

LANGUAGES LEARNING THROUGH SONGS, KARAOKE AND INTERNET

Giampiero DE CRISTOFARO¹

1. Prof., PhD, Federazione Nazionale Insegnanti, Centro di iniziativa per l'Europa
Corresponding author: fenice-eu@libero.it

Abstract

The starting point for the didactic and methodological idea is the use of songs and the Internet in order to increase multilingualism both in schools and in lifelong learning courses and to promote the integration of immigrants.

In order to encourage innovation in education and to facilitate integration with a view to enhancing and improving communication and intercultural interaction and understanding, the Federazione Nazionale Insegnanti Centro di iniziativa per l'Europa, a non-profit professional association, in cooperation with institutions from several European countries, produced, tested, optimised and evaluated teaching materials for IT/RO/RU/FR/ES as foreign languages linking the use of songs (particularly useful to building up communicative skills in a foreign language and intercultural learning) to the use of karaoke and audio visual materials put in the web. This approach helps overcome the problems caused by age and differences among learners.

The material, addressed to teachers of IT/RO/RU/FR/ES as a second language and their students - regardless their age - and to people from various age groups wishing to learn one of the languages for work, tourism or immigration, is accessible through the web portal www.languagesbysongs.eu.

The learning materials, at CEFR A2 and B1 levels, require learners to have A1 linguistic competence and are based on the guidelines which explain the methodological criteria, the introduction to the method and give suggestions both on how to introduce the music approach when teaching a language and on how to write suitable exercises.

The materials were put in the website after being experimented to ensure suitability, relevance and effectiveness. They can be used everywhere, also in autonomous learning and the project can be considered a model to apply to other languages as well.

1. - RATIONALE

International indicators (Pisa, Ocse, TIMMs), practically without exception, underline that students' levels of competence in the South of Europe are rather low, certainly inferior to the European average. Students' performances are

particularly unsatisfactory in fundamental skills such as reading, understanding, speaking the foreign languages, etc. Youngsters coming from deprived environments and foreign pupils are, of course, at the greatest disadvantage. This is largely due to the fact that in the teaching practice too much importance is still given to the knowledge of grammar rules rather than to communicative skills; at the same time the topics chosen and the vocabulary taught have very little connection with the reality students live in. We believe that the approach we suggest may help improve this situation only if it starts spreading in everyday practice. The musical approach in foreign language teaching in secondary schools, university and courses for older people has been tested and has shown its effectiveness in the rapid acquisition of communicative abilities also in autonomous learning. (Santiago Palacios Navarro - e-Learning Papers N°13 • April 2009) It also enhances the intercultural knowledge of the students (taking into account that the lyrics contain historical, social and cultural references) and promotes the integration of immigrants in schools and in centers for adult education.

2. - WHY DO SONGS WORK?

Songs are a powerful tool for language learning. Therefore it is no wonder that the idea of using music in a language classroom is given greater and greater attention by both researchers and practicing language teachers.

The most obvious reasons for integrating "musical lessons" in the language teaching process are advantages such as easy memorizing and consolidation of vocabulary; implicit practicing of pronunciation; mastering language

patterns through their repeated use and building motivation through emotional involvement. Furthermore, they help improve our listening skills, influence our behavior and emotions. Other reasons are:

- Ø everybody likes music;
- Ø using music in the classroom is a great way to liven up listening activities or, at times, to soothe and relax;
- Ø it enables teachers to teach grammar and vocabulary in an entertaining and relaxing way;
- Ø the language of songs extends beyond everyday language that people know;
- Ø frequently, the lyrics of songs stick memory very easily;
- Ø it is a great way to practice pronunciation and intonation, plus, it can be easily done at home as well;
- Ø a memorable melody imprints linguistic patterns in people's minds unawares (when listening to catchy music, learners will retain grammatical structures and vocabulary for the rest of their lives)
- Ø learners will learn about the culture and the people, which also inspires various interesting topics for discussion.

However, we should not forget the affective component which music and songs add to any kind of teaching. Keeping in mind that the best teaching results occur when, in the learning environment, anxiety is minimal and interest is at its peak, the usefulness of music can scarcely be exaggerated. Music helps the teacher induce a positive emotional state in the learner.

As far as language learning is concerned, a song can be regarded as a valuable means of internalizing the target language –whether foreign or second. There are two processes that take place in the acquisition of language skills: intuitive and conscious. Using songs can successfully contribute to both of them. On the one hand, being exposed to songs in the target language, the learner can pick up the language much quicker than through systematic study. On the other hand, the lyrics can be used in various types of learning activities, as they very often present interesting linguistic material.

These two processes are connected with the use of both brain hemispheres. It is common knowledge that the left part of the brain is responsible for logic and analytical thinking, while the right hemisphere ensures creativity, using images, metaphors and emotional expressiveness.

A number of researches show that the real learning and mastering of a skill take place when there is a switch from the left to the right hemisphere of the human brain.

