the study's authors, Nina Kraus, said the findings suggested that studying music "actually tunes our sensory system." This means that schools that want children to do well in languages should hesitate before cutting music programs, Dr. Kraus said. She said music training might also help children with language problems.

Mandarin speakers have been shown to have a more complex encoding of pitch patterns in their brains than English speakers do. This is presumably because in Mandarin and other Asian languages, pitch plays a central role. A single-syllable word can have several meanings depending on how it is intoned.

For this study, the researchers looked at 20 non-Chinese speaking volunteers, half with no musical background and half who had studied an instrument for at least six years.

As they were shown a movie, the volunteers also heard an audiotape of the Mandarin word “mi” in three of its meanings: squint, bewilder and rice. The researchers recorded activity in their brain stems to see how well they were processing the sounds.

Those with a music background showed much more brain activity in response to the Chinese sounds.

The lead author of the study, Patrick C. M. Wong, said it might work both ways. It appears that native speakers of tonal languages may do better at learning instruments, Dr. Wong said.