

The Music is in the Mail – Bilingual Education Vocabulary Elicitation using an Autographed Musical Quotation Postcard

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Robert Abrams and Marissa Caputo developed the curriculum. Robert Abrams designed the study. Marissa Caputo taught the lesson to her students.

Introduction..... 2

Emergent bilingual concepts used in the study..... 2

Classroom observations 4

Results 4

Initial exploratory analysis 4

NR count analysis (No Responses)..... 5

Extracted vocabulary 5

Avian identification..... 6

Discussion 6

Activity components 6

Slide show used to support instruction 6

Printout of postcard..... 9

Activity sheet 11

Conclusion 14

Bibliography 15

Appendix A: Extracted vocabulary..... 16

Vocabulary extraction and processing procedure..... 16

Word lists 16

Grade 5 - See English..... 16

Grade 4 - See English..... 19

Grade 5 - Hear English..... 21

Grade 4 - Hear English..... 23

Grade 5 - See Spanish..... 24

Grade 4 - See Spanish..... 26

Grade 5 - Hear Spanish..... 27

Grade 4 - Hear Spanish..... 28

Both Grades - See Turkish..... 28

Both Grades - Hear Turkish..... 28

Introduction

This study presented 4th and 5th grade students in a suburban New York school with a postcard mailed from Havana, Cuba in 1902. The postcard, referred to as "Cuban 33" because it was numbered 33 by a previous collector and was mailed from Cuba, featured an Autographed Musical Quotation (AMQ) by Ignacio Cervantes and an illustration of Giuseppe Verdi and swans. Twenty Grade 5 General Education students completed the activity sheet, and 18 Grade 4 students in an Inclusion class (Inclusion in this case means the students have a plan in place for additional supports, team teaching being one of those supports) completed the activity on the same day. To the best of our recollection, this was all of the students in attendance in those two classes that day.

The postcard was used as a prompt to elicit students' vocabulary in both English and the students' home language (mostly Spanish, with a small number of Turkish speaking students).

This lesson was the second lesson developed for *The Music is in the Mail* and was developed within a bilingual education class at Teachers College, Columbia University. The first lesson was developed within an educational leadership, data and action research class at Mercy University (Abrams & Caputo, 2023).

I wanted to create a bilingual education lesson that supports both English speakers and Languages Other Than English (LOTEs, also called Home Languages, as in, a native or L1 language that is spoken at home that is not English) speakers in learning both English and one non-English language.

Following the Novakian¹ principle of meaningful learning that we should first learn what the students know and then teach from there (Novak & Gowin, 1984), this lesson asked students to list words they know which could be used to describe what they see and hear (when the musical quotation is played on the piano) in the postcard.

The postcard is from Robert Abrams' collection. The lesson was developed collaboratively by Robert Abrams and Marissa Caputo. The students gave us more than enough words, in three languages, to learn and play on.

Emergent bilingual concepts used in the study

"The number of new concepts embedded in a lesson or text is its cognitive load." (Meyer, 2000, p. 229) We limited the number of vocabulary words requested to six for each question, and only as many as would fit on one letter size page to limit the cognitive load of the activity. We intentionally did not play any Verdi music for this lesson to reduce cognitive load and to keep the focus on the postcard itself.

¹ Dr. Joseph Novak was Dr. Abrams' doctoral mentor at Cornell University.

"Culture load refers to the amount of cultural knowledge required but never explicitly explained in order for the learner to accurately comprehend the meanings of a text or appropriately participate in a learning activity in English." (Meyer, 2000, p. 230) In retrospect, there is cultural load for a teacher trying to create space for non-English speaking students. We created space for two Turkish students, but neither Ms. Caputo nor I speak Turkish (except for "Baklava"). Now I have the added load of finding a Turkish speaker to help. I am happy to make the effort, but without it the activity is of limited ongoing use to the teacher and to those students whose language the teacher does not speak.

"Federal bilingual education policy has changed over the past 5 decades from taking into account the students' home language practices and being flexible about educational approaches to being far more rigid in emphasizing English-only instruction for those labeled as English learners." (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 29) Our lessons push back against this trend. In music, knowing at least some of multiple languages is eventually essential.

