



Using Latin American Songs to Enhance Motivation in Spanish Language Learning: A Case Study at Makerere University, Uganda

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of Latin American songs in enhancing motivation and reducing anxiety among Spanish language learners at Makerere University, Uganda. Grounded in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), the research compared two groups of third-year Spanish beginners over a 16-week semester: an experimental group exposed to songs from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, and a control group taught through traditional methods. Data were collected through class observations, focus group discussions, and lecturer interviews. Findings reveal that the experimental group demonstrated higher interest, improved pronunciation, greater confidence, and stronger emotional engagement than the control group, which remained hesitant and less participative. Songs such as Vivir Mi Vida and Despacito provided cultural resonance, lowered classroom anxiety, and encouraged active participation. The study concludes that integrating Latin American music into Spanish instruction offers a practical and enjoyable strategy to foster learner motivation, reduce affective barriers, and promote cultural appreciation in foreign language education.

Keywords: Songs, Motivation, Spanish as a Foreign Language, Language Anxiety, Affective Filter, Uganda, Latin American Music.

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Introduction

Spanish is one of the most widely spoken and influential languages in the world. With almost 500 million native speakers and about 100 million third language speakers as of 2023, the total number of hispanohablantes has reached approximately 600 million. This makes Spanish the third most natively spoken language, and the fourth most spoken language overall globally (Albares, 2023). Spanish is also the third most widely used language on the Internet, and it represents a cultural force that has profoundly shaped history, politics, literature, and global communication across all five continents.

The Spanish language therefore holds immense importance to the social fabric of humankind, enabling communication through conventionalized vocal sounds and structures that allow speakers to understand one another (Learningexplorer.org, 2024). For students in Africa, and more particularly in Uganda, learning a foreign language such as Spanish is both necessary and useful in today's interconnected world. However, it should also be emphasized that learners often hold different motivations, expectations, and levels of engagement when approaching a foreign language (Tugues, 2024).

This article explores the role of Latin American Spanish songs in enhancing Spanish language learning as a foreign language. Specifically, it investigates how Latin American music, with its rich rhythms, diverse genres, and cultural messages, fosters enthusiasm, reduces anxiety, and increases engagement among learners. The motivational impact of Spanish songs from Latin America is substantial, particularly in non-native contexts such as Makerere University in Uganda. To keep students engaged and inspired, innovative teaching techniques are required. We argue that these songs serve as a highly effective tool because they provide cultural insights, natural language exposure, and emotional involvement that enrich traditional classroom practices.

Music in general has been described as a delivery of feelings, stories, and explanations conveyed in beautiful language to influence the listener's heart and mind (Samaranga, 2008). A song is typically a brief piece of music with spoken words (lyrics) that invite listeners to sing along, making it both a cultural and emotional artifact. When applied in language pedagogy, songs provide learners with authentic linguistic material embedded in rhythm, rhyme, and cultural meaning.

Literature Review

Music as a Pedagogical Tool

The integration of Latin American songs into language classrooms aids in the retention of vocabulary, supports memory through repetition, and stimulates learner engagement. According to Claerr and Gargan (1984), “with some imagination, songs can be used to teach all aspects of foreign languages.” This view was echoed by Falioni (1993), who asserted that practically all grammar points can be found in music texts, while the accompanying lyrics offer a wide variety of vocabulary to practice the four communication skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Thus, music is not simply a form of entertainment; it is a pedagogical resource with broad applicability in language teaching.

Language Anxiety and Its Implications

One of the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety theory developed by Horwitz and Cope (1986). They explain that many students experience anxiety reactions that impede their ability to perform successfully in a foreign language class. Anxiety is defined as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with arousal of the autonomic nervous system. Spielberger (1983) categorized anxiety into three types: trait anxiety, situational anxiety, and state anxiety. The type most often observed in language classrooms is situational anxiety, triggered by the specific demands of learning and performance. Similar to how anxiety hinders individuals in mathematics or science, it also restricts learners in foreign language acquisition, often making the classroom environment stressful and discouraging.

