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Intercultural approaches to language learning

Christine E. Poteau, Alvernia University, PA

Poteau, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of World Languages at Alvernia University

Abstract

Our globally changing economy necessitates intercultural competence development. To address this global need within the Brazilian Portuguese as a foreign language (BPFL) context, this article examines three fundamental areas: 1) intercultural competence development, 2) neurobiological factors in language learning, and 3) pedagogical examples using music.

Introduction

In our globally changing society, there is a growing need to learn languages and become culturally cognizant. Nevertheless, language educators across the globe face increased challenges to innovate curricula that spark learners' interests and foster intercultural competence development for effective communication in diverse contexts. Drawing upon specific Brazilian musicians and songs, this article reviews intercultural approaches to Portuguese language learning that exemplify cultural and linguistic diversities.

Accordingly, this article examines three areas: 1) concept of intercultural competence, 2) neurobiological factors in language learning, and 3) practical applications of Brazilian music in BPFL contexts. With an aim of justifying the concept of language as a cultural tool, this article enables educators to construct experiential learning environments that explore human diversities and re-examine the role of the Portuguese language learner (PLL) as active participant and lifelong learner.

Concept of intercultural competence

The concept of intercultural competence is not limited to the language classroom, but also plays a vital role within medical (Ohana & Mash, 2015; Pérez & Luquis, 2014) and legal contexts (Eades, 2012; Hafner, 2012). Since language learners enter our classroom doors with diverse career interests and learning styles, multiple intercultural approaches must be integrated to help learners make global connections.

Though intercultural competence has been interpreted in numerous ways, Deardorff (2016) identifies the concept as "appropriate and effective" (p. 121) communication and behavior within interactions. Specifically, there are three interrelated domains of intercultural competence: 1)

affective (i.e., attitudes and motivation), 2) behavioral (i.e., practical application of skills within a context), and 3) cognitive (i.e., knowledge and understanding).

An individual's negative attitude (or affect), for example, can impede intercultural competence development since it impacts cognitive development and behavior. As Schumann and Wood (2004) note, the "cognition involved in effective learning and behavior would be impossible without emotion, affect, or motivation..." (p. 29). Consequently, stimulating learning environments promote active learning and increase learners' motivation.

In order to transform the language learner's classroom into one that increases motivation and supports both critical self-reflection and reflections on the roles of language on human identity, educators can construct learning environments that allow for a shift from an ethnocentric perspective to global citizenship. Learners' reflections can enhance critical thinking skills and contribute to intercultural competence development, cognitive development, positive change in attitudes and motivation, and can allow learners to challenge stereotypes. As research (MacIntyre & Serroul, 2015; Schumann & Wood, 2004) consistently evidences, emotion plays a critical role in learning and motivation, which are explored in the subsequent section.

Neurobiological factors

There are numerous factors that can positively impact or negatively interfere with language learning, including a learner's environment. As external stimuli, learners' environments can, in part, affect emotions, attention, and reactions (Schuchert, 2004), which ultimately affect intercultural competence development.

Therefore, constructing learning environments that encompass various aspects of language that consider diverse learning styles helps create optimal learning spaces and maintain learners' attention. Incorporating music in the language classroom is one way to create a positive learning environment that encourages active participation and increases learners' cultural and linguistic awareness. Moreover, music in the language classroom can lower learners' anxiety (Dolean, 2015), increase motivation (Good, Russo, & Sullivan, 2015), and enhance language learning (Ludke, Ferreira, & Overy, 2013).

Research (Alferink & Farmer-Dougan, 2010; Mårtensson et al., 2012; Wolfe, 2010) indicates that both the left and right cerebral hemispheres simultaneously process language in different ways. Thus, as Wolfe (2010) notes, pedagogies should involve "teaching to *both* halves of the brain" (p. 48), since content entails text (a left hemispheric process) and text includes context (a right hemispheric process). Furthermore, in Mollica's (2008) interview on bimodality, Danesi argues that bimodal approaches to learning involve simultaneous connections between the right (R-Mode) and left (L-Mode) cerebral hemispheres.

Specifically, in Mollica's (2008) interview, Danesi notes that contextualized instruction helps learners connect form (L-Mode) to content (R-Mode). The brain can decipher the meaning of new concepts or structures when references to cultural aspects are available to the learner during the R-Mode stage as an experiential learning form. With background information on new concepts or structures, learners can actively apply and practice the new concepts during the L-Mode stage

through analytical forms. Thus, cultural and practical contextualization techniques can serve as stimulating learning forms.

With respect to the present study, novel structures and concepts in song lyrics enable learners to connect linguistic input to cultural contexts (i.e., regional, historical, etc.). The following section reviews pedagogical examples using diverse Brazilian music to foster intercultural competence development.

