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Implementing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy Through the Use of Music in the ESL
Classroom

by

Libby Arnosti

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

May 2022

Primary Advisor: Jennifer Carlson
Content Expert: Ben Creagh
Peer Reviewer: Laura Duke

To my grandmothers, Constance Fish Arnosti and Caroline Rose Malde. Both teachers, they taught me to believe in the importance of justice and joy in the classroom. I also want to thank my parents, Meg Malde Arnosti and Don Arnosti, and my life partner, Erik Hemstad, whose unwavering support made this achievement possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

This paper introduces a unit plan for English as a Second Language (ESL) students that promotes the use of music as both a teaching tool and as a means of implementing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in the secondary classroom. The purpose of this work is to leverage the documented benefits of the use of music in language instruction (Berman, 2014; Bjorklund, 2002; Cooper, 2011; Ragsdale, 2017; Talada, 2015) and the value of cultural representation and student choice in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2014; Paris, 2017; Gay, 2002). The primary research question guiding this work is: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* Chapter 1 provides the context for my interest in these questions. I discuss the role of music in my own learning and outline some anecdotes from my personal language-learning journey as an elementary school student in Argentina. I connect my memories and personal experiences to the three areas of research that I unite through this project.

Love of Music

Since I was very young, I have loved music. I find myself instantly keyed into whatever song is playing as I navigate department stores, elevators, classrooms, the music coming through my own headphones or the radio. Single words or phrases from conversations, billboards, or reading can trigger earworms that last hours. I hum songs without realizing that I am doing it. Instruments of all kinds have provided a framework for me to learn how to make new sounds and familiar tunes alike come to life. I am

captivated by the sounds they make. If a song begins to play in my vicinity, I'm pulled into its energy, whether it's bubbly, moody, intense, or reflective. It affects my whole body. The lyrics seep into my mind without me realizing it, cycling over and over in my brain until I know every word. As I have grown older, I have realized that I may be particularly attuned to music relative to many others around me. But the more significant realization I have made is that a connection to music in some form is universal to the human experience.

Human Connection to Music

The relationship that people have to music is undeniable. Humans are hardwired to seek out patterns in the world, to make sense of visual and auditory constellations by finding patterns within them (Weissman, 2010). Significant correlations between research participants' cardiorespiratory responses and the music they are listening to have even been documented (Bernardi et al., 2009). Music is beat-based, providing the patterns our brains seek out, giving us a rhythmic and sonic template for our bodies to align with. It also carries the richness that has evolved through thousands of years of musical traditions; culture, place, history, pain, and love. Music is an incredible tool and natural means by which people learn about and engage with the world around them. It is no accident that many of the building blocks for early language acquisition in small children are delivered through song. Through music, we learn information, shape experiences, and form important parts of our identities. People habitually list artists' names, songs, or genres of music as a way to articulate who they are. Just as food is culture, so is music. It connotes values, attitudes, and life experiences. The music we listen to most intentionally

and hold the dearest often says much about our identities in the world. This is certainly true for me.

Identity in Music

During my childhood as I grew older, I started noticing that what I learned through music stayed with me much longer than any facts I had rote memorized. In second grade, we learned the 50 States Song, in which singers list all 50 states in alphabetical order. Twenty-two years later, I can still comfortably sing the song in its entirety, and can therefore name all 50 states in alphabetical order – a skill that has come in handy many times throughout my life. Folk songs that I sang with my family as a child still reside in my head, where I occasionally take them out, turn them over, and probe their meanings, often realizing that I now understand their words in a way I hadn't previously. I notice myself periodically pulling out facts about dates and places and people from songs I memorized when I was young. The musical Hamilton has increased my long-term knowledge about our nation's founding fathers, and about the historical time period they lived in, tenfold compared to what I retained from reading history books.

When my family moved to Argentina, I had just finished third grade and knew just a few words and phrases in Spanish. One of my first purchases after our arrival in Mendoza was a Spanish-language Shakira tape, which I listened to repeatedly. At the time, I knew very few of the words whose sounds I memorized from that tape, but throughout the year we lived in South America, I noticed myself understanding more and more of what I was saying as I sang along. Those songs, along with other Spanish-language music I listened to during that year, gave me an access point into both the Spanish language and culture from which the music was born. My relationship with

that music, especially once returning to the United States in fifth grade, became very meaningful to the part of my identity that was formed during our time in Argentina.

Music in The Language Classroom

Music and language share many attributes that lend themselves to each other as learning tools: pitch, rhythm and phrases are important features of both (Berman, 2014). Familiarity with these concepts and others in the realm of music can give learners a significantly improved ability to translate this understanding to language.

