



Impacts of Music on Disadvantaged Foreign Language Learning Contexts. Multimodal Insights from Bataan.

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Abstract

This paper deals with one main research question: Can music serve as an adequate pedagogical tool when teaching foreign languages in a socio-economically disadvantaged area? The answers to this question will be based on the outcomes of the *Multimodal advantages: The Bataan Case study*, an ongoing sub-project of the *Multimodality in Practice* research project [1]. To answer this question, the paper adopts a socio-semiotic theoretical framework [2] based on Multimodal principles [3]. This framework is used for the analysis of a set of qualitative empirical data [4] i.e. fieldnotes, observations, teacher interviews and lesson plans designed and used to teach foreign languages to students attending the Jose De Piro Education Centre for Arts [5] in the poverty-stricken town of Pagalangang in the Bataan region of the Philippines [6]. The paper as its main results (and as a sound answer to the research question) presents five insights derived from the socio-semiotic evaluation of a set of practical student-centered [7] music-related task-based [8] pedagogical activities which were used during lessons conducted in this disadvantaged learning context. Later, as its main conclusion, the paper suggests that notwithstanding the limitations encountered in similar disadvantaged learning contexts, even the teachers working in seemingly advantaged contexts can learn a lot from the way teachers and students use music while teaching and learning foreign languages in these at-first-glance disadvantaged and deprived situations.

Keywords: *Foreign Language teaching, Teaching through music and songs, Multimodality*

1. Introduction: The Filipino Setting

According to Termes et al [9] the Philippines is a poor country with high inequalities. In fact yearly published statistics issued by UNESCO [10] indicate a constant trend of a high majority of the whole Filipino population living below the national poverty line. The situation got even more concerning due to the Covid Pandemic. In fact, a report by the World Bank [11] indicates that:

“The Covid-19 pandemic has reversed part of the gains achieved in poverty reduction and shared prosperity. With the economic recession, the upsurge of unemployment, and fall of remittance inflows, poverty incidence has increased from 21.1 percent, in the first semester of 2018 to 23.7 percent in 2021”.

Therefore, while the state – according to the 1987 Constitution [12] - guarantees the right of quality education to every Filipino at all levels and promises to take the necessary steps to make education accessible to all, and while Filipino parents are frequently willing to try their best to educate their children [13], on the other hand, Maligalig et al [14] suggest that ‘with a poor family’s severely limited resources, education tends to be less prioritized over more basic needs such as food and shelter’ and thus the opportunity for a family to truly move out of poverty are very limited.

In this light, as a recently published UNESCO document indicates, notwithstanding budget prioritization for Education and the intention of increasing access, Philippine education still faces a number of pertinent issues such as: “high dropout rates, a high number of repeaters, low passing grades, lack of particular language skills, failure to adequately respond and address the needs of people with special needs, overcrowded classrooms and poor teacher performances. These problems in turn resulted in a considerable number of illiterate Filipinos and out-of-school youths and graduates who are not prepared for work” [15]. To add to this, one also observes a discrepancy among the 81 provinces in the Philippines. While all the provinces face the abovementioned situation, certain provinces are poorer than the less poor ones [16].



2. Proactive drops in an ocean

Together with the goodwill of the people to evaluate this situation and its impacts, the Filipino Government frequently accepts to endorse proactive initiatives through which improvement might be sought. This, for example, happened back in 2005 when the Jose De Piro Education Centre for Arts was founded [1] in the village of Pagalanggang in the Dinalupihan Municipality of the Bataan Province. Since then, as clear through the Centre's mission statement [17] the Missionary Society of Saint Paul has launched a free-for-all education institution, which as suggested by Mallia [18] aims to reach three main goals:

1. uses music (theory and practice knowledge) as a tool through which children and adolescents of the province are supported to keep away from perils and vices in the surrounding streets;
2. equips students with foreign language skills through the use of music (and the students' musical knowledge) as a pedagogical tool;
3. focuses on the students' spiritual and personal formation, therefore implementing principles of holistic education.

The Jose De Piro Education Centre for Arts has its headquarters in Pagalanggang but then also caters for 4 schools which are close to the Parish and also for a school on the Bachawan mountain.

3. Research Question and Methodology

Keeping in mind the challenges referred to above (i.e. in Section 1), specifically focusing on the mentioned lack of language skills prevalent in the Filipino context, through a case study (i.e. as a first step focusing on one particular learning context from the Philippines), this paper intends to evaluate insights obtained from qualitative data [4] collected from the Jose De Piro Education Centre for Arts and presents answers to one particular research question:

Can music serve as an effective adequate pedagogical tool when teaching foreign languages in (such) a socio-economically disadvantaged area?

The data sets analysed include field notes, observations, and lesson plans designed and used to teach foreign languages, particularly English, German and Italian to 11 to 15-year-old students attending the Centre and the schools it caters for. These data sets were collected during my three (one-month each) visits to the Centre between 2017 and 2019. After the transcription of each data set was completed, the data was interpreted by adopting the original MIRROR framework [2] based on multimodal discourse analysis principles [3].