"There has been a discourse shift in terms – from *bilingual education* programs to *dual-language* programs." (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 30) Garcia and Kleifgen argue that "the latter term focuses, not on leveraging and developing the bilingualism of emergent bilinguals who are progressing toward spoken and written skills in English along with their home language, but on programs that most often also include language-majority students, speakers of English who are learning an additional language "for enrichment."" (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 30) Our lessons fit this dual-language definition. I also do not see any issues with bilingual versus dual language education. The school in which these lessons have been taught have students who speak multiple languages, and is not self-labeled as either a bilingual education or a dual language school. We want language-majority students to enrich their Spanish skills and language-minority students to enrich their English skills.

There is a practical problem in that it can be difficult to find "teachers who speak [the emergent bilingual students'] language." (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 35) We have this problem for our lessons. We have not found a solution yet.

"It is very important that emergent bilinguals labeled LTELL receive explicit instruction in their home language. Home Language Arts (HLA) classes build on and extend the strong oral communicative skills these students bring to school." (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2021, p. <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/translanguaging-resources/resources-for-work-with-particular-subgroups/supporting-emergent-bilingual-learners-labeled-long-term-english-language-learners-ltell/>) The Music in the Mail curriculum can support Home Language Arts with Home Music Arts.

"Emergent bilinguals labeled LTELL make great progress when math, science, and social studies teachers, in addition to ENL, ELA, and HLA teachers, develop language and literacy objectives that support their content objectives." (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2021, p. <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/translanguaging-resources/resources-for-work-with-particular-subgroups/supporting-emergent-bilingual-learners-labeled-long-term-english-language-learners-ltell/>) While we have not implemented this kind of cross-subject

collaboration yet, it would make sense, especially as the lesson described here overlaps a lot with the vocabulary instruction normally delivered in ELA. This kind of collaboration, both within and across schools, could potentially reduce professional isolation and increase professional connection, which was the topic of my dissertation (Abrams, 1997).

Celic recommends that teachers make portfolios that transfer from one grade to another for each student. (Celic, 2009, p. 49) This could be a part of our continued development of the Music is in the Mail. We would also like to provide support to students in both English and their home languages, consistently across each school year and multiple school years.

Classroom observations

At least one student whose home language was, or was inferred to be, Spanish was observed helping another student whose home language was English with Spanish words that could describe the postcard or the music. While this assistance muddies the interpretation of the data, in that the unit of analysis was supposed to be individual students (1.0), and now as implemented must be regarded as somewhere between individual and small group responses (between 1.0 to 2.0, and in some cases as much as 5.0), it also means that the kind of student to student language support we would like to see in bilingual classes was in fact happening in this class.

It remains a question whether the assisted Spanish vocabulary written by Home-English students is actually comprehended by those students. That's an investigation for another day.

It was observed that some students wanted to write down more than six words in a given list. They could not do so because we limited each of the four lists to six words to make everything fit on one letter-size page (and in one class period), and to limit the load of the activity. However, if students are motivated to go above and beyond the limits of the activity as given, we could support this, especially if some modest reward could be given for extra optional work completed at home.

One challenge for going above and beyond the limits of a one period activity, in this case and this school, is that music is only taught one period per week for each student.

Results

Initial exploratory analysis

Students were supposed to respond with vocabulary words or short phrases. A possible next step was to have the students use those vocabulary words to build sentences. Some of the students anticipated this next level work and wrote complete sentences using several sentence stems.

Just from eyeballing the data entered into a spreadsheet, the Grade 5 General Education students had fewer non-responses (marked NR in the spreadsheet) than the Grade 4

students in the Inclusion class. This is not surprising. It is also not a judgment. We told the students there were no wrong answers, and we meant it. This will allow us, with a little work, to show the vocabulary known by each class. Knowing the vocabulary can give the students an actionable way to advance in both languages, or all three if we fully enable the two out of 38 Turkish students.

NR count analysis (No Responses)

NRs (No response) were counted across the six questions for each of See English, See Spanish, Hear English and Hear Spanish, divided by the Grade 5 General Education class and the Grade 4 Inclusion class. The one Turkish student in each class was excluded from this analysis because they didn't answer the Spanish questions, and answered for Turkish instead, and are thus not directly comparable to the English-Spanish students. Later analysis could include the Turkish students.