As a teacher now, I remember how important Schoolhouse Rock songs, The Quadratic Formula Song, The 50 States Song, German-language rhythms and ditties, and countless other educational songs were to my own learning growing up. This narrative of music as central to learning has heavily informed my work as an early-elementary school Spanish teacher, where I created curricula for K-3 language learners that heavily utilized the power of song. I embedded foundational vocabulary in song and rhythm and repeated each of the songs many times with my students. This gave a learning community the ability to pull what we need from the information those songs contain. Once my students knew a song by memory, I found that all I needed to do was prompt them by singing a bit of the relevant song to help them remember a word or piece of information they were trying to recall during class. In this way – by getting very young students to memorize a huge number of Spanish words and phrases in song (some of which they do not yet understand) – I was able to give learners lifelong access to the language that those songs carry with them, the same way that I experienced when I was a young language learner.

As I became a language teacher for students learning English, I wanted to transfer the utility of this kind of song learning into my classroom. I was curious about the impact

of building in opportunities for older students to learn by way of sharing their own music. I believed that this practice could create meaningful musical learning experiences that also brought into play the lived personal and cultural identities of all of the students in the classroom community. By sharing music that is important to them, and by learning from the music of peers, students may be able to gain access to a broader range of cultures, all while leveraging it to advance their language skills.

Rationale

Engaging with music has great potential for being part of the learning process in a classroom setting. My own personal experiences as a young person and a learner have reinforced this concept many times over, and I have found success in building from the power of song in my own teaching. Now as a high school ESL educator, I have found myself seeking meaningful, responsive curriculum that unites student interests with music – something that, as described in this chapter, has greatly impacted my own educational journey both as a student and as a teacher. It is my hope that a unit such as the one developed in this project, crafted with these considerations in mind, could become a cornerstone of a culturally inclusive and responsive classroom.

Summary

In Chapter 2, I lay the foundation for this work by reviewing the neurobiological relationship that humans have with music, the sociocultural significance of music in the identity formation of adolescents, and the guiding philosophy of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.

CHAPTER TWO

This chapter investigates the literature that lies at the intersection of music and the relationship that humans have with it, the sociocultural significance of music in the identity formation of adolescents, and the guiding principles of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. The central question directing this work was: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* This question loosely breaks down into two prongs: the neurobiological relationship that humans have with music that gives it great power as a learning tool for the brain, and the sociocultural significance of music in the identity formation of adolescents.

This chapter explores first the research on the nature and importance of the relationship between humans and music on a neurobiological level. Second, the sociocultural significance of music in identity formation is unpacked. This chapter also provides an overview of the evolution of the concept of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in American classrooms. The accompanying unit plan unites these areas of research in practice. It serves as a broadly useful four-week unit plan that can be implemented in high school ESL classrooms to help facilitate the inclusion of culturally and linguistically meaningful musical learning experiences for English learners.

Music and Stress Patterns, Learning Styles, Memory, and Emotion

Below are outlined three different approaches to analyzing music that help identify its utility in the process of language acquisition. All have great potential for use in the classroom as they each unpack a different element of language at the phonological, word, and discourse levels.

Vocabulary and Stress Patterns

Language and music have common core components in pitch, intonation, rhythm. Spoken language and music also are structurally similar, both relying on phrases that are made up of smaller parts – individual words and individual notes – which work together to create meaning. Although English is not a tonal language, it is a stress-controlled language, meaning that stress placed on different parts of words and phrases has a measurable impact on a person’s ability to be understood by other English speakers (Haasch, 2016). This aspect of language can be difficult to master for non-native speakers of English. However, the use of English-language music can help students hear how native speakers combine words and phrases, where stress is placed, and how natural pronunciation can sound different than academic English pronunciation (Berman, 2014).

The relationship between lyrical music and language is strong and full of opportunities for classroom use. Because of the similarities between the two, and the elements they have in common, music can be a conduit by which students gain concrete academic skills. The following subsection will discuss ways that this learning can be made accessible to all students.

Learning Styles

The use of music in the ESL classroom has many benefits, one of which is that it can serve students with many diverse learning styles. In Gardner’s 1983 theory of multiple intelligences, the influential educational researcher actually identified musical intelligence as one of the seven forms of intelligence, the others being linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Gardner, 1983, 2016; Mokhtar, Majid & Foo, 2008). Gardner’s research gave way to a

new body of research devoted to defining different learning styles, and although today there are many theories of learning styles, it is clear that there are a variety of ways to define learners' particular skill sets in acquiring new learning. A few commonly accepted learning styles include aural (auditory), visual, and kinesthetic (Bjorklund, 2002).

An instructor can leverage the learning styles of their diverse group of students in many ways through music: a song can be played or sung repeatedly, appealing to the aural learner; lyrics can be studied on paper, appealing to visual learners; and games and interactive activities can be designed around vocabulary, intonation patterns and phrases found in the musical piece, which can draw in kinesthetic learners (Bjorklund, 2002). By leveraging this knowledge, songs can become sources of creative linguistic expression through a variety of classroom activities.

