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**FEATURE**

**The Socio-Pragmatic Role of Songs  
in the L2 Classroom**

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**Abstract.** *In recent years, the field of second language acquisition has highlighted the teaching of culture, emphasizing that culture and language influence each other. In this relationship, songs are one expression of culture. As such, they are worthy to be included in the L2 classroom. Their importance is given not only because of the meaning of their lyrics, but also because of the value of the music per se. This paper explores how to use songs as a pedagogical resource to favor the understanding of L2 culture and pragmatics in Spanish and English L2 settings. Songs foster multicultural connections and enhance social intelligence, two key elements to raise students' communicative competence in a globalized world.*

**Keywords:** Culture, language, music, song, L2 classroom, education, teachers

**Introduction**

Since the 1990s, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has emphasized culture teaching as a key element to favor second language (L2) acquisition (Byrd, Hlas, Watzke, & Valencia, 2011; Genc & Bada, 2005). This orientation supposes finding different means for enhancing students' cultural competence and, therefore, their communication competence as well. Music is included in the broader spectrum of culture as a cultural product (Byrd et al., 2011), and as such deserves a place in the study of culture as an expression of the beliefs, feelings, and traditions of a nation (Copan, 1991; Pascale, 2011; Seeger, 1991).

Songs, in particular, are a key element to transmit subjective cultural elements. Added to the pedagogical advantages of music in general, the affective factor is present when songs are used to help students get closer experiences

regarding both cultural and pragmatic elements. This paper analyzes this phenomenon. First, the relationship between culture and language is examined in the context of the L2 classroom. Second, a synthesis is provided regarding the importance of songs as a pedagogical resource, focusing on the value of songs to develop pragmatic competence and raising cultural awareness. Third, examples of teaching culture through songs are offered for the English and Spanish L2 classrooms from a Christian worldview perspective.

### **Culture and Language in the L2 Classroom**

The globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century world reality requires communicative competence among people. This is why L2 learners abound around the world. Every language, though, supposes a culture, and this multicultural reality requires L2 students to be knowledgeable of the different socio-pragmatic features in order to communicate. The moderate claim is that language and culture influence each other (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). This relationship, however, still leaves an ample ground to explore in the context of the L2 classroom.

Researchers have proposed that cultural awareness enhances communicative competence in L2 learners (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). This is why teaching culture has gained popularity as a pedagogical strategy that points to the objective of communication as a whole process.

Describing what culture is and what elements are to be included in an L2 classroom is not an easy task. Lack of time and resources also threatens L2 teachers in their efforts to help students gain intercultural competence (Byrd et al., 2011). The goal for teachers is to find resource- and time-effective pedagogical tools to approach the teaching of culture.

A wise approach for teaching culture includes using pedagogical resources that can encompass the broader definition of it. Culture is described as an objective element—with a focus on people's products, and as a subjective element—with a focus on people's beliefs (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). Many elements can be analyzed and presented in the L2 classroom to help students grasp and increase their cultural awareness (e.g., food, customs). One of the most valuable pedagogical tools an L2 teacher might use for this purpose is songs.

### **Songs as a Pedagogical Resource**

Songs are a key element that needs to be more explored in the L2 classroom. Songs are music and words together, and this combination provides a balance in the presentation of both subjective cultural values—through the lyrics, expressing beliefs and attitudes, and objective cultural values—through the music, as a cultural product in itself. The musical factors alone have been analyzed extensively in the linguistic, psychological, and social framework research areas

(e.g., Besson, Schön, Moreno, Santos, & Magne, 2007; Speh & Ahranjian, 2010). Music reduces the affective filter, favoring the acquisition rather than rote learning of language, including the acquisition of vocabulary (Kirson & Lee, 2004; Medina, 2002). Musical intelligence has been also linked with better pronunciation and sound recognition (Milovanov & Tervaniemi, 2011). In an L2 classroom, music can provide a warm atmosphere that fosters learning in a better way (Grenough, 1994).

The above-mentioned benefits and uses of music are relevant whether L2 students sing or listen to music. Listening to music appeals more to a context where silence is the expected atmosphere in the classroom. Singing the music, on the other hand, supposes a more active approach. As Metcalf (1997) points out, people remember 90% of what they do and say. In this context, singing songs seems to be a more enriching pedagogical experience.

Songs also have a second component other than music: words. These alone can express the beliefs, feelings, and traditions of a nation. Analyzed carefully, they provide an important input regarding how people live and act in a particular culture (Nettl, 2005). Words have extra value in the context of pragmatic competence and cultural awareness, making explicit the subjective component of culture.

### **Pragmatic Competence**

The words of an appealing song are hard to forget. Memorization enhanced by singing has been an instructional medium for thousands of years—since biblical times (White, 1903). The advantage of singing in the pragmatic competence context is that the target language is not easily forgotten. It means, moreover, that songs provide real language usage in context. Sometimes the language used in songs is more poetic than the real, street language. In other cases, such as in rhymes and nursery songs, the language might be simpler. All cases, however, provide L2 teachers with real language examples for their students, and as such have a place in the L2 classroom.

### **Cultural Awareness**

In the language teaching context, cultural awareness is derived from both the words and the music of the song. As Farley (2006) points out, even though music today is a global phenomenon, the essence of the musical manifestation speaks in favor of a culturally biased production and perception of it around the world. In case of the words, a song can be carefully chosen to make comparisons explicit. The theme of the song might vary (i.e., family, customs), but a well-chosen song facilitates students' acquisition of cultural elements (Abril, 2006).