The Problem in Ugandan Context

The specific challenge addressed by this study is the high level of anxiety and low engagement among Ugandan Spanish learners, a consequence of cultural and linguistic distance, limited exposure to native speakers, and heavy reliance on traditional textbook-based methods. In Uganda, where Spanish is studied purely as a foreign language, students often struggle with low proficiency and poor motivation. This study responds to that challenge by integrating culturally resonant Latin American songs into Spanish lessons as a way of reducing anxiety and fostering interest. The approach also aligns with Uganda’s broader goals of equipping students with global language skills for economic, educational, and cultural integration.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The main theoretical foundation of this study is Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982). The term affective refers to emotions, attitudes, and feelings that influence learning.

According to Krashen, negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, boredom, and lack of motivation act as a psychological filter that reduces a learner's ability to absorb comprehensible input. In contrast, a weak affective filter indicates a positive learning environment where students are open to acquiring language naturally. Krashen (1982, p.1) emphasizes that "for optimal learning to occur, the affective filter must be weak. A weak affective filter means that a positive attitude toward learning is present. When it is strong, the learner will not seek input and, in turn, will not be open for language acquisition."

The practical application of this hypothesis in the classroom means that a teacher of Spanish should create a positive and encouraging environment that lowers stress and fosters motivation. Songs are one method of weakening the affective filter and promoting language learning. In contrast to traditional teacher-led, output-heavy instruction—characterized by testing, correction, and pressure—songs introduce joy, rhythm, and cultural connection. This study therefore assumes that once the affective filter is lowered through the use of Latin American songs, students will be motivated and more receptive to language input, leading to improved acquisition (Wiik, 2025).

Bridging Affective Filter and Anxiety Frameworks

Both Krashen's theory of the affective filter and Horwitz and Cope's framework on classroom anxiety inform this study. The integration of Latin American songs addresses both perspectives: songs help lower the affective filter by creating a joyful, low-pressure learning environment, while simultaneously reducing the situational anxiety that is common among learners of foreign languages. Songs with emotional resonance, repetition, and cultural relevance provide learners with a sense of belonging and engagement, making them more inclined to participate actively and less fearful of mistakes.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the motivational role of Latin American songs in Spanish language learning among third-year students at Makerere University in Uganda. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of learners' lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and cultural responses when exposed to music as part of their language lessons. Case study design was particularly appropriate since the research sought to capture the complex and situated realities of a small, purposively selected group of students within their natural classroom setting, rather than to generalize across a large population.

The participants consisted of 20 third-year undergraduate students enrolled in Spanish as a foreign language in 2024. They were purposively divided into two groups of equal size: the experimental group ($n = 10$), which received instruction supplemented with selected Latin American songs, and the control group ($n = 10$), which was taught using traditional textbook-based and teacher-centred methods. Gender distribution within the groups was fairly balanced, with 7 males and 6 females in the control group, and 3 males and 4 females in the experimental group. The study spanned one academic semester (16 weeks), enabling the researcher to capture longitudinal changes in motivation and engagement.

Data collection employed three complementary techniques: classroom observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interviews with lecturers. Observations were conducted weekly to record students' participation, emotional responses, and classroom dynamics during lessons. FGDs were organised with both students and lecturers to elicit deeper reflections on their experiences, particularly focusing on anxiety, enjoyment, and motivational shifts. Interviews with lecturers further contextualised the findings by drawing on their pedagogical expertise and perceptions of how songs influenced learning. Triangulating these three methods increased the validity of the findings by providing multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon.

Findings and Results

Learner Motivation and Anxiety in Spanish Language Learning

During data collection using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) at Makerere University, it was observed that Spanish songs were a key motivational factor for students learning Spanish as a foreign language (FL). On admission, many students affirmed that they initially had no idea what Spanish was and showed little interest until they were introduced to familiar Latin American songs such as *Dura* and *Gasolina* by Daddy Yankee or *Despacito* by Luis Fonsi featuring Daddy Yankee. At this point, enthusiasm and engagement increased markedly, as affirmed by their lecturer (FGD, October 2024).

During class observations, it was noted that the third year students having garnered some vocabulary and cultural exposure to the target language cultures in the first two university semesters, became more comfortable with the songs. They could sing along and comment on the messages therein. During the in-depth interviews, these students affirmed that Spanish lectures that involve learning with and through songs are indeed exciting and fun and they always looked forward to participating. They shared testimonies about how the different Spanish songs improved their Spanish language acquisition in ways they never imagined.