By finding ways for all learners to engage with music as a way of gaining academic skills, educators can tap into a deep well: the scientific connection between our brains and music. The relationship that humans have with music is emotional and chemical, and therefore very powerful, as discussed in the following subsection.

Memory and Emotion

Listening to and engaging with music has been shown to have a documented impact on the human brain and its emotions. Levitin (2007) details the neuroscientific relationship our brains have with music in great detail. One finding is that there is an interwoven relationship between the hippocampus, a central memory-keeper, and the amygdala, the emotional sphere in the brain. When our brains hold onto music, emotions are triggered as well (Levitin, 2007, p. 166). Therefore, the relationships that people have

with music they love and remember are laced with deep emotions. Tapping into this memory-emotion connection can be hugely beneficial to students in the classroom.

In a small 2006 study, Ha researched the impact that the use of music had on the students' motivation to read and their ability to retell stories they had studied. In the study, students read stories such as *Peter and the Wolf* that were accompanied by music. The students engaged in discussions about what different feelings were evoked by the pieces of music that were used to help tell the story, and at the end of the study were asked to retell the story. Ha (2006) found that all students improved their ability to retell stories in which music was used, and as the study progressed Ha noticed that their motivation to read also increased.

Although there may be little empirical evidence to support the idea that incorporating music directly causes an increase in student motivation, there is much evidence that music directly influences other contributing effects of strong classroom performance. For example, as Levitin (2007) noted, listening to music evokes positive emotions in the brain. Additionally, Krashen's research (1982) resulted in the creation of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which addresses the environmental and personal needs of students that help them keep their affective filter low. Krashen uses the term affective filter to describe the things that can impede a student's ability to be fully available as a learner in a classroom. According to his theory, negative emotions and lack of motivation are both factors that raise a student's affective filter, making it difficult for them to learn. Krashen (as cited in Talada, 2015) asserts that students who have self-confidence, are not anxious, and are motivated will have a low affective filter and be more successful learners. It has also been concluded by a variety of researchers that the use of music in

the classroom lowers stress and is fun and enjoyable for most students (Claerr & Gargan, 1984; Coe, 1972; Levitin, 2006).

Summary

All of these related findings support the use of music as something that is likely to benefit student motivation and overall well-being in the classroom. Beyond lowering affective filters and creating positive emotions, music is something that can unite students and create community within the classroom. The following subsection unpacks research about the impact that music can have on community-building and cultural identity formation.

The Sociocultural Significance of Music in Identity Formation

As young people become adolescents, the role of music often becomes increasingly important as one way to define identity. Educators may choose to recognize and investigate this connection between music and the people their students are becoming. Recognizing music as integral to the identity formation of adolescents grants educators the opportunity to center the diverse and developing cultural identities of their students in the classroom. In doing so, they invite students to engage in meaningful simultaneous exploration, both of their developing sense of self and of language.

Community, Identity and Culture

Around the time of adolescence, or even before, music often becomes a significant part of a person's identity and therefore an important signifier of the cultures that person feels a part of (Perkins, 2018). The relevance of music in the personal and cultural lives of students may provide educators an opportunity to build from this and create meaningful connections. It may also, conversely, create an opportunity for

educators to inadvertently alienate and distance their students if mishandled. Wulf (as cited in Berman, 2014), an associate professor of linguistics at George Mason University, adds, “Music is an aspect of a society’s culture, and culture is an indelible part of language” (p. 38).

Paris et. al. (2017) extrapolate widely the cultural power that educators have within the classroom. The authors note that an “important tenet regarding cultural membership is that people always belong to multiple cultural communities. Communities defined by ethnicity are just one source of community identification” (Paris et. al., 2017, p. 267). They also point out that music is another such source of community identification. Individual students may culturally identify more or less strongly with the practices their parents were raised with, with a particular kind of music, or with a language.

Where there exists great cultural diversity in the classroom there should be great musical diversity represented within it, too. Because music carries with it such powerful cultural meaning, a meaningful way to build an inclusive classroom culture that incorporates music is to invite students to contribute to their own learning by choosing and studying music that resonates with them and represents their own identity. This is a particularly salient point given that as of 2017-2018 statistics collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 80% of all educators in the United States were white, and 76% were women (NCES, 2021). While these are just two identity markers, these statistics indicate the racial and gender homogeneity of the teaching workforce in the United States; contrast this with the U.S. student population, which continues to get increasingly diverse. From 2001 to 2020, the overall percentage of students of color

enrolled in American public schools increased from 38 percent to more than 55 percent (NCES, 2021). In 2019, over 25 million students representing many dozens of different ethnicities were enrolled in America's public schools (ACS, 2019). It is clear there is a stark contrast between the diversity represented in the nation's public school students and the educators that provide them with academic instruction. Educators alone cannot be responsible for creating or finding curricula that accurately represent the multiple and complex cultural identities of their particular students each year. However, if educators recognize music as a direct representation of culture, then they will be more likely to see the potential in developing culturally inclusive teaching practices – for example, creating an opportunity for students to incorporate their own musical identities into their classroom through academic work.

