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# Pop Culture - A Tool for Improving the Communicative Competence of the Students

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**Abstract:** *It's no doubt that we are living in times of great change. As we teachers prepare our students for the new era, we are aware of these changes occurring globally. The makers of curricula include intercultural objectives and teachers are faced with the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence through the teaching. Foreign language education is by definition intercultural. Why? Because bringing English as a foreign language to the classroom means connecting students to a world that is culturally different from their own. The objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of communicative competence in English (or any other foreign language). English teachers are now required to teach intercultural competence as well. Teaching culture includes changes in attitudes, beliefs, identity and values. It also requires students to revise their social identity, to reconsider the ideas they have held etc. In the context of foreign language learning, intercultural competence is linked to communicative competence in English as a foreign language. Communicative competence refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in a linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate way (Council of Europe). But for a successful intercultural process in the classroom, English teachers need additional knowledge, attitudes, competence, skills, good techniques, professionalism and of course a good source materials for teaching culture. Also the teachers should be skilful creators of learning environment that promote students' acquisition of intercultural competence. They can help students to relate their own culture to English speaking cultures, to compare cultures and to understand foreign cultures' points of view.*

**Keywords:** Popular Culture, EFL, Teaching, Textbooks.

## 1. Introduction

In Macedonia, British dictionaries are standard issue (most commonly *Longman* and *Oxford*), as are the textbooks and grammars, which are often written by British people, or by Macedonians schooled in the British fashion. Although we are seeing greater space in the textbooks being devoted to other varieties of the language – these activities are used as an example to show an individual with a British orientation encountering someone who is the other. Speakers of other varieties of English are patronized at the expense of the British perspective. Americans are often downplayed while British are depicted as those who demonstrate what proper language and appropriate social behaviour are all about. But this order is in the process of breaking down as a result of changes taking place both inside and outside the classroom, and this process is closely connected with the intercultural understanding. For example, in recent years we are witnessing the use of the numerous American materials, not only in textbooks, dictionaries and grammars, but more noticeably in intercultural communications. Much of the information technology available to Macedonian school children is in American English, as is media exposure. Books and computer applications are often in American English, and present an alternative to British English orientation. This movement is further enhanced by reading and writing books in American English by foreign English speakers. It is becoming increasingly apparent to a lot of English language teachers in Macedonia that the belief in a cultural studies program which is totally focused on a British conceptualization of the world is old-fashioned. That's why they look for other materials, materials which focus on

multiculturalism and on cultural diversity.

It has been said that there is one English word that is known everywhere. The word is cowboy. This remark has a certain amount of truth. Such words as *pop star* and *cowboy* seem to be known by almost everyone (by almost every young person, at least). Indeed such English words are usually learned without being taught, without being explained or drilled in class. This is because the young learner is exposed to British and American pop culture before s/he starts to learn English at school. Pop culture in general is defined as the totality of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images and other phenomena that are deemed preferred per an informal consensus within the mainstream of a given culture. Heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of the society. Pop culture (popular culture) is often viewed as being trivial and "dumbed-down" in order to find consensual acceptance throughout the mainstream. As a result, it comes under heavy criticism from various scientific and non-mainstream sources (most notably religious groups and countercultural groups) which deem it superficial, consumerist, and sensationalist and corrupted.

The term "popular culture" itself is of 19<sup>th</sup> century coinage, in original usage referring to the education and culturedness of the lower classes. The term began to assume the meaning of a culture of the lower classes separate from the opposed to "true education" towards the end of the century, a usage that became established by the interbellum period. The current meaning of the term, culture for mass consumption, especially originating in the USA is established by the end of

World War II. The abbreviated form “pop culture” dates to the 1960s.

In the textbooks that are used in the schools for students who learn EFL today, popular culture plays an important role in helping students to learn English more easily and more effectively. Pop music, films, television, TV soaps, magazines, internet etc. from English-speaking world are part of the everyday life in the most of non-speaking countries, partly as a part of the process of globalization partly because of the dominance of British or predominantly of American lifestyle.

## 2. Methodology of Research

The subject of interest of this paper is pop culture used as a tool for improving the communicative competence of English. We chose “Dream Team” textbook series for the following reasons:

- They are widely used in Macedonian primary schools;
- A great percentage of cultural topics covered in the textbooks;
- Textbooks equally cover English and American culture;
- Pop culture is used as a basis for language teaching;
- Offers out of classroom projects about pop culture.

