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Connecting with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners through Music

ILEANA CORTES SANTIAGO

Music has an alluring quality that beautifully complements language arts and literacy lessons, making them all the more meaningful to young and adult learners. I have offered workshops on music and literacy to a variety of learners: families, teachers, culturally and linguistically diverse students, pre-service teachers, and fellow graduate students. One aspect I have discovered as a result of these experiences is that people love to sing and engage in conversation about songs. These aspects make a sound argument for considering music as an integral part of learning, interacting, and experiencing life.

In this article, I share important learning moments, themes, and practical ideas that transpired during a workshop I offered in Spring 2012 in which a group of Latino/a families learned and made meaningful connections between music, language arts, and literacy to showcase their own understanding of the world and garner skills to help their children with English-related lessons.

Music in English and Spanish served to engage the parents and guardians, as they were learners tapping, unpacking, and developing ideas while finding ways to employ them at home. They sang, read, suggested songs, dialogued, contributed ideas, and crafted sample activities to enhance their understanding of language arts curricula and support their children's learning. Thus, these learners explored and engaged in myriad sign systems (Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000) manifested through "hyphenated, plural, or multiple literacies that acknowledge the diversity of information sources and media that people access, negotiate, and redeploy in everyday contexts" (Luke, 2003, p. 398).

The use of music as inspiration to meaningful literacy experiences and as a medium to engage learners makes a case for approaching literacy as a sign system that sparks the multiple ways human beings create meaning and communicate it. Moreover, according to Albers, Holbrook, & Harste (2010),

art forms such as music can be used presents to "service literacy curricula" (p. 169).

Does Music Work? A Brief Literature Review

Music certainly works (Lems, 2005) and has been used to enrich language and literacy learning in content area instruction, particularly English/language arts. Music can be a "vehicle" to teach English (Medina, 2002, p. 4) or a tool in a "learner's literacy toolkit" (Pane & Salmon, 2011, p. 36). Whether vehicle, tool, doorway, or catalyst, there is evidence of music's effectiveness with native speakers of English (Edwards, 2013) and non-native speakers of English, such as the parents and guardians who participated in the workshop.

In an article focused on her experience working with adult English Language Learners (ELLs) and music, Lems (2005) highlights the benefits of incorporating songs into second language instruction through literacy (e.g., reading, singing aloud) and language arts lessons (e.g., reading comprehension, identification of narrative lines). Medina (2003) shows that songs with narrative structure—that tell a story—can foster vocabulary acquisition and genre awareness. Meanwhile, combining music with artistic and performance-based activities can engage learners and nurture the acquisition of a second language (Medina, 2002). But how do we choose songs?

As educators are well aware, adding anything to the curriculum calls for careful consideration and effective criteria, such as assessing proficiency levels or cultural backgrounds, Kramer (2000) argues that "appropriately selected songs can [...] serve (like pictures) as a type of comprehensible input or form of realia that packages language rules into extralinguistic context" for language learners (p. 1), making them more receptive to this art form. This means that in times of MTV's and VH1's video countdowns, Billboard.com's Hot 100, YouTube, Pandora, and iTunes, educators must know which songs are popular among their students and their families while turning on their assessment radars.

Regarding popular music, Murphey (1992a) argues that pop songs have an alluring quality, “a simple and affective language,” (p. 771) that can elicit a unique mental process: the unconscious rehearsal of a song, also known as the “song-stuck-in-my-head phenomenon” (p. 773). This is indeed a fascinating statement with which many of my students and partnering families have agreed by sharing colorful examples during classroom discussion. For those of us exposed to music in multiple languages, we realized, it can happen alternatively with songs in, say, Spanish or English.

Interestingly, when participants ask for texts on this topic, I let them know there are few books dedicated solely to music and English language learning (Murphey, 1992b). Also, because this book is written in English, it is not accessible to all readers. To supply the demand for instructional materials tailored to Latino/a families, our workshop provided a repertoire of content area and literacy strategies using the families’ home language and the language of their children’s schooling and context, English. In addition to inquiries concerning strategies and resources, Latino/a families are often interested in research studies.

Research on employing music with culturally and linguistically diverse learners has shown positive results. For instance, in a study of relative effectiveness of music with adult ELLs, Li and Brand (2009) found that participants who were “exposed to the most music” obtained higher scores in language-based post and delayed tests (p. 73). Meanwhile, Pane and Salmon (2011) found that “music facilitated children’s literacy development in an inquiry as learning environment” that prompted participants to explore dif-

ferent ways of making sense of their environment (p. 41).

In a study about students’ and teachers’ perceptions of using music in second language learning in Vietnam, Huy Lê (1999) found that “English music was highly valued” in pedagogy and literacy development (p. 1). In addition, research on the effects of singing combined with signing on vocabulary acquisition found that ELLs who engaged in these activities “performed significantly better than did [those] who rehearsed new vocabulary by speaking only” (Schunk, 1999, p. 121).