The following section outlines research that supports the use of this kind of inclusive teaching practice, framed by the theory of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. This framework has paved the way for years for educators to engage pedagogically with culturally inclusive teaching practices.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In the 1990s, Ladson-Billings began a landmark movement towards reshaping critical pedagogy. In response to the relative academic underachievement of Black students as compared to their white peers, Ladson-Billings (1990), said that “instead of asking what was wrong with African American learners, I dared to ask what was right with these students and what happened in the classrooms of educators who seemed to experience pedagogical success with them” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). What resulted from that epistemological question was her now-famous theory of Culturally Relevant

Pedagogy, or CRP. Within the theory, three domains were outlined that describe a culturally relevant classroom: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (1990) defined academic success as the intellectual growth that students demonstrated resulting from their classroom experiences. Cultural competence was defined as the ability to enable students to appreciate and celebrate their own cultures while also learning about at least one other culture; finally, she defined sociopolitical consciousness as the ability to apply learning to real-world situations in ways that create change (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This framework shaped a new way for educators to approach the diverse populations of students in their classrooms, to challenge the norms within the field of teaching in the United States, and to give space for students' cultures to be more meaningfully part of the fabric of the classroom.

Over the course of decades, many more researchers added to Ladson-Billings' (1990, 1995) epistemological foundation as culturally relevant pedagogy took hold and was adopted more widely. Eventually, it evolved along with the tapestry of the educational landscape in the United States. In 2012, educational scholar Paris introduced an updated concept, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, or CSP, which highlights the need for schools to be a place where all represented cultures are not only relevant but are also actively sustained (Paris, 2017). As Paris et. al. (2017) wrote, "CSP explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color" (Paris, 2017, p. 5). Paris goes on to note the extreme demographic shift in the student population of the United States since Ladson-Billings (1990) first published her work on CRP. In 1970, 80% of students nationwide were white; by 2014, over half were students of color. This change calls for the continued evolution of the paradigm that frames our

pedagogy, particularly as the teaching population in the United States underwent no such demographic shift and remained steadfastly very white (NCES, 2021).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is a framework for teaching that articulates the need for the complex identities of students to be continually integrated into the life of a classroom. Paris et. al. (2017) provides a guiding paradigm for educators who see their pedagogical mission as one that is inherently inclusive of students' identities and cultures. This approach is essential to answering the question: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* The following subsection grounds the framework of CSP in tangible steps that educators can take. It specifically discusses how multicultural teacher education is essential to being a culturally sustaining educator.

Cultural Scaffolding

Gay (2000, 2018) draws from research to bring to light the many ways that educators must prepare and educate themselves in order to truly be responsive or – as Paris has since articulated it – culturally sustaining. In each ESL classroom there are students who come from many different cultural traditions and norms, and being educated on some of these is the first step to truly building an inclusive classroom environment. Gay (2000) states that “*Culturally responsive teaching* is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). As it is unreasonable to teach what you do not know, educators must do the work of equipping themselves with knowledge. Gay (2000) gives such examples as understanding which cultures give priority to communal living and problem-solving, the different cultural considerations for appropriate

child-adult interactions, and what the gender role associations might be within different cultures. These specific examples bring to light such broad topics as communication styles, behavior norms, signs of respect, and daily task management methodologies, all of which may be present in daily classroom life.

Gay (2000, 2018) comments on the importance of cultural scaffolding, which describes the process of using your own cultural experiences to broaden intellectual horizons and academic achievement. This is something all students may naturally do at school, but for many white students, the curriculum is designed around their cultural experience and is therefore easily accessible to them (Peters, 2015). For many nonwhite students, then, the scaffolding that supports their cultural experiences may often be missing, and they may be forced to build their learning off of experiences they do not relate to.

In order to enable all students to leverage their own cultural scaffolding in the classroom, therefore connecting their prior knowledge to new knowledge, it is first necessary to disrupt the pattern of curricular practices that center on white cultural experiences. The opportunity for all students to be represented in their classroom is a primary rationale for the creation of this curriculum.

Identity and Music

One core tenet of culture that Paris et. al. (2017) discusses the extreme importance of language in the identity formation of young people. Paris et. al. (2017) state, “the linguistic repertoires of youth of color must be sustained in educational contexts because language is a crucial form of sustenance in its own right, providing the basis for young people’s complex identities as well as their social agency” (p. 44). This is yet another

reminder that language, the topic at hand for all ESL educators and students, carries with it enormous cultural weight.

