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## Analyzing Song Lyrics as an Authentic Language Learning Opportunity

Georgia Coats  
Wayne State University

### Abstract

An essential goal of language instruction is to inspire and equip students to more competently function within the target language (L2) and culture beyond the classroom. Music is a unique resource for language learning because of its recursive nature and the extensive cultural and linguistic information it contains. In this unit lesson, students analyze song lyrics as authentic texts in order to begin to distinguish genres, (i.e., communicative events that are shared by members of a discourse community; O'Brien, 2004). Genre analysis is a pedagogical tool that equips students to better understand a linguistic context, so that they can more competently participate in the target culture. Identifying patterns and analyzing genres allows students to comprehend how the linguistic content contributes to a particular genre (Hyland, 2007). When analyzing song lyrics, students first choose a relevant song in their native language (L1), and in their L1 analyze the lyrics on various macro and micro-levels, including features that contribute to the overall big picture of a song, phonology and dialect, verb choices, metaphor and idiomatic expression, syntax, and cultural references. Then, students listen through a playlist of L2 songs and begin analysis in the L2 to discern patterns as they interpret L2 lyrics. Subsequently, students independently select a new L2 song, acquire the lyrics, and analyze their linguistic and cultural significance. By learning how to use the resources available through target language song lyrics, students are better equipped to foster connections and explore distinct perspectives in a variety of discourse contexts beyond the classroom.

### **Introduction**

Target language song lyrics provide a culturally rich and authentic context through which learners can discover the world from differing viewpoints. Because of the personal, social and cultural nature of music, it inherently lends itself to repeated listening and is naturally shared and discussed in social settings, which also distinguish it as a strategic resource for processing language. As students learn to function competently in target language (L2) discourse communities, they need tools to be aware of the conventions and expectations of “how language is structured to achieve social purposes in particular contexts of use” (Hyland, 2007, p. 148). Hearing distinct genres of music creates a link between understanding music genres and *genres* in a linguistic context, which O’Brien (2004) describes as communicative events that are recognized and shared by members of a discourse community. In turn, analysis is a pedagogical tool that equips students in a systematic way to better identify and interpret the linguistic and sociocultural context of authentic texts so that they can increase their communicative competence in the target language and culture. One central goal of a genre-based approach is to provide learners with tools to interpret features of different genres that contribute to meaningful communication (Hyland, 2007) and ultimately foster their own personal connections with the L2 music. As a pedagogical approach, analyzing song lyrics through the principles of genre analysis provides a framework for focusing on language in context.

The present project draws on genre analysis in the design of an instructional unit with the goal of equipping students to use the L2 beyond the classroom to listen to and analyze relevant songs, and to learn to thoughtfully and independently engage with and compile new L2 music for personal enjoyment and social engagement. Participants in this project utilize music lyrics as their main learning texts to foster connections with themes reflected in their own cultural context and in the target culture. By learning to overtly identify and systematically analyze text features, students are empowered to access patterns, compare features and make links between language and music through song. Thus, this paper provides an overview of genre analysis in relation to song, a rationale for the unique aspects of song lyrics for lexical fluency, and incorporates aspects of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (ACTFL, 2015) as impetus for the unit design. Subsequently, criteria to consider for selecting songs are followed by five essential components students use for analysis, which highlight cultural and linguistic features discovered in specific English and Spanish-language song samples.

### **Genre analysis as a tool for expanding linguistic and cultural knowledge**

Hyland (2007) describes genre as “abstract, socially recognized ways of using language.” He further explains that members in a discourse community generally “have little difficulty in recognizing similarities in the texts they use frequently and are able to draw on their repeated experiences with such texts to read, understand, and perhaps write them relatively easily” (p. 148). For example, a formal acceptance letter from a university has features that distinguish it from an informal birthday greeting from a friend. Throughout their lifetime, native speakers acquire and internalize the

differences between these types of texts and when to appropriately use each one. Often a reaction occurs if a member of a shared discourse community misuses formal discourse features to address their best friend, or on the contrary, uses informal writing when addressing their government leader.

Likewise, within a culture, appropriate contexts for specific genres of music exist, such as songs during celebrations, holidays, somber occasions, or religious events. Like linguistic genres, music genres also carry implicit information shared by a discourse community. For example, it is culturally expected that in summertime the ice cream truck will play popular, playful childhood tunes that are easily recognizable. However, if the ice cream truck drove down the street in July playing the tune of *Jingle Bells*, the members of the shared discourse community would react to the deviation from the expected norm; although the music fits the criteria of popular and recognizable children's tunes, it has the added element of Christmas, which is strongly associated with winter and holiday-specific melodies. Music plays a unique role in societies because it can be personal, relational, social, cultural or historical. It can inspire an individual or empower a community through its expression, as it both reflects identities and contributes to the formation of them. With these factors in mind, when students interpret song lyrics they begin to foster their own connections in the L2 by implementing five main aspects of analysis, which are explicated in the latter section: *Components of song analysis*, with Figure 1 below presenting the questions students use to guide their analysis. These components incorporate micro-level linguistic features students need for interpreting song lyrics and macro-level comprehension that draws on students' background knowledge and provides a context for understanding perspectives of the target culture to which the song lyrics are inextricably connected.

**Figure 1.** Student Questions for Analysis of Song Lyrics

**Big Picture:** What genre is it? Who listens to this kind of song? Where would you hear or not hear this song? Also notice patterns—what is repeated in the song? How does the sound of the music contribute to the genre?

**Imagery:** What metaphors, imagery, play-on words, or personifications do you observe in this song? What idioms do you see? What references to culture, history, literature or religion are there?

**Language use:** What kind of language is used—slang, formal, informal, old English? Is there a particular dialect or style used? What key vocabulary is used in this song? Are there synonyms to other words you know? What kinds of rhymes are used? Provide examples from the song that you find.

**Grammar:** Take note of verb tenses and person. Who is talking to or about whom? What word choices are used? Make note of word order or changes to normal word order that you notice.

**Personal Response:** What about this song is meaningful to you? How does the music contribute to that? What words, lyrics, rhymes, metaphors stand out to you? What don't you like about this song? Why? What is confusing about this song? What don't you understand about it? Be specific.

