

BOOK REVIEW

Werner, V. & F. Tegge (Eds.). 2021. *Pop culture in language education: Theory, research, practice*. Routledge.
ISBN 9780367365417

Reviewed by Duy Van Vu (KU Leuven)

Along with the rapid development of digital technologies and the Internet these days, pop culture, such as pop music, movies, video games, or cartoons, is ubiquitous in various societies across the globe. In addition to its recreational values, pop culture also has educational values, which has recently been well documented in a range of areas, such as art education (e.g., Toku, 2001), chemical education (e.g., Burks, Deards, & DeFrain, 2017), childhood education (e.g., Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002), adult education (e.g., Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), and especially in language education (e.g., Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2013; Murray, 2008). For that reason, *Pop culture in language education*, edited by Valentin Werner (University of Bamberg, Germany) and Friederike Tegge (Massey University, New Zealand), is a much needed book. This edited volume not only presents empirical studies but also includes practical chapters on the potential and use of pop culture for language learning and teaching, providing a comprehensive insight into how pop culture can be incorporated in language education in and beyond the classroom. The book can have great value for language educators, researchers, material developers, and even policy-makers.

Pop culture in language education is comprised of 17 chapters in total and starts with an Introduction section where Valentin Werner and Friederike Tegge provide a broad contextualization of pop culture and demonstrate its relevance for language education in Chapter 1. The authors outline the reasons for the incorporation of pop culture in language classrooms, including ideological rationales as well as other psychological, sociological, and pedagogical factors. The authors also discuss evidence for the use of pop culture in both formal language classrooms and extramural encounters (i.e., out-of-class language exposure), suggesting the educational benefits of the engagement with pop culture for young, adolescent, and adult language learners in a variety of contexts, especially in terms of learning vocabulary and developing communicative competence. In particular, the authors argue for a move away ‘from language education *through* or *with* pop culture [...] toward language education *about* or *for* pop culture’ (p.16), promoting pop culture literacy in language education. With this introductory chapter,

Valentin Werner and Friederike Tegge skillfully set the scene for the next chapters of the volume.

After the Introduction section, the volume is further divided into four parts which not only explore the potential of pop culture for developing language abilities and informing language education practices in and beyond language classrooms but also consider pop culture through a sociocultural and culture-critical lens.

Part I, *The language of pop culture and language skills areas*, uncovers the characteristics of pop culture discourse by means of different corpora and corpus techniques. In Chapter 2, Silvia Bruti examines teen talk in American TV series. Through a detailed corpus analysis, Silvia Bruti demonstrates that media discourse, especially in TV series, not only reflects contemporary trends in daily speech but also disseminates linguistic innovation and emotional language as a model of linguistic and social behavior in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Also looking into language in TV series, Chapter 3 by Monika Bednarek investigates swear/taboo words using both corpus techniques and insights from screenwriters and EFL learners. The chapter reveals that swear/taboo words are frequent in a corpus of TV dialogue and vary in terms of frequency and range. In addition, a questionnaire with EFL learners shows that learners are aware of the presence or absence of swear/taboo words in TV series while interviews with screenwriters indicate different functions of swear/taboo words. While Chapters 2 and 3 by Silvia Bruti and Monika Bednarek convincingly illustrate the great potential of using pop culture discourse for foreign language (L2) learning and teaching, it should be noted that L2 teachers are responsible for selecting appropriate language to introduce to their learners with careful considerations for several factors such as learners' age, proficiency, needs, or context.

The next two chapters in Part 1 explore the vocabulary and grammar of the lyrics of rap and pop songs. Chapter 4 by Friederike Tegge and Averil Coxhead investigates the lexical profile and vocabulary demand of rap songs in a specialized corpus. The findings show that high-frequency vocabulary provides lower coverage of rap songs compared to pop songs and that rap lyrics have higher vocabulary demand compared to other genres, such as general spoken English, TV, academic English, or movie scripts. For those reasons, Friederike Tegge and Averil Coxhead suggest that rap lyrics are more suitable for L2 learners of advanced proficiency and additional support is needed for L2 learners' comprehension of rap lyrics. In Chapter 5, Valentin Werner analyzes a corpus of pop lyrics which shows that pop lyrics cover a wide range of aspects of core conversational grammar, demonstrate emerging uses of grammar, and represent colloquial and non-standard grammatical variants. The results illustrate that pop songs can

be used for contextualized grammar teaching in L2 classrooms. It is clear from these two chapters that rap and pop lyrics can afford plenty of opportunities for both L2 vocabulary and grammar teaching and learning.

