Songs and Spanish Language Learning

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Introduction

Songs, more so perhaps than any other aspect of a culture have a strong popular appeal for everyone, from children to adolescents, to adults. Thus it is not surprising that foreign language songs have been used by language teachers and learners for a long time as tools to help acquire the language and decipher the culture behind it.

Songs are recognized by many teachers as useful tools in the classroom. At the early ages one can find many CD's with children's songs designed to help them learn the language. Children enjoy musical activities and the songs get “stuck” in the children’s heads and they are not easily forgotten.

At the adolescent and young adult level there are also some specialized musical resources such as Anton (1990), that is, songs that are created specifically for the purpose of learning Spanish. For the most part, however, educators seem to prefer to make use of existing popular songs from the language’s culture. Sandra Adkins (1997) is an enthusiastic advocate of using songs to energize and motivate students at the high school level who has explored a middle ground of working with popular tunes to which she wrote new lyrics in Spanish that fit the topic she wanted students to practice, such as for example the future tense.

As one of the few recent articles on the topic has put it, “songs may be viewed as poetic texts which convey messages about human emotions, humorous events, tragedy, and other phenomena that capture the author’s imagination” often containing “universal themes” such as love and alienation (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:478-9).

Also, it has been claimed that there may be something to putting words to music that helps with the acquisition of the vocabulary and grammatical patterns in the words.

Finally, songs can conceivably be a powerful motivator for some foreign language learners, as long as there is a strong emotional connection with the songs, which is why choosing the right kind of songs is crucial.

Many authors have claimed that “music is an effective memory aid,” which is why we easily remember the jingles in television ads and why corporations spend so much money
devising catchy ones (Anton 1990:1166). Music relaxes and reduces stress and anxiety, thus putting the mind at ease and more receptive to acquiring information. Anton also mentions that music “helps reduce inhibitions which often hinder language learning” (ibid.). In other words, music “helps lower the students’ affective filter (that is, helps them relax and become more receptive to learning)” and also “combines the creative, non-verbal, emotional processes carried out by the right hemisphere of the brain with the specific, verbal, and logic-based learning achieved by the left hemisphere” (ibid.).

The following are some of the arguments that have been put forth to explain the importance of using songs as part of a language program:

- Songs provide an “excellent source of [linguistic] input for the student” and according to Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) “input hypothesis,” “listening comprehension and reading are of primary importance in the language program” since “speaking ability ‘emerges’ after the acquirer has built up competence thought comprehending input” (Krashen and Terrell 1983:32) (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:475)
- Songs are an “artististically stimulating exposure to Spanish” (Willis & Mason 1994:102)
- Songs “can provide excellent practice in all five skill areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture” (Willis & Mason 1994:102)
- “Songs are often closer to the real life experiences of the students than most textbook material” (Willis & Mason 1994:102)
- “a song constitutes an ideal text that is admirably suited to a multiplicity of learning/acquisition activities carried out in the language classroom” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:477)
- “Songs can reinforce grammar points already learned and increase vocabulary both actively and passively, while remaining a veritable wealth of material for the learning of both colloquial and literary expressions” (D’Onofrio 1988:V, cited in Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:475)
- “Listening to and working with songs can aid greatly in enhancing aural comprehension at the introductory stages and can develop in the more advanced students an understanding of symbolic and metaphorical language, as well as the need for various registers and levels of speech” (D’Onofrio 1988:V, cited in Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:475)
- Students enjoy popular and folk songs, they are relevant to their lives, and unlike literature they are non-elitist language materials (Griffin 1977:942).
- Songs can be an door to the culture, one that students can relate to.

Culture is often taught as an afterthought and as an exercise in memorizing facts that the student has no connection to and no interest in. As Seelye (1984:3) mentions: “Facts are cheap. They are also meaningless until interpreted within a problem-solving context”

Gardner (1983) has argued that “students should not only be taught to increase their verbal, spatial, and numerical intelligences, but also to nurture their musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. Clearly, we learn in different ways, and as learners unconsciously establish our own preferred sensory system” (Fonseca Mora 2000:146)

“The brain has different ways of processing outside information—different specialized devices, different types of intelligences, and therefore, different kinds of memories... psychological and linguistic studies reveal how the interaction between music and language acquisition is activated at a very early stage” (Fonseca Mora 2000:146)

“Singing is an easy way of memorizing something... Tim Murphey (1990) defines the ‘song-stuck-in-my-head’ phenomenon as a melodic Din, as an (in)voluntary musical and verbal rehearsal” (Fonseca Mora 2000:150)

