

Chapter 16

Pop Lyrics and Mobile Language Learning: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Pop lyrics represent a rich, but underused resource in language teaching in both institutional and informal contexts. This is striking in view of analyses from the fields of motivational and cognitive psychology, didactics as well as linguistics, which all provide evidence for the inherent potential of pop lyrics. This paper will first take a closer look at arguments in favor of exploiting pop lyrics for learning purposes. Next, it will outline gateway steps and potential difficulties on the way toward using lyrics in a video/lyrics app tailored to the requirements of an informal, gamified and learner-centered setting. In conclusion, the authors suggest that pop lyrics can be used effectively to establish a connection to the world of the learner both within and beyond the language classroom. However, there remain a number of technical and methodological challenges that have to be overcome to create a fully adaptable and flexible framework for using lyrics in mobile-assisted language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Even though pop culture surrounds all of us on a daily basis (some would even say it is hard to avoid), surprisingly few attempts have been undertaken in mainstream English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts to consistently exploit the inherent potential of arguably the most prototypical and widespread pop culture manifestation – pop music and its lyrics – for the purposes of (English) language learning

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7663-1.ch016

(Langeland, 2013). For instance, in a large-scale meta-analysis, Summer (2011) has shown that even though song-based activities can be found in most state-of-the-art EFL textbooks, they are often restricted to task types like “Listen to the song. What is it about?” and potential discussion topics related to the content of the lyrics. Thus, the potential for other activity types (e.g. study of grammatical structures, study of linguistic variation, issues of language awareness, etc.) is left wholly unexploited. Their underused and “additional activity” status (especially in view of the variety and abundance of other text- and grammar-related sections) is further illustrated by their (end-of-unit) position in the textbooks. This marginalized state of lyrics-based language instruction is even more surprising in view of the fact that language learners spend more spare time with music than actual foreign language classroom time (commonly four to six contact hours per week). For instance, Summer (2011) found an average daily music consumption of nearly two hours based on a large sample ($n = 400$) of German secondary school students, a number that matches closely with the results of an earlier study on a representative sample ($n = 2,465$) of British adolescents (North, Hargreaves, & O’Neill, 2000). This figure may increase up to four hours daily if watching music videos is taken into account (Dethier, 2003).

As smartphones and tablets, typically used in informal contexts, have become the devices of choice for listening to music and watching video clips, as well as for playing digital games, it seems intuitively plausible that lyrics as content and game-based mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) as a mode of presentation can be fruitfully combined. However, due to the particular nature of lyrics as a special form of language, a number of methodological and technical issues have to be considered first when implementing lyrics-based exercises in an electronic game format. Therefore, in this article, we take a combined perspective on the content (pop lyrics), the format and design (digital games on mobile devices), and the technical challenges (in terms of natural language processing) involved.

Our main aims are (1) to provide an overview of non-linguistic and linguistic arguments for the use of lyrics as learning material and (2) to demonstrate which hurdles have to be overcome from a natural language processing (NLP) point of view in order to implement a cross-platform web-based multimedia lyrics application (app, for short) designed and suited for informal game-based language learning (Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012; Sykes & Reinhardt, 2013). The app presented also matches previous definitions of educational games as it can be categorized as a “casual game [to] practice explicit skills” (Ulicsak & Williamson, 2011, p. 35), and because it may be adapted and integrated into a formal curriculum.

The paper is structured as follows: We start by presenting a number of arguments illustrating why lyrics may serve as appropriate input for foreign language learning in informal contexts, why gamification should be seen as an approach facilitating language learning, and why affordances of (mobile) digital learning are highly suited for the content type discussed. Next, we briefly describe the state-of-the-art in automatic exercise creation, provide an overview of existing lyrics-based language learning approaches and present Rebeats, an app relying on automatic exercise creation. In the subsequent section, we highlight and discuss linguistic, pedagogic and NLP-related challenges. We then summarize and contextualize our findings, suggest that an integration of lyrics-based language learning¹ into institutional contexts is both desirable and possible, and present a number of avenues for further work in the concluding section.

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