So what has music got to do with it? Why are both parts of the brain activated when we use music in language teaching? In a song emotion and language live together – they are inseparable. They coexist ensuring the constant switching from rational to irrational and vice versa. Think also about the rhythm, which facilitates memorising and makes repeating enjoyable. These three components: language – rhythm – melody (i.e. language is repeatedly produced, facilitated by rhythm and melody) guarantee that language patterns, words and grammar forms are transferred to long-term memory.

And besides, let us remember that singing is fun for most people; so it is among the very pleasurable ways to acquire a foreign language.

3. - INTERNET AND YOUTUBE

Here it is right to consider the great diffusion of the Internet and YouTube, especially among youngsters, and to stress that linguistic education and digital competences are transversal (they are two of the 8 key competences!) and, besides, they interact in the curriculum and in creating relationships and a feeling of community.

We observe then that schools in Europe must always make forehead to an ever growing number of immigrants. This new situation asks for new didactic and methodological answers and, at the same time, for the use of new proper technologies for the target groups.

It is, therefore, particularly useful to provide the teachers and the people that wish to learn a foreign language by themselves with tools for a

rapid creation of communicative skills founded on the use of a musical approach and the new technologies (Internet, YouTube, karaoke and interactive multimedia whiteboard).

4. - THE PROJECTS

Starting from these considerations, the Federazione Nazionale Insegnanti Centro di iniziativa per l'Europa, (a non-profit professional association founded in 1981 with the aim to increase the European dimension in education, to highlight the educational and formative value of state schools, the cultural improvement of teachers as well as research and experimentation in the teaching field), in cooperation with institutions from several countries submitted in 2008 and in 2010 two projects of European partnership with the aim to spread a method for teaching/learning a foreign language based on the use of videos, karaoke and songs. To support the project, a team of teachers has created the website www.languagesbysongs.eu containing teaching materials that can be used by teachers of IT/RO/RU/FR/ES interested in using songs in their classroom, by their pupils who wish to practice at home and, finally, by autonomous learners.

To use the materials at their best students should be at least at the A1 level of the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR). The linguistic levels mainly used in the site are between A2 and B2.

The learning materials for Italian, Romanian and Russian have been tested overall by 45 teachers and trainers from 9 countries (IT, LT, MD, RO, BG, SK, FR, USA) on 1018 students of various ages, a number significant enough to give acceptable results. 15% of students were between 6-14, 20% 15-18 and 15% of students over 25. The evaluation form filled in by the teachers at the end of the piloting phase has confirmed the quality and effectiveness of the materials. The learning materials for French and Spanish are at the moment in preparation and will be tested next school/academic year.

The site uses interactive techniques and

technologies for the management of video and audio products and for each language, in addition to the introduction, it contains five sections:

a) General information on the project (objectives, activities, expected outcomes)

b) A Teachers' Area containing 1) methodological procedures on the use of songs in the teaching/learning of a language and instructions on the use of the teaching materials and on the production of one's own materials 2) a report on the results of the experimentation.

c) A Work Area called "Karaoke & exercises" to be used both by teachers and by autonomous learners containing sample songs with lyrics, video, karaoke and worksheets with exercises, activities and a file with the keys to help the learners' self-assessment. Besides the language exercises, the worksheets contain information relating to the history, culture and traditions of the country whose language the student is learning, musical themes, glossaries, grammar contents and oral exercises with the use of karaoke. In order to allow teachers and learners to choose the best option for their objectives, at the beginning of each worksheet we have specified LEVEL (what CEFR level the song is for); FOCUS (grammar and vocabulary practised in the song); TIME (the length of the activity).

d) A section called "Who we are" containing information on the partners, the authors of the teaching materials and the teachers who experimented with them.

e) A Link Area containing links to radio and TV channels and websites on the learning of the above mentioned languages, to websites on language teaching with the support of music and also texts for the learning of a language through songs.

5. - THE DIFFUSION

The project also aims at creating a community of European teachers interested in using songs while teaching a foreign language. Teachers of IT/RO/RU, who did not belong to the partnership but were interested in collaborating to and developing this methodology, sent their

teaching materials created while following this method. The materials have been added to the worksheets written by the project's partners and their names have been added to the authors' list.

In two years, on the basis of ShinyStat statistics, the website has been visited 10150 times by people from 50 countries. The list of the countries with at least 50 visits follows.

Country	Visit
Italia	3326
Bulgaria	1272
Romania	2860
Slovakia	1640
USA	140
Argentina	114
Moldova	106
Spain	93
Russian Federation	55

In sum, we firmly believe in the validity of this approach because it brings the world students into the narrow space of classrooms and, in doing so, it may make learning fun and, as a consequence, easier. Moreover, as we have already stressed, the use of this approach may help students and people in general discover how similar their lives are to those of people living elsewhere, thus leading to a greater understanding and acceptance of different worlds and to a widening of horizons.

We do hope, therefore, that this approach may become more and more popular also thanks to the international cooperation that is behind the project and its implementation.