“Pedagogical activities involving music offer many possibilities for integrating culture, content, and communication during the language-learning process (Siek-Piskozub 1) ... in addition to all those things, when carefully selected, songs can motivate and inspire students—who often define themselves, within their own culture(s), byt the music they enjoy” (Murray 2005:162)

Claim: Songs can be a memory aid, helping transfer vocabulary and grammatical patterns to long term memory

Claim: Songs motivate students and help create a better learning environment in the classroom (Adkins 1997:44 mentions that Sam Crowell in his book Mindshifts argues that music creates “a sense of playfulness and joy in the classroom”)

Claim: Songs stimulate creativity in the use of the language, for example in activities in which the student has to create new lyrics or modify existing ones; by promoting the use of imagination and creativity, learning is enhanced (Moskowitz 1994 “encourages teachers to recognize the potential of imagination; too much schooling does not. Traditional ways of learning and teaching ignore the imagination, which is why students feel that school is so boring” (Adkins 1997:47).

For the most part all the benefits of using songs in the classroom are anecdotal and no scientific studies have been made that prove any of the claims made about the benefits of using songs in general or of different ways of using songs as a learning aid. The best we can do is say
that the use of music as a way to improve language abilities makes sense from a neurological viewpoint, since it helps make connections in the brain, and that it adds the support of one of the multiple possible intelligences discussed in Gardner (1983), namely musical intelligence, and this may be of benefit to all students, and to some—those who excel in this area—undoubtedly more than others.

One thing that is undeniable is that students enjoy songs and learning with songs. There are few empirical studies on this matter (but see Green 1993), but all who have used songs in the classroom can probably attest to this.

Adkins mentions that Campbell (1992) has argued that “music has a way of connecting the two hemispheres by utilizing the left for language and the right for distinguishing musical intonations though consistent integration via the corpus callosum” (Adkins 1997:42) and “the more connections that can be made in the brain, the more integrated that experience is with memory” (Adkins 1997:44)

How to introduce and use songs in the classroom

There isn’t a single method for using songs in the classroom. Adkins (1997) has argued that “each teacher would have to create his or her own program depending on their level of comfort with regard to music” (p. 42). Although this makes sense, there are many suggestions in the literature as to what works best.

The manner in which a song is introduced and the activities

Nuessel and Cicogna (1991) and Nuessel and Marshall (2008) make recommendations for introducing a song into the classroom. Among them we find:

- Develop a wide collection of songs from different sources, such as traditional, popular, and pop songs. [Expand that not all songs are going to be equally well-received by all students]
- “Acquire a dependable music player with good sound projection characteristics...” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008 :140)
- “Use songs with clear enunciation” and at least at the beginning, “avoid songs that are difficult to understand, use unfamiliar grammar, dialects, and ... vocabulary” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:476)
- “Provide some basic information about the song (theme, historical event, cultural content, etc.) and the singer (region, success, other works, etc.) prior to an audition of the song” (ibid.)
• “Select appropriate exemplars that reflect the linguistic and cultural topics being studied in the classroom” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:476)
• “Include appropriate songs in a consistent, though not excessive fashion to reinforce grammatical or cultural materials, and to ensure that such elements are perceived as a normal part of the classroom routine” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:141)
• “Introduce pedagogical graphics to enhance the instructive value of the songs (Danesi 1983). Systematic use of geometric visual elements…” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:141)
• “early integration of songs into the curriculum renders the activity a normal part of the class routine” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:478)
• “Follow the conventional manner of introducing new materials: (a) Pre-listening or pre-reading of the song with appropriate linguistic and cultural information about the content and the context of the piece; (b) audition or reading of the song; (c) post-listening or post-reading activities that include content exercises and activities as well as creative tasks in which students utilize the song and its content to invent and create linguistic scenarios based on the prompt.” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:141)

Nuessel and Marshall (2008) argue that the use of songs in the classroom is beneficial for all three communicative modes (as put forth in the Standards 1998:37): “(1) The interpersonal mode which involves interactive communication (listening, speaking, reading, writing); (2) the interpretive mode which involves receptive communication (listening and reading); and (3) the presentational mode which involves productive communication (speaking, writing).” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:141).

