Pop Culture in Language Education

*Pop Culture in Language Education* provides comprehensive insight on how studies of pop culture can inform language teaching and learning. The volume offers a state-of-the-art overview of empirically informed, cutting-edge research that tackles both theoretical concerns and practical implications.

The book focuses on how a diverse array of pop culture artifacts such as pop and rap music, movies and TV series, comics and cartoons, fan fiction, and video games can be exploited for the development of language skills. It establishes the study of pop culture and its language as a serious subfield within language education and applied linguistics and explores how studies of pop culture, its language, and its non-linguistic affordances can inform language education at various levels of proficiency and with various learner populations.

Presenting a broad range of quantitative and qualitative research approaches, including case studies on how pop culture has been used successfully in language education in and beyond the classroom, this book will be of great interest for academics, researchers, and students in the fields of language education, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, as well as for language teachers and materials developers.

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Acknowledgements

The work and expertise of many people has helped to make the present volume become a reality, and we would like to express our sincere thanks to all of them.

First and foremost, we were fortunate to rely on a selection of authors that were immediately fascinated by this project and that had the capabilities to shed light on a vast topic from multiple perspectives, thus enabling us to go much beyond what we could have achieved alone. We would like to thank all of them for dealing with all our requests in an extraordinarily swift and friendly manner – working with you was a real pleasure!

We were also able to rely on the input from a long list of international scholars that volunteered as referees for individual contributions. We particularly valued the constructive spirit in which criticism and recommendations for changes were provided. This helped to elevate the quality of the individual chapters as well as of the overall book. For sharing their time and expertise we are indebted to Marilyn Abbott, Mansoor Al-Surmi, Emily Bailin Wells, Phil Benson, Katharina Beuter, Rebecca W. Black, Alice Chik, Christian W. Chun, Yen Dang, Pauline Degrange, Patricia A. Duff, Philip Durrant, Carmen Fonseca-Mora, Steven Graham, Wolfgang Hallet, Nasser Jabbari, Christian Jones, Jeff Kuhn, Deniz Kurtoğlu Eken, Lindsay Miller, Freda Mishan, Brigitta Mittmann, Andrew Mobbs, Andrew Moody, Ignacio Palacios Martínez, Anne Peirson-Smith, Eleanor Ridge, Anastasia Rothoni, John Rucynski, Marlene Schwarz, Anna Siyanova-Chanturia, Ross Sundberg, Engelbert Thaler, Kelleen Toohey, James Trier, and Joe Trotta.

Further, for help and advice at various stages, we would like to say thanks to the anonymous reviewers that provided helpful suggestions on the contents and structure of the overall volume, as well as to the publisher’s editorial team, represented by Emilie Coin and Swapnil Joshi. With their outstanding professionalism and open ears for our requests, the Routledge team ensured a smooth publication process.
Introduction
1 Learning languages through pop culture/learning about pop culture through language education

Valentin Werner and Friederike Tegge

Abstract

This chapter provides a broad contextualization of pop culture in language education. It is argued that hitherto the vast inherent potential of pop culture for foreign language education has been underused and underresearched, and that this underutilization is surprising in view of the many supporting rationales from various domains (such as psychology, sociology, and language pedagogy). Pop culture is presented not merely as a catalyst for learning and a vehicle of various other instructional content but — particularly in the form of pop culture literacy and the engagement with non-standard language varieties — as a curricular objective in its own right. Eventually, it is suggested that pop culture should be accepted as a legitimate and valuable point of departure for a range of language-related competencies and topics. The introductory chapter further aims at showing how individual contributions in this volume are linked and how they are related to the general arguments pertaining to the use of pop culture in language education contexts.

1. Introduction

Why so serious?!
(The Joker in The Dark Knight)

In present-day societies worldwide, pop culture is ubiquitous in its various manifestations, such as pop music; shows and movies available in cinemas, on TV, and on streaming services; YouTube clips; podcasts; comics; cartoons; memes; video games; etc., with consumption rates for selected artifact types still increasing (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015; Nielsen, 2019). While this may be considered stating the obvious, it is essential to note that in educational contexts a more general turn toward pop culture is a fairly recent (yet robust) development (Benson & Patkin, 2014; Browne, 2005; Peacock, Covino, Auchter, Boyd, Klug, Laing, & Irvin, 2018). Even though pop culture and its associated language have played a pervasive and socially highly relevant role in the lives of many language learners — adolescents in particular (Grau, 2009; Richards, 1994; Rothoni, 2017, 2019) — it is surprising that, to date, the use of pertinent artifacts and
their language has been undertheorized and underresearched in applied linguistics and language education (Werner, 2018). This neither implies that there is no relevant work at all that recognizes the potential of pop culture for language learning purposes, nor that language educators have ignored pop culture in their daily practice (see, for example Domoney & Harris, 1993 for an older relevant analysis). However, given its large social impact and many favorable theoretical arguments from various fields of study for using it (see Section 2), related investigations and materials seem to be comparatively scarce.