## 3. Research, Results and Discussion

“Dream Team” is a four part series designed to meet the needs of students continuing English as well as those starting English for the first time. The English level varies from beginner or elementary to pre-intermediate. The author of the series Norman Whitney describes “Dream Team” as a “communicative course that teaches students how to use language in real situations, while also paying careful attention to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation”. Probably one segment that is crucial for our interest are stimulating and engaging topics, and an amusing and lively presentation story involving the activities of teenagers, appeal directly to the age group.

Each textbook is divided into 6 units and each unit is divided into four segments: the first segment is presentation of dialogues and communication practice, the second segment is grammar and study skills, the third segment is dedicated to vocabulary and cultural studies and the fourth segment is dedicated to skills work and progress review through an ear-catching pop song. This paper will pay attention to the third and fourth segment, although the first and the second segment also contain some materials about the pop culture in English-speaking countries.

### 3.1 Pop Music

The following pop songs covered in this textbook series were subject of interest for this paper:

**Sittin’ In the Back Seat!** – as every song used in this textbook series, this song as well is part of the last section of the textbook which is dedicated to progress review. Students

should listen to the song first. The lyrics are incomplete, so the first task is to complete the missing words. They should use the words that are given in the box at the top of the page. The missing words are closely connected with task 3 where students are asked which letter is missing from words like: sittin’, talkin’, laughin’ etc. The song serves as a good example how present continuous tense is used, a grammar topic covered in the same unit.

**I’m Walkin’** – again this song is part of the revision of the unit, but this time students should rearrange the lines in correct order as they listen to the song. The aim of this exercise is to point out the usage of interrogative form of present continuous tense. The students are encouraged to find out as many examples as possible of the interrogative form of present continuous tense. Similar to the previous song, again in this song students were asked about difference between formal and informal use of English language.

**Living Right Next Door to an Angel** – this song exercise again is constructed in three parts. In the first part of this exercise, students should listen to the song and fill in the missing words that are given in the textbox above the lyrics. Then students with the second task are encouraged to think why the boy is happy, which lead them to an answer that explains the main usage of present continuous tense.

**Here in the Net** – the revision song in the Unit 4 is again constructed in three sections. First, students should listen to the song and put the lines in the correct order. Then from the song they learn some new vocabulary items connected with internet and why the girl in the song is using internet which leads to the grammar topics of this particular unit and that is expressing intentions and future plans. The third task is connected with formal and informal English – in this song students have to find out the formal form of the word *gonna*.

**Happy Birthday, Sweet Sixteen** – this exercise is organised differently from the previous ones in the first task. The students have to listen to the song and then to complete the missing words, but the missing words are not given in a textbox as usual but the author gives them a hint – all missing words are numbers. Then the second task is to find as many examples as possible of be in past simple, as a revision of the grammar topic from this unit. The third task encourages students to find the words from the song that rhyme with the words in the textbox.

**I Only Wanna Be with You** – this exercise is organised in three segments as well – the first segment is to listen to the song and fill in the missing words (all missing words are regular verbs in past tense, which is grammar topic from this unit). Students for the second task should translate some of the expressions used in the song in their mother tongue (I really love you so, Can’t you see? my true romance, it’s crazy). Again the third segment deals with formal and informal use of the English language.

**Twenty-four Hours from Tulsa** – although this song is the first song from the next textbook of this series, the concept is same – the pop song exercise is organised in a same way – students should listen to the song, fill in the missing words,

pay attention to the pronunciation of the missing words and to find out words that rhyme with particular words in the given song.

**Summer in the City** – First students should listen to the song, and then order the lines in correct order. Again the formal and informal English are subject of interest in this particular song the words *babe* and *baby* and the meaning of these words. And the third part encourages the students to find other song titles about seasons or places.

**Higher and Higher** – the first task here ask students to listen to the song and then to arrange the verses in their correct order. Then they have to find out the meaning of certain expressions in their native language, and the third task is again out of classroom activity where students should find at least three songs sung by a man to a woman and three songs sung by a woman to a man.

**Simply The Best** – is a song from Unit 4 which aims towards practical use of comparison of adjectives in English. It is organised in same way as other song exercises – first students should listen to the song, and then fill in the missing verbs. The second task is to find which three words appear in the verse 1, verse 2 and the chorus.

**I'll Be There for You** – have a different approach towards the missing word. Students first have to read the song and fill in the gaps either with *you* or *your*. Then they have to listen to the song and check the answers. After that, they have to pay attention how many times these words appear in the song and finally again to find out any other songs that have *you*, *your* or *you're* in the title.

**Rocket Man** – Students have to listen to the song and to arrange the words in the chorus in the correct order. For the second task they have to translate some expressions into their mother tongue and the third task asks students to evaluate the song – through this evaluation they learn some new words like *beat*, *rhythm*, *main theme* etc.