• “singing the song as an introductory activity”
• “rote process of learning a song and performing it as a group or perhaps individually”
• “dramatization of a particular song can add zest to the classroom experience” (cf. Zola and Sandvoss (1976). “Di Pietro (1987) provides a scenario format in which students are presented with a likely personal interaction, the dissolution of an intimate relationship”
• “Systematic development of a set of oral questions related to polemical topics will enliven class exercises”, e.g. “ecological problems (Maná, “Cuando los ángeles lloran...”) “compare, contrast, and list songs from their own culture and speak to similar issues”

Interpretive Mode (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:142)
“Songs provide an ideal format to address the interpretive communicative mode… auditory format... printed texts ... non-verbal communication [?]” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:142)

“With the ‘natural approach’ to second-language acquisition, the ‘input hypothesis’ constitutes a strong argument for the presentation of songs as a worthwhile listening activity for neophyte language students (Krashen and Terrell 1983:32-37)” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:142)

“The use of a reasonably simple musical text in combination with a series of short-answer questions helps to build up the self-confidence of each class member” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:142)

“Another worthwhile technique is the formulation of oral or written questions about the content of songs previously auditioned” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143)

“Songs may be treated as poetic texts or short stories... examples of authentic interpretive reading material. Universal themes such as love abound” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143)

Songs can be used “to examine figurative language. Metaphor...” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143)

“Idiomatic language often appears in songs... examples of popular and useful idiomatic expressions” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143)

Presentational Mode (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143-4)

“Having students create a written summary of the contents of a ... song ... limits vocabulary difficulties while simultaneously focusing on special expressions (Raimes 1983)” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143)

“direct students to compose an original song. A ‘warm-up’ or preparatory activity might involve asking students to add a new verse to an existing song, or to re-write the final verse for a song they already know” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:143-4)

Table 1 Songs and the Three Communicative Modes (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:144)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Interpretive</th>
<th>Presentational</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Singing the song</td>
<td>• Listening comprehension with oral questions focused on predicates in song</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Dramatization of song or part of song (TPR)</td>
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<td>• Oral questions about controversial topics/ideas in song</td>
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Activities that can be part of the introduction of a song

- (comprehension skills) Ask simple questions (oral or written) about a song after listening to it, which “help to build up the self-confidence” of students (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:477); “questions related to polemical topics will enliven class exercises” and stimulate conversation (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:478)
- “engage the students in singing the song as an introductory activity,” though this may be problematic “since some students, or even the instructor, may be timid or self-conscious” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:478)
- (oral skills) dramatization of the song, with “use of appropriate kinesics to accompany the verbalization”, especially in the case of songs with action verbs (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:478)
- (oral skills) “Systematic development of a set of questions related to polemical topics” such as “ageism ... or racism” to “enliven class exercises” and “stimulate conversation” Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:478
- (reading/vocabulary) in an advanced class one can “examine figurative language”, such as metaphor, as well as idiomatic language, “since most songs contain worthwhile examples of popular and useful idiomatic expressions” in context (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:479)
- (reading/vocabulary) “eliciting words that are derivative from lexical items in the song proper” demonstrating patterns of derivational morphology. (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:479)
- (reading/vocabulary) “elicit synonyms or antonyms found in the vocabulary of songs” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:479)
- (writing) “A written summary of the contents of the particular song ... limits vocabulary difficulties while simultaneously focusing on special expressions” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:479)
- (writing) “direct students to compose an original song” though “[i]t may be necessary to persuade the class that it is not as difficult as they might imagine.” “Select a topic such as love and tell students to describe (qualifying adjectives) a person they care about” or “describe their subjective reactions to the person involved” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:479-80)
• (culture) “Frequent allusions to popular cultural phenomena occur in songs”. “The place of birth of the songwriters also serves as a point of departure for teaching physical and political geography” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:480-1)

**Gómez-Acuña**

Oral exercises:

• **Interview**: “A student can interview other students. In elementary classes, use with simple questions provided by the instructor. In more advanced classes, students can come up with their own questions, including questions using vocabulary not in the song. A group or class dialogue can take place at the end of the exercise regarding the replies.” (Gómez Acuña 2002:918)

• **Role-Plays**: “students represent a dialogue that incorporates aspects or ideas in the song as well as original ones.” (Gómez Acuña 2002:919)

• **Oral presentations**: “for more advanced levels, students can present on biographic, discographic, or other information about the song” (Gómez Acuña 2002:919)

Written exercises

• **Vocabulary expansion**: Use the song as a way to expand the student’s vocabulary, in particular regional or colloquial vocabulary. [HOW IS THIS A WRITTEN EXERCISE?] (Gómez Acuña 2002:920)

• **Composition**: Have students write things such as an imaginary interview with the song’s interpreters or a comparison between the song in question and other songs with a similar topic. (Gómez Acuña 2002:920)

**Murray**

1) “Begin the semester by selecting a modern song, with which the students can connect, preferably something popular among their age group(s) in the country or region where the target language is spoken” (Murray 2005:162)

2) “Music should become a regular feature of the course... “song of the month” (Murray 2005:162)

6) “Work on pronunciation... the “rhythm” or “accent”” (Murray 2005:163)