Source: Coats, original material, 2015

### **The unique and authentic role of music for lexical fluency**

Music is useful for language learning because it provides relevant social and cultural information as well as a powerful tool for recursive exposure and memorization of authentic language. In learning a foreign language, students often rely on repetition and memorization to acquire new lexical information. However, Gu and Johnson (1996) found that strategies focused solely on retention, such as *rehearsal*, are a “shortcut” for beginning L2 learners that tended to negatively affect both their vocabulary size and their overall L2 proficiency. While rote rehearsal lacks lasting effect, meaningful memorization is productive and useful. One of Van Gelderen’s (2011) principles of developing L2 lexical fluency is through deriving meaning of new lexical items from the context in which they are used. The challenge is how to make rehearsal of new information meaningful by choosing appropriate contexts in which to develop this kind of lexical fluency through repetition. It is fairly uncommon in our society to authentically and repeatedly listen to and memorize a text. This kind of meaningful memorization and repeated exposure applies to actors memorizing their lines in a play, or participants in a religious context memorizing portions of sacred texts. However, memorizing and repeatedly listening to the lyrics of a favorite song is a widespread culturally endorsed phenomenon.

According to Iwasaki et al. (2013), who utilize song to enhance the development of L1 literacy skills for young students, “certain features are embedded in songs that make them memorable and enjoyable. First, the melody and rhythm of songs makes them easy to learn and easy to remember.” Second, “song lyrics (a form of poetry) often are embedded with rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. This playing with the sounds of language through song can be a gateway to the development of phonemic awareness” (p. 138). Iwasaki et al. found that song lyrics have aided in the development of vocabulary as students essentially memorize them through repeated listening while reading printed lyrics. In the L2 learning context, Van Gelderen (2011) explains that both lexical fluency and training in content words positively contribute to efficiency of access to and retrieval of vocabulary items by relieving the burden on working memory. Consequently, memorizing song lyrics by repeated aural and visual exposure is an authentic, culturally and socially acceptable way to experience meaningful language. Moreover, repeated listening to song lyrics while intentionally acquiring the needed vocabulary for comprehension positively affects the retrieval process in the memory.

### **The World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages as impetus for unit design and class procedures**

Music can mark a memory, represent a point in history, and can be recalled from the recesses of the mind at an unexpected moment. It is thus pedagogically compelling, and motivating for students to analyze and interpret song lyrics as a means of looking for patterns, making comparisons, sharing ideas, and discovering different viewpoints. A step towards empowering students to make connections with the target culture beyond the classroom is to guide them through

the process of finding L2 songs and to equip them to independently navigate their understanding of the lyrics. After all, “connections-enhanced teaching” equips students to use the L2 “to explore a different world from various perspectives and to relate that world to their own thinking and experience” (Kern, 2008, p. 370). When students are inspired by music and equipped with the right tools, they have a clearer pathway to exploring the wonders of different worlds.

At the onset of this unit, students analyze and interpret relevant song lyrics in their first language (L1) in order to become familiar with the process of analysis. Then, in the L2 they analyze the unique macro and micro level linguistic features each song provides while acquiring new lexical information through repeated exposure. Coming from a variety of musical genres, these texts contain extensive cultural and linguistic information, which enables students to begin to distinguish the differences between the varieties of musical lyrics and thus develop their understanding of the nature of language and culture. While listening, reading, analyzing, and interpreting music and lyrics of the target culture, students also examine the relationship between the L2 music and the cultural perspectives expressed in their lyrics. Furthermore, during the process of interpreting song lyrics, students exchange opinions and present concepts and ideas in the L2 about the songs they analyze through interpersonal and presentational modes of communication. To exemplify this process, the pedagogical steps of this unit lesson plan are detailed below based on five key Standards-based objectives relating to aspects of Cultures, Comparisons, Communication, Communities, and Connections (ACTFL, 2015). Furthermore, Figure 2 (page 10) presents an overview of the same unit lesson objectives and procedural steps.

*Cultures: Discovering patterns in language and culture*

In order to systematically analyze a song, looking for patterns is fundamental to the process. One objective of this unit is for students to examine the relationship between the L2 music and the cultural perspectives expressed in their lyrics through analysis and interpretation. Because both language and culture are patterned, genre analysis equips students to distinguish the patterns that exist within a given discourse context in the target culture. Savignon (2005) describes cultural patterns as what an individual internalizes as natural or normal through the process of socialization that begins at birth. Members of a community learn these patterns through observation and participation in them. Savignon (2005) posits that the L2 learner understands these patterns in the target discourse community through making generalizations, analogies and comparisons of the L1 and L2 contexts. Students learn to identify and interpret unfamiliar aspects of the new context through authentic literature, video material, and mass media. After all, “language both shapes and is shaped by culture. Access to one is essential for access to the other” (p. 364). Students learn, therefore, to observe patterns within L1 genres, and through comparison and familiarity with the process, extend their understanding of patterns to the L2 context. Thus, looking for patterns within all facets of analysis is essential to the methodology.

*Comparisons: Learning to compare language features through L1 & L2 analysis*

To begin observing patterns in song lyrics, students first listen to a selection of songs, experiencing both the music and the lyrics. The first time students learn the process of analyzing the lyrics of a song they utilize higher-level thinking skills and background knowledge in English, their L1, because it builds their awareness of their own L1 skills for analysis, and equips them to compare features of the target language with their own native language. These comparisons are made as students interact with the lyrics and with each other to co-construct meaning. In step one, the instructor introduces the concept of music genres (see Figure 2) by asking students what kinds of music they listen to as they proceed to listen to a variety of teacher-selected songs from different genres. Students consider what features of a song might contribute to its genre. In step two, students spend time discussing different L1 genres and their own and each others' reactions to them. In this step the class considers their own background knowledge of a particular genre or style, where a song would be heard or not heard, and who might listen to that song, as a means of connecting it to a larger cultural context within a discourse community.