A doctoral study was conducted by Perkins (2018) where 14 adolescent students and two music educators were studied and interviewed over the duration of 3 months. The study found that students experience exclusion and disempowerment when the musical epistemology – the values, norms and ways of knowing music – of their teacher did not align with their own. Perkins (2018) noted that most educators in the U.S. grew up with the *bel canto* vocal tradition, a Eurocentric vocal style that creates an exclusive musical paradigm and establishes a system of right and wrong ways to sing and hear music. The fact of *bel canto* being such a pervasive foundation for music instruction in the United States creates a system ripe for excluding students whose musical traditions and value systems differ from its philosophy. Additionally, the history of *bel canto* has been found to be deeply problematic: South African music scholar Grant Olwage traced the history of *bel canto* to 19th-century colonialism (Olwage, 2004). Ultimately, because of its colonial roots and exclusionary paradigm, the use of *bel canto* as a de facto standard for learning and practicing music in schools can negatively impact students, their relationship, and their self-association with music (Joyce, 2003).

In pursuit of examples of educators trying to address and remedy this issue, Perkins (2018) identified a few studies in which CRP was incorporated into music education. One was a study conducted by Shaw (2016), who studied a choir with a diverse student population and a choir director who, in Shaw's words, "rejected the notion of a single ideal choral sound, and his openness toward multiple valid ways of singing was mirrored in his students' varied vocal models" (Shaw, 2016, p. 64). Through

detailed interviews with student participants, Shaw learned about each student's musical identity and their vocal models – the standard or example of singing representing a particular vocal style – and found that they overwhelmingly reflected the cultural heritage of the student's families and their own lived cultural experiences.

In light of the study's findings, Shaw (2016) noted that the broad education of many different vocal styles and approaches to performance allowed students in the choir to be flexible and well-versed in the legitimacy of many different music traditions. Shaw wrote that "CRP fostered accommodation without assimilation, allowing students to navigate organizational and societal opportunity structures while continuing to identify with their culture(s) of reference" (p. 61). He also found that this approach to music education forged strong "pedagogical bridges" between the home lives and school lives of the children in the choir, which served to further strengthen the developing cultural identities of the students and their relationship with music.

Conclusion

This chapter serves as a review of the literature at the intersection of music, ESL, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in order to help answer the overarching question: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* In addressing this question, this chapter delved into the innate value of music in the sphere of education as it relates to our brains' function, the importance of music in culture, the role that music plays in adolescent identity formation, and the power that it thus has as a tool for learning. It briefly details the history of the movement of how Culturally Responsive Pedagogy morphed into Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, and showed examples of what these

practices look like when implemented in a musical setting. This research also highlighted the stark cultural contrasts that often exist between educators in the U.S. and the English learners they are working with, which led to an examination of the importance of educators broadening their understandings of what it means to inclusively incorporate music into the classroom.

This research explored examples of educators who were incorporating music and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy into their instruction in effective and successful ways. But there are a few meaningful gaps in available research, which is where this project takes hold: first, the research did not identify what it looks like when music that represents students' cultures is incorporated into an ESL classroom. There have been studies conducted in a variety of settings, but none in which an ESL classroom incorporated music through culturally sustaining pedagogy. Second, there was a lack of research on examples of music incorporated in any middle and secondary school classrooms that were not music classes. And third, although there exist researched examples of educators choosing culturally diverse music to incorporate into lessons, there is an absence of research on incorporating student choice in the music selection. The research does not articulate a classroom experience in which an ESL teacher steps aside to allow students to choose music as an educational tool that represents them and their own lived identity. These are the gaps in the research that this project aims to fill.

Preview

Chapter 3 maps out a unit plan that can be utilized at the high school level to address the central question: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL*

classroom? It is aimed at educators who want to adopt the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy for their work and who are seeking ways to motivate, include and enliven their students' engagement with their learning.

CHAPTER THREE

The core research question of this capstone project was: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* Chapter 3 articulates the purpose and target audience of this project: a unit plan to implement with high school English learners that centers the study of student-selected music as part of the language acquisition process. A referenced rationale is presented as a basis for creating this unit that describes how it can help teachers implement culturally sustaining practices through the use of music in their classrooms. The goal of the curriculum is to equip educators with a foundation of knowledge of the value of music in school, as well as concrete strategies for incorporating music in content lessons in a way that centers students. This goal is expanded upon later in this chapter, along with the process used to create the unit plan. Finally, there is a description of the format of the unit plan, including a description of how the curriculum can be implemented. For the purposes of this project, a primary guiding pedagogical theory throughout is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Gay, 2002).

The following sections identify the target audience for this curriculum, the rationale for creating the unit plan, its goal, and the curriculum overview. The chapter begins by identifying who could use this curriculum.

