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## Exploring intercultural awareness through songs

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## EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH SONGS

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**Abstract:** *This paper intends to explore the way in which music can be used as a teaching resource in order to enable the development of cultural awareness in the target language. There are presented several reasons for making use of songs during English lessons. Some of the students who have recently performed their pre-service teacher training practice have been interviewed in order to find out whether they have used songs during teaching activities and if they are aware of the teaching possibilities provided by songs.*

**Keywords:** *cultural and intercultural awareness; songs; authentic resources; pragmatic and linguistic competence; 'real-life' communication.*

**Zusammenfassung:** *Die vorliegende Arbeit (in englischer Sprache) nimmt sich vor, die Art und Weise zu erkunden, in der die Musik als Lehrmittel verwendet werden kann, um die Entwicklung des kulturellen Bewusstseins in der Zielsprache zu ermöglichen. Es werden mehrere Gründe für die Verwendung der Lieder im Englischunterricht genannt. Einige der Studierenden, die vor kurzem ihr Schulpraktikum durchgeführt haben, wurden interviewt, um herauszufinden, ob sie Lieder in ihrem Unterricht verwendet haben und ob sie sich der Möglichkeiten, die die Verwendung der Lieder im Unterricht bieten, bewusst sind.*

**Schlüsselwörter:** *kulturelles und interkulturelles Bewusstsein; Lieder; authentische Ressourcen; pragmatische und sprachliche Kompetenz; „Real-life“-Kommunikation*

### I. Introduction

This paper is comprised of two parts. In the first part of the paper there are identified some reasons for which a teacher should be encouraged to use authentic resources when teaching foreign languages. Furthermore, it is brought up for discussion the connection between songs, which are perceived as valuable depictions of popular culture and the students' development of (inter) cultural awareness. Nowadays teachers can make use of a variety of teaching resources, ranging from written and spoken language to audio and visual aids. Moreover, the use of technology diversifies the possibilities of designing teaching resources and of finding other means of acquiring communicative language skills. Still, providing for one's students the latest learning resources might not seem to be enough simply because these materials have to be in accordance with the students' learning needs and

should be adapted to the particularities of the teaching environment. This is why Rubdy (2003, 49) concludes that "in one sense, a course book by itself has little operational value until the teacher populates it with his/her own ideas and experiences and brings it to life." Therefore, it is advisable that teachers pay attention to the fact that there are various reasons for choosing a particular teaching resource. We intend to present in this paper several criteria for evaluating the content of authentic resources, namely of songs.

The second part of this paper focuses on presenting the findings of the interviews that have been conducted in order to better understand the students' perspectives towards using songs as teaching resources.

## **II. Reasons for choosing songs as teaching resources**

Songs might be perceived by some teachers as time fillers, namely activities that one performs when there are five or ten minutes left with nothing to do. Other teachers might consider that songs are appropriate just for certain levels (pre-school or elementary level) or not appropriate at all at school due to the linguistic discourse used and message sent. Tim Murphey (1993, 12) states that "music and songs is not really one of the conventional categories of language study (grammar, vocabulary, composition, reading, listening comprehension, conversation, etc.); but it can be the content matter of any of these categories and we can focus on any, or many, of these areas when using songs." Songs could replace, to a certain degree, the traditional teaching resources such as: literature excerpts, course books, grammar books, etc. A song could definitely be used in order to learn some grammar structures, new vocabulary items and improve the four skills. But if one wants to think out of the box and take into account the cultural specificity of the target language, then that teacher " would be concerned with aspects of language that are generally neglected, or that at best tend to remain peripheral in course materials: connotation, idiom, the construction of style and tone, rhetorical structure [...]"(Pulverness 2003, 427). In other words, mastering a foreign language also resides in being able to distinguish between a formal and an informal speaking style. Moreover, it refers to developing an intuitive awareness about what words are more appropriate depending on the interlocutor's tone of voice or paralinguistic cues. Such pragmatic knowledge is valuable in order to better understand the instance of communication.