Following explicit calls for more empirical and narrative research, such as the one voiced by Liu and Lin (2017), the contributions in this volume can be seen as attempts toward further normalizing the use of pop culture materials in language education. To provide broader contextualization of the domain, the current chapter (i) outlines shared theoretical underpinnings and methodological approaches and (ii) connects what may seem like disparate strands of research within an overarching theme.

1.1 What is “pop”? What is “pop culture”?  

A basic issue to tackle is how to define the “pop” in “pop culture”. Numerous proposals circulate, which all emphasize various aspects and of which only a selection can be presented and discussed in sufficient detail here. In an effort to systematize approaches toward pop culture, Merskin (2008) establishes the following categorization:

(1) A pejorative meaning referring to objects or practices deemed lesser than or inferior to elite culture, that is, appeal to a mass audience;
(2) objects or practices well-liked by many people, that is, not the small groups of elite or wealthy;
(3) work designed with the intention of appealing to a great number of people, that is, commercial culture meant to be widely consumed; and
(4) things people make for themselves.

While definitions along the “deficiency” view exemplified in (1) can be viewed as traditional and have been largely overcome (Page, 2012), (2) and (3) certainly interact (with (3) focusing on consumption) and are central for language education. These characteristics are also reflected in pop culture essentially being “mass-generated print and nonprint texts […] that use multiple modes (for example, linguistic, visual, aural, performative) to communicate an intended message” (Hagood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby 2010, p. 81). An alternative definition emphasizes the function of pop culture in society by defining it as a “broad range of texts that constitute the cultural landscape of a particular time and/or place, as well as the ways in which consumers engage with those texts and thus become producers of new negotiated meanings” (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015, p. 369; emphasis in original). While the latter part of this definition extends to section
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(4) of Merskin’s (2008) categorization, it is evident that pop culture centrally materializes in textual form, broadly defined. This makes pop culture artifacts a relevant object of study for language researchers and educators in the first place.

As a rule, pop culture texts represent scripted fictional(ized) content, even though the border between fiction and non-fiction admittedly may be difficult to draw sometimes (Queen, 2015), for instance when formats such as semi-scripted reality shows are considered. In addition, from the above definitions pop culture emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing a multitude of different artifacts and thus different text types (see also Marsh, 2008), which opens ample opportunities for language educators to use these texts in a flexible way, allowing adaptation of teaching approaches and contents to particular social and cultural contexts.

A few further aspects need consideration. First, due to its commercial nature, as inherent in definition (3) in Merskin’s (2008) categorization, pop culture traditionally has been criticized as commodified and conformist with mainstream positions and values, a perspective established through the Frankfurt school of sociology (see, for example, Adorno, 1941). However, more recently it has been emphasized that the respective oppositional or conformist nature of each manifestation has to be considered individually (Marsh, 2008) and that it is misguided to conceive of the pop culture audience as mere passive mass consumers (Rothoni, 2017). It is interesting to note that many works that are now considered “classics” and are associated with “high” culture initially were created with an intent to appeal to a mass audience (Hobbs, 2005), which is testimony to the dynamic and situated nature of pop culture and culture more generally.

The globalized nature of pop culture is another issue that is implicit in Merskin’s categories (2) and (3), with modern channels of distribution facilitating the spread of the manifestations worldwide (Marsh, 2008; Miller, 2015; Werner, 2018). As already mentioned above, an aspect strongly related to the globalized spread of pop culture is its connection to mass media (Queen, 2015). Mass media has been identified as one of the three main routes (besides personal networks and travelling) through which language learners come into contact with a target language outside institutional contexts (Grau, 2009; see further Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.3), and this presently includes the ever more spreading digital media (Rothoni, 2017).

