Music in Language Classes: Project of International Collaboration

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Abstract

Why should we use music in language classes? We can use song lyrics as authentic material to improve listening skills, pronunciation, accent, spelling, expand student vocabulary, cultural knowledge, work on language components, and inspire students at the same time. The paper describes a project of international collaboration based on the use of music in language classes regardless of the language taught. The aim of the project is to show how songs are beneficial and can boost motivation in learners. Following a survey carried out among students, in the first stage an Italian and English version of a song was prepared and used in class with several groups of students in the Czech Republic and in Italy. The focus was then creating an anxiety-free environment by generating fun and enjoyable warm-up, main and follow-up activities in class as well as in VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). The experiment of how several aspects of a language can be addressed and recycled in songs was based on experience with students of different degree courses and levels of competences. A number of VLEs were used and the paper also discusses internet issues experienced and solved during the experiment. In a context of international collaboration, this experiment represents a contribution to more complex research based on the elementary idea of music as universal language.

Keywords: *international collaboration, language classes, motivation, music, VLE (Virtual Learning Environment)*

1. Introduction

Since 1835, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, an American poet, stated that music is the universal language of mankind, several scholars have conducted research with the aim of validating that statement. As a matter of fact, music is universal as it exists in every society and is tied to specific perceptual, cognitive, and affective abilities, including language (all societies add words to their songs) [1]. In language classes music can be used with plenty of benefits such as increase of motivation and reduction of foreign language learning anxiety [2]. Songs are beneficial for various reasons: they are meaningful, authentic [3], easily available and suitable for different levels of language learners, they generate interest, they are encouraging, inspiring and motivating. A number of studies conducted in the field of ESL learning show that motivation is crucial to successful ESL learning [4]. They help the process of acquisition of a language which is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language [5].

The paper is a product of a project of international collaboration between researchers from two different European countries which has the aim to show how songs are beneficial and can boost motivation in learners. It describes the first steps of the research conducted on students of a number of degree courses at the University of Calabria in Italy and students of Italian in Pilsen, Czech Republic. To demonstrate how music can be used in language classes regardless of the language taught, English and Italian version of a song was selected and used with students of different degree courses and levels of competences, following a chosen methodology. Due to the current restrictions, a number of VLEs were used and the paper also discusses internet issues experienced and solved during the experiment.

Before the experiment, a survey was carried out among students from Czech Republic and it shows that almost 80% of participants expressed their interest in learning the language through music and more that 70% of them would not mind the use of other then favourite genres [6].

2. Research

The research was almost completely conducted online and it was the product of an international collaboration between Italian and Czech foreign language teachers. The aim of the research was to show how songs are beneficial and can boost motivation in learners of all ages as song lyrics are authentic material that can be used to improve listening skills, pronunciation, accent, spelling, expand

student vocabulary, cultural knowledge, work on language components, and inspire students at the same time.

2. Methodology

The researchers discussed and chose the English version of the famous song *Stand by me* (Tracy Chapman's version) and the Italian version *Pregherò* (performed by Adriano Celentano) to get the benefits described above. Participants exposed to the English version of the song were Italian students of a number of degree courses (Engineering, Economics and Biology) at the University of Calabria in Italy and participants exposed to the Italian version of the song were Czech students of Italian at the University of West Bohemia, at the Conservatory of Pilsen and of the non-profit organization *Associazione Amici dell'Italia of Pilsen*, Czech Republic. There were totally 61 Italian and 45 Czech participants.

The lesson plan for both song versions was discussed and each activity was prepared with respect to the CEFR level of the participants and in order to allow the comparison of the results. The activities consisted of a warm-up, main and follow-up activity, previously experienced as a functional methodology [7]. All the activities were conducted in the target language. The time limit of the lesson for each group was of 45 minutes.

2.1 Warm-Up Activity

Warm-up activities differed in the English and Italian versions. In the English version, participants were given a short text about how *Stand by Me* was conceived and its history in order to be introduced to the song. They were asked to read the text out loud and then focus on key words in order to elicit the meaning of some words or expressions, where necessary provided by translation. Subsequently they were asked to answer a 10-question true or false task related to the text.

As Adriano Celentano was completely unknown to the majority of Czech participants, they were first given a riddle including a conundrum (name of a Celentano's song related to his childhood residence) leading to identify the name of the artist. For students of lower CEFR level (A1) in particular, this activity elicited the vocabulary related to cultural life (*regista, attore, cantante, genere musicale* and others). Participants of higher levels (A2, B1) were then shown the authentic online article and asked five more questions about the artist with the aim of expanding vocabulary and cultural knowledge.

Fig. 1. The riddle leading to identify the name of the artist.

2.2 Main Activity

In both versions the lyrics of the song was prepared for a gap-fill activity by taking out words that students should focus on. In the English version these were irregular past simple of verbs, words students often mispronounce, phrasal verbs, most commonly misspelled words, comparatives, superlatives and modal verbs.

There were three Italian versions of the song, A1, A2 and B1 level.

Participants were provided the song lyrics in class. They watched the video of the song first and tried to fill in the blanks. After that, missing words were spelled when necessary, explained or translated. Additional questions were added in order to elicit correct pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary with the support of the teacher.

2.3 Follow-Up Activity

In the English version, participants were given a crossword with hidden words removed from the lyrics in order to recycle the vocabulary encountered in the gap-fill activity.

Fig. 2. The crossword with hidden words removed from the lyrics.