Under the heading of *Pop culture and classroom practice*, Part II illuminates the practical applications of several pop culture artifacts in L2 classrooms, which might particularly appeal to language educators. In Chapter 6, John Rucynski presents his pilot EFL course named “Humor and Social Issues” in Japan to demonstrate how social issues could be addressed in L2 classrooms through humorous cartoon series. The course was carefully designed with thorough considerations of topics and humor scenes and a range of activities such as readings, viewings, and class discussions. This chapter illustrates the combination of humor and social issues as a way to integrate pop culture into L2 classrooms. Chapter 7 by Sadam Issa demonstrates the integration of comics and political cartoons into teaching Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) classrooms in the USA. Since current AFL textbooks lack pop culture artifacts, Sadam Issa suggests that comics and political cartoons should be integrated in the textbooks to enhance learners’ motivation, sociocultural knowledge, as well as language and multiliteracy skills. The chapter provides specific and useful examples for the incorporation of comics and political cartoons into teaching historical, cultural, political, and even sociolinguistic topics in AFL classrooms, which would certainly be appreciated by AFL teachers. Chapter 8 by Theresa Summer deals with an interesting but often neglected topic: the use of eco-songs, or songs that address environmental issues to raise people’s awareness, for both L2 teaching and environmental education. Having found that eco-songs are lacking in variety in teaching materials, the author provides a list of contemporary eco-songs to be used in EFL classrooms. In addition, the chapter includes an example of a lesson sequence that integrates eco-songs in an English classroom, which is particularly helpful for teachers with little or no experience in using eco-songs for L2 teaching and ecological literacies.

The next chapters demonstrate the incorporation of pop culture into language education in tertiary settings in particular. Chapter 9 by Anne Peirson-Smith and Lindsay Miller reports on an on-going action research project that investigates English as a second language (ESL) learners’ engagement with popular culture using social media in an undergraduate general education course. The chapter illustrates the benefits of using social media in facilitating learners’ sharing their ideas and fostering their motivation to use their second language during their engagement in pop culture topics as well as online and offline interactions, which can help learners develop both their cognitive and language abilities. Unlike Ann Peirson-Smith and Lindsay Miller, Joe Trotta examines the challenges as well as the benefits of using language in pop culture in university degree thesis writing projects in Chapter 10. Joe Trotta argues that pop culture can provide students

with unique linguistic data and pedagogical benefits, as illustrated by several theses using linguistic data from pop culture. While Chapter 9 can be useful for EFL/ESL teachers in a variety of contexts, Chapter 10 might be of particular interest to undergraduate students in linguistics and their supervisors.

Part III of the volume looks into the use of pop culture for language education beyond the classroom. Chapter 11 by Raymond Pai and Patricia A. Duff discusses the integration of pop culture into teaching Chinese as an additional language. They outline a number of theoretical and practical foundations for the use of pop culture in teaching Chinese, followed by examples of several Chinese courses in which pop culture is incorporated. Importantly, this is the only chapter in the whole volume that provides specific criteria and guidelines for using pop culture in language education both inside and outside the classroom, including authenticity, open-mindedness, sociolinguistic knowledge, agency and creativity, and critical awareness, each of which is clearly explained. However, the chapter would be even more beneficial for language educators if some specific practical examples are provided to illustrate those guidelines.

The next two chapters look into the potential of pop culture for boosting L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge. Chapter 12 by Lieven Bollansée, Eva Puimège, and Elke Peters sheds light on the relationship between extramural English and productive vocabulary knowledge of Belgian young learners. Through a questionnaire and a productive English vocabulary test, the chapter reveals young learners' frequent engagement with extramural English, through gaming and watching TV without subtitles in particular, as well as a positive correlation between exposure to extramural English and productive vocabulary knowledge. The chapter demonstrates the great potential of extramural English for expanding young learners' vocabulary knowledge even without formal English instruction. In a similar vein, Chapter 13 by Michael P.H. Rodgers and Julian Heidt examines the lexical coverage of videogames. By analyzing a corpus of language in ten videogames, the chapter shows that 5,000 and 10,000 word families are the amounts of vocabulary knowledge required to understand 95% and 98% respectively of all the videogames. The chapter also indicates that playing videogames can expose learners to an amount of vocabulary similar to watching television. Of note is that the findings reported in these two chapters might be more relevant to certain contexts where many free-time activities, such as gaming and watching TV, are available in English and learners have opportunities to be exposed to English in those activities.

Chapter 14 by Shannon Sauro and Steven L. Thorne introduces pedagogically structured participation in a fanfiction community as a possibility for L2 and literary learning. The chapter elaborates on an English teacher education course for English teacher candidates, which was divided into three phases and involves fan-

fiction activities, such as writing a story from a character's perspective or retelling a story. The course produced encouraging outcomes, helping improve not only learners' engagement but also linguistic gains. The chapter shows that involving learners in a fandom can help solve some problems in traditional formal instructional settings, such as decontextualized learning of linguistic features or learners' lack of interest. Such an idea is likely to gain enthusiastic endorsement from young and adolescent L2 learners, many of whom are passionately interested in fanfiction.

Part IV of the volume, under the heading of *Sociocultural and culture-critical considerations*, addresses more abstract topics. Chapter 15 by Andrew Moody examines the authenticity of pop culture texts for language education from a sociolinguistic perspective. The chapter discusses authority and authenticity in sociolinguistic theory before zooming in on those concepts in media and pop culture and subsequently in language education. The author suggests that pop culture texts can be used to introduce authenticity for the materials used in language classrooms. While the arguments in this chapter are well developed, there are many abstract terminologies and conceptual discussions that might be slightly overwhelming and not readily accessible to language educators and learners with little knowledge of or interest in sociolinguistics.