Question / Class (# of NRs/Class)	Grade 5, Gen Ed	Grade 4, Inclusion	Grade 4 – Grade 5 (Grade 4 had this many more NRs/class, which are negative since more NRs is a "worse" result.)
See English	1	18	-17.00
See Spanish	19	67	-48.00
Hear English	24	75	-51.00
Hear Spanish	75	93	-18.00
Total	119	253	-134.00

Table 1: Number of Non Responses/Class

Question / Class (Average # of NRs/Student)	Grade 5, Gen Ed (19 students)	Grade 4, Inclusion (17 students)	Grade 4 – Grade 5 (Grade 4 had this many more NRs/student, which are negative since more NRs is a "worse" result.)
See English	0.05	1.06	-1.01
See Spanish	1.00	3.94	-2.94
Hear English	1.26	4.41	-3.15
Hear Spanish	3.95	5.47	-1.52
Total	6.26	14.88	-8.62

Table 2: Average number of Non Responses/Student

Extracted vocabulary

See Appendix A for initial analysis.

Also, in retrospect, we should have asked students for both nouns and verbs in the vocabulary activity sheet, although that would have made the sheet and activity longer. Perhaps also adjectives and adverbs. Words for thought for next time.

Some students wrote complete sentences, instead of words or short phrases. Sentences was going to be the next activity, followed by paragraphs. This both showed that at least some students had skills beyond this lesson, and also made analysis more difficult because the unit of analysis was supposed to be the vocabulary word or phrase.

Avian identification

Several students misidentified the swans on the postcards, calling them ducks. This is okay, since we told the students there were no wrong answers (although a swan might take offense if called a duck to its face). This could lead to a whole new music lesson, with songs about swans and ducks, with multi-sensory elements. It is illegal, however, to collect swan feathers in the US.

Discussion

The Grade 5 class had a better result than Grade 4 in all four vocabulary categories.

Within the classes, Spanish NRs were worse (higher) than English NRs.

This means that, as a quick analysis, the Grade 5 class's vocabulary was better than the Grade 4 class's vocabulary in response to the postcard. This isn't an exact measure of vocabulary since there will be some duplicate vocabulary words within classes.

This class comparison is not surprising, given that there is both an age difference and a instructional type difference between the classes. It is also not a judgment. The students' vocabulary is what it is. They can always build wherever they are, but it is important to know where they are. As a bonus, now the Grade 4 students can know what they don't know, giving them a potential advantage going into Grade 5.

To better understand the data, it would be helpful to know the student's home language, but we didn't ask that question.

Activity components

Slide show used to support instruction

This slide show, in Google Slides, was displayed on a large TV-computer monitor for the students to see, and was also displayed on the teacher's laptop. The main difference between the slide show itself and instructions given in class was that students were told they could also find words to describe the back of the postcard, not just the front.

Ms. Caputo played the musical quotation as part of the instruction, and again when students requested to hear it again. We are working on a recording of this musical quotation, for teachers who do not play the piano.



The Music is in the Mail



Today we will

1. Look at a postcard that was mailed to us from Cuban musician, Ignacio Cervantes.
2. Use knowledge of English and Spanish to describe what we hear and see.



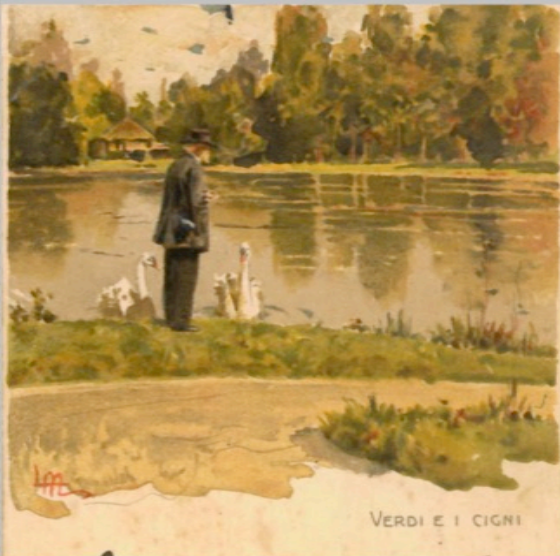
Here is the postcard
we received in the mail.
What do you see?



Let's Take a Closer Look



Describe this picture
found on our
postcard.



Pick 6 words to describe this image.

As many as you can think of,
up to 6 in each language.

The words do not have to be
translations of each other.

