Motivating Secondary School Students to Learn Languages

with Relevant Media — PopuLLar

Figen Yılmaz, Meral Şeker

(School of Foreign Languages, Cukurova University, Adana, Turkey)

Abstract: Maintaining motivation among students in secondary schools has been one of the biggest challenges. When considering the EU mother-tongue-plus-two-strategy accepted in 2002, the huge need to motivate secondary school students to learn languages becomes even more important. Studies show that motivation to learn depends on the extent to which teachers are able to satisfy students' needs: to feel in control of their learning (Zimmerman, 1998); to feel they are learning something which is relevant to their lives (Biggs, 1995); to feel connected with others (Deci & Ryan, 1991); and to feel the activities they are doing are interesting and fun (McCombs, 1994). The EU funded PopuLLar Project[*], described in this paper, has opted for songs, videos and interactive activities in order to meet these students' needs for motivation. Through this project the students will be able to combine their love of music, with creativity, literacy, digital competencies, and group collaboration and, most importantly, use LWULT languages.

Key words: foreign language learning, music in language teaching, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

As Deci & Ryan (1991) point out knowing how to meet individual learner needs for control, competence, and belonging in the classroom is a key to unlock student motivation to learn. Therefore, it can be assumed that the success in motivating students to learn does not depend on using large amounts of resources and materials but perhaps requires a revised approach to teaching on the teacher's side. The engine which generates secondary students' motivation to learn can be basically set to motion by including provisions for relevancy, choice, control, challenge, responsibility, personal connections and fun.

The PopuLLar project, an EU funded educational activity, has opted for songs, videos and interactive activities in general, as one of the most popular teenage interests, and as a path leading to wider possibilities of both self-learning and professional growth. Students, working autonomously on the lyrics of the song of their choice, create new lyrics in their mother tongue and the language they study and record their final product on video. Working with popular songs in this way presents something which meets all the above mentioned

requirements for engaging students — songs are something they are interested in, they work independently, and they get into contact with a school in another European country. Thus, collaboration and learner's autonomy are fostered, social connections are built, and students feel that they are fully in control of the shape of the final outcome. A teacher in this project acts as a guide who supports student's job and supervises the smooth flow. His students' and his own horizons broaden with opportunities that such international collaboration brings. PopuLLar is designed to address multiple priorities and key competencies within the LLP:

- Create a new, innovative teaching methodology
- Motivate students to learn languages
- Foster students' learning to learn key competence
- Raise use of technology in education
- Provide meaningful opportunities to communicate in foreign languages (focusing on LWULT — Less Widely Used and Less Taught)
- Enhance teacher's and students' digital competence

There are six project partners who brought together their expertise from the fields of secondary education, music and video making to produce an innovative educational activity based on using popular songs lyrics to improve teenagers' motivation to learn languages:

- The Mosaic Art and Sound, Ltd. (Coordinator)
- Kindersite, London, UK
- Language School with the State Language Exam Rights PELIKAN, Ltd., Brno, Czech Republic
- University of Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain
- Opera Bazar, Lucca, Italy
- Çukurova University, Adana, Turkey
- Kulturrings in Berlin e.V., Berlin, Germany

2. Pedagogic Background

2.1 Teenagers and Music

Music is an essential part of human existence. It is a way of how people express their feelings all over the world. It is hard to imagine a culture without it. In the context of education, music is becoming more and more popular subject.

Music is a leisure time activity of almost each young person in the world and this is its biggest advantage. Teenagers are overwhelmingly engaged with music, 92% of 14–17 year olds own an MP3 player and they listen to an average of nearly 2.5 hours of music per day (British Music Rights, 2008). Since music is a teen's relevant issue, utilizing it will motivate and engage the students in an area that is an important part of their lives.

2.2 Music in Foreign Language Teaching

One of the most important factors for achieving teaching and learning effectiveness is social harmony among the learners. In a classroom, children often sing together to celebrate birthday, to play games together, to appreciate the feeling of togetherness. Music is also used to soothe the mind, to relax the mind and body. Music enables the learners to be free from pressure and stress. Music is deliberately used to teach language, social and cultural feeling since cultural meanings, inspiration, and worldviews are encoded in songs. In other words, songs

tell thousands of human stories.

While there is no formal approach of introducing music to language teaching, educators have often reported that songs can be used effectively in foreign language education to support different language skills (Spicher & Sweeney, 2007). Studies using participants' native languages have shown that under certain conditions, verbal learning and verbatim memory for text can be supported by using a musical learning method (Thaut et al., 2008). In fact, there is a great amount of research confirming increasing tendency of remembering the language thanks to music. Brewer (2004) summarizes these effects of music stating "music stabilizes mental, physical and emotional rhythms to attain a state of deep concentration and focus in which large amounts of content information can be processed and learned".