After making initial observations, the class then picks a song to analyze collectively in English (see Figure 1, page 3) and uses the printed lyrics of the song so that students can become familiar with the process and the terminology of analysis in English before proceeding in the L2. Because both formulation of language in the L2 and the task of analyzing song lyrics require cognitively focused attention, Roca de Larios et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of parsing out *formulation* of what students want to communicate in the L2 separately from another complex task, such as analyzing lyrics. Therefore, as students become more familiar with the analysis task, this frees up their processing capacity to focus more on fluency to do analysis in the L2. Moreover, students' motivation increases significantly when they are personally involved in the song selections and engaging in the personal and social process in both their background culture and the target language. When selecting authentic content, Shrum and Glisan (2010) highlight the importance of interest level for students. They pose the question, "Is the content interesting, and relevant to students' interests and instructional objectives?" (p. 193). Having students contribute songs of interest to them in English begins this process of relevancy to them and aligns with the instructional objectives of understanding the linguistic features that contribute to the meaning of a song, while cognitively equipping students to compare L1 and L2 features.

In step three, students are then assigned to independently choose an English song to analyze outside of class and then share the results, in written or oral format, with the class or in small groups. Many popular songs are lush with idiomatic phrases which students often have difficulty explicitly identifying because they implicitly process them in their native language. Therefore, in these first three steps it is essential to ask questions that help them see another point of view, mainly that of a non-native English speaker. For example, in one song the phrase *run into my arms* is repeated in the chorus. With the question: *How would you explain this concept to someone who speaks limited English?* students are able to identify that running into someone's arms is not a literal phrase. This opens discussion

of various idiomatic ways *run* is used in English: run into, run-on, run over, run around, a runny nose and running water, which introduces the concept that words have different senses, uses, and metaphorical extensions. In Kern's (2008) analyses of authentic texts he describes how multiple layers of meanings flow through one text, with connections being made on "different realms of engagement" (p. 371). In our own discourse contexts, we continually assess multiple layers of meaning implicitly, often without realizing it. The analysis process requires students to use the linguistic tools at their disposal to explicitly identify the layers of meaning that contribute to comprehension and interpretation. As students reflect back on the analysis task, they can be guided to pinpoint the skills, strategies, and background knowledge that contribute to effective analysis, which then allows them to more explicitly compare L1 and L2 features. Additionally, students begin to form a more global understanding that linguistic information is processed on various levels simultaneously, both in the target language as well as in their native language.

*Communication: Integrating interpersonal and presentational modes with interpreting L2 songs*

After students experience the analysis process in English, in step four, the class then co-constructs a list of terminology necessary for analysis in the L2. This list includes key terms for analysis, questions to ask, and necessary phrases to carry on a discussion and negotiate meaning about song lyrics in the target language, as language proficiency level allows (see Figure 1 for *Student Questions for Analysis of Song Lyrics* in English). In steps 5-8 of Figure 2 (which are a repeat of steps 1-3 in the L2), students spend time interpreting the song lyrics through interaction with each other in groups or in pairs. When analyzing texts in the foreign language learning, Shrum and Glisan (2010) emphasize that the interpretive mode refers to "both (1) a component of daily communication that enables one to make sense of and interpret oral, printed and video texts, and (2) a vehicle for language acquisition" (p. 181). Focusing on interpreting the song lyrics integrates language learning content and meaning construction. After the instructor and students co-construct the necessary terminology to discuss genres and analyze a song in the L2, in step five the class listens through a teacher-provided list of songs from a variety of musical genres in the target language.

In steps five and six, when students receive a new text in the L2, first they skim the text for patterns and repeated verses, and use their background knowledge to consider how the genre and text features contribute to the global theme of a song. This first layer of linguistic analysis is at the discourse level, the *Big Picture* (Figure 1). Big Picture questions guide students through the overall impression of a text and the features and patterns that contribute to the macro-level discourse of the song, such as format, title, chorus, rhythm, theme and style. Analyzing global features allows students to consider the overall purpose and intent of a song. Kern (2008) stresses the importance of observing and comparing a variety of texts at the discourse level, because it puts learners "in the position of having to deal with uncertainties [and] ambiguities" which challenge their way of thinking and can also "guide learners to a better understanding of how meanings are made" (p. 374).

Discourse level analysis helps students to more explicitly understand macro-level linguistic features and their functions within a genre. Students observe patterns, repetitions, and themes that contribute to the unique expression of a song, and learn to more competently navigate the ambiguities that arise within it.

One of the key objectives of this unit is that students interpret written and spoken language, exchange opinions, and present concepts and ideas in the L2 about the songs they analyze which, therefore, incorporates interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes of communication. In step six, discussion time is set up so that students co-construct their discoveries of how language works with each other. Through the *Student questions for analysis* (Figure 1), students learn to use both macro-level or *top-down* reading skills, and micro-level or *bottom-up* skills to interpret the lyrics. Shrum and Glisan (2010) point out that interpretive skills involve the simultaneous use of both text-driven bottom-up processing that focuses on the details of the letters, words and phrases in the text, and also the reader-driven top-down processing that relies on contextual clues and background knowledge to infer meaning in a text. *Skimming* a text is a top-down process of looking for themes and main ideas, while *scanning* a text for details is a bottom-up process.

Once students have skimmed the text, they go back through and scan the text in more detail, focusing their attention on new and known vocabulary, and anticipating key terms they may want to define. Then they circle all the verbs they find and make note of tense and person. They also make note of verb endings they are not yet familiar with (see Figure 2, *Procedure for analyzing an unfamiliar text*). In Anderson's research (1991) on strategies used during L2 textbook reading, he observes that one key strategy is the ability to "monitor comprehension by identifying when comprehension fails" (p. 466). This *metacognitive strategy* requires learners to think about what they know and do not know and adjust their strategy use accordingly. Students who are able to identify a lack of comprehension and then devise a strategic plan to compensate for it become more successful L2 readers. Therefore, scanning a text and discriminating known and new vocabulary and verbs is one way to help students develop successful strategies for encountering and examining other unfamiliar texts.