Target Audience

The target audience for this curriculum is high school English learners. The curriculum is written for educators to implement in their classes, implementing it in

whatever way is accessible and engaging for their particular group of students. This curriculum has been designed as a four-week unit plan, assuming the class meets daily for 45 minutes. The implementation is adaptable to the different class time constraints found across the spectrum of ESL teaching circumstances. As the intended user is a teacher of high-school-level English learners, it is also assumed that the educator using the curriculum has experience working with a variety of language instruction methods and is generally familiar with working with ESL curricula. It is not assumed that the educator would be a proficient music instructor or have any experience as a music educator.

By adopting this unit plan, more teachers may feel empowered to leverage the power of music in an effort to achieve greater student learning, engagement and inclusion. The rationale for this curriculum is detailed below.

Rationale

There are two parts to the rationale for this capstone. First, the inclusion of music in the language classroom at the secondary level is examined. Second, the importance of placing students at the helm of the music selection is articulated.

Music in the Language Classroom

As described in Chapter 1, music has a documented emotional impact on the human brain. The working relationship between memory, emotion and music has enormous potential for academic learning. As Krashen (1988) and Talada (2015) and many other researchers (Claerr & Gargan, 1984; Coe, 1972; Levitin, 2006) have found, the use of music in the classroom lowers students' stress and anxiety and boosts confidence. Though there is significant research on the use of music in the process of learning, largely through studies done in conjunction with music educators or elementary

school educators, one gap found in the research was in the area of music incorporation in the middle and secondary school grade levels. The positive connections between music and low stress, and between memory and emotion, are not shown to be age or content-specific. However, the use of music is largely seen with young children or in designated music classes. Therefore, this research falls in an area of need: finding a way to leverage the potential for music to enhance learning in the high school ESL classroom.

One key element of harnessing this positive predisposition toward music is methodology, which is articulated further in the following section about the importance of student choice.

Student Choice

After an examination of the research, there was found to be a distinct absence of examples of students being granted autonomy over the musical choices used in their classrooms. Even in the Shaw (2016) study in which a teacher was studied who drew heavily from culturally sustaining practices and made significant efforts to choose music that his students could relate to culturally and personally, the students themselves played no role in selecting music to study and practice in class. As noted in Chapter Two, adolescence is a time in life when young people begin to strongly identify themselves in part by way of the music they listen to and relate to (Perkins, 2018). Through music, young people may recognize themselves or shape developing sides of themselves. Music preferences may reflect the life experiences of the listeners who love it, be a reflection of the social life of the listener, or be related to their cultural heritage.

Because the music that feels most meaningful to a given ESL student may not come from their family's cultural heritage, it can be difficult for an educator to accurately

predict on behalf of their students what music might resonate most deeply and feel most relatable to them. By choosing music for their students based on representing the cultural heritage of their families, as was observed in the study conducted by Shaw (2016), a teacher may be relying on their own biases and assumptions about what students relate to, which may or may not be accurate. To avoid this outcome and to achieve the curricular goal of the unit, the element of student choice is essential when music is incorporated as part of an inclusive teaching practice. This curricular goal is further expanded upon below.

Goals, Overview and Writing Timeline

The goal of this capstone was to develop a unit plan that serves teachers working with high school ESL students who wish to expand their capabilities by incorporating the use of music into their practice in a way that is responsive, student-centered and culturally sustaining. In it, there are supports for educators, including scaffolds that can be used in conjunction with lessons, ideas for how to adapt the curriculum to students at varying English proficiency levels, and a list of materials.

The four-week unit begins by exploring some of the common concepts and vocabulary to both music and language. Students will study concepts that will help them recognize and articulate elements of language found in lyrical music, and utilize vocabulary such as *pitch*, *mood*, *phrase* and *line*. Students will study each concept as it functions in the English language before applying their learning to analyze their own chosen songs. The unit hinges on the educator choosing example pieces of music with which to model concepts and exercises. Using these examples throughout the unit, the educator will demonstrate methods of analysis that incorporate language skills spanning

the four modes of communication: speaking, listening, reading and writing. The educator will facilitate a structured practice through large-group and short partner activities to help each student prepare to apply their learning independently. By the end of the unit, students will have completed creative summative projects in which they share the meaning of the song to them personally through video, visual art, or writing, and which they will present along with their text analysis. The analysis is described in greater detail below.

Each student will complete a final project as a summative Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA), which culminates at the end of the unit. The final project includes an in-class presentation in which the student presents the language analysis that they completed as part of the unit's areas of study. Each student will also spend the final week of the unit developing a creative interpretation of the song that reflects its mood and the meaning of the song to them personally. Students will complete these projects in accordance with the language objectives presented in the lesson plans, using language appropriate for their respective WIDA level expectations. In the final days of the unit, the whole class will have the opportunity to listen to and experience the musical selections of other students. The unit is described in greater detail in the following section.

