

7 ‘La ballata dell’amore cieco’: a case study on the use of songs in Italian language learning

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Abstract

The song ‘La ballata dell’amore cieco (o della vanità)’ (1966), by Italian singer-songwriter Fabrizio De André (1940-1999), offers students opportunities to practise their language skills, stimulate their cultural appreciation, and expand their knowledge of a musical and poetic form (the ballad), while reflecting on the close connection between poetry and dance. Moving from receptive to productive skills, from gist to detail, learning activities are staged over three sessions, where students examine the song’s musical features and lyrics and then produce their own ballads in writing. The paper first discusses the benefits and pitfalls of using songs as a tool to develop linguistic skills and raise cultural awareness. It then describes the learning opportunities offered by De André’s song and concludes with an evaluation of the effectiveness of these activities, examining the potential for further research.

Keywords: student engagement, language and culture, music and language learning, poetry and dance.

1. Introduction

Despite activating different brain functions and neural pathways, music and language are intimately connected. In evolutionary terms, speech has

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emerged from human development and the use of sounds (Khaghaninejad & Fahandejsaadi, 2016, p. 90). Babies, who are not able to distinguish between singing and speaking, learn the ‘music’ of a language before using it communicatively (Stansell, 2005, pp. 6-8). Music and language share features such as pitch, intonation, and stress. There is, therefore, a good degree of overlapping and mutual cognitive support between abilities that pertain to music and language.

From the literature surveyed, music and/or songs can make a positive impact on language acquisition in broadly three areas: motivation, linguistic development, and cultural competency.

Engaging students with activities based on songs certainly adds variety to teaching and learning and “represents a change of pace in the classroom” (Chandler, 2016, p. 25), but it does not necessarily translate into increased motivation, as scholars sometimes too hastily indicate (e.g. Stansell, 2005). There are at least four variables that determine student engagement in this context: students’ interests in music; whether they relate to the genre or the song they have been asked to work on; their preferred learning style; and the teacher’s approach and personality, as aptly suggested by Fisher (2001, p. 47).

Selecting a song that sparks curiosity in the learners can indeed be challenging. From my own experience with learners of Italian in a British university context, students are not generally drawn to Italian (vocal) music. Although a small number are opera enthusiasts, the majority finds the genre dated, nor are students excited about overly sentimental Italian pop music, or Italian rap, which they often perceive as less appealing than its Anglophone models.

Linguistically, a song can be exploited to focus on pronunciation, as well as to consolidate and expand vocabulary and grammar. Songs can help students familiarise themselves with pronunciation and boost their confidence when reusing a given word or phrase; however, the prosody of a language changes when it is sung (see Leith, 1979), and many songs include words pronounced with an unnatural stress in order to accommodate a given rhyming pattern or for other intended effects (see Chandler, 2016). Furthermore, songs in a regional

dialect can be productive for advanced levels but potentially misleading and confusing for beginners and intermediate students.

Songs have intrinsic qualities that can be fruitfully exploited for vocabulary acquisition and grammar development, “since many people often remember rhyme, rhythm or melody better than ordinary speech” (Failoni, 1993, p. 98), but the combined effect and interplay of music and text can be ‘distracting’ for the learner: “when the music was too difficult or the melody remained unlearned, it had the opposite effect on recall” (Khaghaninejad & Fahandejsaadi, 2016, p. 26).

Moreover, compared to more traditional drills and language tasks, songs offer students exposure to ‘authentic language’, often rich in colloquialisms and slang, and can be a valuable mnemonic device to internalise a given grammar rule, without the need to recall a formal definition (see Chandler, 2016, pp. 23-25). However, exposure to ungrammatical structures, very common in song lyrics, combined with the fact that songs can stick in our minds, can interfere with the learner’s acquisition of grammar at lower levels: the use of a double negative in (*I can’t get no*) *Satisfaction* by The Rolling Stones is a case in point.

Songs can also enhance cultural competency and appreciation, given that lyrics (e.g. references to social and political issues) and/or music (melody, rhythm, and instrumentation) may contain elements which are representative of the target culture(s). It is therefore advisable to avoid songs which replicate a foreign model or genre too closely without affording insights into the target culture(s), or songs that may perpetuate stereotypes and clichés about the target culture(s), as Griffin (1977, p. 943) notes in relation to the reception of Hispanic musical culture in the United States.