#### *Communities: L2 music for personal enjoyment and social engagement*

After students gather both macro-level and micro-level data from the text, in step seven they discuss their results in the L2. While the initial emphasis is on interpretation of the lyrics, students' discussions involve the social process of interpersonal communication; and formally planning for and sharing results with the class utilizes the presentational mode of communication. When students share results, it is important that they provide explicit examples of their discoveries from the text. Then, in step eight students learn how to access songs and lyrics to songs in the L2. In Spanish *con letra* (written lyrics) is an important phrase for searching the Internet for lyrics to print. After that, students work in pairs to find new songs in L2 genres that interest them. Another main objective is that students will be able to find and repeatedly engage with L2 songs in order to use the L2 within and beyond

the school setting for personal enjoyment and social engagement. As students are equipped with culturally and socially relevant reference points through the song lyrics they study, they can begin to connect socially with the target culture through finding and sharing music. In step nine, the class compiles a playlist of students' analyzed song selections. Since a variety of music is easy to access and since music is naturally shared, it becomes an entry point to participate in the target culture and discuss particular songs, and inquire about native speakers' song preferences.

*Connections: discovering distinctive viewpoints through songs*

Another key objective in interpreting L2 music is to learn to see the world from the differing viewpoints that specific song lyrics provide. Music often references cultural and historical events and themes that require deeper investigations into the target culture. In the analysis process, students look in depth at metaphors, imagery, and cultural references in the song lyrics to make connections and experience viewpoints that are only available through the target culture. Kern (2008) points out the "strong link to be made between language and music through popular song" (p. 376). Teachers can tap into this resource to help students make further connections through components also used in literature, "such as theme, metaphor, form, and style" (Kern, 2008, p. 376). He further explains that language is "a resource for creative thought, a framework for understanding the world, a key to new knowledge and human history, and a source of pleasure and inspiration" (Kern, 2008, p. 367). Music lyrics are a rich resource of creative thought, where learners experience the adventure of discovering the world from differing viewpoints.

In order to expand students' new perspectives gained in their analyses, in step 10, the instructor utilizes the content, vocabulary, concepts, grammar and important background information for follow-up activities, extensions to learning, and assessments. Depending on what is discovered in a song, there are various extension and expansion activities, such as essays, reflections, musical performances, song comparisons, and personal responses to content; grammar structures and forms to practice, applying metaphor for personal descriptions or poetry writing, further study and exploration of a cultural event, and extended research on idiomatic phrases in the L1 and the L2. Also, background information on artists is a rich resource to be explored by students as they expand their studies beyond the lyrics of a song. It is worth noting that this process can also be adapted to meet the learning needs and goals of beginning learners. For lower-level students, the task can be simplified and more scaffolded, selecting key portions of L2 songs and introducing vocabulary and cultural content in pre-teaching activities. It is essential even at the beginning levels that students learn to make basic comparisons and connections as they familiarize themselves with a text. Kern (2008) makes a strong point about exposing students to texts even as they begin language learning:

Foreign language teachers sometimes believe that getting students to analyze texts to make connections to culture, to other points of view, and to other disciplines is something that is only realistic at a

relatively advanced level of language study. However, it is really in the early phases of the curriculum that the ‘connections’ mindset must be established if students are going to be able to gradually develop the skills and sensibilities that will allow them to succeed in dealing with texts by the time they get to advanced level courses. (p. 375)

Also, by learning the linguistic components initially through analysis of L1 songs, even beginning students can then develop such a ‘connections mindset’ while enjoying exposure to new music from the target language and culture.

**Figure 2.** Analyzing song lyrics: unit lesson plan

**Goal:** Students use the target language (L2) beyond the classroom to repeatedly listen to analyzed relevant songs and learn to thoughtfully and independently engage with and compile new L2 music for personal enjoyment and social engagement.

**Standards-Based Objectives:**

**Cultures:** Through listening, analyzing, and interpreting music and lyrics of the target culture, students will examine the relationship between the L2 music and the cultural perspectives expressed in the lyrics.

**Comparisons:** By learning to analyze songs first in English, students will be able to compare features of the target language with their own.

**Communication:** Students will be able to interpret written and spoken language, exchange opinions, and present concepts and ideas in the L2 about the songs they analyze.

**Communities:** Students will be able to find, analyze and repeatedly engage with L2 songs in order to use the L2 within and beyond the school setting for personal enjoyment and social engagement.

**Connections:** Through songs in the target language students will recognize and investigate distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

**Procedure for Song Lyrics Analysis Unit:**

*(These procedures vary depending on classroom context, age groupings, and proficiency levels)*

1. Whole class: (in English) Teacher introduces unit: Ask students: *What kinds of music do you listen to? What kinds of playlists do you have? What genres can you think of?* Then, listen to a variety of songs from different genres in English and make observations about the music. Then discuss opinions and reactions to different songs.
2. Whole class: (in English) Select a song to analyze. Small groups: Students use printed lyrics and become familiar with the analysis process and the terminology through discussion. Identify **specific examples** of findings from the text. Share results with the class.

**Procedure for analyzing an unfamiliar text:**

- a. Students skim the text and observe macro & micro level patterns: repeated stanzas, rhymes, words, etc.
- b. Students scan the text again and
  - (1) identify new & known vocabulary
  - (2) mark words to learn
- c. Students then circle all the verbs they find and make note of tense and person. They also make note of verb endings they are not yet familiar with.
- d. Students proceed to answering questions for analysis, providing specific evidence from the text for each discovery. (See Figure 1: Student Questions for Analysis of Song Lyrics).

3. Individual assignment &/or small groups: (in English) Students choose their own song to analyze with the printed lyrics, and share the results in small groups (teacher specifies mode—written or spoken or both)
  4. Whole class: Compile necessary terminology to discuss genres and analyze a song in the L2.
  5. Whole class: (Repeat step 1 and 2, in the L2.) Teacher introduces a playlist of previously songs from a variety of musical genres in the L2. Observe and discuss song selections.
  6. Individual or small groups: Students select and analyze a song from the teacher-provided playlist.
  7. Small groups: Students discuss their results in the L2 (depending on proficiency levels).
- IMPORTANT: Students must provide explicit examples from the text.*
8. Individuals or pairs: (Repeat step 3, in the L2.) Students independently find and analyze a new song in the L2.
  9. Whole class: Compile a new class playlist of student-selected songs.
  10. Follow-up activities: Based on content and constructions in song lyrics, teacher incorporates level-appropriate lessons in varied modalities on form/grammar, comparing texts, reflection, oral presentations/performances, research on cultural or historical topic, biographies, or other pertinent features of the songs.