In the end, my experience has taught me that culturally and linguistically diverse families are very receptive to dialogue with well-informed teachers who draw on relevant research, theory, classroom experiences, and best practices; they are also eager to learn with them in educational workshops.

The Context

This is a fragment of the story, a verse in the long song, of how I came to partner with a group of dedicated and charismatic Latino/a families in the Midwest. I met the liaison for the Lynn Community Center in early 2011, when a colleague and I were planning a series of collaborative initiatives for Latino/a parents, guardians, and their children. During my first visit, I had the opportunity to talk with some of the mothers and their little (and not so little) ones, as I explored the Center’s facilities—the modest chairs and tables where seniors had their coffee and chatted about life and the good old days.

Similar to many venues in my home country, there is a latent strength and charisma organic to community organizations that serve mostly under-

represented populations. There were brochures announcing free or low cost services at the entrance, hand crafted art projects bringing a kaleidoscope of color to light-beige walls in the main room, and a small bookshelf with what appeared to be old books, most of them in English and written by U.S. Caucasian authors.

This was one of many meetings; the first of many new noises, voices, and musical memories, of many conversations about the families who visited and benefited from services at Lynn. As someone deeply invested in advancing her community, the liaison often shared the strengths, needs, and concerns of the families. Some of the aspects I learned included the family’s lack of resources and understanding of the U.S. school system and their concerns about the *educación* of their children in the Midwest.

Later, these ideas guided the planning of a various collaborations with graduate students and faculty members—including conversatorios, workshops, and family-oriented activities—focused on literacy development and language arts. In my case, I wanted the focus of my workshop to be music.

In the past, I have had amazing experiences when integrating music into college-level English classes and workshops for teachers. In particular, I knew I could draw on pop music from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States to lure culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

The 11 participants who registered for the workshop were mostly of Mexican descent, both rural and urban, and with diverse academic backgrounds: some had completed elementary, middle school or high school while others held college degrees. Based on my observations and dialogues with some of

the participants during previous activities, I would rate their Levels of English Language Proficiency between Level 1—Starting and Level 4—Expanding (TESOL, 2006). Also, most participants arrived with their children and sat as I prepared the equipment, CD player, handouts, and materials. At this point, I know their names and most of the names of their sons and daughters. In all honesty, I enjoy sharing with this group of parents and guardians; their commitment is evident.

The Workshop: “Cantemos en Español e Inglés”

Throughout “Cantemos en español e inglés,” I had the opportunity to share with Latino/a families effective techniques on how to use music in Spanish and English to prompt and scaffold student literacy learning, particularly as it applies to ELLs. I was guided by instructional approaches suggested by Gibbons (2002) who promotes drawing on participants’ previous knowledge and culture; modeling instruction and building conceptual understanding or general ideas; scaffolding learning; and engaging in hands-on collaborative work.

Overall, these strategies are considered best practice when working with ELLs, but are also an excellent fit when working with native English speakers in language arts instruction. Because I knew all participants shared Spanish as L1, I incorporated both English and Spanish in all materials, including the PowerPoint® presentation, handouts, and additional documents. This has been standard practice in all collaborative initiatives with Latino/a families.

The following three main themes transpired during the workshops and are further developed in individual sessions: music and social justice, music and conceptual knowledge, and music and literacy development.

Music and Social Justice

Drawing on multiple theories and scholarship on social justice, Zeichner (2009) has come to define the term as the symphony of two areas: “recognition (caring and respectful social relations where all individuals and groups are treated with dignity) and redistribution (where there is a fairer distribution of material differences)” (p. xvi).

During the workshop, the families had access to materials and resources carefully developed and chosen according to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and were offered guidance on techniques conducive to literacy development. When I offered explanations and scaffolded conversations, I constantly code-switched from English to Spanish (and vice versa) and used leveled questions—or questions tailored according to the participants’ language proficiency levels that serve to elicit responses from them (Herrel & Jordan, 2012)—to foster active, formative participation.

By creating the necessary conditions for Latino/a parents and guardians to establish meaningful connections and contribute to the development of ideas and strategies, the small workshop room at Lynn Center became a space of “caring and respectful social relations” (Zeichner, 2009, p. xvi).

For example, as I alternated between the use of English and Spanish, participants had time to think about ideas and take notes. Further, they sang,

evaluated, and suggested new songs to add to a collective play list (Kramer, 2000) while reflecting how their music choices tapped into unique aspects of their identities; thus, choosing songs by artists such as Alejandro Fernández and Selena, two prominent Mexican/Mexican American singers, allowed for the reconstruction of important family experiences and critical literacy conversations about cultural ties and national identity. For instance, Selena’s use of *esperanza*—hope—in her popular song “No me queda más” can become a symbol of strength against the adversities of life in a new context.