2. Methodology

This case study includes a sequence of learning activities based on *La ballata dell’amore cieco (o della vanità)* (1966), a song written by Italian singer-

songwriter Fabrizio De André (1940-1999). Both the music and the lyrics include elements which would be difficult to categorise as typically Italian. The learning activities rely on this element of novelty to spark students' curiosity and trigger their reflection on their perception of Italian music. Students also learn more about a musical and poetic form (the ballad) as well as the relation between poetry and dance.

The lyrics, appropriate for advanced learners, offer students an opportunity to revise certain elements of grammar and acquire new vocabulary. Moving from gist to detail, and from receptive to productive skills, tasks are spread over three sessions.

In the first stage, students are presented with six questions in Italian before the first playback: What do you think about the song? What emotions does it evoke? What images does it conjure up? What are the lyrics about? Do you listen to Italian music? Is this song a representative example of Italian music?

Students are then asked to listen to the song and focus on the first four questions, which aim to canvass their personal reactions and understanding of the song and lyrics. After the first playback, students discuss their answers in pairs, or small groups, before opening the discussion to the whole class. The role of the tutor is to facilitate the discussion during this phase. Students learn more on the song through a gap-fill exercise on the lyrics, which also helps them revise articles, pronouns, and possessive adjectives (see sample stanza in [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Gap-fill exercise

NUOVO ASCOLTO E RICOSTRUZIONE DEL TESTO
articoli, pronomi e aggettivi possessivi in evidenza

... uomo onesto, ... uomo,
tralalalalla tralallaleru
... innamorò,
... .. che non ... amava niente.

At this point, after playing the song a second time and checking their answers in the gap-fill exercise, pairs or small groups are asked to consider the lyrics in relation to the music (melody, rhythm, instrumentation) and answer the remaining two questions they were presented at the beginning.

After helping students examine the lyrics in more detail and clarifying any unknown vocabulary, the tutor elicits comments on both the lyrics and the structure of the song (e.g. division verse/chorus, rhyming patterns). Students' attention is finally drawn to the word 'ballata' in the title. For the following session, they are invited to research the ballad form in both musical and poetic terms and then think of other examples of ballads they may be familiar with.

At the beginning of the second session, students discuss their findings and provide examples of ballads. During the discussion, they are invited to reflect on the intimate connection between music and poetry and are finally asked to compose their own ballads following a given rhyming scheme which, as in all ballads, includes a refrain (see line marked with 'x' in [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Ballad scheme

SCRIVIAMO LE NOSTRE BALLATE

Un giorno al m**ARE (x)**

Era un'estate torrida ed af**OSA (a)**
 ed io me ne stavo dist**ESO, (b)**
 mi si avvicinò una persona fam**OSA (a)**
 che mi disse di slogg**ARE (x)**

io che ero ancora assop**ITO (c)**
 le dissi di andare a quel pa**ESE, (d)**
 tanto ne fui indispett**ITO; (c)**
 la stupida si mise allora a grid**ARE (x)**

coprendomi d'insulti e parol**ACCE (e)**
 dandomi del troglod**ITA (f)**
 mi disse ch'ero buono a vendere foc**ACCE (e)**
 furibondo e sbalordito, io la volevo schiaffegg**IARE (x)**

Students are divided into groups of six to eight students and each group has to compose their own ballad on the institution’s virtual learning environment (Blackboard) before the final session. Each student is expected to contribute one to two lines, depending on the group size, and their line(s) should not only follow the rhyming scheme but also coherently fit with the lines previously written by peers. Ballads are shown and discussed in class in the final session and have occasionally been included in the departmental newsletter (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Students’ ballads