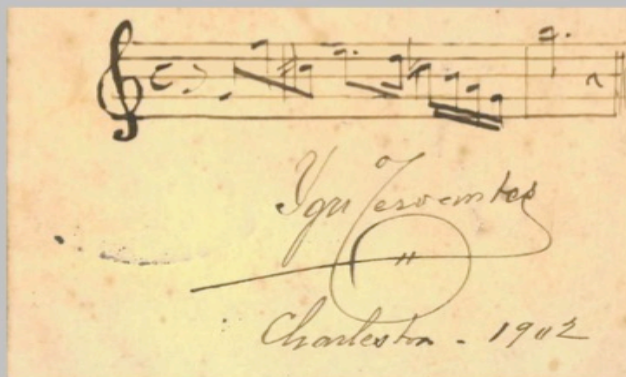
English	Spanish
1.	1.
2.	2.

Pick 6 words to describe the music from the postcard.

What does the music sound like?

As many words as you can think of, up to 6 in each language.

The words do not have to be translations of each other.



English	Spanish
1.	1.
2.	2.

Printout of postcard

A print out of the postcard was made, using Avery postcard cardstock paper. The postcard was printed using a Xerox laser print, on two sides of the paper in one pass. Enough copies were made for every student in the class (about 25). The result was a little darker and more orange than the original, but not so far off as to be a problem. There wasn't time to adjust color profiles.

(Printing on one side at a time only worked half the time. The other half, the paper would jam. Such paper can only be printed one sheet at a time, with one duplex printing run.)



M

VERDI E I CIGNI



Il più fervente

Charleston - 1902



Activity sheet

A copy of this activity sheet was given to each student. Students were given a sharpened pencil. Student names are included on the sheet because this is a classroom activity that supports classroom instruction. Student names are not retained in the data for research purposes.

There was one student in each class who spoke neither English nor Spanish at home. These students spoke Turkish at home. The Turkish students were instructed to cross off "Spanish" on the activity sheet, write "Turkish" and write up to six Turkish words in the two lists, since the intent of the activity was to support home languages. (The vast majority of students at this school are known to have either English or Spanish as their home language. We were trying to keep the activity sheet as simple as possible, so we didn't have space to specify something like "Spanish, or other language if your home language is neither English nor Spanish." Sometimes it is easier and better to improvise and talk.)

We might in the future add a demographic question to the activity sheet, and I would insist on it, since it would make the data much more interpretable, even if that meant shortening the number of words in the word lists.

Home language: English Spanish Other (Please specify: _____)

No other demographic questions were asked because there was not enough space, and for both instructional and research purposes there was no compelling reason to ask. The word lists were intentionally *not* translations from one to the other, in order to reduce load and to enable free expression in both languages equally and independent of each other.

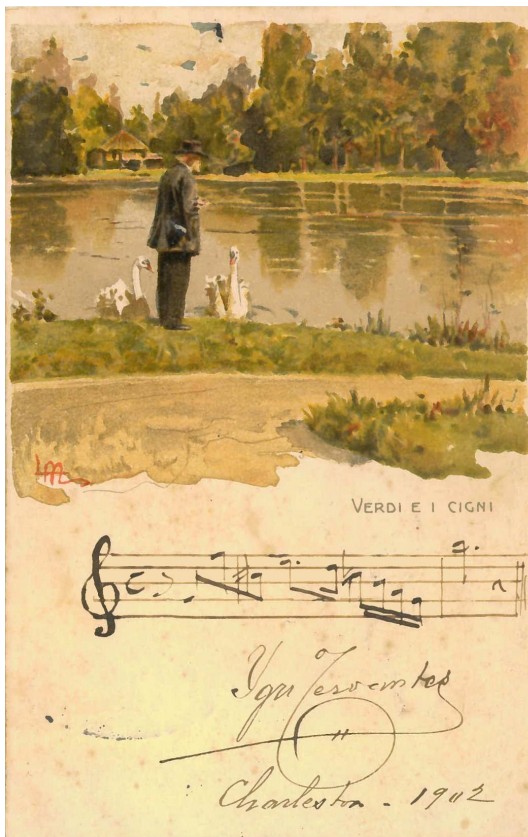
Name: _____

The Music is in the Mail

Take a look at the postcard we received.

You will look at the postcard and listen to the music.

Using your knowledge of English and Spanish, **describe** what you see and hear.



Use the table on the back of this page to write your answers.

Name: _____

*(Up to any six words in English, and up to any six words in Spanish.
They don't have to be translations from one language to the other.)*

Describe what you see.

English words
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Spanish words
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Describe what you hear.

English words
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Spanish words
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Conclusion

As the first implementation of this lesson, it can be considered a success. Students worked well together, including Home-Spanish speakers assisting Home-English speakers with Spanish vocabulary. Using the postcard and playing the musical quotation on the piano, we were able to elicit students' vocabulary in English and Spanish from all students regardless of their home language. We also made a change to the lesson plan on the spot, supporting the Turkish home language of two students.