On a different note, it is crucial to mention the persisting bias toward Western(ized), and, particularly, American(ized) forms, and an overrepresentation of English as the language of pop culture (Liu & Lin, 2017). A look at the table of contents shows that the present volume can be considered representative of these biases, which are also reinforced by English serving as global lingua franca and being the most-studied second and foreign language worldwide (see, for example, Rothoni, 2017; de Wilde, Brysbaert, & Eyckmans, 2019). However, while English continues to feature prominently whenever language education and pop culture are brought together (Benson & Patkin, 2014; see also Lee & Moody, 2012), this certainly does not preclude other languages from
being considered, and a number of contributions (Issa, this volume; Pai & Duff, this volume) illustrate this development.

In sum, in accordance with the foregoing thoughts, pop culture will be broadly conceptualized here. Its scholarly study represents a wide field in terms of both the various artifacts comprised and the theoretical frameworks and research-methodological approaches applied. Thus, language educators are encouraged to also apply a wide angle when engaging with pop culture to fully exploit its potentials.

1.2 Overview

In the following, a number of rationales for using pop culture in language education are presented (Section 2), and it is argued further why pop culture (in its own right) should also form part of the language curriculum, shifting the focus from educating through or with pop culture to educating about or for pop culture (Section 3). The final part (Section 4) provides some concluding remarks.

2. Rationales for using pop culture

*I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.*

*(Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*)

Marsh (2008) presents a summary of what she refers to as “ideological rationale[s]” (p. 530) for using pop culture. While her overview derives from perspectives advanced mainly in first-language and literacy education, the principles appear sufficiently generalizable to language education at large.
The Venn diagram shown as Figure 1.1 indicates that there is some overlap between the various rationales, which individually can be detailed as follows:

- **Utilitarian model**: pop culture is exploited as a means to lead to schooled literary practices;
- **Culture capital model**: pop culture is acknowledged as an integral part of students’ lives and valued as sole cultural experience in certain social environments;
- **Critical model**: learners are to be developed into critical readers and writers of both canonical and non-canonical texts;
- **Recontextualization model**: a new type of knowledge is created, bringing together home and classroom cultural spaces.

In addition to these general arguments, which serve as a kind of theoretical base on which other rationales rest, more specific factors favoring the use of pop culture in language education have been identified, as explained in the following (see also Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2013).

### 2.1 Psychology of learning and motivation

*I can’t get no satisfaction!*  
*(The Rolling Stones)*

A main argument for the use of pop culture artifacts in language education derives from their potential to affectively engage learners (Sposet, 2008; Tomlinson, 2017) and to discursively stimulate emotional experiences (see Langlotz, 2017). This emotional quality of the language material used has been found to potentially reduce stress levels and levels of language learning anxiety (Dolean, 2016), which naturally is conducive to language learning and may help to foster learners’ motivation, a key factor established in second language acquisition (SLA) research (for example, Loewen, 2014; see further below).

The multimodal nature of the majority of pop culture artifacts is also relevant from a cognitive perspective, notably in terms of the “multimedia principle” (Plass & Jones, 2005, p. 480). This principle holds that as encoding regularly happens in more than one mode (music and lyrics for pop songs, still images and text in comics, moving images and text in TV series and movies, various modes on webpages, etc.), parallel information processing and resultant multiple encoding and decoding may occur. In turn, this facilitates the retention of content and structures (see, for example, Allmayer, 2008; de Wilde et al., 2019; Mishan, 2005; Montero Perez & Rodgers, 2019). Note, however, that others have been less enthusiastic in this regard and have, for instance, when song-based teaching is employed, cautioned against a “cost of singing” (Racette & Peretz, 2007, p. 250), that is, an additional processing burden that lowers rates of verbal recall.

Arguably the most central (and also most widely discussed) psychological area is learner motivation. Here, it has been claimed that working with pop culture
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materials serves to specifically foster the language learners’ intrinsic motivation (for example, Cheung, 2001; Gilmore, 2010; Kao & Oxford, 2014; Liu & Lin, 2017; Scott Langeland, 2013; see also Peacock et al., 2018). Such findings are grounded on the assumption that motivation is raised whenever learners work with texts they perceive as authentic and personally meaningful (see also Section 2.3.1) and are regularly supported by surveys on learners’ self-reports where working with pop culture materials is experienced as an enjoyable activity (see, for example, Werner, forthcoming b for a pertinent review study on pop music).4

2.2 Sociology

*I get by with a little help from my friends!* (The Beatles)

A “social turn” (Block, 2003, 2007a) in second language research in the 1990s brought a stronger focus on language as not only a symbolic system but also as a form of social practice to act, engage with and position oneself within the social world(s). This brought about inquiry into language learning as not only a cognitive but also a social process of participation “in the everyday activities of communities of language users” (Duff & Talmy, 2011, p. 96), and was accompanied by an increased use of qualitative methods, particularly narrative-based research.