4. Results and discussion

The socio-semiotic multimodal analysis points out five insights that clearly serve as reflections and outcomes of this research venture.

To start with, two results are directly linked to the use of music during foreign language lessons.

- Music is present and used as a pedagogical tool even in very resource-deprived and economically-disadvantaged contexts. To reach the school located on the Bachawan mountain one requires almost a two-hour off-road trip from the Jose de Piro Centre. The school is situated in an area with limited electricity and water facilities. However, as the collected data indicates, in this very deprived learning context, teachers and students still made use of music particularly through self-made instruments and singing. Furthermore, to create student-centered learning activities, teachers



narrated how they frequently dedicated part of their low salary (i.e. around 400 to 500 Euro a month depending on their scale), to buy music resources for classroom use [similar to 19].

- The data also shows that based on the fact that the majority of students have music theory and practice lessons, even if not expecting high music levels, foreign language teachers use this music knowledge to conduct creative task-based foreign language learning activities [20] frequently involving students not only as passive listeners of songs but also as active composers and critics of music.

Together with these two results directly linked to the use of music in foreign language learning context, there are three other results that came out indicating that music can also serve as a tool through which deeper culture-related insights might be obtained.

- Music serves to highlight a need of change in the concept of time: Data tends to indicate that the use of music used as a pedagogical tool during foreign language lessons, serves as a motivator for students to understand and become more familiar with the concept of time, in a culture where time is not prioritized [same as 21]. One of the teachers indicated how – because of the use of music and through the use of music-related content and tools – students are intrinsically motivated to be more punctual instead of coming ‘sometimes even a day late’¹ for the foreign language lesson.

- Music highlights different aspects of the concept of poverty: Several students (excluding the ones in Bachawan mentioned above) who attend the Centre have smartphone mobiles and buy internet load which they continuously use to chat, listen to music and to watch music videos. Teachers too frequently make use of these resources while teaching foreign languages. However, this music-related situation and the way students have mobiles and use them to access their favorite music videos even during their free time indicates the result that within the same particular ‘disadvantaged’ situation different forms of poverty reside [same as 22]. This poverty ranges from lack of money to lack of account-keeping skills and money mismanagement, where families buy an expensive smartphone and top up their internet load but then find they do not have the necessary money for necessities such as food. Linked to this is also social poverty where family members leave the country to go and work abroad and sustain their family members by sending money from abroad. While doing this, primary caregivers such as the father and/or the mother, frequently are obliged to leave their children deprived of their presence and the longed for attention.

- Music serves as a tool highlighting the negative aspect of competition: Results indicate that the way music is used during foreign language lessons serves to help in reducing competition among students. Whereas the national school system in the Philippines encourages students to involve themselves in all sorts of competition [same as 23] including music competitions, which frequently are sought because they increase the status of the school and of the class, all the students at the Jose De Piro Education center for arts, are constantly reminded that notwithstanding their abilities and the different levels reached, they still fit in the system, are welcome, have potential and should feel all equal.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, the abovementioned findings and their discussion serve as very valid insights through which one can answer the main research question of this paper through an affirmative reply since:

- Music (such as songs, videos and students’ own compositions) effectively serves to improve the linguistic skills of the students in the Foreign language classroom, involve them and put them at the center of the lesson, and to motivate them further while learning;
- The way music is used also serves to indicate other insights related to the Filipino culture specifically linked to the way Filipinos define time, poverty and competition.

Therefore the first conclusion reached in this paper is that the way music is used in Filipino foreign language learning contexts indicates that while many [as in 14 above] suggest that improving

¹ Quote taken from one of the teachers’ interview transcript.



education levels in such disadvantaged contexts depends on improving the socio-economic poverty-stricken situation, the results above also indicate that in these people (ie. the Filipinos) there is hope that things also go the other way round i.e. that poverty could be improved through education.

Furthermore, the results above should also be followed-up through a further *so what* question. Now that these insights came out as results of this paper, one should plan future studies through which suggestions required to bring about change may be formulated².

While acknowledging the importance of embarking on this next research venture, a second conclusion from this paper should be that anyone conducting research in similar disadvantaged contexts, needs to adopt a humble open non-judgmental attitude towards what is considered or viewed as 'disadvantaged'. This attitude is required because through similar research ventures like the one presented in this paper and others that I plan to do in Bataan in the very near future, one can hopefully start moving away from the often patronising state of 'false generosity' through which educators from the West very willing often seek to just help, save and change these seemingly disadvantaged contexts (Freire, 1996).

Instead of adopting this attitude, one should seek to initiate the gradual self-evaluating process through which one learns more about himself than about the disadvantaged. To one's surprise, this evaluative non-judgmental attitude might indicate that after all others considered disadvantaged might show the advantaged ones that they too, have their own disadvantages to deal with.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Ms. Rodelyn Joy Manuel (a graduated Filipino educator) and Fr. Joseph Cremona (Director of the Jose De Piro Education Centre for Arts) for their insights and feedback about the educational system in the Philippines.

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² This is being proposed as a suggestion for future studies due to the word-count limit in this paper.



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