Through experience, they suggest easier songs to their beginner colleagues even without the lecturers' involvements hence students are self-driven thanks to the Spanish songs. This results in enormous psychological and emotional benefits to the Spanish language learners.

During the FGD, the Spanish lecturers in Makerere University expressed the concern that despite the growing interest in learning Spanish, many learners still faced challenges with motivation, engagement, and consistent language practice. However, since the Spanish classes were relatively small and could sit around one desk top computer to listen carefully to a piece of music, this greatly improved attention, peer support and the attention span. They thus argued that Latin American songs did serve as a motivational tool to enhance language learning. They help students to feel attended to, gain confidence and start to pronounce words consistently until when they end up speaking comfortably.

In contrast, the group of students who were being taught under the Center Language and Communication Services (CLCS) under the School of Languages, Literature and Communication, after the 16 weeks of observation, it was noted that most of them were still too shy to make any oral presentation. They reported that they” felt intimidated by the new pronunciation” (FGD after Class Observations, September 2024). They also reported finding “the grammar hard and the exercises so time -consuming for us as evening students from the Science Colleges” (FGD after Class Observations, September, 2024). In an effort to improve student attention and interest, they suggested” the introduction of enjoyable audio-visual documents with songs and dances from Spanish-speaking cultures” (FGD after Class Observations, September 2024). Finally, in the language course test they did, their creative and written expression were lower than those of the experimental group which was motivated into discussion by the songs that had been introduced in their lessons. This confirms the theoretical base of this study, where language learning anxiety can be reduced and motivation can be increased through the use of Latin American songs in Spanish teaching in an African University environment.,

Reduced Spanish Language Learning Anxiety Among Students

From the observations of Group 1 (Experimental) we noted that students were crossing an intrinsically anxiety-inducing experience, particularly when faced with unfamiliar linguistic structures, cultural differences, and the pressure to communicate effectively. The anxiety often stemmed from multiple sources: unfamiliar pronunciation, complex grammar, fear of making mistakes, and the challenges of understanding diverse Hispanic accents. However, when a song was introduced, especially a new one, the cultural and enjoyable elements, such as melody, rhythm and dance significantly reduced anxiety and made the learning process more engaging

and interesting. In particular, the Latin American songs, with their rhythmic qualities and emotional appeal, do serve as a powerful tool to alleviate the anxiety often associated with learning Spanish.

Latin American songs, like Marc Anthony's *Vivir Mi Vida* used during the class observations conducted in 16 weeks, to assist in reducing Spanish language learning anxiety among most Beginner students at Makerere University. Released in 2013, this song quickly became a global anthem of resilience, joy, and celebration. With its infectious salsa rhythm, upbeat tempo, and powerful message of overcoming adversity, *Vivir Mi Vida* offers a rich resource for Spanish language learners. We noted that while exploring the vocabulary and the positive messages a motivational song, like Marc Anthony's *Vivir Mi Vida* creates a relaxed learning environment, and promotes emotional engagement. The smiling faces clearly showed reduced stress, and postured a more positive attitude toward language learning pedagogical tasks.

In particular, Marc Anthony's *Vivir Mi Vida* video clip, which is characterized by its lively rhythm, catchy melody, emotionally provocative lyrics and the agile accompanying dancing strokes proved infectious in a class where some of the students are offering music, dance and drama as their third academic discipline. The nature of Latin American music encouraged active participation, gesturing and adding spectator's comments, thus making a collective performance which eased learners into speaking and practicing the language without the fear of judgment or making mistakes. For students in an African university, where Spanish is practiced as a third or third language, incorporating Latin American music can help bridge the gap between linguistic competences and cultural barriers, thus making the learning process intimate, less intimidating and more enjoyable.

In addition, we noted that the lively rhythm and repetitive chorus of *Vivir Mi Vida* serves as an ideal foundation for beginning to copy the singer:

Vivir mi vida (living my life), la la la la

(Voy a reír – I am going to laugh) voy a gozar- I am going to enjoy

Vivir mi vida (living my life), la la la la

That rhythm in *Vivir Mi Vida* invited students to move along with the music, helping them to relax and let go of the tension typically associated with unfamiliar words and sentence structures in Spanish language learning. That the song's energetic pace also encourages active listening and participation, motivating Spanish language learners to engage with the language in a more relaxed and joyful way without the stress of performing in front of a classroom.