Identity theory (Block, 2007b; Norton & McKinney, 2011) is one socially oriented approach which can be fruitfully applied to analyze and account for the role of pop culture in second language learning. Drawing on poststructuralist theories of language (for example, Bakhtin, 1981; Bourdieu, 1977) and identity (for example, Weedon, 1997) and on sociocultural theories of learning (for example, Wenger, 1998), identity theory explores the discursive (re-)construction and (re-)negotiation of multiple learner identities within different social contexts and the impact thereof on the language learning process (Norton & McKinney, 2011). In this context, rather than viewing a learner in terms of the learner-internal, psychological concept of motivation, Norton (see, for example, Norton, 2013) introduced the concept of a learner’s investment in the target language. Investment relies not only on the learners’ desires for (future) beneficial “returns” (for example social status, relationships, and professional and financial advancement; cf. the “utilitarian” dimension in Figure 1.1) but also on access to relevant communities of practice and the identities learners can assume within them (for instance of particular pop culture spheres). The construct of investment – in contrast to the cognitively oriented motivation (see Section 2.1) – accounts for the individual’s embeddedness in a social context such as the language classroom, which might cause a learner to be “highly motivated to learn a language, but not necessarily invested in a given set of language practices” (Norton, 2013, p. 3). Here, the connection to cognitive processes of language learning is clear, as the learner’s investment and the social context can increase or restrict opportunities to practice the target language.

Pop culture is at the core of many affinity groups formed around a common interest (Gee, 2004), notably including fandom, fanfiction, and multiplayer-game
communities, but also special interest groups, for instance, environmental activists (see Summer, this volume). Such groups, often found on the Internet, can enable translocal\(^5\) communication between individuals of diverse regional, social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015). They can offer alternative and often powerful identities to learners (Liu & Lin, 2017; Norton & McKinney, 2011) who might experience language learning and use as marginalizing and who may find themselves viewed solely in terms of linguistic and cultural deficiency in their identities as learners (Black, 2006), non-native speakers, and migrants (see for example Duff, 2004; Norton, 2013). Such voluntary spaces of participation around a common interest can engender personal and emotional engagement and warrant greater investment, while also providing opportunities to develop communicative competence and literacy skills and to receive language support and feedback from peers.

Several studies have highlighted that language learning is often motivated and sustained in the long term by an interest in pop culture (for example, Nomura & Yuan, 2019). It has also repeatedly been observed that young learners who struggled academically and socially and were stigmatized as low-achievers in school developed language and literacy skills as well as self-confidence through using a globalized, online form of English. Such developments have been interpreted as a positive result of (i) interacting with multicultural and multilingual – and also potentially transcultural and translingual – peers and (ii) actively contributing in pop-based affinity groups that provided a sense of belonging and allowed them to forge a more powerful and esteemed identity (Black, 2006; Lam, 2000; Liu & Lin, 2017).\(^6\)

In foreign language contexts, pop-culture based affinity groups outside the classroom may also offer opportunities to escape (or at least complement) the institutionally defined identity of students (Thorne et al., 2015) and engage in meaningful communication in the target language not as a learner but as a legitimate language user (Chen, 2013; see also Peirson-Smith & Miller, this volume). For example, massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) offer extensive opportunities to develop communicative competence through authentic social interaction and collaborative problem solving with international peers (Rama, Black, van Es, & Warschauer, 2012).\(^7\)

Pop culture may also allow learners to access aspirational imagined communities (Norton, 2001). Ibrahim (1999, 2011, this volume), for example, observed that young African migrants in Canada – positioned as “Blacks” by society – identified with the African-American and African-Canadian community despite the fact that they did not at first have contact with those communities. In their process of “becoming Black” they used hip-hop culture as a site of identification and as a source of linguistic and cultural knowledge, and they opted to learn African-American Vernacular or Black English as a Second Language (BESL). Imagined communities also play a role in foreign language contexts. Murray (2008) quotes Taka, a Japanese EFL learner, whose motivation to learn the language was rooted in a desire to participate in the American society as depicted on TV: “I wanted to be close to them … I wanted to be part of it”. Menard-Warwick (2011) observed that Chilean EFL teachers engaged with English-language films and music on a
weekly or even daily basis to maintain a transnational identity as well as a professional identity as language experts.