Chapter 16 by Awad Ibrahim discusses the role of pop culture in language education from a sociocultural perspective. The chapter uncovers two cases of English language learners in Africa who acquire English through watching TV, listening to music, and using social media, which the author calls 'the new normal'. Besides, three existing ethnographic studies are presented to highlight that pop culture can take language learners beyond their language classrooms and that social identities are also directly involved in the language learning process. One particular thing that I personally like about this chapter is that it is illustrated with animated stories and conversations about language learning, which can likely resonate with a number of contemporary language learners and educators.

Chapter 17 by Hyeyoung Jung and Graham V. Crookes discusses the use of pop culture for language education from a critical pedagogy perspective. The authors introduce a three-step model used in an English for Academic Purposes course that aimed to improve learners' academic literacy, including presenting a sociopolitical topic to learners through a Korean pop song, followed by an article-reading activity for problem-posing and finally a discussion for problem-solving. Additionally, the chapter includes a discussion of using rap lyrics to present academic vocabulary and discourse patterns as well as foster learners' critical awareness in an academic reading class. The chapter provides a clear illustration of using pop culture to enhance learners' language use and critical engagement in language classrooms.

One of the main contributions of this edited volume is that it involves a range of pop culture artifacts that can be incorporated into language education; therefore, it is potentially a valuable resource for language educators, especially for those in contexts where pop culture is currently not yet fully exploited. Since the volume includes both empirical studies and practical chapters, it is highly convenient for language educators to not only understand the theoretical foundations for using pop culture in language classrooms but also explore its practical applications. The volume can also likely convince material developers and policy makers to consider the possibilities and necessity of including pop culture artifacts in language teaching materials and curricula. In addition, different research methods are reported in the chapters, such as corpus techniques, surveys, interviews, which is apparently helpful for interested researchers, novice researchers in particular, to have a good grasp of the possible methodologies adopted for investigating the potential use of pop culture in language education. Another strength of the volume is that it is quite reader-friendly. The chapters in the volume are generally well-written, so readers can understand most of the contents without much difficulty, although some chapters in Part IV might be more challenging for several readers due to an abundance of terminologies and concepts.

While the volume is informative and thought-provoking, there is still some room for improvement. The very first thing that can be improved is the way each chapter is organized. It would be easier for readers to follow if all chapters follow a consistent way of organization. It should be noted, though, that since the volume attempts to cover both empirical studies as well as practical chapters, it might be difficult for all the chapters to achieve consistency in terms of their organization. Second, on a practical note, language educators might even better appreciate the volume if it addresses more adequately how pop culture can be integrated into learning and teaching specific language skills, such as listening, reading, speaking, or writing. In addition, the volume mostly focuses on the learning and teaching of L2, especially English, with only two chapters on Chinese and Arabic languages, which might limit its generalizability and applicability to the education of first language or other languages. Also, most chapters on the practical applications of pop culture in and beyond language classrooms in Part II and Part III seem not to take several other important factors into consideration, such as the readiness and appreciation of learners for pop culture discourse or the required background knowledge of both learners and instructors to comprehend pop culture artifacts (see Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2013). Finally, while the volume presents a number of practical activities where pop culture is incorporated in language classrooms, it still lacks empirical research on the learning processes in the suggested activities as well as their results. Such research would make a notable addition to the

growing body of evidence supporting the integration of pop culture in language education.

On the whole, *Pop culture in language education* is a pleasant and useful read. As a comprehensive volume that includes a range of pop culture artifacts and offers insights into their features and potential use in language classrooms, it can be a practical resource book for language educators and relevant stakeholders.

Funding

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with KU Leuven.

References

- Anderson, K. J., & Cavallaro, D. (2002). Parents or pop culture? Children's heroes and role models. *Childhood Education*, 78(3), 161–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2002.10522728>
- Burks, R., Deards, K. D., & DeFrain, E. (2017). Where science intersects pop culture: An informal science education outreach program. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 94(12), 1918–1924. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.7b00070>
- Duff, P. A., & Zappa-Hollman, S. (2013). Using popular culture in language teaching. In C. A. Chappelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 5997–6002). Wiley Blackwell.
- Murray, G. (2008). Pop culture and language learning: Learners' stories informing EFL. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 2, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501220802158792>
- Tisdell, E. J., & Thompson, P. M. (2007). 'Seeing from a different angle': The role of pop culture in teaching for diversity and critical media literacy in adult education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26(6), 651–673. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370701711349>
- Toku, M. (2001). What is manga?: The influence of pop culture in adolescent art. *Art Education*, 54(2), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193941>

Address for correspondence

Duy Van Vu
Faculty of Arts
KU Leuven
Blijde Inkomststraat 21
3000 Leuven
Belgium
vuvan.duy@kuleuven.be

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0249-8028>

Publication history

Date received: 11 May 2021

Date accepted: 26 September 2021

Published online: 19 April 2022