

# The Eurovision Song Contest within Formal Educational Learning Contexts: A Critical Multimodal Interpretation of Possible Inter-Disciplinary Connections

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**Abstract:** The Eurovision Song Contest [ESC] is often viewed by many as pure entertainment followed annually by millions around the globe and by over 95% of the Maltese population. This paper aims to move on to deeper levels and to discuss how the songs of this popular cult can be viewed as interdisciplinary resources which eventually serve as effective pedagogical tools within formal educational contexts and classrooms.

Adopting a socio-semiotic multimodal approach, an original multimodal framework<sup>1</sup> is presented through which Eurovision songs are analysed before they are connected to these educational contexts to serve as pedagogical tools.

Referring to a socio-constructivist epistemology, a practical example taken from the ongoing 'Learning through the Eurovision: a multimodal research project'<sup>2</sup> is discussed where these songs are viewed as inter-disciplinary tools made up of socio-semiotic elements which, when viewed as connected, can facilitate learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** Foreign language teaching, multimodality, Eurovision Song Contest

- 1 G. Cremona, 'Cultural representations of Germany in the Maltese German as a Foreign Language (GFL) learning context. A critical interpretation', Ph.D. thesis (UCL Institute of Education, 2015).
- 2 Id., 'Creating student centred language learning environments through the innovative multimodal pedagogical use of Eurovision Music', *Conference Proceedings of the International Conference The Future of Education*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn. (Florence, 2017), 240–4.

## Connecting songs to formal educational contexts

Students learn better and their motivation in class increases<sup>3</sup> if what they are learning is connected to elements which make sense to them even out of the classroom context and if the learning is ‘integrated into contexts in which the language is meaningful and useful, such as in everyday or playful situations’.<sup>4</sup>

Since my early teaching days, this line of thought has continuously driven me – particularly during lesson-planning stages – to look for popular resources valued by my students, i.e. my target audience in the different classrooms. Each time I meet new classes, I compile a list of resources beforehand which Cakir<sup>5</sup> describes as ‘triggers of motivation, interest, enjoyment, and emotions’. This is a process I repeat each time I start working with new students. Once I get the grasp of the particular resources students in a particular classroom enjoy using even during their free time, I embark on a critical venture which tries to connect these out-of-classroom elements and resources to the classroom reality. My priority as a teacher has always been and still is to think of all the possible and available triggers leading to student motivation in class and constantly evaluate alternatives and ways through which the favourite out-of-classroom resources of a particular student cohort could be connected effectively in my lesson plans to have students pedagogically benefit through them and their use.

My 14-year [ongoing] teaching experience constantly confirms Miranda’s<sup>6</sup> suggestion that one of the most popular out-of-classroom triggers which predominates during social events such as concerts, sporting events, parties, dates, dances, ceremonies, rallies, and dinners is music. My experience in class similarly confirms Ross’s<sup>7</sup> statement

- 3 M.R Young, ‘The motivational effects of the classroom environment in facilitating self-regulated learning’, *Journal of Marketing Education*, April 2014, 25–40.
- 4 European Commission, *Language Learning at Pre-Primary School Level: Making it Efficient and Sustainable. A Policy Handbook* (Brussels, 2011). Available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/earlylanguage-learning-handbook\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/earlylanguage-learning-handbook_en.pdf)
- 5 A. Cakir, ‘Musical activities for young learners of EFL’, *The Internet TESL Journal*, 5 (11) (1999). Retrieved from: <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Cakir-MusicalActivities.html> (accessed 07 July 2017).
- 6 D. Miranda, ‘The role of music in adolescent development: much more than the same old song’, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, Vol. 18 (1) (2013), 5–22.
- 7 J. Ross, ‘ESL Listening Comprehension: Practical Guidelines for Teachers’, *The Internet TESL Journal*, 12 (2) (2006). Retrieved from: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Ross->

that songs are one trigger which follows students wherever they are, at home, while they travel, at school, and during their free time.

Kruse<sup>8</sup> identifies different types of songs which one can consider importing in class. These includes a wide range of songs such as classical, oldies, pop, and alternative hip-hop. Through all these genres and styles, variety can predominate in classrooms and other pedagogical contexts.