The tone and style of music in connection with the words is what gives the student the cultural awareness. Words and music together working synergistically might enlighten students' perceptions about how cultural aspects are treated in a certain culture (Abril, 2006). According to Brown (2006), even lullabies and children's songs are useful for developing culture in an L2 setting. An L2 classroom, therefore, might benefit from different song selections.

Singing and analyzing various songs might provide students with a larger background that could help them develop an L2 worldview. This new worldview has been called a second set of eyes (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). Its conformation sets the first steps to acculturation (Brown, 2000), which helps an L2 student gain communicative competence.

### **Teaching L2 in Two Settings: A Practical Approach**

Teaching culture and pragmatics through songs can be achieved regardless of the particular L2 taught. The following examples are only meant to illustrate the possible use of songs. The English and Spanish L2 classrooms are chosen as exemplifying cases, being the two most studied L2s around the world.

Songs have been abundantly used to enhance pragmatic competence. The interest regarding this particular point is shown, for instance, in the number of blogs with ideas for using songs in this way (e.g., Malburg, 2013; Rhalmi, 2009). The focus on culture does not seem to be so emphatic or specific in the L2 classroom even though it is mentioned repeatedly in music research literature (e.g., Hormigos-Ruiz, 2010; Pascale, 2011).

Salcedo (2004), for example, points out that as she teaches, students get not only the meaning of the song, but "cultural expressions" as well (p. 4). Furthermore, Edwards' analysis of teachers' preferences suggest that they value music to fostering cultural awareness only slightly under music as used for vocabulary acquisition purposes (as cited in Salcedo, 2002). A thorough review of the available language-and-music related methods reveals, though, that cultural awareness is not emphasized to the same extent that pragmatic competence is. For this reasons, the practical approach suggested in this paper focuses on teaching culture through songs.

### **Teaching American Culture Through Songs**

English as a language is representative of many cultures (e.g., British, American). The pedagogical applications will be drawn from American culture as the most influential in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages. For this purpose, two songs will be briefly analyzed.

***This land is your land.*** The first part of the song describes the United States of America geographically. This gives an opportunity to know different places

and their social realities. The chorus emphasizes the American dream philosophy as an American characteristic, as it says “this land was made for you and me.”

The music helps the L2 student approach the culture with a song presented in a lively folk tune (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010). The teacher might encourage students to sing it within the same cheerful spirit. Christian teachers can also make connections regarding the United States of America as a vital part of the prophecy in the last days of the Earth (White, 1950).

***Go down, Moses.*** A Negro Spiritual, this song echoes the slavery times in the Southern part of the United States. The codified message of freedom sought can be heard in the words, asking Moses to deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh. Most versions of the songs are sad, and deeply-felt renditions that can help students approach slavery, the Civil War, and segregation.

The teacher might encourage students to sing this song with a gloomy but hopeful spirit. Christian teachers can also help students reflect ethically about slavery and trace the freedom movements in the United States of America that made the country what it is today.

Other examples of songs that can be used to teach the American culture might include the *National Anthem*, *Jingle Bells*, and *Joyful, Joyful*. These are culture-loaded songs representative of important themes in the American culture.

### **Teaching Mexican Culture Through Songs**

Spanish as a language is also representative of many cultures (e.g., Peruvian, Mexican). The pedagogical considerations in this paper will be derived from the Mexican culture, approached through two songs briefly analyzed.

***Cielito lindo.*** *Mariachi* music provides a Mexican feeling to this song. The chorus repeats “*Canta y no llores*” (Sing and don’t cry). It is typical of Mexican culture to hide the sorrows with songs, friends, and a good meal—or drink. Their worldview indicates that the circumstances cannot be changed, so worrying about them is pointless.

The lyrics also refer to love, which speaks of the passionate nature of Mexicans. The teacher might encourage students to sing this song with a spirit of abandon, being resigned to one’s fate. Christian teachers might enable students to analyze this attitude, contrasting it with trustingly accepting Christ’s power in one’s life.

***La Cucaracha.*** This song is in a *corrido* style example, with a rich story behind. It was created to mock a leader during the Revolutionary War, calling him “*Cucaracha*” (cockroach). The lyrics say that the cockroach cannot walk anymore because it lacks its two hind legs. The cultural implications of the song

are suggestive of the troubles Mexicans had to overcome to arise as an independent nation. The music, however, adds a contrasting happy tone.

The teacher might encourage students to sing this classical Mexican song as people that, despite adversity, have traditionally kept their spirits joyous. Christian teachers might want to connect the conflict theme that originated the song with the Great Controversy and sin themes. Other examples might include *Bésame mucho*, and *Solamente una vez*, songs that typically mix the passionate Mexican culture regarding love with a sorrowful one, resigned to the destiny of the Mexican people.

Songs face the common risk of stigmatization and prejudice against members of an L2 culture. Songs provide, however, a general perspective of how people work and live in a particular culture. L2 teachers might want to use this tool that, besides developing lexical knowledge and enhancing language acquisition, might contribute to raising students' communicative competence and developing socially intelligent individuals with a heightened perception of multiculturalism.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Songs are a powerful pedagogical resource to favor and enhance communicative competence, gained by raising the pragmatic competence and the cultural awareness. Culture acquired through the music and words of a song impacts students' lives. Songs can cause students not merely to sing the words, but, in a way, to live them.

The L2 Christian classroom might be greatly benefited from the inclusion of this lively tool, meant to emphasize similarities and highlight differences between cultures and people. In a warm, respectful climate, the L2 teacher might help students be more flexible and adaptable to the various realities of the world, preparing citizens that will serve God and humanity better due to their multicultural perceptions and sensitivity to others.

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