One of the biggest advantages is that music is all around us. It means that there is nobody who can have no opinion about it. The students' point of view is maturing with their age and that's why they want to discuss their favourite genre or artist. Everybody wants to know what their popular artist sings about. There are so many kinds of music so everyone can choose what they prefer. In general it could be said that music is a pleasure close to everybody. Another advantage is its accessibility and simplicity of using it. Teachers can start the activity in the lesson by introducing a task and then lead the entire work through stream, social networks and other tools. It is easy, fun and it attracts students' attention not only at school but also at home in their leisure time. Actually, music enriches every language lesson and there is a presumption that music can bring closer and friendlier relationship between the students and the teacher. It means that the lessons are enjoyable, gripping, engaging and witty. The combination of fun, rhythm, vocabulary, melody, and the presence of the foreign language aspect causes great progress in learning.

In the PopuLLar project, the work with lyrics of a chosen popular song represents a language task students need to complete. This method is based on Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach, which basically refers to language acquisition through solving a problem or doing a task without concentrating on language features. The role of the teacher is providing a suitable environment for facilitating language acquisition and setting a task or problem to solve. Students then work autonomously on performing the task. A deeper language analysis is incorporated after learners have completed their job. The emphasis is placed on reaching a balance between language accuracy, traditionally sought by formal school instruction, and conversational fluency. This way, students will practice in relevant context something they like and feel familiar with — music and lyrics — with a language practice in form of recreated lyrics.

2.3 Teenagers, Multimedia and Foreign Language Learning

Modern day technological advancements are constantly seen throughout every aspect of life. Teenagers today are surrounded by cell phones, portable Internet availability, laptop computers, smart phones, iPods, Mp3 players of every brand, and many other devices, and many more. Figures from a recent survey conducted by British Music Rights (2008) reveal interesting findings on the state of digital music in UK. Quite unsurprisingly, the age groups who lead the time spent on listening to music are young adults aged 18–24 with more than 4 hours a day listening to music, and teenagers aged 14–17 who spend on average more than 3 hours listening to music.

Although some voices claim all these technological advancement are creating a less interactive generation, technology also has positive impacts on today's youth, especially in terms of social activity. Internet not only offers an easier way to share information, but also contributes to sociability by providing a way to communicate with distant friends and family. In addition, it gives socially challenged teenagers an opportunity for interaction in

any language they choose.

The use of multimedia, which refers to the use of audio and video to record a song in PopuLLar, can take integrating music into language learning even further by providing lots of benefits; such as amusement, diversity in class activities, availability, possibility of sharing and collaboration, creating reflecting opportunities, etc. Now that audio recording technology has become very accessible and easy to use, the recordings can be easily uploaded and shared. Audio recordings are a good option if privacy is an issue and the students don't want to show themselves. Recording music can increase students' motivation as they will be able to keep a record of what they have developed and share their results. Additionally, they become more competent in the active use of media – supporting visual and media literacy of the learners.

3. How to Use the PopuLLar Project Autonomously

In order to be able to implement the methodology developed, the following steps will guide students:

Phase 1 – Creating and recording a song

Step 1 - Select a song

Step 2 - Rewrite the lyrics (native language – the language you speak in your classroom)

Step 3 - Translate the lyrics (target language – the language you are learning)

Step 4 - Record singing audio & video (both versions of your song)

Step 5 - Upload and share

Phase 2 – Sharing across Europe

Step 1 - Select a song made by other students across Europe

Step 2 - Translating (native language)

Step 3 - Record singing audio & video

Step 4 - Upload and share

Although writing lyrics is a complex task, a simplified brief outline of the typical song writing process can help students throughout this process. However, it's important to remind students that the choices they make along the writing process will determine the result.

(1) Selecting a strong music background which evokes some ideas and feelings.

(2) Selecting the topic of the song (The choice is theirs. It can be anything from pains of a broken heart, friendship, betray to the last holidays.)

(3) A string of thoughts flowing from the initial idea, brainstorming.

(4) Noting down the ideas.

(5) The development of the lyrics or music by choosing carefully and meaningfully each word.

(6) Keeping verses.

(7) A revision of the phrasing or order of the music/words, meaning, rhyme and purpose to fit with the music frame.

(8) Rewriting necessary parts.

(9) Language proofreading of the lyrics.

(10) Final accommodation of the lyrics with the music frame.

(11) Coming up with a catchy song title.