### **Connecting the Eurovision Song Contest to formal educational contexts: the rationale of a pedagogical project**

Throughout my teaching career, different students have indicated they prefer different types of music. Notwithstanding the variety of musical preferences, teaching within the Maltese context has indicated that there tends to be a common trend which constantly manifests itself through what students say. Students in Malta are keen followers of the Eurovision Song Contest. Students I have encountered can be broadly categorized in two different categories: those who love the contest, its songs, and its content and the others who loathe it but still find time to comment – at times even sarcastically – about this massive cult followed by millions around the globe.<sup>9</sup> This situation which I observe in classrooms tends to be confirmed and strengthened by official statistics stating that over 95% of the Maltese population follow the Eurovision Song Contest annually.<sup>10</sup>

The constant annual recurrence of this trend, motivated me to launch the ‘Learning through the Eurovision: a multimodal research project’.<sup>11</sup> As I have explained at length elsewhere, the aim of this project is to

ListeningComprehension.html (accessed 7 July 2017).

- 8 D. Kruse, ‘Being Hip-Hop’; javascript: \_\_doLinkPostBack mdb~~a9h%7C%7Cjdb~~a9h jnh%7C%7Ccs~~JN%20%22General%20Music%20Today%22%7C%7Csl~~jh, Vol. 30, Issue 1, 53–8.
- 9 P.T. Jordan, ‘The Eurovision Song Contest: Nation Branding and Nation Building in Estonia and Ukraine’, Ph.D. thesis (University of Glasgow, 2011).
- 10 PBS, ‘Ghandi xi nghid’, Radju Malta, 4 February 2017, available online: TVM.com.mt. <https://www.tvm.com.mt/mr/radio-programmes/ghandi-xi-nghid-3/>
- 11 Newspoint, ‘Learning through the Eurovision: A multimodal research project’, University of Malta, 2016 [online], <https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/news/features/2016/05/teachingthroughtheurovisionamultimodalproject>

work with teachers in primary and secondary schools. Together with the teachers – who freely show interest to participate in the project – we select a syllabus topic from those set as curricular topics of the particular scholastic grade. Then, together we design a set of lesson plans through which the selected curricular topic(s) may be taught.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, in each case, Eurovision songs and Eurovision-related material, such as music videos of participating songs, interviews with singers, and visuals such as photos and posters and others, are used and adapted to serve as resources through which the environment where the learning is conducted benefits, becoming more student-centred and increasing motivation in students.

### **Semiotic connections: Adopting an original multimodal framework**

It is important that, before importing any song and/or ESC-related available resources in class, teachers should choose their material systematically, adopting the original MIRROR Framework,<sup>13</sup> which includes the following steps:

- M**onitoring available ESC songs and choosing the actual songs to use in class from all those which have participated in one of the past editions of the ESC;
- I**nitial descriptive interpretation (per individual song focusing on the message of the text, i.e. lyrics);
- R**epresentational multimodal semiotic interpretation (per individual text, i.e. this includes a deeper analysis of the song. Among others this step analyses the content of the song, the linguistic level of the lyrics, and the style, genre, and arrangement of music);
- R**epresented social interpretation (per individual text focusing on socio-cultural messages implied);
- O**verview of the themes observed; later comparing individual trends with common trends derived from texts as a whole (where possible);
- R**eorganizing and presenting the text according to the needs of the students in the particular learning context.

The framework therefore connects an initial descriptive semi-

12 Cremona, 'Creating student centred language learning environments', 241.

13 See footnote 1 above.

otic interpretation to deeper semiotic levels.<sup>14</sup> Thus ESC songs and the other ESC-related material are treated and viewed as resources made up of connected modes, i.e. channels through which messages may be transmitted. These modes include embodied and disembodied modes which Norris<sup>15</sup> defines as:

*Embodied modes* classify language with other modes like gesture, gaze, or posture which ‘can play a *superordinate* or an *equal* role to the mode of language in interaction, and therefore, these modes are not merely embellishments to language’. On the other hand, *disembodied modes* ‘include, among others, music, print, layout, colour, clothes, and any other mode deriving from the setting or material world where the interaction is happening. These too can take a superordinate role in interaction and at times even ‘overrule’ embodied modes.

### **Socio-Semiotic connections**

Furthermore, the framework also connects a social aspect to the interpretation of the songs. Each song is viewed as an amalgamation of social features. Before including the songs or ESC-related material in the lesson plan, as early as the lesson planning stage, together with teachers, we ask the question: ‘What particular social feature(s) is included/referred to in this particular ESC-related text?’