7) “Explore the cultural dimensions of the song... group discussions about the foreign culture as it is presented through the song, students cultivate their conversational skills and increase their cultural awareness...” (Murray 2005:163)
8) “Ask students to research and make presentations about foreign music... research an artist of their choosing and present a song or music video to the class” (Murray 2005:163)

During the first month of classes, the song was used during six class sessions” (Murray 2005:164)

Assessment

“The following constitutes some traditional means of evaluating songs introduced into the second-language classroom” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:481-2) (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:144-5)

2. Sing along (interpersonal) to evaluate “phonetic aspects of ... pronunciation” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:144)
3. True-False questions: “Create well-formulated “true-false” statements to determine if the students understand the meaning of a song” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:481-2)
4. Dictation: “Dictate a segment of a song to evaluate the students’ aural comprehension skills (Davis and Rinvolucri 1988) with followup oral or written questions over the content including gist, detail, inference questions, connections and comparisons” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:144)
5. Open ended questions: “Elicit oral or written responses to the content [of the text]. Include personalized, open-ended questions (e.g., What is your opinion? What would you do in this situation? Etc.).” (Nuessel and Cicogna 1991:481-2)
6. “Elicit appropriate antonyms based on vocabulary in a particular song”
7. “Test word formation skills by requesting students to produce a word (adjective, noun, adverb, etc.) derived from a frequently occurring vocabulary item in songs”
8. “Employ Cloze tests to determine students’ comprehension”, even using “a modified Cloze procedure to focus on a particular grammatical point” such as a “predicate or preposition”
9. “Create well-formulated ‘true-false’ statements to determine if students understand the meaning of a song” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:144)
10. Employ “discrete point puzzles such as word searches, crossword puzzles, scrambled letters, jumbles, word tic-tac-toe, match-ups, word mazes, cryptograms, etc. (Danesi 1985a,b; Nuessel 2006. All of these procedures may be used as linguistic and evaluation activities” (interpretive) (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:145)
11. “Use Eddy’s (2007) extensive list of performance-based assessment which consists of a
list of 35 separate activities and tasks (145-46)” including “compose poetry,” “create
your own music video for the song,” “critique the song,” “write a four-line song plot for
CD liners,” and “assume the role of a singer” (Nuessel and Marshall 2008:145)

Culture

As we mentioned before, all forms of artistic expression are great ways of learning
about culture. As Eddy (2007) mentions: “Through the arts, language an culture come alive to
ignite inquiry and active learning whereby memorization of facts and recall tasks hardly fit the
bill. Music defines and transmits culture, dissolving barriers... Every society responds to and
creates music” (Eddy 2007:142).

Eddy argues persuasively, however, that we have to go beyond “low-level, skills-based
tasks,” such as “fact-based, mechanized responses that do not 1) foster authentic discourse, 2)
demonstrate understanding of the lyrics, 3) engage students in negotiation of meaning , 4)
provide prompts for utilizing prior knowledge, 5) solve a problem, 6) create a product, 7)
transfer skills to flexible application, or 8) encourage critical thinking skills (Eddy 2006)” (Eddy
2007:142). “Low-level, skills-based tasks are suitable when used appropriately but not as an
assessment to demonstrate real understanding. A fact-based treatment of culture does not
allow for development of awareness, examination of beliefs, or empathy for another culture”
(Eddy 2007:142).

Both students and teachers often prefer the less creative activities, but the creative
ones are necessary to achieve the necessary acquisition of the culture. “Students are often only
comfortable with questions phrased in a predictable and rehearsed manner which is the
antithesis of what they will encounter when using the language in authentic situations where
flexibility is required. This scenario results in students being unable to apply or transfer skills to
new contexts or situations” (Eddy 2007:143).

That’s why she argues that, besides “[choosing] music selections that have
interdisciplinary themes and reflect cultural practices and perspectives”, we should “[d]evelop
[presentational and communicative] tasks that encourage critical thinking skills, rather than
plug-in or fill-in activities” and “[c]reate activities that encourage interpretive strategies and
that address diverse learner styles” (Eddy 2007:144).

Eddy provides a “sample of performance-based tasks” of which I will mention a few
(about half) (Eddy 2007:145-6):
• Solving problems, dilemmas, situations
• Change the ending of a song
• Increase vocabulary through circumlocution
• Ask questions about content, inferences, and artist’s intent
• Conduct a survey or poll
• Write a letter to the person in the song
• Compare song track with another song you know with a similar theme
• Write first person journal entries assuming role of another person
• Solve the problem in a song
• Critique the song as if you were an entertainment critic
• Propose solutions with your classmate on how issues could have worked out differently
• Discuss with classmate views, habits, opinions
• Write a movie or theatrical plot based on song
• Stage a debate
• Write a four line song plot for CD liner notes

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Published by: American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Italian
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