4. Pilot Implementations of PopuLLar across Europe

4.1 Results for Students

4.1.1 Participants and Context

The project has been implemented in initial piloting in five different school settings from Turkey, Italy, Czech Republic, Spain and Germany so far. A total of 65 students whose ages range between 14 and 19 participated in the study. The whole group completed all the phases described in the methodology. Prior to and following the implementation, participating students were given a pre and post questionnaire.

4.1.2 Results of the Pilot Implementations for Students

Students were given pre-questionnaires to elicit their prior experience about and expectations from the proposed new approach to learning. The results of the student pre-questionnaire show that all students love music of many types varying from pop-rap, R&B, jazz, lounge, rock and blues. They were all aware that music was very important for foreign language learning. Almost all students (97%) stated that they use the internet on a daily basis for communication, entertainment and education. Overall, students had highly positive expectations of their participation in the PopuLLar project. They thought that it could help them improve their language skills, be more creative and collaborative.

Students reflected on the results and compared them with their expectations in the post questionnaires. Students (93%) reported that they had enjoyed working autonomously in groups in the process of choosing a song, writing and translating the lyrics and shooting the video. The majority of the students (87%) also said that they used their creativity in writing and translating the lyrics. Thus, the results of the post questionnaire indicate that the students feel that they have gained and improved skills in terms of cooperation, autonomous work and creativity.

As for the difficulties that the students have encountered, almost all students (81.5%) agreed that writing and translating the lyrics was the most difficult phase. According to 18.4% of the students, singing was the most difficult phase. In addition, one student indicated that video-editing was the most difficult. Hence, students' reflections regarding the difficulties that they have encountered during the initial piloting process differ from one another.

In order to overcome these difficulties, two options can be offered. Firstly, as the perception of difficulties differ among students, jigsaw method might be implemented to make use of individual differences and students' different skills and knowledge so that active and effective participation is ensured in group work activities. Also, it could be an option to let the students decide whether they want to complete all steps of initial piloting (three audio/video products in total) or if they focus on one or two videos where they can put more creative energy to it.

4.2 Results for Teachers

4.2.1 Participants and Context

The project has been implemented in five schools: Turkey, Italy, Czech Republic, Spain and Germany and 11 teachers participated along with their students. The teachers' role in PopuLLar Project includes observing and guiding or assisting when there is a demand from students. Since the project's ultimate aim is to encourage students to work autonomously and collaboratively, teachers are not expected to monitor or interfere with the process. They completed pre- and post-questionnaires before and after the implementation.

4.2.2 Results of the Pilot Implementations for Teachers

According to pre-questionnaire, teachers had some positive expectations. They stated that they were eager to try a new method (i.e., using music and multimedia) in their language classes and thought that it would be a motivating and creative experience for their students. They also liked the idea of sharing students' work on the web since it would encourage students to perfect their work.

Previous to the implementation, several teachers expressed their worries about the students' participation. Some of the teachers reported that a number of students looked a little insecure before starting to work in the project. Teachers expressed their fear that students would need a lot of help to work on the lyrics. They were also worried about the time needed to work on the project.

However, after the implementation of the project was completed, majority of the participating teachers expressed their surprise for high student participation. They noted that their students became more willing to participate as they started to work on the phases together. In particular, uploading their work to the web accelerated their participation. They also stated that students were observed to have a lot of fun working together. They gave their ideas, commented on others' and discussed the details in collaboration. They stated that the project resulted in friendship and reflection. Some of them expressed their surprise that students spent their free time to complete the phases of the project, which normally would not happen to complete their homework. They also stated that they were thrilled with students' creativeness and the variety of skills (e.g., using technology, playing instruments, writing lyrics, creating stories, acting, etc.) they used during the project.

According to the participating teachers' reflections, the project has increased students' motivation and willingness to get involved in the language they were learning. They described the project as different, innovative and encouraging. As a teacher, they were happy to have seen their students so enthusiastic and creative. All of the teachers rated the tasks in the Project as very effective and stated that they were very happy to have participated in PopuLLar Project.

5. Conclusion

Overall, both students' and the teacher's opinions of the Project were very positive. They found the experience to be rewarding and fun. The students were very proud of their work and kept asking for the comments from Project partners. They gave feedback on partnering countries' songs and compared theirs with them. The teachers mentioned that they became aware of the importance and power of music for language learners and would definitely integrate music in their teaching.

As the results of the Initial piloting demonstrate, the PopuLLar project idea is appealing to students' interests and relevant to their lives. It has also been rated by teachers highly and referred as innovative, motivating and relevant. The methodology created in the project works in the context of secondary and high school education. Thus, the project has an enormous potential to promote certain skills such as cooperation, creativity and autonomous work in education.

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