Pedagogical examples

From the resounding drums of *axé* to the laughs and cries of the *cuíca*, the diverse sounds of Brazil can undeniably function as electrifying pedagogical tools that highlight the complexities of cultural identities. Brazilian music offers linguistic and cultural varieties that cannot be fully experienced from a textbook.

Though each song in this section can generate a repertoire of intercultural tasks that integrate cultural and linguistic aspects of Brazilian Portuguese, these pedagogical examples serve as models that can be applied in online and/or traditional classroom settings. Also, though there are numerous interpretations of the concept *task* (Nunan, 2015; Skehan, 2014), this concept will broadly refer to interactions that lead to specific objectives of a lesson through oral exchanges of content (Ellis, 2012). The terms *task* and *activity* will be used interchangeably, since each concept implies learners' active roles outlined in each example.

Beginning with Agepê, this singer created his iconic name out of the initial letters of his full name (Antônio Gilson Porfírio). The present study draws upon one of his famous songs, “Moro onde não mora ninguém” (1975). Depending on the level of the course, this song can introduce PLLs to one or all of the following five areas:

- 1) Double negatives (e.g., *não mora ninguém, não passa ninguém, etc.*)
- 2) Cultural and/or regional contextual references (e.g., *Não tem bloco na rua, Não tem carnaval, etc.*)
- 3) Grammatical morphemic constructions of past participles and diminutives (e.g., *casinha, amarrado, etc.*)
- 4) Verb conjugations in the present tense (e.g., *moro, passa, vive, tem, saio, canta, etc.*)
- 5) Possessive adjective formation (e.g., *meu*)

Agepê's (1975) lyrics (below) include examples of each of the five areas by verse. As a pre-listening activity, learners can identify each of the five areas while reading the song and culturally contextualize the utilization of one example from each of the five areas. This cultural and linguistic task should include identification of the corresponding area by verse and specific examples that highlight each of the areas (as illustrated in the examples).

Agepê's (1975) “Moro onde não mora ninguém”	Corresponding area
Moro onde não mora ninguém	1 + 4
Onde não passa ninguém	1 + 4
Onde não vive ninguém	1 + 4

É lá onde moro	4
E eu me sinto bem	4
Moro onde moro ...	4
Não tem bloco na rua	4 + 2
Não tem carnaval	4 + 2
Mas não saio de lá	4
Meu passarinho me canta a mais linda	5 + 2
Cantiga que há	4
Coisa linda vem do lado de lá	4
Coisa linda vem do lado de lá Moro onde moro... (eu também moro...)	4
Uma casinha branca	2 + 3
No alto da serra	2
Um coqueiro do lado	2
Um cachorro magro amarrado	2 + 3
Um fogão de lenha, todo enfumaçado	2 + 3
É lá onde moro	4
Aonde não passa ninguém	1 + 4
É lá que eu vivo sem guerra	2 + 3 + 4
É lá que eu me sinto bem	2 + 3 + 4

As a listening task, PLLs can identify unique instruments (e.g., cuíca), analyze the strategic use of specific voices (e.g., chorus, female, etc.), and describe the rhythm that embodies traditional samba. After listening, learners can share their responses in small groups and analyze the cultural implications of Agepê's solo start to the song that features no instruments or chorus. Agepê's symbolic use and cultural underpinnings of the chorus and female voice resonate throughout the song as if they are accompaniments to the singer's solitude in an uplifting manner.

Examples of post-listening activities include a class discussion that enables learners to share their responses to the listening activities and apply one or all of the five areas to context in written form. In this practical contextualization written activity, each PLL can construct their own song using concepts from the five areas examined in the song that draws upon a self-reflection of their lifestyles.

Following this, learners can critically reflect on Agepê's perspectives on life in the *campo* first in written form and next in small groups. These intercultural tasks allow learners to move from an ethnocentric point to self-reflect on their communities and critically examine one representation of human experiences in the *campo*.

Brazil's modern electronic and samba blend is prevalent in Luciano Nakata Albuquerque's music, whose stage name is Curumin, a name he selected to reflect both his diverse background and Brazil's history (Six Degree Records, 2013). Of Spanish and Japanese parents, his multicultural heritage represents the diversity of Brazilian realities and is expressively depicted throughout his music. Curumin's (2008) song "Compacto" reflects an eclectic meshing of electric and raw sounds with culturally and linguistically rich lyrics.

As illustrated in an excerpt of the lyrics below, “Compacto” exhibits an array of concepts and verbs. Following the excerpt, pedagogical examples of cultural contextualization tasks are presented to direct learners’ attention to the specific language forms and its cultural implications.