Curriculum Overview

The first week of this unit plan includes a study of music and its relationship to identity, memory, and emotion. Beginning with identity, the instructor will guide students through a series of activities and discussions that help them begin to articulate the music that they listen to, and how it relates to their cultural identity and their emerging personal identity. This week draws from the role of music in culture (Berman, 2014; Perkins,

2018). It is informed foundationally by Paris (2017) and his idea of multiple cultural identities.

The second week of the unit launches students into an analysis of syllable stress, the first language feature that students will study in this unit. Students will learn to identify syllable stress within words, and word stress within phrases. They will analyze their chosen song for syllable or word stress, and demonstrate an understanding of the concept through their analysis. This section of the unit draws from understandings about the connection between music and the brain (Levitin, 2006) and the vocabulary of music that is relevant to language learning.

The third week of the unit introduces students to a study of verbs and verb tenses. Students begin the week by learning to identify verbs as a part of speech, developing an initial understanding of present, past and future tenses. They then learn about commonly found applications in writing for each of the three tenses. They will apply this knowledge as they analyze their song for its use of verb tense, making inferences about the function of the verbs within the lyrics of the song.

The fourth week of the unit introduces mood. Studying this literary feature helps students begin to create physical representations of the feeling created within songs. By studying mood through music during the week, students are prepared to work independently on their own creative representations of their songs during the final week of the unit. During the final week, students have time to work independently on creative projects that demonstrate the meaning of their connection to their chosen song, and to finalize their analysis. At the end of the week, students spend the final two days presenting their projects to the class.

Timeframe

It was my goal to write this curriculum over the course of the spring semester, from February through April of 2022. As the unit is loosely designed to have four distinct weeks, I broke up my writing into four time periods. My first step was to complete a rough draft of the whole unit plan, in order to create a full scope of the project before honing the details. As such, I spent the first few weeks editing Chapters 1-3 before completing a rough draft of the unit. By the beginning of April, I produced a full draft of the unit, after which, with feedback from advisors and peer readers, I spent a week completing revisions and edits before submitting my final capstone during the third week of April, 2022.

Conclusion

This chapter has described how the research conducted on both the neuroscientific and sociocultural significance of music to adolescents, guided by the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, can inform a unit plan designed for high school English learners. The unit merges these areas of research in a way that helps educators expand their pedagogical horizons and be more inclusive of students and their interests. This curriculum is an attempt to answer the question: *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum be developed that incorporates the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?*

It is my hope that this curriculum can be used to achieve positive impacts on both students and teachers alike. I hope, too, that it can be a gateway to further research and curriculum development that takes advantage of the great potential offered by the study of music in the language classroom at the secondary level, and that it can lead to the

design of more curricula that create space for student choice. This chapter has identified the target audience for this unit plan, the rationale, the goal, the curriculum overview, and the timeline of writing.

Chapter Four reviews the curriculum writing process. The full unit plan will be submitted separately, including the scope and sequence of the plan, lesson outlines, and activities and materials.

CHAPTER FOUR

As an educator, I am constantly seeking ways to incorporate joy, authentic connection, and student identity to promote learning in the classroom. I am also aware that as a white, female educator, I bring to my teaching certain assumptions and expectations that I may still be unconscious of but that influence the way that I teach. I am additionally aware that, particularly as an English as a Second Language teacher, my life experience is not the same as that of my students, all of whom come from varied backgrounds. Knowing that the field of teaching is a space dominated and designed by white people, I was very interested to see what curriculum could be designed that was truly inclusive of students and their complex identities, that disrupted what I perceived as a structured standard of whiteness within the classroom. I wanted to create a curriculum that made space, by design, to center the lived experiences of the students in the classroom.

With the realization that music could be a very effective anchor of all of these things, I found my way to the research question, *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* During the research and writing process, I developed a foundational understanding of the role that music plays in adolescent identity development and cultural identity, and the nature of its real potential as a central component of curriculum.

In this chapter, I will identify the key learnings from my writing process, outline the design of the project, articulate its implications for future research, explain the limitations of its implementation, and provide concluding statements about the project.

Key Learnings

In conducting my research, I immediately found that Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy was an effective philosophical guide for my process (Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2014; Paris, 2017). I also found strong evidence supporting the idea that the rich relationship humans have with music can be leveraged to great effect in the school environment (Bjorklund, 2002; Levitin, 2006; Ha, 2006). Although I did not find a total absence of examples of non-music educators implementing responsive curriculum featuring music (Ha, 2006), I was surprised to find in my research no examples of student choice being centered as a core part of these classroom experiences. As the philosophy of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy hinges so deeply on the importance of recognizing and making space for complex identities, I found this gap in research to be a notable one, where my research could reside. I found it exciting to find such a dearth in the research at the intersection of my particular areas of interest, because it meant that there was a place for my innovation in this academic body of knowledge.

Curriculum Design

The five-week unit plan was designed to facilitate learning about three different language features that can be found in lyrical music. It was intended to be implemented as a way for students to incorporate their own choice of music into their English-language learning. The unit was laid out in such a way as to help students build their

comprehension of these concepts incrementally, from the phonemic level to the discourse level.