Furthermore, the students stated that they “are attracted to the energetic and familiar african-like rhythms” of Vivir Mi Vida which make learning Spanish feel less like a daunting academic task and more like a fun-filled and enjoyable activity. That as their students listen to this song, they find themselves singing along and substituting verbs: “Voy a reír, voy a gozar, voy a bailar,” which helps to introduce new interactive expressions. The repeated phrases in the chorus, provide a comfortable way for students to practice pronouncing new vocabulary, verb conjugations, and sentence structuring in a fun and non-threatening environment.

During the FGD with the Spanish lecturers at Makerere University, (October 2024) they explained that the most powerful features of Vivir Mi Vida are its emotionally uplifting message. That the song’s lyrics “convey themes of resilience, joy, and overcoming challenges, values that resonate deeply with many of their Spanish learners” (FDG in Makerere, October 2024). This was true of those who were facing “their own set of challenges in learning Spanish as well as in their lives outside the classroom, the message of this song provides motivation and encouragement” (FDG in Makerere, October 2024). It was explained that “by focusing on the positive and celebratory themes of this song, Spanish students do momentarily shift their focus away from the fear of making mistakes and instead embrace the joy of learning” (FDG in Makerere, October 2024).

During the FGD, the Spanish students at Makerere University argued that the motivational role of Spanish songs from Latin America in Spanish language learning is immense. That a song like Vivir Mi Vida provides valuable opportunities for pronunciation practice. They stated that “this song’s clear, slow-paced verses and easy repetitive chorus” allow them as Spanish language learners “to focus on individual sounds and word stress patterns in Spanish”. They added that “the repetitive nature of the lyrics helps reinforce vocabulary and grammar structures (like, the near future tense in “Voy a reír”) and popular culture sayings (like, “Voy a vivir”) (FDG in Makerere, October 2024). By singing along, we could see that the Spanish language learners were getting to practice these elements in a relaxed and enjoyable manner.

Furthermore, for many of them who are unfamiliar with certain Spanish phonetic features (such as the rolled “r”), Vivir Mi Vida offers a playful way to practice difficult sounds without the pressure of formal pronunciation exercises. In the class observation sessions (September 2024), we could see that by mimicking this song’s rhythm and intonation, students were practicing pronunciation in a less stressful context, helping to build their confidence in using the Spanish language.

The integration of Latin American songs, such as Marc Anthony's Vivir Mi Vida, into Spanish language learning plays a crucial role in reducing this language learning anxiety among students at Makerere University. By leveraging the emotional, rhythmic, and repetitive elements of Latin American music, students were able to engage with the Spanish language in a non-threatening and enjoyable way. The combination of emotional connection, pronunciation practice, and cultural exploration offered by songs like Vivir Mi Vida creates a relaxed learning environment where anxiety is minimized, and motivation is significantly enhanced. As a result, students are better equipped to overcome the challenges of learning a new language, fostering a positive and lasting connection to the Spanish language and culture.

Sparking Interest in Spanish Language Learning Among the Students

In this study, we noted that Spanish Language learning involves not only the mastery of grammar and vocabulary but also the development of cultural understanding and emotional engagement with this language. One of the key challenges in the Spanish language learning journey, particularly for students in at Makerere University who are studying Spanish as a foreign language, is maintaining an emotional engagement and interest. Spanish, while widely spoken, is sometimes be perceived as distant or difficult due to its complex grammar and pronunciation. Spanish songs from Latin America, we noted in our study, inherently carry an emotional component that makes them a powerful motivator. The songs express themes of love, joy, struggle, and identity, which resonate with Spanish students on a personal level. When African students connect emotionally with Spanish music, whether through its rhythm or lyrics, they are more likely to remain motivated in their language learning journey. Emotional engagement is closely tied to long-term retention of language skills, as it fosters an emotional memory connection to the language (Moeller, 2021).

During the FGD at Makerere (October 2024), students talked about “the cultural richness of Latin American songs and how this enhanced their emotional connection to the Spanish language”. In the FGD at Makerere (October, 2024), learners commented on the emotions in songs that have a massive impact on Spanish language learning. They singled them out as “crucial in creating a positive and safe environment which promotes better information retention” (FGD at Makerere October, 2024). The emotional state of students allows the lecturer to adapt teaching and learning techniques favorably for the best possible results. One student explained that “it is critical to remember that each student is unique, and always take into consideration their individual characteristics, such as the pace of information perception, learning style, and level of concentration. The songs, she said, “help to effectively build the learning process using innovative pedagogy”. (FGD at Makerere, October, 2024).

