

**Enhancing the Process of Learning English through the Implementation  
of American Popular Songs: The Case of Louis Armstrong ‘ Song  
(What a Wonderful World!)**

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**Abstract :**

In all human cultures, english language is regarded to be as a determining factor in the achievement of positive social links with nations from different parts of the world ; both in scientific and commercial context or simply in cultural exchanges.

From this perspective, the popular american song has proved to be an appropriate medium when used in teaching english and its culture ; because there is a correlation between language and culture.

Louis Armstrong's song "What a wonderful world ?" is perceived as an accurate target thanks to its wide range of vocabulary, syntax, and above all due to its well-meaning words for its involvement in cultural interactions.

**Keywords:** Popular song- poetry- learning english- culture- Louis Armstrong

**Introduction:**

In all human cultures, language is regarded as a crucial factor in establishing social interactions. It is inconceivable for a human being to disregard this means of communication, which remains the prerogative of the human condition. In other words, language is the uncontested means for humans to forge social connections with each others and the social milieu to which they belong. Jean-Claude Romano expressed this in his work entitled : "The Construction of Identity": "Individuals socialize and build their identity in stages through a long process that extends from

birth to adulthood. Their beliefs and self-representations constitute an extremely important psychological structure that enables them to select their actions and social relations"<sup>1</sup>

However, one can enumerate three types of languages: the mother tongue or native language, which is the language children understand before starting school and through which they interact within society during adulthood. The language learned in school, which acquires the status of an official language. Finally, the foreign language, which is also learned in academic institutions for pedagogical and scientific purposes. Children at Algerian school are exposed to the learning of two foreign languages: French and English.

The approach used in learning English language undergoes certain strategies, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. American popular songs, however, prove to be an indisputable means of implementing these four types of language skills.

**Problem Statement:**

The nature of this research requires the following question:

- In what sense could American popular song contribute to the didactics of English?

**Some hypotheses:**

1. American popular song sheds light on certain aspects of North American history, which falls within the discipline of American civilization.
2. American popular song can also enrich the learner's lexical repertoire in the context of oral communication.

**1/ The compulsory Learning of English at Algerian schools:**

Due to Algeria's geographical location, situated midway between the northernmost point of the African continent and the southern part of Europe, it has become vital for Algerian citizens to learn foreign languages, particularly English, in order to communicate with European citizens and convey their messages effectively.

In today's world, on account of technological advancements that the contemporary world has witnessed, such as digital technology, the internet, and other audiovisual means, our planet has shrunk into a small global village where humans have all become citizens of a borderless world. However, English is undeniably the predominant language used in social interactions. It has become a determining factor in achieving positive social connections with other nations, be it

in the realm of commerce, science, or simply in cultural exchanges. This aligns with what Patrick Zelnick stated in his work "The Adventurers of Culture": "Globalization radically changes societies and their cultures."<sup>2</sup>

Everybody knows that nowadays, english has become the most widely used in the world of work and international communication. It serves as the official language in over 75 countries, spoken by more than 2 billion people, and is used as a foreign language by 750 million people.<sup>3</sup>

## **2/ The popular song at the disposal of english language :**

Before delving into the popular song, it would be wise to provide a brief definition of poetry since it is an integral part of popular songs. Poetry reconnects us with the most sensitive aspects of existence, stimulating our subconscious where sensitivity flourishes. It is a means of accessing to the truest and most sensitive aspects of ourselves by infusing meaning into certain lexicons.

Thus, the etymology of the term "poetry" comes from the Greek word "poein," which conveys the idea of producing or creating<sup>4</sup>. Poetry is a language art that explores all resources to express something, playing with rhythm and musicality.

Originally, poetry was sung and accompanied by a lyre, giving rise to the concept of lyric poetry. Each author shares their feelings and emotions in their work. Poetry is often an expression of an inner "self" but is also connected to the world, as in the case of engaged poetry. Through reading and writing poetic texts, young learners can develop their linguistic skills, which can bring ease to their oral expression.

As far as the empirical studies are concerned, they have revealed that the process of learning a foreign language, comprises three types of difficulties : articulatory or phonetic, lexical concerning words and their meanings, and finally, syntactical and morphological difficulties which are related to sentence organization and pronoun usage<sup>5</sup>. Learning poetry can help young learners overcome these difficulties, since foreign language acquisition involves the process of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thanks to listening to american popular songs, children become familiar with a rich lexicon and vocabulary specific to poetry, which is part of cultural diplomacy.