In second language learning contexts, pop culture knowledge itself can serve as important cultural capital (see Figure 1.1) in the discourse and power structures of a dominant community. Lacking such knowledge can hinder (full) participation, as group affiliation and membership status often rely on shared knowledge and experiences (see also Rucynski, this volume). Norton (2013) recounts how Eva, a Polish immigrant to the USA, felt positioned as an outsider, shamed, and silenced by her co-worker for not knowing the TV show *The Simpsons*. Pop culture might carry particularly great value among adolescents and in secondary school contexts (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; Zuengler, 2003). Duff’s (2001, 2002, 2004) research on classroom discourse highlights the role of pop culture knowledge as “a powerful resource for the display of teachers’ and students’ social and cultural identities and affiliations” (Duff, 2004, p. 233). Migrant youths who could neither understand nor contribute to such “pop culture-infused talk” (Duff, 2004, p. 231) were marginalized and perceived as solitary and deficient by local students. Their academic progress was also affected, as they were often excluded from active participation in discussions which relied on and elaborated academic concepts by means of pop culture references.

Pop culture in education, when explored within a framework of identity and socialization, is linked to and draws on other areas of inquiry, which cannot be explored in detail here, including studies on globalization (Pennycook, 2010), new literacies (Thorne & Black, 2011), social media (Reinhardt, 2019), adult education, critical media literacy (Wright, 2018; see also Section 3), and fan culture (Duffett, 2013), as well as on specialist disciplines, such as environmental studies (see Summer, this volume). In addition, negative experiences of learners in pop-based digital spaces and affinity groups due to, for example, intercultural miscommunication (Kramsch & Thorne, 2006) or negative attitudes towards second language speakers in communities dominated by native speakers (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011) remain to be investigated. It seems that a shared interest in pop culture is no guarantee for welcoming, supportive social practices. Nonetheless, pop culture can and does provide alternative spaces for positive engagement and the development of target language competencies for many learners.

### 2.3 Language pedagogy and second language acquisition research

*Ooh, that’s a bingo!*

(_Hans Landa_ in _Inglorious Basterds_)

A multitude of arguments for the use of pop culture has been discussed in the domains of language pedagogy and SLA research. We do not claim to provide an exhaustive overview but would like to draw attention to the various perspectives and rationales in favor of using pop culture discussed in these disciplines.
2.3.1 Authenticity and learner-centered teaching

An important issue to be considered is authenticity. While the discourse surrounding the concept of “authenticity” of language learning materials cannot be fully reflected here, it is evident that pop culture texts commonly are viewed as authentic (see, for example, Gilmore, 2010; Mishan, 2005; Montero Perez & Rodgers, 2019; Summer, 2019) as they were “created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which [they were] produced” (Little & Singleton, 1988, p. 21). Employing authentic materials that represent language in use (and that thus crucially go beyond the – by necessity, truncated – repertoire of “classroom language” mostly encountered in institutionalized contexts) is further considered to foster authentication on part of the learners (see also Moody, this volume; Werner, this volume). This implies the learners perceive the material as meaningful and relevant and that they can use or adapt it in personal contexts of use (McCarthy & McCarten, 2018), which in turn raises learners’ motivation (see Section 2.1).

Authentication is crucial to counter the longstanding issue of disconnectedness between language learning activities and the students’ lifeworld(s) as well as their daily language practice (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Schwarz, 2013; cf. the “culture capital” approach shown in Figure 1.1). Pop culture possesses a high everyday relevance for learners, irrespective of their social and linguistic backgrounds. Accordingly, the vast majority of everyday literary practices, especially among adolescents, is related to pop culture in one way or another (Benson & Patkin, 2014; Domoney & Harris, 1993; Grau, 2009; Liu & Lin, 2017; Rothoni, 2017, 2019). It is therefore suggested that taking pop culture artifacts seriously as both content providers and subjects in themselves (see Section 3) may serve as a starting point for learner-centered teaching (Nunan, 2013). Further, it helps to overcome the persistently reported ignorance of engagement with languages in non-institutionalized contexts (see, for example, Bednarek, 2018; Grau, 2009; Hofmann, 2018), and may also be conducive to informal and incidental learning, thus establishing a link to extramural contexts (see, for example, de Wilde et al., 2019; Kerekes, 2015; Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015; Page, 2012; Peters & Webb, 2018; Rothoni, 2017; Schwarz, 2013; Webb, 2015; Werner, Lehl, & Walton, 2017; see further Section 2.3.3).