Moving forward, extensions for the lesson would likely include asking students to construct sentences, and then paragraphs, using the English, Spanish and Turkish vocabulary they listed. If we were able to do this extension, it could be done in either the music class or an English Language Arts class.

With a little tweaking of the activity sheet, such as adding a Home Language question, we feel we are ready to test this lesson, and other lessons like it, with more students at multiple schools, as well as to ask for feedback from professional musicians and other domain experts and stakeholders.

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Appendix A: Extracted vocabulary

Vocabulary extraction and processing procedure

Copy in Excel.

Paste in Word.

Select just the table.

Convert table to text, with items separated by paragraph marks.

Sort paragraphs ascending.

Manually group words that are the same or similar meaning, mostly means repositioning the phrases that start with "a" and "the" or a number.

Separate word groups with spaces.

Reduce list of NRs to "NR (# of NRs)".

Note that grouping of words was used for Spanish, but with less sorting than for English because the authors' Spanish comprehension is less than their English comprehension. There was no grouping of words step for Turkish for the same reason as with Spanish, just more so, and that there were fewer words in Turkish since there were only two Turkish speaking students.

Word lists

Grade 5 - See English

a mysterious letter next to the pic

Grass

a red symbol

Grass

Grass

Artistic

Grass

grass

Cabin

Grass

Cabin

Grass

Grass

Cursive

Grass

Cursive

Grass

cursive handwriting

Cursive handwriting

House

cursive writing

House

House

a dirt road

House

a dirt road

House in the background

House in the background

a duck next to the man

a house

the duck things

a house

a house

grass

a house across the lake

a house in the back
The house at the back

NR

Instrument

Plant

Lake
Lake
Lake
Lake
Lake
a lake
a lake

a pond

Reflection
Reflection

Man
Man
Man
Man
Man
A guy
A man
a man
a man
a man
A man
A man
a man
a man by a pond
a man in all black
The man on the lake

Signature
Signature

Sky

Stamp
Stamp
Stamp
Stamps

Music

music notes
Music notes
Music notes
music notes
Music notes
Music notes
music notes
music notes

Swan
Swans
Swans
Swans
Swans
Swans
Swans
Swans
Swans
swans
Swans
swans by a pond
2 swans
4 swans
two swans

Notes

Time

Trees
Trees
trees
trees
Trees
Trees
trees

Trees
Trees
Trees
Trees

Water
Water
Water
Water
Water
Water
Water

Writing/dates

a year

Grade 4 - See English

1902

1902

1902

Draweot oa - 1902

it was met on 1902 3pm

Kantos 1902

Year 1902

3pm

a lake

a man

A man

A man feeding ducks

a old man

AA

Birds in the skies

Cabin

Cabin

Cabin

Cabin

Cabin

Cabin

a cabin in the back

Carte Postal

duck

Duck

Ducks

Ducks

Flowers

Grass

Grass

Grass

Grass

Grass

Hachre

a home

house

A house in the background

Lake

Lake

Lake

Lhn

Looks like painted

Man

Man

Man

Man

Man

Man

Man feeding swans

Man in suit

Music

Music

music

Music

Music notes

NR (18)

Numbers

Panting

Passenge way / walk way

Picture of lake

Sengr

Snith balajes

Spring

Stamp

Sunset

Swan

Swan

Swan

Swans

Swans

Swans in both
a swan

Tree

tree

Trees

Trees

Trees

Trees

trees

Trees

Trees

Tuba

Tuba

Tuba on back

Verdi el Cigni

Water

Water

Water

Willy lily pads

Wood cabin

You

Grade 5 - Hear English

a movie

a theme song

At the end it is loud

Ballet song

Ballroom music

Beautiful

Bedtime

Calming

Calming

Calmly

Calmly

Calmy

Church song

creepy music

creepy sounds

different sounds

different sounds

ding dong sounds at the end

a ding

a ding at the end

Domino notes

Eighth notes

End (of a movie)

End of a song

Ending

First date

Graceful

Happy

High (sound)

High note

High notes at the end

High pitch

High pitched

Intro vibes

it sounds like a

Kind of loud

Last note was loud

like if it is at the beginning and creepy
movie

Loud

Loud and low

loud at the end

Love music

Memories music

Musica

Mysterious

Nice

Nice

notes up and straight down

notes up and straight down

NR (24)

Old fashion

Peaceful

Peaceful

Peaceful
Peaceful
Peaceful
Peaceful
Peaceful
peaceful
peaceful

Piano

Pretty
Pretty

Pretty like Ms. Caputo

Quiet
Quiet
Quiet
Quiet
Quiet

Quite

Relates (to the picture)

Relaxing
Relaxing
Relaxing
Relaxing
Relaxing
Relaxing

Rest

Sharbs (?)