**Good Thing** – is the first song from the last textbook of this series. There is no difference how this type of exercise is organised. As usual, students have to listen to the song and rearrange the lines first, then to find examples of present perfect in the song and to translate some English expressions in present perfect into Macedonian.

**What Have I Done to Deserve This?** – again the tasks related to this song are organized in same way: first to listen to the song and fill in the missing words, then to count how many times do they hear *What have I?* and then how some expressions are said in Macedonian.

**On Broadway** – the tasks for this song are almost identical like the rest. Students should listen to the song first and then put the words in correct order. Then students should think about who are 'they' in the song, and where do they live. The third segment again pays attention to a certain English expression and its meaning in Macedonian.

**When Will I Be Loved** – students have to listen to the song and fill in the missing words (all verbs in past tense). Then along with the grammar topic from the same unit, students should find examples of passive in the song.

**Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves** – beside the already mentioned tasks, here students are asked to find out all pronouns *we* and *you* in the song and to whom or to what they refer to. The last segment is to give the equivalent of an English phrase in Macedonian.

**Money, Money, Money** – the first task in this exercise is to listen to the song and then to put the lines of the chorus in their correct order. The second task is to find examples of the second conditional and their meaning. The third task is to translate some words from the song in Macedonian and to find out the connection between them. The exposure to authentic English is an important factor in promoting language learning. It relates directly to both the affective filter and automaticity. If students are exposed to songs that they enjoy, more learning is likely to occur since they may seek out the music outside of the classroom. The repetitive style of songs then helps to promote automatization of colloquial language.

Also it is shown scientifically that listening to music is more effective than memorization in isolation. Don G Campbell is an author who has studied the musical brain and who is the director of the Institute for Music, Health and Education in Boulder, Colorado. He states that "music has a way of connecting the two hemispheres by utilizing the left for language and the right for distinguishing musical intonations through consistent integration via the corpus callosum. Millions of neurons can be activated in a single musical experience. It is through the activation of these neural connections that learning takes place. The more neurons that can be connected, the greater the learning potential. The more connections that can be made in the brain, the more integrated that experience is within memory." It is a well-known fact that pop music is one of the biggest sources for learning English outside the classroom. But learning in classroom is more productive. The students enjoy because it is not the usual way how one English class works and also they learn some other aspects of language like: the usage of particular tense, expressions, pronunciation etc.

English songs also reflect a great variety of foreign cultures. They often contain words and expressions connected with history, culture or tradition of different nations, so the teacher should explain to the pupils the embedded culture elements of English speaking countries. Songs also give new insights into the target culture. Furthermore, through using traditional folk songs the learners' will broaden their knowledge of the culture reflected in those songs.

Pop songs are especially good at introducing vocabulary because songs provide a meaningful context for the vocabulary. In this context, words could be understood better and other related words could be extended by visual images or some other methods. Some songs tend to use lyrics with high-frequency vocabulary that have emotional content,

which makes them strong candidates for word study or for reinforcing words already learned through written means.

Pop music is also a great source for improving the reading and speaking skills. The textbooks pay a lot of attention to current trend in pop music today so the textbook is full with some small but very important exercises where students can express their personal opinion about particular pop song or artist. We have to bear in mind that maybe some students won't show much interest in English music but most of the exercises can be interesting for all students. A particular exercise in the textbook that is interesting one where students should tell what's their favourite record from the charts? and then they should tell which instruments can they hear on it? This exercise is closely connected with the vocabulary they learn (musical instruments) but as well with culture about *Top of the Pops* – the famous British chart show on BBC, where famous pop artists from Britain perform live. But also the teacher can give some more information about the chart show that is famous in the USA – The Billboard chart show. These kinds of exercises with elements of pop culture not only enrich student's vocabulary, but he also receives some cultural information about pop culture in English-speaking countries and their particular attitude towards some aspects of it.

#### 4. Conclusion

Textbooks are important factor in teaching English as a foreign language, and therefore embedding culture in these textbooks is an important factor whether students will acquire the English culture successfully as well as English language in general. "Dream Team" textbook series offer a wide range of texts and topics that cover British as well as American culture, especially texts that are connected to pop culture in English – speaking countries.

The most of the texts of pop culture are concerned with pop music, and even the revision segment of each unit is done through a pop song. This is a positive characteristic of these textbooks because the revision of the unit is interesting, fun and relaxing for the most of the students.

Texts about television and film are lesser than those about pop music but they are also equally fun and educational. "Dream Team 3" textbook doesn't cover any topic concerning film or television, but pays more attention to American culture in general. Film industry is part of American culture and American lifestyle so therefore this aspect should be covered but probably the writer of the textbook decided that some other aspects

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