An example that livened the room and opened the door to the sharing of personal connections to home countries and traditions was the singing of “Corazón contento” by Palito Ortega, a famous Argentinean singer; here, participants chuckled, sang along, and brought back sounds and discourses from younger days. Moreover, they were actively involved via critical discussions of possible ways to adapt some of the strategies and songs to make them part of their literacy routines.

For one of the moms, this meant highlighting vocabulary, making visuals, but most of all, enjoying a musical experience with her sons. Also, it is important to note that participants received a comprehensive handout with tips, ideas, and recommendations (Figure 1) for an adapted version of this document for teachers).

As I reconsidered the value of music and social justice when teaching diverse adult learners, I am reminded of the powerful role of culture and home values (Valdés, 1996) and personal preferences among Latino/a families when teaching English as a content area. In light of this, I share

song recommendations in English and Spanish for social justice: “Redemption Song” by Bob Marley; “Beautiful” by Cristina Aguilera; “Do you Know the Enemy?” by Green Day; “One” by U2; “Al Otro Lado del Río” by Jorge Drexler; “Desapariciones” by Maná.

Music and Conceptual Knowledge

Aguilar, Fu, and Jago (2007) highlight the importance of concept learning as individuals engage with ideas and expand their understanding of them; thus, they ‘name’ and redefine them in their own terms.

It is important for teachers to scaffold students’ developing knowledge beyond the memorization of terms and towards a more profound understanding of concepts by deconstructing the language, building meaningful connections via dialogue, and exposing students to discourse (Keene, 2007). During the workshop, I incorporated concept development in a number of ways. One of the best examples transpired during a hands-on activity.

The activity asked students to think about a possible lesson using music that was related to language arts (e.g., characterization, rhetorical figures) or literacy (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, drawing, crafting, among others). I had already introduced these terms before, so the participants focused on developing multiple ideas that echoed Lems’s (2005) suggestions for literacy activities: using visuals paired with terms and sentences, developing questions to have a meaningful conversation about a specific song, and using sentence strips to divide the songs into parts and then ask students to reconstruct them.

As I always do, I walked around the tables, moving from an outspoken and vivacious group of mothers/caregivers to one of the most introverted participants. I was intrigued and very excited to learn what she had been working on, so I sat next to her and asked, “¿Que haces mamá? / What are you doing mom?” In response, she shared with me an important conversation she had had with her child that took place as they listened to a popular song. It all began with her singing of Mana’s “Si no te hubieras ido” at home, and her recollection of a conversation about longing and love. The song reads as follows: “No hay nada más difícil que vivir sin ti, / sufriendo en la espera de verte llegar, / el frío de mi cuerpo pregunta por tí [...]” This excerpt presents a claim of loss and difficulty with coping; the term *frío* depicts the deep sadness that makes one’s skin shiver. Whether in English or Spanish, this caregiver’s profound conversation included the explanation of metaphors and sensory imagery as it relates to human emotion.

Her chosen song also allowed for a personal connection with the home language, while strengthening important components of the language arts curriculum. Similar to the rich use of the word “cold” in “My Girl” by The Temptations (“When it’s cold outside, I got the month of May”), her chosen song contained sensory imagery teachers can draw on to develop students’ understanding of abstract terms. Teachers can further use these examples to demonstrate how metaphors, for instance, are not elite rhetorical figures found solely in literature, but are a recurrent and organic part of every day discourses (Lukin, 2008).

Whether read or sung in English or Spanish, the rich conceptual knowl-

edge nurtured in this child/young adult will likely find its way into the English classroom, in a literature lesson. This mom’s conscious and detailed conversations cultivated a thirst for inquiry. In the end, my dialogue with her focused on highlighting the formative nature of her mother-son exchange; I also offered scaffolding techniques and explored with her additional options to foster more of these exchanges.

For this participant, her connection to a song mediated a critical conversation. For other educators, especially practicing teachers, here is a brief list of songs I have used to build conceptual knowledge.

Metaphors and Similes

Train, “Drops of Jupiter”

Katy Perry, “Firework”

Rihanna, “Umbrella”

Kelly Clarkson, “Stronger”

Smashmouth, “I’m a Believer”

The Muppets, “Life’s a Happy Song”

Seguridad Social, “Un Beso y una Flor” (Spanish)

Jesse y Joy, “Espacio Sideral” (Spanish)

Characterization

Journey, “Don’t Stop Believing”

Alejandro Sanz, “Toca Para Mí” (Spanish)

Atención, Atención, “El Sapo” (Spanish)

Music and Literacy Development

The cloud of energy that emanates from a group of people singing a song and experiencing the multiple ways music can enrich literacy development is amazing. As researcher and teacher, Lems (2005) claims she enjoys

being around people interacting with music because it brings forth powerful responses from them. In the past, I have had students who combine singing with dancing, drawing, using objects to generate alternative sounds, signaling, laughing, writing, recording themselves—hence, they employed and communicated through a multiplicity of signs in meaning making (Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000; Luke, 2003).