In both versions, learners were asked to fill in a questionnaire previously created on the online platform (Quizizz.com). The task was to choose correct words and expressions (previously studied in the lyrics) in a new context.

In the Italian version, the only group having the on-site lesson, could benefit from another lesson and was also asked to look for hidden words in a crossword. This group of participants (opera singers) was also shown two short videos, one about Celentano's serenade from the movie *Innamorato pazzo* based on the well-known melody from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and the other one showing Figaro's cavatina *Largo al factotum* (performer by Andé Rieu), both very funny scenes. Students were asked to analyze and compare the lyrics of the Rossini's original with the Celentano's remake (e.g. *bravo, bravissimo* transformed in *cotto cottissimo*).

3. Results

Working in tandem and planning minutely all the activities allowed researchers not only to implement all the lesson plan in different VLEs (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet) but also to compare the results and the benefits in both the English and Italian versions.

3.1 Warm-Up Activities

All participants were given enough initial input to follow the lesson and participate actively in all tasks. Italian participants got involved in the activity and answered true false questions related to the song they did not know before. Particularly, Czech participants got involved in the riddle that was solved correctly by all groups before receiving the lyrics and listening to the song.

3.2 Main Activities

For groups of higher levels (A2, B1) listening to the song once was enough in filling in the gaps. Listening to the song twice was necessary for lower-level groups which also needed more explanations or even translations of words, phrases or collocations. All participants collaborated actively by pronouncing, spelling, conjugating or explaining the filled gaps.

3.3 Follow-up Activities

Additional work on language previously used was accepted with enthusiasm by all participants. The online quiz got them involved and required particular attention. With some exception participants managed the activity easily. The results of the quiz could be then used by teachers as a diagnostic tool since they show, in practical terms, which of the studied language components were acquired easily and which of them needed to be re-addressed. The results of all groups are shown in the tables below:

Level	Number of groups	Number of participants	Class accuracy average
A1-A2	3	19	70,50 %
B1	1	41	76,70 %

Table 1. The results of the online quiz of Italian participants.

Level	Number of groups	Number of participants	Class accuracy average
A1	7	26	68,59%
A2	2	15	75,8%
B1	1	4	76,75%

Table 2. The results of the online quiz of Czech participants.

3.4 VLE's Issues

Due to the current restrictions, with exception of one Czech group, all lessons were taught online and a number of VLEs were used (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet as part of Google Classroom). Several difficulties occurred and were solved as follows:

Difficulty experienced during online lesson:	Solutions suggested / provided by teacher:
Student experiences internet connection failures.	a) turn camera off b) get as close as possible to the router c) use a LAN (cable) connection
Student does not hear properly.	a) go to VLE settings and check the sound options selection b) go to device settings and check the sound options selection c) use head/earphones d) use share sound options of the VLE e) send mp3 file to students
Student cannot see the videoclip.	a) use a different browser b) install and use VLC Player
The quality of original videoclip is low.	a) download and share mp3 file
Student does not have access to the chat.	a) install Acrobat Reader b) send lyrics via email c) write explanations/translations in the pdf file shared on the screen
Student cannot access or have lost access to Quizziz.com (or similar platform).	a) access the platform for the student, share the screen and ask the student to answer orally

Table 3. Difficulties occurred and solved during the use of music in synchronous online lessons.

4. Conclusions

The research is a product of international collaboration between researchers from the University of Calabria in Italy and the University of West Bohemia in the Czech Republic. The aim of the research was to show how songs are beneficial and can boost motivation in learners in a context of more complex research based on the elementary idea of music as universal language.

With the aim to demonstrate how music can be used in language classes regardless of the language taught, the Tracy Chapman's version of *Stand by me* was used with Italian participants of English classes and Adriano Celentano's version of *Pregherò* (Italian version of *Stand by me*) was used with Czech participants of Italian classes. The lesson plan for both song versions consisted of a warm-up, main and follow-up activities according to the methodology focused on creating an anxiety-free environment. Lowering of the affective filter - by the use of music and creation of enjoyable activities in the experiment described above - increases students' motivation and self-esteem. This, according to Krashen, provides opportunities for language acquisition to occur more efficiently and quickly among the learners [8]. All the activities were conducted in the target language, regardless of participants' mother tongue.

The benefits of the planned activities were numerous. The use of music in addition to practice of listening skills allowed to expand vocabulary, grammar and cultural knowledge and to elicit correct pronunciation and spelling in both studied languages. The main goal was set on growing motivation in

learners. Based on a previous survey, in which Czech participants expressed their interest in learning the language through music, activities of the lesson plan were analysed. It can be stated that all 106 participants worked actively in all the three parts of the lesson demonstrating their interest and motivation by solving all tasks (answering true-false questions, solving the riddle, filling in the gaps, working with language components, carrying out the questionnaire). The online questionnaire, designed to recycle expressions previously studied in the lyrics in a new context, allowed to obtain measurable and comparable results of class accuracy. The results show, both in English and in Italian versions, a growing tendency of language acquisition with respect to CEFR level that confirms that acquisition occurred efficiently as the affective filter did not blocked students' motivation.

Due to the current restrictions, almost all lessons were given online and a number of VLEs were used. Some difficulties occurred and the paper also reports solutions adopted during the experiment.

In conclusion, it can be stated that despite difficulties that may occur, music is suitable for synchronous online lessons and can provide several benefits as the growth of motivation in learners of different degree courses and levels of competences regardless of the language taught.

This first step of the project was limited by the number of participants and languages included. It is meant to be extended in a second stage.

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