### **3/ The importance of poetry for young learners:**

It is obvious that poetry is a vehicle for imagination, motivation, and creativity. As a matter of fact, poetry is regarded to be a well-suited medium as far as the learners expression of his creativity at a given moment. In fact, it paves the way to unleashing the potential and intellectual faculties of each individual, as well as consolidating the oral language.

Through the combination of the four skills : ( listening, speaking, reading and writing), poetry is considered as an excellent tool to guide learners to be fluent in english and be able to face eventual real word performances. This is what language school use to call competency-based learning. It is an approach to education that focuses on the learners' demonstration of desired learning outcomes as central point to the learning process.

As far as the emotional life of human beings is concerned, poetry has a great impact in shaping the character and the thinking of learners. On the other hand, numerous definitions have been stated in this context, including the one found in the "lexis" dictionary: "It is the art of evoking and suggesting sensations, impressions, emotions through a particular use of language, using sounds, rhythms, harmonies of words and phrases, as well as images."<sup>6</sup>

Another definition refers to the potential for meditation and soliloquy, with a positive impact on the flow of ideas: "It is a form of literary expression characterized by a harmonious use of language sounds and rhythms, along with a wealth of imagery."<sup>7</sup>

It is claimed that learning poetry in a group at classrooms contributes effectively to developing socialization and self-affirmation skills. In fact, poetry is supposed to lay foundations for otherness and tolerance by giving free rein to emotion, sensitivity, and aspirations.

It has been proved that there is a close relationship between reality and imaginary. It is meant to reconcile the real and the imaginary, as George Jean said: "Poetry works on the imagination to express reality"<sup>8</sup>.

It's the teacher's role to help the learner discover this distinction. Once this dichotomy is given, poetry becomes a means to have access to the imagination for the sake of concretizing reality just because expression is a release from the tensions of reality.

### **4/ Didactics of culture through popular song:**

Nowadays, there is a great number of popular music styles. That is to say ; among the most famous ones, we can mention pop, rock, blues, and jazz for example. It is evident that these music genres are universal and listened to all over the world. Popular songs tell the everyday

stories of social groups, allowing individuals to find their place in the world while respecting and tolerating cultural and belief differences. They also foster the creation of a collective imagination.

As far as jazz music is concerned, it is originated in the United States, specifically in the city of New Orleans. It emerged from the fusion of african european american musical influences. Jazz is deeply rooted in the musical culture of Africa brought by the slaves and the European classical repertoire<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, we can assert that jazz is a music of fusion, emerging from various different musical styles. The three fundamental characteristics of jazz are rhythm, improvisation, and sound. The most commonly used instruments in this music genre are the trumpet, saxophone, and double bass.

#### **4.1 A brief biography of the singer Louis Armstrong:**

Louis Armstrong was an American singer, trumpeter, and composer, born in New Orleans on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1901 and he passed away on July 6<sup>th</sup>,1971 in New York. He played a crucial role in the history of music. He is the one who invented and popularized jazz as we know it today. Louis Armstrong, born into a disadvantaged environment in New Orleans, was placed in a reform school at the age of 13.

He could have delved into a life of delinquency, but his acquaintance with a music teacher changed his life. He began playing in orchestras and clubs. Despite his inability to read sheet music; he compensated by relying on improvisation instead. Once he became a true star, he made in many movies and performed in different countries under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State as a cultural ambassador<sup>10</sup>.

#### **4.2 The song ‘what a wonderful world’ :**

I see trees of green

Red roses too

I see them bloom

For me and you

And I think to myself

What a wonderful world

I see skies of blue

And clouds of white

The bright blessed day  
The dark sacred night  
And I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
The colors of the rainbow  
So pretty in the sky  
Are also on the faces  
Of people going by  
I see friends shaking hands  
Saying, "How do you do?"  
They're really saying  
I love you  
I hear babies cry  
I watch them grow  
They'll learn much more  
Than I'll ever know  
And I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
Yes, I think to myself  
What a wonderful world

This song was written in 1967 by Bob Thiele and George David Weiss during a politically tense period in American history. At that period, the United States was in the midst of the Vietnam War and segregation was causing a wave of social disparities, followed by the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. It was intended to bring peace and optimism during troubled times. Director Barry Levinson included it in the soundtrack of the film "Good Morning, Vietnam" in 1988. "What a Wonderful World" was released as a single 20 years after its initial release and received the recognition it deserved<sup>11</sup>.