One of the first rules of incorporating music into the classroom is that teachers must be willing to engage with music in multiple ways—including singing solo for the first time, as it has been my experience—to foster an environment that makes all students feel relaxed excited, comfortable (Lems, 2005). In the workshop, I asked the parents/guardians to share artists they liked and/or songs they enjoyed. I did not present them with language or any additional constraints; thus, the responses varied in genre and language preferences.

Later, I shared with them a short list of songs in English I had garnered after careful observation of their interactions and dialogues at Lynn. In contrast to our Spanish repertoire of music at the beginning of the workshop, this time, the song had to be in English, because I wanted them to give it a try. They chose “I Believe I can Fly” by R. Kelly.

I played a lyric video from YouTube, which is video produced by using the song and displaying the lyrics as it plays, on the white screen. Some participants stared at the screen while others focused on the printed copy and began to sing. I was happy to observe many of them writing and taking detailed notes on their handouts as they followed.

In this exercise, receptive skills (i.e., listening to the pronunciation by means of the singer’s and their peers’ voices) and productive skills (i.e., singing, reading from the handout) were supported.

After years of conducting many collective sing alongs similar to this one, there are aspects that participants almost always highlight from the experience—whether they be families, students, teachers: first, there is always vocabulary they claim “they did not know,” even with familiar songs; second, having the lyrics at hand and playing them on the screen karaoke-style helps them connect sounds and morphemes in the printed words; third, they can sing in English and want to continue doing it after the song is over. Oftentimes, these discoveries elicit the exploration of meaning in relation to phonemic and morphological awareness.

Here is a short list of songs I have used in literacy development lessons:

Narrative Writing

Nine Days, “Story of a Girl”
Bon Jovi, “Living on a Prayer”
Maná, “El Muelle de San Blás”
(Spanish)

Argumentative Writing

Gotye, “Somebody that I used to Know”

Reflective Writing

Michael Jackson, “Man in the Mirror”
Hoobastank, “The Reason”

Comparison and Contrast

R. Kelley, “I Believe I can Fly”

Parts of Speech: Pronouns

Bon Jovi, “It’s my Life”
Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes,
“(I’ve had) The Time of my Life”
Selena, “No me Queda Más”
(Spanish)

Parts of Speech: Adjectives

Louis Armstrong, “What a Wonderful World”

Final Thoughts

As a content area and literacy and language educator, I find myself in the conundrum many teachers face everyday: meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students while making language arts curriculum exciting and accessible to all learners—whether they be parents, guardians, young adults, or children. Music has an organic appeal and the power to spark the interest and creativity of learners to identify and make connections with their identity; music can also make teaching and learning English equal parts entertaining and challenging. Thus, educators can incorporate music into their classroom and use it to connect with their students’ families.

In “Cantemos en español e inglés,” I engaged with participants by drawing on music in English and Spanish and presenting topics integral to the English curricula that I had implemented with my students as educator in the Caribbean. Informed by theories that attest to learner’s engagement with multiple sign systems, I hope the ideas and strategies we shared serve as testimony of Latino/a families’ commitment to literacy education and as an invitation to educators to keep making English intellectually stimulating and fun.

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Figure 1. How to Build a Successful Play List

- Keep your audience, the students, in mind. What do they like? Which tunes and/or songs are akin to their identities?
- Songs must be appropriate to the students' ages and English proficiency levels; for beginning levels, lyrics should be very clear [e.g., Levels 1 and 2—short words (high frequency), repetitive, short sentences, rhyme].
- Build a “classroom play list” that comprises myriad musical styles to reach as broad an audience as possible.
- The text and content of the songs should allow for various activities/pedagogical approaches.
- “The singer’s diction must be clear, so that students can easily understand the lyrics” (p. 3).
- Think multilingual and multicultural! Upon conversing with students and their families, select one or two songs in their home language, and then give them agency to enrich the classroom play list.
- Develop engaging lessons that draw on learners’ diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. For instance, if you do not speak Farsi, consult with the language teacher or contact community services and language centers in academic institutions nearby.
- Find a recording of the song. Dialogue with students—no illegal downloading. o Purchase, reproduce, and leave copies for them to use in a reference section or media library.
- Transcribe the lyrics for handouts.
- Label songs clearly—as suggested by Murphey (1992b), include full title, artist, copyright information.
- Ideas adapted from Kramer (2000).