Alan Maley (1990, 93-95) has identified ten reasons for using poetry and songs as teaching resources: memorability, rhythmicity, performance/recitability, ambiguity, non-triviality, universality, playfulness, reactional language, motivation and interaction. Songs tend to stick to our minds because they use rhymes, a lot of repetitions and usually depict a story with which the listener can easily relate to. Tim Murphey suggests three other reasons for working with songs during foreign language learning. Murphey states that "most importantly, perhaps, songs are relaxing", they can" [...] be used as a means for teachers to increase rapport with their students" (Murphey 1993, 8) and " [...] can stimulate

very positive associations to the study of a language, which otherwise may only be seen as a laborious task, entailing exams, frustration, and corrections” (Murphey 1993, 6). We have the feeling that songs are relaxing because we usually listen to them in informal settings and this emotion is transferred, to a certain degree, in the classroom. One of the rules of establishing rapport in the classroom refers to knowing one’s students. A teacher can choose from a wide range of activities in order to find more details about his/her students’ interests. Music represents one of these opportunities. Students could create some projects that focus on the music they like. Bringing music in the classroom is a good opportunity for students to exchange ideas and get to know their colleagues.

Music also brings cultures closer to each other. This constitutes another reason, in addition to the foregoing examples, for integrating music in language learning. Martin and Nakayama (2010, 360) suggest that “[...] people often are introduced to other cultures through the lens of popular culture”, namely through television, music, magazines and even gastronomy. Music has a social function because it can foster bonds between people and can convey values. Still, sometimes it is challenging to use music and other popular culture elements because they can convey false identities and reinforce stereotypes. Because so much meaning is conveyed through popular culture, Martin and Nakayama (2010, 349) suggest that this has “[...] a significant influence in intercultural interaction.”

Music can fulfil different functions depending on where one listens to it. Murphey (1993, 9-10) makes an interesting distinction between the reasons for which songs are listened to in everyday situations as opposed to a learning environment. Therefore, Murphey (1993, 9-10) indicates some purposes for listening to songs on a daily basis

- sing, hum, whistle, tap, and snap fingers while we listen
- talk about music, lyrics, singer and video clips
- use songs and music to set or change an atmosphere or mood
- use music and song to make internal associations with the people, places and times in our lives, so they become the personal soundtrack of our lives

and in a learning environment

- study grammar
- practice selective listening comprehension
- read songs, articles, books for linguistic purposes
- translate songs
- write dialogues using the words of a song
- do role-plays
- dictate songs
- use a song for gap-fill, cloze, or for correction
- teach vocabulary

- break the routine.

The differences are quite considerable, ranging from relaxation to making the effort to learn a foreign learning. Therefore, the use of songs in classrooms might confuse or demotivate students to a certain degree. By focusing only on grammar, vocabulary and translations one might lose one's enthusiasm for sharing and listening to music. A more convenient approach would be that of integrating music, culture and language in the same activity. Alan Pulverness (2003, 428) suggests that there is an intricate bond between language and culture and therefore language should not be treated as a value-free code because "[...] it is likely to deprive learners of key dimensions of meaning and [to] fail to equip them with necessary resources to recognize and respond appropriately to the cultural subtext of language in use." By letting themselves guided by this principle, students are going to be equipped with the necessary tools in order to decipher the meaning of a song, both from a cultural and a linguistic perspective. Likewise, students would become more aware both of the intended and the implied meaning suggested by lyrics. They would be able to understand and differentiate between cultural clichés and genuine cultural values. In addition, it can be stated that music has become a trait of character. When someone asks you what kind of music you listen to, he/she already *labels* you and assigns you certain characteristics. Because music carries so much personal value, people tend to be sensitive to the message, the mood and the feelings that are conveyed through it.

### III. Cultural awareness and language learning

Cultural awareness is a concept that refers to knowing and understanding one's culture. At a first glance, everyone could state *I know my culture very well* but in fact it is much more complicated than that. This feeling of awareness has not fully developed until that person compares his/her culture to another one, in order to observe the differences and the similarities that characterize each country. A contact with a foreign culture makes a person more conscious of one's own culture. Sometimes a person is not aware of a certain situation until he/she analyses it from a different perspective. This perspective is provided when travelling abroad or when interacting with foreigners. The prefix *inter-* suggests something that takes place between people, countries or cultures<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, intercultural awareness represents in fact the ability to interact with the surrounding world and to relate to other cultures and people. Thus, we gain new perspectives about another culture by analysing our own culture.