2.3.2 Going beyond standard varieties

It is clear that pop culture texts can be used as a vehicle to illustrate various kinds of linguistic structures and phenomena (Liu & Lin, 2017; see, for example, Akbary, Shahriari, & Hosseini Fatemi, 2018 for a study that explores the potential of lyrics to introduce and illustrate English phrasal verbs; Bruti, 2018 and Ryan & Granville, 2020 for investigations of how pragmatics can be taught with the help of TV series and movies). From a language-educational point of view, pop culture material offers the additional affordance to introduce language
variation, both in terms of different modes or registers (for example, spoken/colloquial vs. written/formal) and in terms of regional and social varieties (see, for example, Frumuselu, De Maeyer, Donche, & del Mar Gutiérrez Colon Plana, 2015; Werner, 2019, this volume). It has been claimed that current textbooks fall short of representing authentic versions (see also Section 2.3.1) of the target languages as mostly standard material with a bias towards written and formal language is presented (Saraceni, 2017). By contrast, analyses of pop cultural texts have found that the language presented there often is fairly natural and resembles spoken conversation better than textbook dialogues (for example, Jones & Cleary, 2019; Jones & Horák, 2014; Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2017; see also Werner, this volume). Pop culture texts have also been found to often be more comprehensible for learners than natural (unscripted) conversation (Jones, 2017).

Using pop culture in language classrooms can hence contribute to the overall goals: (i) to lead to an acceptance of non-standardness as the default case when languages are encountered, (ii) to critical assessments of prescriptivist notions, (iii) to nuanced conceptualizations of acceptability and appropriateness in certain registers, and thus (iv) to increased language awareness and a more accurate picture of linguistic realities. Using pop culture texts therefore is squarely in line with the recent trend to move away from merely engaging with standard(ized) language as traditionally represented in textbooks and other materials (Saraceni, 2017).

2.3.3 Assessing engagement with and learning through pop culture

Many language educators (see, for example, Acharya, 2015; Alisaari & Heikkola, 2017; Benson & Patkin, 2014; Peacock et al., 2018; Rose, 2016) as well as young and adult learners express a positive attitude towards and make use of a range of pop culture artifacts both in formal classroom-based language education and in extramural encounters, that is, out-of-class foreign language exposure (see also Trotta, this volume). Artifacts include pop music (Green, 1993; Hindémè, Egounléti, & Kottin, 2018; Kerekes, 2015; Summer, 2010; Tegge, 2015, 2018; see Tegge & Coxhead, this volume; Werner, this volume), movies and TV (Y. Wang, 2012; C. Wang, 2016; Webb, 2015; see Bednarek, this volume; Bruti, this volume), video games (Chik, 2011; Ibrahim, 2018; see Rodgers & Heidt, this volume), comics (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; see Issa, this volume; Rucynski, this volume), and internet-based materials, such as YouTube videos and social media content (Chik & Ho, 2017; Muniandy & Veloo, 2011; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014; see Peirson-Smith & Miller, this volume; Sauro & Thorne, this volume).

The benefits of engaging with pop culture for second language development have been the focus of a range of empirical research studies, with some pop artifacts being studied more intently (for example, movies, video games, and songs) than others (for example, comics). The research tends to fall into three categories: (i) assessment of materials (for example, lyrics or movie scripts) or communicative contexts (for example, interactions that occur during multiplayer gaming) and the learning opportunities they afford; (ii) exposure to the
materials in- or out-of-class; and (iii) assessment of learning outcomes. Learning is measured with regard to particular language skills and competencies, particularly vocabulary recall, and also through performance in comprehensive tests and summative grades received in formal language classes (see also Werner, 2018, forthcoming b).

The following passages provide an overview of research exploring extramural encounters of learners with pop-based language input. In addition, studies investigating specifically the vocabulary learning opportunities afforded by various pop materials are discussed. Finally, a brief review of research assessing learning outcomes is provided, with a focus on gains in vocabulary knowledge and communicative competence.