SE SOLO SAPESSI CHE TI SONO ACCANTO	PENSIERI DI UN PASTORE TEDESCO	IL MIO PROMBLEMINO CON IL CUCCHIANO
<p>Dammi qualche minuto Ti dirò tutto ciò che tu vorrai mai sapere, Il futuro che ho immaginato fatto di noi e della nostra vita insieme.</p> <p>Mentre il viaggio sarebbe lungo Il nostro amore sarà forte e profondo Al tuo fianco mi pongo Non ti nascondere da me.</p> <p>Dammi la tua mano di nuovo E asciuga bene le lacrime Tutte queste sensazioni meravigliose dal mio cuore provengono Sembra come un amore programmato per noi due.</p> <p>(Clare, Andrew, Franky, Suzanne, Floriana, Petrit, Meritxell)</p>	<p>Il giorno era lungo e freddoloso, così mi sentivo come un pazzo fuori di me, come un pazzo arrabbiato e geloso Provavo ancora qualcosa per te.</p> <p>E così gironzolavo per le strade, Non potevo pensare ad un'altra, Sei veramente la luce delle mie lampade, Oh perché non provi a brillare per me!</p> <p>Il giorno è venuto, ho voluto sapere Quanto ancora mi vuoi o se è tutto finito, Risolvo i problemi cominciando a bere, È l'unica cosa che faccio per te.</p> <p>(Owen, Naomi, Martin, Fay, Daisy, Jennifer, Ed, Will)</p>	<p>Era un giorno scuro e piovoso, seguii alcuni passi al carnevale, Ma, una cosa molto fastidiosa, Non potevo trovare il mio favorito cucchiaio!</p> <p>Il giorno dopo era soleggiato, così, ho camminato sulla spiaggia, poi ad un bar, prendo un caffè mac- chiato, Dove ho chiacchierato con un uomo di Torino.</p> <p>Dopo un'ora mi sembrava una cosa, Quest'uomo era infatti una donna, Era proprio strana questa settimana, perché la cosa più curiosa... Era che lei teneva il mio cucchiaino!</p> <p>(By Ian, Tom, Hannah, James, Caroline, Sarah, Julie, Rebecca)</p>

3. Findings

I designed the learning activities above in the academic year 2009-2010 and have developed and adapted them since. They have generally received a very positive response from students and elicited their interest and curiosity. However, the overall engagement and enthusiasm has varied, also depending on students’ interest in music and Italian music in particular.

Engagement with the group composition of a ballad (formative writing task) has also varied considerably. Students more naturally inclined to a divergent (imaginative) mode of thinking took the task as an opportunity to practise their language skills creatively, and this emerged from the attention they put in framing their lines and their word choices, whereas students more drawn to convergent (factual) thinking may have felt that the task was not particularly appealing to their learning style or that there was limited scope for writing practice in composing a couple of lines for a ballad (Marashi & Tahan-Shizari, 2015).

The themes, tone, and quality of the ballads were also heterogeneous, and ranged from generically romantic (see the first two columns in [Figure 3](#)) to humorous/nonsensical (final column). Irrespective of students' appreciation of the song or overall engagement, the learning activities have had two important merits, which I felt most students valued in light of their comments during and at the end of the activities. Firstly, the tasks drew students' attention to Italian music, a cultural aspect that is generally peripheral in academic curricula, and challenged their idea or perception of Italian modern popular music. The song was different from stereotypical ideas of Italian music, it was not an aria, nor could it be classed as mainstream pop music. The song chorus recalls the sound of a jazz big band, De André's singing style is close to French chansonniers and Leonard Cohen, and the upbeat jazzy rhythm contrasts with the sombre lyrics, which tell the gruesome story of a twisted love affair (find song with lyrics in [A Study in Floyd, 2011](#)).

The second important merit is that these learning activities have led students to research and reflect on an important poetic and musical form, the ballad, and the close connection between poetry and dance, which are often thought of as diametrically opposite forms of art: the former, mental and (extremely) serious, and the latter, physical and often associated with (light) entertainment.

4. Conclusion

Although choosing a suitable song for the relevant learning stage can be challenging, an appropriate song is a versatile resource that allows students

to practise all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and grammar. It can also increase their cultural awareness and engage them beyond the immediate language or culture-specific context. A syllabus that includes activities based on music and/or songs is more varied and inclusive, as it caters for those students who are auditory learners or have a predominant musical-rhythmic intelligence.

Both my perspective and findings have limitations that future iterations of the learning activities and further research can address. It would therefore be interesting to widen the perspective by exploring the response of learners from a different cultural background or in a different learning context, or the engagement of students of other languages in similar learning activities. Future administration of pre- and post-intervention questionnaires could also assess the effectiveness of the learning activities in terms of cultural awareness development (i.e. whether tasks have helped students reformulate their perspective on Italian music) and further substantiate my observations and findings.

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