### **Connecting students to the texts: The socio-constructivist epistemology**

Having identified the modes [i.e. channels through which messages may be passed] and the social features presented in each ESC song, the next step is to find ways through which this socio-semiotic amalgamation may be connected to the actual topic the teacher aims to teach the particular classroom. In other words, before starting the

14 G. Kress, *Multimodality: a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication* (London, 2010).

15 S. Norris, *Analyzing multimodal interaction: a methodological framework* (London, 2004).

design of the lesson plan, one needs to familiarize oneself with the particular ESC songs and material available and only then critically evaluate whether it can be imported in class or not.

Once a song or ESC-related material is viewed as having pedagogical potential for the particular classroom, together with teachers, we initiate a process exploring ways how the particular song or ESC-related material may be used to connect the particular students with the particular topic the teacher intends to teach. To do this, the ‘Learning through the Eurovision: a multimodal research project’ follows a constructivist epistemology.

This views students as beings who can assume active roles when presented with texts. This idea resonates with the constructivist view that learning is viewed as an active process happening when learners engage with and become involved in appropriate cognitive processing. These processes lead to the construction of cognitive representations.<sup>16</sup> This involves intricate processes happening each time students encounter texts used to teach the subject. The students

turn [a] text into a situation model in the reader’s mind. Even constructing a decent representation of the text itself – a textbase – requires active processing, for texts are never fully explicit. The passive reader, who does not perform this required activity, will end up with an inadequate textbase.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, these cognitive constructivist views suggest that the developmental processes of students can change over time and teachers can improve their conduct if they make careful observations about the way students obtain knowledge and interpret shared information through normal developmental sequences.<sup>18</sup> These views sustain that students are not always passive, but instead can actually and eventually become active consumers able to connect with the ideas being presented in class, process these ideas, and actively react to them. ljs

With all these mental processes, the socio-cognitive aspect suggesting that ‘thought has a social external origin’<sup>19</sup> sheds further light

16 R.E. Mayer, *Multimedia learning* (New York, 2001).

17 Kintsch in Tobias and Duffy, ‘Constructivist Instruction: Success or Failure?’, *Educational Technology and Society*, 13 (3) 2009, 281–4.

18 J. Piaget, *The moral judgement of the child* (New York, 1964).

19 J.P. Lantolf and W. Frawley, ‘Oral-proficiency testing: A critical analysis’, *The Modern*

about student activity. Applying the terminology of Capocchi Rigiero,<sup>20</sup> what is missing above (i.e. in the cognitive constructivist view) is a clear mention of the effects of the interactions between members of the learning community through which meanings (i.e. in this case the way students react to ideas included and derived from ESC songs or ESC-related materials) can be negotiated. Block<sup>21</sup> defines student activity as involving a critical process through which students form and consume the material transmitted in class both through factors lying inside the learner – namely the inner psychological side – as well as other factors resulting from interactions between different individuals in the classroom and/or in their environment. Seen in this light, the idea of texts and their function is directed to view:

a text [as] a sociological event, a semiotic encounter through which the meanings that constitute the social system are exchanged. The individual member is, by virtue of his membership, a ‘meaner’, one who means. By his acts of meaning, and those of other individual ‘meaners’, social reality is created, maintained in good order, and continuously shaped and modified.<sup>22</sup>

While acknowledging the benefits of the socio-cognitive (i.e. constructivist) epistemology, I also feel that

the general world of human experience, and the social and educational world, is not an objective structure but a constructed, organic interaction of people organized and shaped by their culture, status and gender.<sup>23</sup>

Keeping this in mind, while active students should combine the cognitive and social relevant incoming information and relevant prior knowledge, they should also debate the concept of ‘relevance’ and

*Language Journal*, 69 (4), 1985), 337–45.

- 20 M.A. Capocchi Ribeiro, *Consciousness Raising Age and Motivation. A case study* (Leicester, 2000).
- 21 D. Block, ‘Review of Rod Ellis’s Task-based Language Learning and Teaching’, *Language Learning Journal*, 29 (1) (2004), 18–23.
- 22 T.A. van Dijk, ‘Ideology and discourse analysis’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11 (2), (2006), 115–40.
- 23 M. Watts and Z. Jofili, ‘Changing teachers’ thinking through critical constructivism and critical action research’, *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 1 (2), (1995), 213–27.

probably redefine it as a regime of truth.<sup>24</sup> Among other things, they should pose questions about what is presented in ESC-related songs and that frequently presented as ‘relevant’ in the classroom context and beyond. A second complementary question should focus on who decides what is ‘relevant’ and ‘irrelevant’ in what is being presented in the context.

