

Brazilian Music as Comprehensible Compelling Input

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Over the last few years I have developed a 2-semester (6 credit hours) course sequence in the Portuguese language at the University of Texas Pan American, a university on the Texas-Mexico border. The vast majority of the students are native to the region and variably bilingual in Spanish and English, though a few are primarily 'English-speaking'. For many of these students, Portuguese will be their third language.

Students typically enroll in these courses to complete the 6 hours of required foreign language study as part of the core curriculum, or they take the courses as electives. Students from all class standings are drawn to the courses. Enrollment has been quite stable over the last few years and student feedback has always been very positive, in part due to consistent use of Brazilian music and song lyrics. I believe the students' ability to use Portuguese has benefitted greatly from this use of authentic text.

Spanish is my first language, Portuguese is my second and English is my third. Some time ago, I had a unique opportunity to acquire and learn Portuguese by immersing myself in the Brazilian language and culture in Mexico City. During that period of time, I worked in the Portuguese department at the Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) where I routinely interacted in Portuguese with Brazilian professors and instructors. At the same time, I completed advanced and intensive coursework that led to a Diploma (Certificado de Perfeccionamiento en Portugués) that certified my command of the language. Music, within and outside the classroom, was one of the cornerstones of my Portuguese language development, so I also sang and did theater in Portuguese for 3 years under the supervision of a Brazilian director.

In the classroom, I studied Portuguese through the *Curso Ativo de Português* (Silva-Gomes, Lage-Pessoa, & Åkerberg, 1985), a communicative approach to language teaching that has been the basis for the program curriculum for more than 25 years. Dr. Helena Maria Da Silva-Gomes based the curriculum on the interests of the learners, in this

case Mexican university students. Using a student survey to understand why this Spanish-speaking student population was motivated to study Portuguese, Dr. Da Silva discovered that these Mexican students were keenly interested in Brazilian music. Their motivation was neither instrumental nor linked to fulfilling some kind of university requirement. Consequently, some part of my early acquisition and learning of Brazilian Portuguese was driven by this communicative and active approach to language learning with authentic materials, including Brazilian lyrics and music. This experience was later followed by undergraduate and graduate studies in the Brazilian Portuguese language and literature.

Integrating Brazilian Music

Now with the opportunity of building this 1-year Portuguese course sequence, I decided to adopt a standard textbook to give some structure to the 2 courses. I realized that while the text offered direction and structure and was readily used across the U.S., the content and activities were not especially interesting or exciting. In an effort to respond to this void, and drawing on my own personal language learning experience, I decided to integrate Brazilian music into the courses.

I select a song with some kind of connection (e.g. key grammatical structures, topic, student interest) to the unit at hand. These authentic songs are a kind of natural introduction to some language features the students might be ready to acquire or will likely study later on. I also prefer songs that are available with video on the Internet. This way students can also see the song being performed or some related visual representation of the song's content. For example, I have the class sing the simple but enjoyable song by Rita Lee "Nem Luxo Nem Lixo" starting the first day of Portuguese I. Right after they introduce themselves, we repeat with Rita Lee, "Como vai você?" On the other hand, I end Portuguese II with the pop Brazilian rapper Marcelo D2 and his challenging lyrics of "Batucada." The availability of these songs on the Internet being performed by the artists only adds to the students' enthusiasm.

Students are provided with the lyrics to the song at the beginning of each textbook unit. We watch and listen to the video, and they talk about the possible meaning as a team. Then we listen to it a second time while reading the lyrics, and they discuss them again as a team. At this point they are just searching for the general meaning, and I scaffold their comprehension as needed. After that, they try to sing the song a couple of times in chorus as a whole class, and their homework is to finish studying the lyrics at home.

The next class we work the song a little more, and I fill in gaps as needed. From that point on, we sing the unit song during the last 10 minutes of class. The highlight of using this kind of authentic material is whole-class participation; some students may sing loudly enough to be heard in the next room or engage their bodies through dance.

In addition, and outside of class, students almost naturally seek out more information about the singer or band given their interest and ready access to the Internet. Each semester, students bring me not only new songs from the unit artist but also from different singers or bands they find on the Internet. If the lyrics are appropriate, I always use what they find in the classroom; in other cases they are able to research the meaning of those lyrics on their own.

Understanding the Students' Response: A theoretical interpretation

There are several inter-related explanations that, taken collectively, help explain why my students responded so readily to Brazilian music as a component of these 2 courses:

- △ *Comprehensible compelling input.* Songs easily qualify as "compelling" comprehensible input, meaning input that is so interesting that the acquirer "forgets" that it is in another language; such input may be optimal for language acquisition (Krashen, 2011). In my estimation, these songs constitute the most compelling input my students have access to.
- △ *Song as an innate structure.* It may well be that humans are naturally drawn to rhythms in music and language; we may have an "innate receptiveness" to respond to music (Jolly, 1975). Jolly concludes that "by using songs as teaching aids in the foreign language classroom, we are merely capitalizing on this natural responsiveness" (see also Bergen, 2012).
- △ *Cognate languages and authentic texts.* Since a number of my students are native speakers of Spanish, this allows for a fair amount of transfer from Spanish to Portuguese and the ability to understand authentic texts early in their second language development (Carvalho, Luna-Freire and Da Silva, 2010).
- △ *Song and video as pedagogical material.* Beyond their linguistic richness (Nuessel and Marshall, 2008) the use of the Internet and

video representations of the songs adds greatly to the appeal of using songs for teaching Portuguese. Most university students also have some kind of device that allows them to access the Internet and the videos in question. With the lyrics in hand, they can listen to, watch, and rewind the performances repeatedly and at their leisure. In addition, it is possible that some of the images in the video help promote comprehension and, in turn, language acquisition.

Next Steps

In light of my experiences and these key pedagogical, empirical, and theoretical positions, I believe that the Brazilian songs I have come to rely on to breathe life into my Portuguese courses with these university students represent a curricular design worth expanding. The possibility of developing a 2-course sequence using a content-based approach (Lyster & Ballinger, 2011), with music at its center instead of its periphery, is both appealing and defensible. Songs entail a variety of language learning benefits and content well beyond their linguistic properties. It is not difficult envisioning the integration of themes that tap into the geography, culture, politics, history, and current events embedded within these lyrics and their video representations to recreate this yearlong course sequence.

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