Source: Coats, original material, 2015

### Criteria for song selections

While some songs abound with cultural information, others use a grammatical structure that students need to learn, and still others are reflective of the popular target culture. It is important to select songs from a variety of genres in the target language such as traditional ballads, classic songs, simple and repetitive choruses, and even pop songs that might be difficult at first to understand, so that students can expand their understanding of the target culture through comparing features of each genre. Each genre of music often contains genre-specific content and linguistic features. For example, country songs lend themselves to a story-like structure, while pop songs tend to be full of pop-cultural references and idiomatic expression. A Mexican ballad might contain more social and cultural commentary, where rock music would more likely reflect counter-cultural themes. In some situations, after thinking through the Big Picture of a song, the bottom-up level analysis may need to be limited to select portions of a song (see example of the song *América* in the *Grammar* section of analysis below). Part of interacting with real genres of discourse is knowing how to navigate these other aspects of a text and teaching students to do the same.

Focusing on pedagogical considerations, in Kramer's *Criteria for Selecting Songs* (2001), he suggests that it's helpful if songs have clear grammatical points or themes, that the text fit the students' level of language, that the singer's diction be clear and understandable by students, and that songs come from a variety of musical styles (p. 30). Kramer's criteria are not only helpful to instructors, but should be shared with students as they learn to find their own songs. Part of the joy of analyzing song lyrics is for students to find songs that spark their interest, even if the lyrics are initially hard for them to understand. On the issue of grammatical

points, though some songs for beginners are based on the simple grammatical structures in the lyrics, song selection need not be limited by the grammar in it. In this less controlled environment of authentic texts, students must learn to recognize information they do not yet know, focus on what they do know, and use strategies to account for ambiguities and discover meaning in that tension. They may come across structures they have not yet learned, but when they do learn them, recalling the lyrics of a song they know is a useful reference point. In a more sociocultural way of unlocking a text, music analysis is not about using music to teach grammar, but rather understanding the unique beauty of a song by being equipped with the linguistic tools to understand it, grammar being one of them.

### **Components of song analysis**

The questions in Figure 1 *Student Questions for Analysis of Song Lyrics* incorporate five main aspects of analysis, which enable students to think through the macro and micro level linguistic features in a song that contribute to its meaning within its given cultural context. This section expounds upon the aspects of the Big Picture, Imagery, Language Use, Grammar, and Personal Response in more detail and highlights unique features discovered in specific song samples. Although these questions of analysis target different aspects of linguistic features for students consider in the song lyrics they analyze, the questions are not exhaustive, nor are they all answered within every song.

#### *The Big Picture: discourse level analysis*

At the discourse level of analysis students in this project answer questions about each song they analyze, such as (see Figure 1): *What genre is it? i.e., Rock, Pop, Inspirational, Regional, Traditional... Who listens to this kind of song? Where would you hear or not hear this song?* As mentioned earlier, they also focused on noticing patterns and macro-level features: *what is repeated in the song? How does the sound of the music contribute to the genre? What concepts or themes do you find in this song?* For example, in the rock song *Todo es del mismo color* (Everything is the Same Color) by *Malsujeto* (2009), the lyrics refer to a context where everything is *fuera de control* (out of control) and *todo es del mismo color* (everything is the same color), except, in *en esta guerra no hay dolor* (in this war there is no pain). At first glance, these lyrics are clues to a theme for which students have no cultural reference. Humans naturally tend to make meaning, and therefore draw from personal experience and background knowledge to guess at the meaning. However, without the cultural context of background knowledge, these lyrics, though clear and easy to comprehend at the phrase and word level, are a discourse mystery. Students eventually discover that this is the theme song for the famous *Tomatina* festival in Buñol. The “war” that takes place is with tomatoes, hence, there is no pain and everyone ends up the same color, tomato red.

Another example of a Big Picture experience is with Christmas carols. In one instance, a member of the target discourse community shared *villancicos* (carols) that were relevant and important to her. One was a traditional Latin-American Christmas carol, *Mi Burrito Sabanero* (My Little Donkey from the Plains); the

other, *Cascabel*, was to the tune of Jingle Bells. When students began to analyze these songs, we discussed the question, *Where do you hear or not hear Christmas carols?* The students agreed that Christmas carols with more religious lyrics are typically not heard in the context of a public school, while non-religious carols, like *Jingle Bells* and *Deck the Halls* are typically heard in schools during the holiday season. They were surprised, however, to discover that these *villancicos* centered on the Nativity story were performed in a public school in the target discourse context. In *Mi Burrito Sabanero* (Blanco, 1976), for example, the first line is in reference to the birthplace of Jesus: *con mi burrito sabanero, voy camino de Belén* (*with my little donkey from the plains, I'm on my way to Bethlehem*). Even the Spanish lyrics to the tune of *Jingle Bells* (*Villancicos tradicionales 2*, 2009) contain an abundance of religious references. My students, therefore, made comparisons and discoveries on various linguistic and cultural levels, such as new holiday vocabulary, how translations from Jingle Bells to *Cascabel* are not always literal, exposure to a traditional holiday song, and that culturally, religion plays a different role than in their own predominant discourse context.