### **Connecting ESC-music to curricular activities: A case in point**

In the following sections, I will present one example to show how ESC materials were connected to the classroom and used as pedagogical tools following the above-mentioned MIRROR theoretical framework. Owing to word limit constraints, I will only present and focus on just one (of many possible examples) lesson presented as part of the Learning through the Eurovision Project.

Part of the syllabus of Year 4 (8-year-old boys and girls) classrooms in Malta stipulates that students should learn how to write a narrative using the past tense. After two introductory lessons where the teacher introduced and reinforced the concept of the past tense, as a last activity in order to motivate students to write a narrative using the past tense, one teacher opted to use the song called *Tomorrow* sung by Gianluca Bezzina who represented Malta in 2013 and obtained a prestigious eighth place. The teacher specifically intended to use this song with a class in which students clearly and frequently stated that they hate writing but love drawing.

Through the application of the MIRROR framework, after this initial interpretation of the song, the lesson-planning phase identified a number of modes included in the music video which could pedagogically help students reach the aim of the lesson, i.e. writing a narrative using the past tense. The teacher thought of using *context* as a mode and opted to start the lesson using an *image* (i.e. a photo) of Gianluca Bezzina who is very popular with the younger generation in Malta. The lesson started with a guessing game where students through the selected photos of a nose, a pair of eyes, and a mouth had to guess the mysterious singer, i.e. Gianluca. The teacher then moved on to play the *song* and showed

24 M. Foucault, *The care of the self*, trans. R. Hurley (Harmondsworth, 1984).



students the music video (i.e. *moving visuals*) of the song. The narrative (i.e. *lyrics*) presents the love story between Jeremy who works in IT and the girl he loves but whom unfortunately he never manages to meet even though they visit the same places, pass through the same experiences, and find themselves in the same locations.

After a first listening, the teacher asked students to work in groups and start formulating brief notes about what happened in the narrated love story. After this, she invited students to form groups of four and to summarize the content of the song by expressing the message of the song through four drawings. This was done in a race-against-time since students had only five minutes to draw these drawings.

Once they finished these drawings, the students were asked to formulate and write sentences in the past tense through which they could narrate what happened to Jeremy and his crush. Per drawing they were requested to write 4–5 sentences. By the end of the 15 minutes assigned for writing, the students ended up with a short paragraph summarizing the story narrated in the song.

A third final critical step, asked students to identify a number of social elements included in the love story. In this the teacher served as a guide since she could identify these social features through the third step of the MIRROR framework. Once the students had finished their writing, they were encouraged to discuss and evaluate the relationship of Jeremy and his girlfriend in the light of these social aspects and to express themselves about the behaviour of the protagonists, i.e. also (simultaneously) using the past tense. This discussion included points about the race of the two lovers, their social backgrounds, and gender stereotypes which featured predominantly in the music video and through the lyrics of the song.

## **Conclusion**

In brief, the outline of the Learning through the Eurovision Project discussed in this paper should highlight the idea that the success of this project is based on the skill and ability of finding connections. At times these connections are so obvious that they are taken for granted. As should be clear from the discussion presented above. the project, at

its crux, connects:

- Theoretical epistemologies to practical situations;
- Out of classroom resources to curricular topics;
- Initial interpretations of ESC related texts and songs to deeper interpretations;
- Semiotic elements (i.e. modes) to Social elements.

Through the discussion presented in the paper, now that these connections have been identified and discussed, one could – as a main conclusion – propose a further step. The popularity of the Learning through the Eurovision Project around Malta and the invitations it received from a great number of educational contexts, including schools and universities around Europe (such as Sweden, Germany, Italy, Ukraine, and Switzerland), urges me to propose a follow-up step.

Now that, through this paper, I have set clear the way the project amalgamates connections, a follow up-step should and could also propose that other educators and teachers critically follow these steps and, through the suggestions proposed by this paper, initiate projects not only related to [Eurovision] music but also to other resources which students enjoy during their free time and out of class. Similar connections may facilitate other educational projects linked to sports, dance, animals, fashion, the culinary world, and a thousand other possible areas.

Through this paper the example is set ... hopefully students will get what they truly deserve.