**The interdependence of culture and language:**

Language is not only a means of communication but also a powerful tool for preserving national identity, cultural values and customs. In this context, students may learn about the history of

african americans who lived on the fringe of society being deprived of certain civil rights due to their ethnicity.

In the UNESCO Universal Declaration, culture is defined as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, and emotional characteristics that characterize a society or social group, encompassing not only the arts and letters but also ways of life, value systems, traditions, and beliefs<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, it is appropriate to say that culture is essential in foreign language learning because terms are closely linked to cultural facts or social values. This implies that language cannot be isolated from practical social actions, rituals, customs, traditions, and heritage.

The song : "What a Wonderful World ?" relates to various cultural and civilizational facts, such as the assassination of the activist pastor Martin Luther King, who died because of his political commitment to the fundamental freedoms of African Americans. It also gives references to his famous speech, "I Have a Dream," delivered on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963 at the Lincoln memorial Washington D.C, during the March on Washington for the abolition of slavery and the advocacy of human rights<sup>13</sup>.

Nowadays, it compulsory to give to english lessons a multidisciplinary aspect. Indeed, the act of integrating other disciplines into language and culture learning, as in the case of popular songs, helps learners become aware of its vitality. Proficiency in language is not only beneficial for those pursuing literary studies but also for those who need to communicate with different cultures in the context of intercultural dialogue. As Edward Sapir said, "Culture is the set of attitudes, worldviews, and specific characteristics that give a particular people their place in the universe"<sup>14</sup>.

There is no doubt that integrating popular songs into foreign language didactics contributes to enriching the learner's lexical repertoire and provides access to foreign culture, which is an integral part of globalization.

### **What the process of english language learning Owes to Popular Songs:**

When exploiting this song in terms of didactics, learners have much to learn about semantics. It is regarded as an opportunity to learn about colours. For instance, we may find terms like:

- 'green,' which means 'vert' (green).
- 'red,' which means 'rouge' (red).
- 'blue,' which is 'bleu' (blue).
- 'white,' which is 'blanc' (white).

- 'dark,' meaning 'sombre' (dark).
- 'bright,' indicating 'clair' (bright).
- 'The colours,' which translates to 'les couleurs.'
- The term 'rainbow,' which is 'l'arc-en-ciel' and contains different colours.

On the other hand, the teacher can also explain to the learners the difference between British English and American English, for instance, the term 'colour' with 'u' belongs to British English, while 'color' without 'u' belongs to American English.

Students may also learn about the history of African Americans who lived on the fringes of society and were wiped out of certain civil rights due to their ethnic background.

In fact, this popular song allows for a playful approach to language through refrains, repetitions, sounds, wordplay, while conveying essential vocabulary related to time, space, colours and interactions. For example, "How do you do?" can be used to teach greetings.

It can also be considered as a support for the implicit learning of grammar, such as the exclamatory form: "What a wonderful world!" and personal pronouns like "I," "you," and "me." It can also help with sentence structure, for example, "I see trees," which follows the SVO (subject-verb-object) structure.

As far as the grammar is concerned, learners may have the opportunity to get familiar with past simple tense especially irregular verbs when the teacher relate the biography of the singer 'Louis Armstrong'

**Regular Verbs** : passed away- played- invented- changed.

**Irregular verbs** : was- began- became- made.

**Exclamatory sentence** : « what a wonderful world !»

### **Conclusion:**

Specialists of sciences education claim that schools play a crucial role in a child's development, both emotionally and intellectually. Besides the family environment in which he grows up, school remains his first contact with the outside world. In other words, the school takes on the task of shaping the mold of socialization. In fact, the school provides the child with access to language learning, particularly foreign languages, as they are vehicles for social and intercultural values. In this regard, American popular songs offer an endless source of opportunities for learning English, in terms of culture and lexical aspects as well, since there is an interdependence between language and culture.

Louis Armstrong's song "What a Wonderful World" does not make any exception to this rule, as it is rich in grammatical expressions for it paves the way for children to embrace tolerance, respect differences, cultivate a spirit of coexistence.

Finally, we may conclude that human being is not able to live without music. Friedrich Nietzsche said : "Life without music is simply a mistake, a weariness, an exile."<sup>15</sup>

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