One aspect of the Big Picture is that songs often contain a story, a point, or a perspective illustrated throughout the song, which Kramer (2001) refers to as a “micro narrative-like structure” that “encapsulates a coherent context” of many songs (p. 29). An example of a song that encapsulates a unique cultural viewpoint is *Supermán es Ilegal* (Superman is an Illegal, Los Hermanos Ortiz, 2003). This song is in the movie, *La Misma Luna* (Under the Same Moon, Barrera, G., 2008), a compelling story that deals with the issues and heartache of immigration, both legal and illegal. Before my high-intermediate high school students watched the movie, we analyzed these song lyrics in Spanish. The song begins by accusing Superman of being an illegal alien (these lyrics were translated into English for the movie subtitles):

(Spoken) It's a bird! It's a plane! No, man, it's a wet\*\*\*\*!  
 He came from the sky tucked in a spaceship. From Krypton to Earth was such a long trip.  
 We've one thing in common: we managed to skip, Requesting American citizenship.  
 You know there are laws about immigration, and he simply lacks his documentation.  
 So how can he work as a newspaperman? By rights he should be locked up in the can.  
 But he's blue-eyed, tall and muy lovey-dovey; I'm dark-skinned, short and a little bit chubby.  
 He got in for free, but I had to pay. Coyotes ain't cheap but they sure know the way.

Rarely does someone in our cultural context question the merits of Superman, a great American hero, who also happens to be a fictitious immigrant from another planet. The singers' viewpoint that challenged an implicit esteem for Superman surprised my students. The song does, however, provide a compelling comparison

between the tall, blue-eyed superhero's immigration status in the U.S. with the plight of the "dark-skinned, short and a little bit chubby" man trying to emigrate from Mexico. This discussion and analysis led students to discover more about the immigration process, and the desperate circumstances surrounding those attempting to immigrate illegally. Ultimately, this learning activity provided students with a unique opportunity to view one of their own cultural heroes from a different vantage point as a means of expanding their own understanding of immigration, a culturally and socially relevant issue. To sum up in Kramer's (2001) words, "the song-based approach...relies on authentic texts as the underlying linguistic linchpin to connect language acquisition to cultural literacy" (p. 30) by providing distinctive viewpoints that students have access to by way of the target language.

*Imagery, metaphor, idiom and cultural references: semantic and pragmatic levels of analysis*

*Semantics* as a linguistic area of study focuses on the meaning of language through human expression, and also includes how words and phrases have multiple senses. In natural discourse, analyzing more than one sense of a word is part of the cultural pattern that Savignon (2005) says we internalize through the socialization process from birth. For example, in the pop rock song *Breakeven* (Script, 2008) the lyrics use the word *break* in multiple senses in one line: *when a heart breaks, no it don't break even*. 1. *Break* in the literal sense of glass that shatters is extended metaphorically to the idea that abstractions seem shattered and dysfunctional like broken glass. 2. A *broken heart* is in the idiomatic sense of a painful end of a significant relationship. 3. *Breaking even* is in the idiomatic financial sense that neither a profit nor a loss has occurred. The idea is that something that breaks, literally and metaphorically, is never an even split, and a broken heart implies that truly a loss has occurred. Students learning the vocabulary word *break* in the most literal sense can quickly begin to understand metaphorical uses of the same word. This layering of senses of a word also opens discussions to how metaphorical uses of a word do not always translate evenly from one language to another. *Breaking-even* in Spanish is *el punto de equilibrio* (the point of equilibrium), whereas a broken heart is expressed through a different phrase, *el corazón roto*. This song, therefore, would not have the same effect if translated literally into Spanish. Because as humans we implicitly make meaning, we do not always realize all the ways our minds are processing multiple senses in our native language. However, by pointing out these processes explicitly in the L1, they become an integral part of lyric analysis in the L1 and the L2.

As students look for metaphors, idioms and multiple senses of words they discuss questions such as: *What metaphors, imagery, plays on words, personifications and idioms can you find in this song?* One example of a song rich in metaphor is the Alternative, inspirational song *Tu Amor hace eco en todo mi universo* (Your love echoes throughout my universe) by Rojo (2009). Because of the simple use of the verb *ser* (to be) that students learn early on in beginning Spanish, and because the metaphors are clear and descriptive, the chorus of this song was utilized in an

intermediate Spanish class where students made a list of as many metaphors they could find in the lyrics.

<i>Eres el aire, la lluvia</i>	(You are the air and the rain
<i>La risa de los niños</i>	the laughter of children
<i>La fuerza, la calma</i>	strength and calm
<i>La guía en el camino</i>	the guide of my way)

Along with use of metaphor and idiom, students also concentrate on cultural, historical, and literary references. Kern (2008) refers to this kind of referencing and re-appropriating of cultural information within a song as *intertextuality*, which is a notion he finds most readily available to illuminate through song lyrics. To focus their *pragmatic* analysis, that is, how context influences meaning, students answer questions such as: *What references to culture, religion, literature or history are there?* For every discovery, students explicitly identify their examples from the text in writing, and then break down the meanings of what they discover.

*Use of language: phonological and morphological levels of analysis*

As students consider Big Picture and Imagery aspects of analysis, they move from a more top-down view of the text to a bottom-up look at details that contribute interpreting a text. Looking at the *Use of Language* involves both text details and contributions to the overall discourse. *Phonology* is the study of meaningful sounds in a language, which also includes dialectal distinctions and language register. Questions such as: *What kind of language is used: slang, formal, informal?* contribute both to understanding the discourse of a text and to observing the meaningful sounds in language and how words are pronounced differently in different dialects. Dialect clues provide information about a region that an artist is from and the style of music common to that region, which can contribute to the global understanding of a song. At first, it is difficult for students to identify phonological differences on their own, but once the phonological distinctions are highlighted, students are then able to discern them in other contexts. A common example of different dialects in Spanish is in the song *Todo es del mismo color* (Everything is the Same Color), which originates from Spain. This song can be used with beginning students to point out that in Spain {z}, and {c} before {i} and {e}, are commonly pronounced with the “th” sound [θ] (as in *think*); whereas {c} and {z} are pronounced with an [s] sound in Mexico and other Latin-American countries. Students go through the printed lyrics and highlight the places where they expect to hear the “th” [θ] sound, and then listen for it in the song. Another example of dialect comes from the Christmas carol *Mi Burrito Sabanero* (My Little Donkey from the Plains). In the line: *si me ven, voy camino de Belén*, (if you see me, I’m on my way to Bethlehem) in the singer’s dialect, the words *ven* and *Belén* are pronounced with a velar nasal [ŋ], the kind of nasal sound English speakers use in pronouncing at the end of words such as *sing* or *gang*. This is a common phenomenon in some regional dialects of Spanish. Pointing out these dialectal distinctions helps students utilize yet another layer of information they are receiving from the lyrics that contributes to understanding the overall context of the song.