Learning a foreign language implies also a certain accommodation to the culture and the people belonging to the target language. Little children and young adults tend to accommodate easier to these cultural differences (language, customs, values etc.), but adults find it often difficult. They might even face a 'culture-shock'. Alan Pulverness (2003, 429) explains that "the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/inter->

experience of learning another language is more than simply the acquisition of an alternative means of expression. It involves a process of acculturation, akin to the effort required of the traveller, striving to come to terms with different social structures, different assumptions and different expectations". Grammar might seem an easy target to achieve in comparison with sociocultural or pragmatic competence. Therefore, language learning has deeper meanings and is more complex than it looks at first sight. Language and culture cannot be learnt apart since " [...] language teaching and learning inevitably involve issues of sociocultural meaning, and that approaches which disregard the cultural dimension of language are fundamentally flawed" ( Pulverness 2003, 426).

Teachers tend to focus on the students' acquisition of linguistic competences which, according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>2</sup>, include "lexical, phonological and syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realisations". The usefulness of this type of knowledge cannot be questioned. Still, it does not provide the student with the necessary skills in order to cope with any type of speaking situation. In order to do that, the learner needs to acquire a sociolinguistic and a pragmatic competence. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>3</sup> suggests that while the sociolinguistic competences refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use, the pragmatic competences are more concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources, namely with the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence. The emphasis is placed on paying more attention to the way in which one should accommodate his/her speech to different types of interlocutors (for example being aware of the rules of politeness when speaking with a senior citizen in a foreign country). Since learners are going to use English not only with native speakers but also with any other person who can speak this language, it means that they are being exposed to different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, they should be equipped with the following intercultural skills, as suggested by the Common European Framework:

- "the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf), p 13

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf), p 13

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf), p. 104-105

In other words, learners should get accustomed to culturally diverse speech styles, should learn how to negotiate meaning, how to use in their advantage pragmatic knowledge, and how to cope with non-verbal language. We could conclude this analysis of perspectives between the intricate relationship *language vs. culture* with another more direct statement. The focus of foreign language learning for general purposes resides in acquiring a set of communicative skills, namely productive and receptive skills. In addition to these, Kramersch (1993) (Pulverness 2003, 428) suggests that there is definitely a place for a fifth one and he states that culture in language learning is “[...] always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them”.

#### **IV. Songs and authentic materials**

The authentic teaching materials are those resources that are neither graded for a certain level nor produced for teaching purposes. These resources belong to different genres and registers. Therefore, these might contain words that are unknown to students (for example slang or secondary meanings) or even topics and feelings that are new to them. Still, these should not be perceived as being disadvantages as long as the content is appropriate to the subject of the lesson and to the learner’s needs. We consider that motivation and active participation in a lesson are sustained by the use of teaching materials that are more challenging both from the point of view of vocabulary and ideas that are expressed. Bernice Melvin and Daniel Stout (1990, 44) sustain the fact that “fully exploited, authentic texts give students direct access to the culture and help them use the new language authentically themselves, to communicate meaning in meaningful situations rather than for demonstrating knowledge of a grammar point or a lexical item”. So, authentic resources motivate students to focus more on real-life situations such as: expressing one’s feelings about a certain topic, writing an email or a book review, applying for a job, etc. These activities provide a better understanding of what students can actually do with the language.

Songs enter into this category of authentic resources. The culture of a country is also conveyed through music. Murphey (1993, 8) state that songs “[...] are important tools in sustaining cultures, religions, patriotism, and yes, even revolutions.” Therefore, the use of songs has the advantage of exposing students to an audio-video and written resource that offers them a broader perspective on the use of the target language in different real-life situations. It could be argued that while course books provide guided learning, songs and music give students more freedom of interpretation, of enhancing critical thinking skills, and of exchanging ideas with each other. Music appeals to all ages, ranging from little children to senior citizens. “Music is everywhere and all students have musical tastes. [...] I also hope it will show teachers how

stimulating it is to tune in to the wealth of information, reactions, and feelings already there in our students. The advantage of musical materials is that they are so readily available to the teacher, and so immediately motivational to most students.” (Murphey 1993, 5) Nowadays the influence of the English language has spread in the music industry. This means that students are predisposed to listen to English and acquire vocabulary involuntarily, in an informal environment. Consequently, the learning of English takes place also outside the classroom and is fuelled by the students’ interest towards music.

But using songs as authentic resources might impose some problems, in terms of complexity and content. Therefore, the teacher should bring resources that are appropriate for the students’ level and interests. Students might feel overwhelmed by this new teaching resource because they are faced with a different kind of vocabulary, with various metaphors, connotations, secondary meanings, and an informal speaking style. Melvin and Stout (1990, 52-53) suggest that “the best way to reduce this initial anxiety is to design exercises that draw the students’ attention to things in the text they will have understood. These activities might include the identification of number and gender of singers of a popular song or of a persons referred to in the lyrics, characterization of the type of text (e.g., poem, advertisement, love letter), or the names of central characters”.