Sharps

Short
Short

Short/Fast

Sixteenth notes

Sleepy
Sleepy
Sleepy

Slow -> Fast

Smooth

Soothing

Star Wars

Thanksgiving dinner table

The end of a old fashion music

The notes get high pitched

Unique

wedding

Grade 4 - Hear English

9 or 10 notes

A padtn of a looe and hi pitns

a scale

Beuanae

Botefl

Can be played by

Happyness

High note

High note

I'm at the lake feeding all the swans

Light sounds

Low note

Low note

Low note x2

Mid note

Music

Music

Music

music

Music

Music

Music

Music is drawn

Nature

Notes

NR (78)

Orchestra

Quick music

Romance

Song

Spring music

Grade 5 - See Spanish

Agua

Agua

Agua

Agua

Agua

Agua

Agua (water)

Agwa

Aqua

Aqua

Arbol

Arboles

Arbonl

Arbowl

Auga

Auge

Awa – water

Ayuna

Blaras

Casa

Casa

Casa

Casa

Casa

Casa

Casa

Casa atlas

Casa atras de la toto (?)

Cassa

Cursivo

Cuse

Dos swans

Firma

Firma

Firma

Futbul

Futbul

Gans

Ganso

Ganso

Ganzo

Herba

Hieraba

Hierba

Hierba (?)

Homb

Hombre

Hombre

Honbre

I un camino

I un letra roho

I un pato lado del ombre

I una palabras cursive

Musekas

Musica

Musica

Musica

Musica

Notas

Notas

NR (19)

Ombra

Ombra

Ombra

Patos

Patos

Plantas

Reflecion
Reflesion

Señor

Stampe

Stomp
Stomp
Stomps

Tempo -> 3 pm
Timpo
Timpo

Un Hoblr (?)
Un hombre
Un onber

Yerva

Yo vayo
Yo vayo
Yo vayo
Yo vayo cursara (?)
Yo vayo palabla
Yo vayo stomps
Yo vco letras de musica
Yo vco patos
Yo vco un letra roho
Yo vco un ombre
Yo vco un umbre
Yo vco una camino
Yo vco una casa
Yo vco una casa lado del la pising

Grade 4 - See Spanish

1902

Potö

Abor

Reaö

Ricordi C Milano

Agau

Agua

Terida

C Milano Deposta

Yo ueo patos

Yo ueo patos

Casa

Yo vce case

Yo veo un rio

Coves

Yo veo una casa

Yo wea un rio

Leaö

Leaö

Musica

Musica

Musica

Musica

Nota

NR (67)

O

Obrö

Officine G Ricordi

Ombre

Ombre

Ombre

Ombrë

Onte

Oprea

Patö

Planatas

Grade 5 - Hear Spanish

Bueno

Nota arriba

Notas dominos

Caladito

NR (75)

Casa

Ocho natas

Ocho notas

Cayatito

Ceiyaatita

Piño

Descansa

Poko

Diezis

Relajate

Relajate

Domedo

Relajate

Domendo

Relajate

Relasate

Feliz

Relasute

Fin de la casona

Rorems

Fine

Silencio

Hapa dedorpe

Slese yo

Hopa de dorpe

Sonbrero

Lindo

Tia de casome

Linto -> rapeto

Linto rapeto

Venita

Vonita

Mochoa rerral

Yo chocha

Musica

Grade 4 - Hear Spanish

Musica
Musica
Musical

Nota
Nota
Nota
Nota
Nota
Nota

NR (93)

Both Grades - See Turkish

Ağaçlar var
Altta müzik noalari var
Arka tarafta eu var
Cimen ve bitkiler var
Göl var
Kuğular var
Kum
Kuslar
Mantar
Ordek Su
Yesilikler

Both Grades - Hear Turkish

Anllari hatirlaton
Evlence veya nisanlanma
Güzel bir müzik
Ilk bulus ma
Rahatlattan bir müzik

NR (7)