In relation to *morphology*, or parts of words, students notice patterns of rhyme: *What kinds of rhymes are used?* Again, they provide specific samples from the text of their discoveries. One example of identifying morphology in English is from the INXS song *Mediate* (1998). The song mainly lists a plethora of words that end in the morpheme *-ate*. Using a song like this helps students understand in their L1 how patterns, roots of words, and endings are useful for rhyming, and carry linguistic information. In Spanish, in the popular song *Bailando* (Dancing) by Enrique Iglesias (2014), he rhymes words like *anatomía* (anatomy), *melodía* (melody), *fantasía* (fantasy), *filosofía* (philosophy), and *vacía* (empty), which leads students to make observations of patterns of rhymes and discoveries of other common morphemes at the ends of words.

*Grammar: inflectional morphology and syntax levels of analysis*

*Grammar* in a general sense mainly centers on rules of morphology in relation to inflectional verb endings, and *syntax*, which focuses on word order. When students receive any new text to analyze, lyrics or otherwise, it is essential that they learn to navigate the unfamiliar text first by identifying and analyzing the verbs of the text. They take note of where the verbs are in the text and what information they contain, in regards to person, number and aspect. Even unfamiliar verbs in Spanish are often recognizable by their roots and endings and link to their explicit or implied subjects. By training students to be aware of the verbs in a text they are better able to understand the other words in relation to the verb, and begin to develop a sentence-level awareness. Then, as Kern (2008) suggests, “because words are always embedded in linguistic and situational contexts, a language learner’s task is to figure out relationships between words, between larger units of meaning, and between texts” (p. 379). When students consider the grammar of a song, they focus their attention on verb tense and person with questions such as: *Who is talking to or about whom?* The information of the person speaking and the one(s) they are referring to and or addressing is helpful for understanding the overall intent of the lyrics. For example, in the song *Si Puedes Perdonar* (*The Apology Song*, Luna & Santaolalla, 2014) from the animated bicultural movie *The Book of Life* (Fox Films, 2014), the singer sings in the first person an apology to the informal second person: *¿Me perdonas? Toro, ¿Me perdonas?* (Forgive me, *Toro*, forgive me), which in this context is a matador talking to the bull he doesn’t want to fight. Understanding that the matador is apologizing to the bull opens up layers of information about the culture and history of bullfighting in Mexico, juxtaposed with a current cultural trend against animal cruelty. Consequently, identifying the verbs in a song and interpreting the information contained in them is fundamental for students to get their bearings of the text and gain greater global insight of the communication choices of the artist.

In relation to analyzing aspects of syntax, students make observations about word choices and word order, and the links between larger units of meaning that contribute to the overall impact of the song. One example of a song that can be used with beginning language learners is the chorus of *América* by *Los Tigres del Norte* (2015). This regional Mexican ballad is useful with beginners because it

deals with words of nationality and country names, of which many are cognates in English. Also, the chorus is one simple repeated phrase: *De América yo soy* (From America, I am). Students learn *yo*, the first person pronoun, and *soy*, a form of the verb *to be*, early on in Spanish, especially in relation to talking about where they are from. Even though the constituents of this sentence are not in standard sentence order, this chorus is understandable on the word and phrase levels. Furthermore, when analyzed in its context, this chorus provides a powerful connection with the singers' viewpoint, which, in this case reflects an insightful cultural value. The main point of this song is that even though Americans come in a *mosaico de mil colores* (mosaic of a thousand colors), we are all still Americans. Just as *él que nace en Europa es Europeo, Y él que nace en el África, Africano* (those born in Europe are Europeans, and Africans are from Africa), everyone from the Americas is American, because *América es todo el continente* (America is the entire continent). The alteration of the word order in this chorus highlights the linguistic concept of *information structure*. Casielles-Suárez (2003) explains that an important part of discourse competence in Spanish involves understanding the *information structure* of a sentence, which relates to how new and given information are revealed within a discourse context by the order of the sentence constituents. In this case, *topicalization* of the chorus changes the emphasis of the sentence: *De América yo soy* (From America, I am). Topicalization occurs when constituents of a sentence are reordered so that the second part of the sentence reveals the new information. In this song, the connection between the order of the constituents in the sentence and understanding the overall theme of the discourse come together. Casielles-Suárez (2003) emphasizes that "all sentences occur in a context" and the word order of a sentence is "mandated partly by the particular discourse in which it occurs." Furthermore, understanding information structure is relevant for language teaching pedagogy in an effort to develop discourse competence by addressing the context in which information is given (p. 16). In relation to song lyrics, especially considering rhythm and rhyme, reorganizing syntactic structures to emphasize information is not uncommon. In this chorus, since it is the only line, reordering the structure is meant to make a clear point: From America—I am! The emphasis is on the fact that the Mexican singer identifies himself as American, and furthermore, he represents the other Central and South Americans mentioned throughout the song. This alteration of the normal syntactic structure draws attention to the new information, the point of the song. Even at a beginning level students can observe sentence structure and how it relates to the overall understanding of this text, and therefore they can foster a connection with the sociocultural viewpoint revealed in these lyrics, mainly that to be American is not limited to one country, but rather is a continental experience. Students discover this viewpoint as the theme of this song through the analysis process, and then the theme can be expanded through other instructional activities on geography, nationality, and personal identity.