Within the unit, each week of study was designed to unfold in a similar manner: each started with the introduction of the language feature of the week. During the first three days, students observe modeling by the educator, participate in large group, small-group, and partner activities to help solidify their conceptual and practical understanding of the language feature. Then, students were given the final two days of the week to apply their learning through their own analysis of their chosen song. In this way, the summative project is being constantly created by students throughout the unit as they slowly add to the sections within their song studies.

To accompany the unit plan found in Appendix A, I designed eight sample lessons outlining each first and fourth day of the first four weeks of study. The first two lessons were created as exemplars, and detail a step-by-step guide for the instructor to follow, including scripted teacher talk. All lessons include referenced materials such as handouts, videos, graphic organizers, and sample note sheets. These can be found in Appendix B in PDF form. Together, these materials provide a solid foundation on which to base classroom instruction for the unit.

As this unit is intended to be flexible in accommodating the language levels of students at WIDA levels 1-3, the precise implementation and pacing of the unit is up to the instructor. The resources and lessons provided in this project offer guidance that can be interpreted and expanded upon at the discretion of the instructor, given the specific needs of the group. Together, the unit plan, lesson plans, and accompanying resources

and rubrics provide a complete map of this unit that can be implemented with a wide variety of English-language learning groups.

Limitations

Although I attempted to craft this curriculum into one that could be implemented effectively in a variety of circumstances, there are some limitations worth noting. This five-week plan would work well with students in a standalone English as a Second Language class or English Language Arts class, but for instructors co-teaching in another content area, it could be difficult to implement as written. Additionally, there may be students for whom listening to music is forbidden as part of their religion or cultural practice – for example, some orthodox Sunni Muslims. For these students, this unit plan would not be appropriate. Finally, this unit plan would be difficult to implement with new-to-country students, as they may lack some of the foundational English-language skills to access instruction and learn the concepts using the timeline suggested in the unit.

Implications and Further Research

This project provides students in an ESL setting the opportunity to bring an authentic piece of their identities into the classroom. This possibility has great potential to positively impact students by centering something personally meaningful to each of them. This could have the effect of improving both learning outcomes and increasing each student's personal investment in their classroom community. This unit also delivers the message to students that their identities are integral to their learning, not separate from it. This is a crucial point to make, and one that I believe this unit does effectively, as each student builds from their own unique cultural scaffolding when working with and analyzing their chosen song.

From a teaching standpoint, I believe that this project can be used by instructors as a launching point for further student-choice based, culturally sustaining curricula, broadly used in ESL classrooms across the United States. This project helps demonstrate the possibilities for educators in the profession who want to adopt culturally sustaining teaching strategies and adapt their pedagogies to better fit their students. To share this work, I will make it available to my own school community, and plan to teach it in my own classroom. It will also be available on the Hamline digital commons to future access by graduate students.

I found that, as I wrote this project, I had many ideas along the way for other unit plans that could be written in a way that centers student choice. One of these ideas is the idea of adapting a similar unit to poetry. This unit would entail a similar central feature, in which students would select a piece of poetry for study that is meaningful to them personally or culturally. It is my hope that this music curriculum project will soon be among many pieces of research that investigate ways in which curriculum can be designed around students and their individual interests.

Conclusion

This project aimed to answer the question, *How can a culturally sustaining curriculum incorporate the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition in the ESL classroom?* At the conclusion of this project, I feel as if I have written an answer to the question in the form of my unit plan. Throughout the course of this project, my ability to crystallize culturally sustaining pedagogical ideas into concrete, applicable lesson developed greatly. I feel proud of the work I have completed, but more proud of the new way I have begun to approach my work in the classroom. In writing my

unit plan, I discovered that I am capable of tackling ambitious intellectual projects and planning instruction for my students that truly invites them to be at the center of their own learning. If I am honest, at the beginning of this project I was not at all sure *how* I would create a unit that incorporated the use of student-selected music into the process of English acquisition, only *that* I wanted to do that. Over the course of the past ten months working on finding an answer to *how* this could happen, I do feel as if I have grounded theories that guide my teaching philosophy in a practical, student-centered unit that I am excited to implement and share.

I also believe that there is a great amount of untapped potential for future work that strives to answer similar questions to this one. I feel driven to continue the work of investigating new and innovative ways to evolve my pedagogy as a teacher, and to create space for students to bring their authentic and full selves into my classroom. I want to continue finding opportunities for students to view their own interests, life experiences, cultures and stories as assets for language learning and for connection. By beginning this work with a project that centers music, building from its power as a bearer of identity, culture, and memory, I hope that I have planted the seed that there is great possibility for classroom learning experiences to be culturally sustaining and deeply meaningful for both instructors and for students.

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