The content of a song can also pose some other kind of problems. Bernice Melvin and Daniel Stout (1990, 50) state that “the wide array of language used is not the only factor making material difficult for the student. Culturally unexpected behaviour or attitudes can increase its inaccessibility.” Artists communicate through music different ideas that can be traced back to a cultural or a historic background. Therefore, songs represent an interesting way of making students understand the target language and its representatives.

## **V. Selection of teaching resources**

In this section we intend to point out relevant criteria for choosing music as a meaningful authentic resource. The evaluation of teaching resources can be carried out by teachers in a variety of ways. Sheldon (1988) identifies a framework that “covers a range of criteria from those relating to purely practical factors like availability and physical characteristics such as layout and graphics to more psychological and psycholinguistic aspects such as learner needs and learning objectives, their assumed background, target age range, culture, conceptual and schematic development, expectations and learning preferences. [...]appropriacy, authenticity, cultural bias and flexibility [...]” (Rubdy 2003, 43). Unfortunately, it is quite challenging for publishers to address all these criteria both for financial and practical reasons. Therefore, the best solution for the teachers is to bring additional resources in the classroom in order to accommodate the aspects mentioned above.



The songs that have an appropriate content both as concerns the language used and the students' age can be used at different proficiency levels. There are presented below some criteria for evaluating course books from the perspective of cultural awareness, authenticity and self-development. We consider that these criteria can be also employed in evaluating a song or any other authentic teaching resource. Rubdy (2003, 45-54) assesses the effectiveness of teaching materials in accordance with their Psychological Validity, Pedagogical Validity and Process and Content Validity. Before choosing a resource, the teacher should consider the following perspectives:

#### *Self-development*

- Do the materials also involve the learner's emotions in the learning process?
- Do the materials allow for the development of creative and critical thinking skills?
- Do the materials allow scope for the development of a desirable set of attitudes?
- Do the materials involve the learners as human beings rather than just language learners?
- Do the materials help build personality and learner voice and give learners an understanding about themselves? (Rubdy 2003, 48-49)

The content of a teaching resource should take into account criteria such as authenticity and cultural sensitivity.

#### *Authenticity*

- Do the materials provide extensive exposure to authentic English through purposeful reading and/or listening activities?
- Is the content realistic, reflecting topics and events and texts from the real-world situations?
- Do the texts generate 'real-life' communication process? (Rubdy 2003, 52)

#### *Cultural sensitivity*

- Are the materials relevant/suitable/appropriate to the learners' cultural context and sensitive to their values and beliefs?
- Do the materials reflect awareness of and sensitivity to sociocultural variation? (Rubdy 2003, 52)

As regards the self-development criterion it can be stated that songs definitely involve learners as human beings rather than just language learners. Whether songs are associated with listening or reading activities, the target language is used for communicative purposes and not for testing acquired knowledge. Songs create emotions, feelings, attitudes towards something that is valuable for the learner. Music tackles various topics ranging from love, identity and freedom to war and politics etc. We provide some examples of songs that can be listened to in order to engage students in discussions about freedom,

feelings or revolutions: Beatles - *All You Need is Love*, Petula Clark - *The Other Man's Grass (Is Always Greener)* or, Scorpions - *Wind of change*. Therefore, it is impossible not to be receptive to music. Students who listen to music that is sung in English are definitely exposed to authentic language use, to different accents, and to different cultural backgrounds. From this perspective, it can be stated that music reflects sociocultural values and it can be used as a meaningful resource both for observing language use and for generating passionate discussions.

## **VI. The students' perspectives towards the use of songs**

The second part of this paper focuses on the interviews that have been conducted. Our objective was to find out in what ways students have used songs during their pre-service teaching activities.

*Span of time:* the interviews were taken in January 2013 after students completed their teaching practice

*Respondents:* I have interviewed ten students who have performed their teaching practice in English.

*Recruitment:* the respondents have been chosen randomly by the researcher from the above mentioned group. The students have been informed about the details of the study.

*Assumptions:* the findings are based on the assumption that what respondents have answered is valid and reliable. The results cannot be generalized due to the small number of respondents.