*Personal response*

Once students have engaged in both macro and micro level analysis of a song, they return to their personal response to it. As highlighted in the Unit Lesson (Figure 2), aspects of personal response are addressed at the onset of lyric analysis when students experience the Big Picture of a song and consider their overall impressions. It is crucial, however, that students return to reflecting on their personal reactions to a song after they have spent time analyzing, interpreting, and interacting with the sounds, patterns, rhymes, language and themes in the songs. In this section, students answer questions such as: What about this song is meaningful to you? How does the music contribute to that? What words, lyrics, rhymes, metaphors stand out to you? What don't you like about this song? Why? What is confusing or difficult to understand? Be specific. Much insight is gained through students' reflections of their personal interaction with the music and lyrics. Whether it is related to their own cultural perspectives and opinions of the target culture, or whether it is personal preference of a particular sound or connection with the lyrics, or a combination, this topic helps students become more aware of their own attitudes and the contributing factors of what shape those attitudes, both positive and negative. After all, attitude has a significant impact on overall language and cultural competence. To summarize, students are not only learning language in a repetitive fashion through music, they are also learning to consider how they interact with the target culture by interpreting linguistic features that musicians are utilizing to share their culturally situated messages.

**Other considerations for song selections**

Through the analysis of song lyrics, language becomes the key to unlock the mysteries of culture. However, when selecting songs, it is worthwhile to consider additional important factors such as the depth and breadth of instructor expertise, suggestions for where to find content, and the use of songs with translations. When using authentic texts for language learning, a certain amount of ambiguity and unanticipated challenges arise. One such challenge is that instructors understandably do not have all the cultural and linguistic information necessary themselves to be experts on all song lyrics and music genres. However, instructors can model and participate in the co-construction and interaction of the discovery process by identifying what they do and do not understand, and actively implementing strategies to make meaning in the L2 context. This can become a learning opportunity for further research, or inquiry of a native speaker. It is also helpful to point out that many references to popular songs in English are not entirely understandable to all members of a discourse community. While some lyrics have a clear meaning, or layers of meaning, others are often intentionally ambiguous. Sometimes a personal connection to the lyrics affects our own interpretation of them, even if it is not the intended meaning of a song. All of these factors require critical thinking skills that we use all the time to understand the world around us. Kern (2008) stresses that in order to make connections through texts, "critical thinking is not reserved for special lessons," but is integrated into

students' regular classroom tasks, and cultural exploration, then, "permeates all aspects of the lesson" (p. 370). Essentially, instructors explicitly model critical thinking by navigating the ambiguities of a text as they seek to make meaning, and also guide their students through the same process.

Also a tension exists in finding songs that are interesting and appropriate for the learners, and meet the instructional goals of the teacher. Utilizing a social media player, such as Pandora or Spotify, provides suggestions for new songs in related styles and genres, which is one resource for finding future songs for analysis. An abundance of relevant songs for analysis can also be found in movies, on the radio, through textbooks, on websites, by YouTube related links, and through popular singing competition programs. Another worthwhile source is song suggestions from students and native speakers who also contribute cultural and social information through their song choices. For example, *Reggada* (Outlandish, 2006), a student's song suggestion, is a stylistic and linguistic fusion of hip-hop, folk and pop with ethnic elements related to a Moroccan wedding celebration. The lyrics are expressed in English, Spanish and Arabic. The artists' music reflects their cultural and intercultural experiences, and in essence, their global citizenship. Song suggestions from students provide another layer of powerful connection, which is the diversity that students bring to the class with them and how the music they listen to often reflects that.

Some songs have both a Spanish and English version that can prove insightful for making comparisons. Translations from one language to another are often very complex and rarely word for word. Translations of songs enable students to understand how idiom and nuance affect the translation in each context. Numerous songs mentioned in this paper have translations that are useful for comparison: *Si Puedes Perdonar* (The Apology Song), *Bailando* (Dancing), *Superman es Illegal*, and *Cascabel* (Jingle Bells). Kern (2008) offers the suggestion that students compare multiple translations of a text, and even do their own translations, as a way to add to their discovery process:

Translation makes students distinctly aware of how important word and syntax choices are in expressing meaning and makes them realize that there are rarely simple one-to-one correspondences between expressions in the two languages. Translation also requires active confrontation of text–context relationships, and this can help reduce students' tendency to see texts as autonomous expressions of singular meaning. (p. 375)

Many tools are at our disposal for genre analysis, and translation is one that is helpful for making comparisons and understanding word choice in relation to the overall genre, rhythm, and theme of a song. It is another facet of genre analysis that aids in ushering students into becoming more competent intercultural communicators.

## **Conclusion**

In the classroom, using authentic texts in language learning integrates language and culture that is more reflective of real-world experiences. Wilkinson

et al. (2015) found in their culture-driven classroom that the key is “to teach language for cultural discovery rather than language and cultural discovery.” They shifted their end goal of students achieving language accuracy, to students “using [language forms] to analyze their own and another culture, as well as to understand themselves as both native and nonnative cultural participants” (p. 8). Through engagement and enjoyment of L2 music students can begin to utilize their growing understanding of and participate in the target discourse community. Likewise, music in the L2 provides an authentic experience for students to use language for cultural discovery within and beyond the confines of the classroom. Because of its inherent social nature, music is a natural bridge to connecting socially, culturally and linguistically with the target discourse community. Therefore, in this unit, students find music with their lyrics that is relevant and interesting to them, and ultimately explore ways to share L2 music with others, so that they learn to incorporate target language music as part of their own personal enjoyment and social engagement with music.

Students have incredible access to an abundance of world music, and the lyrics and translations to songs are equally accessible. Access to music from around the globe is reflective of students’ access to a global community of which language instructors equip them to be competent members. As instructors, we too have that same accessibility and model our own adventures of global citizenship. Part of the journey for becoming competent global citizens is knowing how to navigate linguistically and culturally diverse language in various cultural contexts through tools and strategies that provide access to authentic texts and media. Understanding musical expressions represents an artistic reflection of the intricacies of language, culture, and humanity. Because authentic music lyrics are naturally layered with complexities, a systematic way of processing and explicitly unpacking the song’s lyrics, language, and genre is fundamental to a genre-based learning approach as it opens up our understanding to viewpoints beyond our own. People are innately inspired by music because it reflects us personally, socially, culturally and universally. The lyrics of the song *Live Life* (Jesse & Joy, 2014) from the movie *Book of Life* sum this up well: *Live life like it’s a song, so turn it on and sing along*. After all, what better way to celebrate the world as its global citizens than through the diverse expressions of music and song.

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