Curumin’s (2008) “Compacto”

Mais um dia besta
Aqui no meu mocó
Quero fazer contato
Engrossar o caldo do mocotó
Descarregar direto pro oco da cabeça
Neurônios descontrolados
É nós e tá ligado
Então deixa cair

Compacto que eu só quero ouvir
Compacto sossegado
Compacto um fino um raro
Compacto que eu só quero ouvir
Compacto então eu só quero ouvir
Compacto então deixa cair
Compacto sossegadinho
Compacto em eletricidade
Compacto

Sentir a raiz crescer sob seus pés
Deixar a tampa vazia abrir
É nós e bote fé
Então deixa cair

Compacto que eu só quero ouvir
Compacto sossegado
Compacto no meu canto no meu lado
Compacto um fino um raro
Compacto que eu só quero ouvir
Compacto então deixa cair
Compacto que eu só quero ouvir
Compacto no meu canto no meu lado
Compacto quietinho sossegado
Compacto

Estamos prontos para junta-los
E cantar uma pequena rotina em estilo livre
Tudo isso ao som da música
Use somente sua imaginação

E faça o que lhe faz sentir bem
Se você tiver algum problema
Não fique desencorajado
Simplesmente volte ao início do corte
E comece novamente

For cultural contextualization of linguistic forms, learners can conduct inquiry-based research to identify key terms in the song that reflect distinct Brazilian realities. For example, learners can initiate inquiry-based learning by researching the artist's background to gain a deeper understanding of multiculturalism in Brazil. Following this, learners can research the concept *mocotó* (e.g., origin, ingredients, etc.). This inquiry-based research promotes development of critical thinking, linguistic, and cultural skills.

Depending on the course level, the next task is to identify and examine the following two aspects of the song:

- 1) New concepts and their corresponding cultural significances (e.g., mocó, mocotó, etc.)
- 2) Imperative command formations (e.g., deixa, faça, volte, etc.)

Practical contextualization tasks for “Compacto” include small group activities that enable learners to analyze the two aspects and construct a creative narration (e.g., poem, comic strip, etc.). Each narration should include the new concepts and at least four imperative commands. After constructing their narratives, each group can share their creative pieces with the class. These inquiry-based learning and practical contextualization tasks allow each learner to become active participants.

Similar to Agepê's solo entrance in “Moro onde não mora ninguém”, Zeca Baleiro's (1997) “Mamãe Oxum” begins with a solo introduction that segues into a dramatic pulsating beat. “Mamãe Oxum” allows PLLs to examine Afro-Brazilian diversities. These are depicted in this song through powerful voice, rhythm, and verse with direct references to Mamãe Oxum of the Candomblé religion and unique Afro-Brazilian sounds.

As a pre-listening activity, PLLs can identify and examine the following two areas:

- 1) New concepts and their cultural/regional significances (e.g., Oxum, cachoeira, beira, areia, maré, etc.)
- 2) Irregular and regular preterit verbs (e.g., vi, se animou, etc.)

The example below provides a review of PLLs' pre-listening task. In this cultural contextualization written task, students label each verse using the two areas and include concrete examples presented in “Mamãe Oxum”.

Zeca Baleiro's (1997) “Mamãe Oxum”	Corresponding area
Eu vi mamãe Oxum na cachoeira	1 + 2
Sentada na beira do rio	1

Colhendo lírio lírio lê	1
Colhendo lírio lírio lá	1
Colhendo lírio	1
Pra enfeitar o seu congá (X2)	1
Ê areia do mar, o céu serena	1
Ê areia do mar, céu se animou	1 + 2
Na areia do mar maré areja	1
Maré cheia e mar marejou	1 + 2

In reference to the first area, PLLs can work in small groups to critically examine the concepts *mamãe Oxum*, *lírio*, *congá*, and *areia do mar* as representations of Candomblé rituals and physical context (e.g., *areia do mar*). This cultural contextualization task enables learners to negotiate meaning of new concepts within the distinct context reflected in the song.

For a practical contextualization task, each small group can assess the cultural implications of the concepts and apply the concepts to the second area, since they are culturally connected and realized in Candomblé performances and traditions. These assessment and application tasks serve to foster communicative exchanges that enable each learner to actively apply concepts to actions that are presented in the song to reflect a cultural situation.

In a final task, each PLL can write reflections on the cultural and linguistic meanings of the key concepts and how “Mamãe Oxum” transports them to the multicultural Brazilian realities and African ancestral roots.

As each song exhibits, the artists reveal unique cultural and linguistic diversities of Brazil. Bringing language to life using songs can promote collaboration and facilitate intercultural learning.

Conclusion

Music can function as an intercultural approach to language learning that enables learners to connect form (L-Mode) to content (R-Mode). The instructional techniques reviewed demonstrate innovative bimodal constructs that integrate intercultural approaches to language learning. Each task examined allows learners to gain deeper linguistic and cultural understandings through critical analyses of authentic resources. Music is one way to incorporate more than novel linguistic input; it offers an intercultural approach that can actively engage learners in making meaningful connections.

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