*Anticipated problems:* students might not want to respond to some questions since the interviewer is also their teacher.

*Design:* The semi-structured interview has been designed by Raluca Petruș. The students had to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. Do you think that music represents a valuable teaching resource? Why?
2. How often have you used songs during your teaching training practice?
3. What levels were targeted? (Beginner, intermediate or advanced)
4. Name some criteria for choosing a song
5. How can you use songs during a lesson? Provide some examples of ways in which you have used songs in the classroom.

### **Data analysis: qualitative data analysis**

The purpose of interpreting the data collected refers to understanding the respondents' view on the use of songs in teaching English. The respondents gave various answers to the first question addressed to them. They thought of various reasons for using music as a valuable teaching resource: it is relaxing and interesting, it engages students and keeps them motivated, it can be used

in order to teach grammar and vocabulary, to improve listening and reading skills, it is useful for improving pronunciation and it determines students to be pay attention to the subject matter due to the fact that it is 'something unusual'. It seems that students know how to exploit music in the classroom, even though they feel that music belongs to the more informal way of teaching English.

But not all respondents have used songs while performing their teaching practice. Three students have not used at all music, five have used songs just once and two of them have used songs two or three times. Still, they mentioned that they have engaged their learners in other listening activities that were part of the course book. Students had to teach five lessons and observe other fifteen lessons during their teaching practice. We could draw the conclusion that these would-be teachers might not have been able to establish a rapport with the learners in the limited amount of time spent with them. Since they did not know which are the learners' interests it was more difficult to bring new teaching resources. It also depends to a certain degree on the mentor's way of teaching, namely whether he/she has accustomed his/her learners to diverse authentic resources. Furthermore, due to a lack of teaching experience these would-be teachers might have been afraid to bring new activities or to replace those assigned for that particular lesson.

Three students have used songs with the intermediate level, three with beginner level and one student has been given the opportunity to use songs with all the levels. The use of songs with beginners (in this case elementary school) tends to focus more on acquiring good pronunciation skills and on creating a relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere. Two students mentioned the fact that they have used songs, (e.g. carols) with their learners just because the lesson took place two or three days before the Christmas holidays. The students who have used songs with the beginner, intermediate and advanced levels focused more on vocabulary, word order and the topic of the song.

Students provided valuable feedback related to the criteria for choosing a song: the song should send a certain message, it should be famous, funny and appropriate both for the learners' age and time of season (e.g. holidays), it should have an appropriate content, it should pre-teach vocabulary or evaluate vocabulary that belongs to a certain topic (e.g. family, hobbies etc.), it should be easy to understand and be 'grammatically correct'. In fact, it can be quite challenging to bring songs in the classroom due to their informal style. Songs contain slang words or connotations and students might find these difficult to comprehend. Moreover, songs do not always obey grammar rules and students might find word order or even conjugation troublesome. Still, the teacher could explain the learners these details beforehand. We conclude that songs could be successfully used in order to create a certain mood and to discuss a topic that is related to the lesson.

Students have been asked to give examples of activities that involve the use of songs. The answers referred to the fact that they have used songs: as warm-up activities in order to pre-teach vocabulary, to solve gap exercises with missing

words, to create a positive learning environment and relax the students at the end of the lesson, to mime or to role-play a song, to analyse the song from different perspectives (e.g. message conveyed, grammar etc.), to have fun, and to improve writing skills. One student has made a reference to teaching culture or presenting culture through music. The student has brought a song broadcasted in the United Kingdom because the lesson was about this country. Students have used songs in various activities that have improved the learner's communicative skills and linguistic competence. In addition, learners were given the opportunity to experience songs also from the point of view of the message conveyed. This has definitely given them the chance to develop some attitudes, to get to know better their colleagues and to use language in order to manage real-life situations.

## VII. Conclusion

This interview has provided valuable insights into the students' perspectives towards the use of songs in teaching sequences. Students have identified various ways in which authentic resources can cater for the learners' needs and interests. I have expected more students to point out that intercultural contact could be exploited through the use of songs. Still, I am confident that students are going to be able to make a better use of all authentic resources after they gain more teaching experience.

In conclusion, we could state that music represents an authentic resource that should not be neglected in learning and teaching a foreign language. We have provided several perspectives that sustain the use of songs and various criteria for choosing the most appropriate songs.

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2. [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf), p 13, 104-105. Accessed on January 12, 2013

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