POP OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Language learning by means of engaging with pop culture frequently occurs in extramural encounters, outside of formal, classroom-based education. Adult and young learners frequently engage with various artifacts or pop-based communities, either for self-guided language study or – more commonly – for the primary purpose of entertainment and socialization in the target language, with language learning often being a beneficial side effect. Frequently, this takes place in online contexts in the digital wilds, that is, “in digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts” (Sauro & Zourou, 2019, p. 2).

Research on adult learners’ extramural engagement with pop culture frequently focuses on self-guided study and takes a small-scale approach, possibly because adult learners, especially after finishing tertiary education, are difficult to recruit in large numbers. Qualitative studies such as Murray (2008, 2011), Murray and Kojima (2007), and Chik and Ho (2017) have investigated the relevance of engaging with pop culture in biographies of young to senior adult learners. Milton (2008) reviewed case studies of individuals who made significant gains in their respective vocabulary knowledge through listening to Greek film songs, reading the comic Lucky Luke in Dutch, and watching Xena Warrior Princess in English with Greek subtitles.

More insights have been gained into the engagement with and educational benefits for young language learners. Especially in Northern and Western European countries such as Sweden or the Netherlands, children’s out-of-class exposure to a foreign language, particularly English, through pop culture and the media can vastly exceed time spent in language classes (Sundqvist, 2011; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014) as well as time spent engaging with a foreign language through reading more traditional texts (Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013). Common forms of engagement with a foreign language for children and adolescents around the globe, from Sweden (Olsson, 2016; Sundqvist, 2011), Germany (Grau, 2009), and Croatia (Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013) to Mexico (Sayer & Ban, 2014), include TV, digital games, music, movies, and internet-based activities like reading online magazines and watching video clips. In addition, even with little
or no formal second language education, children in Belgium (Bollansée et al., this volume; de Wilde & Eyckmans, 2017; Kuppens, 2010), Denmark (Jensen, 2017; Muñoz, Cadierno, & Casas, 2018) and Iceland (Lefever, 2010) have been shown to display observable levels of proficiency in a foreign language.

A positive impact of out-of-class engagement with foreign language entertainment media on language proficiency or school grades has also been observed in adolescent learners (Peters, 2018; Peters, Noreille, Heylen, Bulté, & Desmet, 2019; Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015; Uuskoski, 2011). In a study with over 1,000 adolescent EFL learners in Sweden, Sundqvist (2019) found a significant correlation between time spent playing video games and scores on receptive and productive vocabulary tests. However, extensive extramural exposure is not necessarily the norm in other countries, such as Turkey (Coşkun & Mutlu, 2017). It further varies, for example, due to socio-economic and educational factors or gender (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2011; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). De Wilde and Eyckmans (2017) stress the resulting difficulty for foreign language teachers in beginner language classrooms, since such a diversity in knowledge “makes for very heterogeneous classes at the start of formal […] instruction” (p. 685). Given the strong evidence for a positive relationship between extramural exposure to a foreign language and language proficiency, Lindgren and Muñoz (2013) encourage teachers to draw students’ attention to the learning opportunities outside the classroom and suggest assigning homework that involves pop culture artifacts such as movies or songs.

VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH POP CULTURE

A traditionally strong research focus is on the lexical demand and sophistication of and vocabulary learning opportunities afforded by pop materials, including pop songs (Tegge, 2017), TV series and movies (Rodgers & Webb, 2011; Webb, 2011; Webb & Rodgers, 2009a, 2009b), and TED talks (Coxhead & Walls, 2012). Thorne, Fischer, and Lu (2012) investigated the lexical diversity and sophistication as well as the syntactic complexity of game-presented quest texts in World of Warcraft and of texts providing support for players on game-external websites. Csomay and Petrović (2012) provide rare insight into the potential of movies and TV shows with legal content (for example, the series Law and Order and the film Runaway Jury) for English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and incidental learning of technical, discipline-related vocabulary. Rolls and Rodgers (2017) explore the affordances of science-fiction literature for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by investigating the frequency of common science-specific word families in a corpus of science fiction and fantasy short stories and novels, including chapters from Jurassic Park and the Star Wars series.

Empirical intervention studies have shown that significant gains in vocabulary knowledge are possible when engaging with pop culture texts. This lends support to their use as valuable alternatives to more traditional texts for intensive or extensive reading, listening, and also viewing, including TV and movies (d’Ydewalle & van de Poel, 1999; Feng & Webb, 2019; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992; Peters &