In this study, we explored sparking interest in learning Spanish through the use of popular Latin American songs that resonate with global audiences; songs like Despacito by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee. This song has proven to be a powerful tool in generating excitement about Spanish language, capturing the attention of many students all over the world, and providing a gateway into deeper cultural exploration.

During an Informant's Interview (September 2024) with one of the Spanish lecturers at Makerere University in the Department of European and Oriental studies, explained that this Spanish "song was released in 2017, Despacito by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee became a worldwide phenomenon, breaking records on streaming platforms and receiving widespread attention in both Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking countries. Its infectious reggaeton beat, catchy melody, and romantic lyrics made it a favorite for listeners of all backgrounds. The global success of Despacito, she affirmed, marked a turning point in the way Latin American music was perceived, particularly in regions where Spanish is not the first language. She pointed out that "for Spanish students at Makerere University, Despacito offers a unique opportunity to engage with the Spanish language and culture in a way that feels fresh, modern, and relevant".

In this study, we explored how Latin American songs such as Despacito can play a pivotal role in sparking interest in Spanish language learning among Spanish students at Makerere University by examining its cultural appeal, emotional engagement, and linguistic benefits. We observed in the Third Year Beginners' class that popular Spanish songs like Despacito actually serve as an effective catalyst for cultivating interest and motivating students to increase both their language proficiency and cultural awareness.

During the FDG with the Spanish lecturers at Makerere (October 2024), the majority agreed that motivation is a fundamental factor in successful Spanish language learning, influencing the learner's enthusiasm, persistence, and willingness to engage in the learning process. They noted further that "songs provide a multi-sensory experience that combines auditory, emotional, and cognitive engagement, making them more memorable and enjoyable than traditional learning materials" (Lecturers' FGD, Makerere, October 2024). One of the lecturers stated that "by incorporating popular songs like Despacito into the learning process, educators tap into students' intrinsic motivation, making Spanish language learning feel more engaging and less like a chore" (Lecturers' FGD, Makerere October 2024).

Furthermore, the students at Makerere University, most of whom have limited exposure to Spanish-speaking cultures, indicated that "Latin American music offers a fun and accessible entry point into the language. By using Spanish songs like Despacito, which have achieved

global popularity, it provides us with an opportunity to connect with the language on a deeper emotional level, fostering a sense of excitement and curiosity about Spanish-speaking cultures” (Students’ FGD, Makerere (October 2024).

In addition, during the class observation, one lecturer at Makerere expounded that “one of the primary reasons that Despacito is so effective in sparking interest in Spanish language learning is its global popularity. That the song's success transcended geographic and linguistic boundaries, becoming a hit not only in Latin America but also in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa”. She stressed that a popular song like Despacito Spanish “represents a bridge between their own musical tastes and the Spanish language, making it easier to relate to the song and by extension, the language itself”. (Class Observation Session, September 2024).

Furthermore, the lecturer also noted, that “this song's blend of reggaeton, Latin pop, and tropical rhythms mirrors the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of Latin American music. For students who are often accustomed to their own rich musical traditions, Despacito offers an opportunity to explore the similarities and differences between Latin American and different Ugandan musical cultures” (Informants’ Interview, September, 2024). From our own point of view, this shared emphasis on tropical rhythm, dance, and community goals makes Despacito an ideal cultural entry point, facilitating interest in learning more about the language and the people who speak it.

The popularity of these musical rhythms in Africa itself highlights the increasing global influence of Latin American culture. Many students in at Makerere University, we noted, were normally already familiar with Despacito from radio stations, streaming services, or social media platforms, making it a recognizable and appealing point of entry for Spanish language learners. This song therefore, according to us, motivates students to pursue further study of the language, not just because it is part of a global phenomenon, but also because it resonates with their own experiences and interests.

During the FGD with Spanish students at Makerere University, they stated that while Despacito may be a fun and catchy song, “it also serves as an excellent resource for practicing clear, well-articulated lyrics, to hear the nuances of the Spanish language, such as vowel sounds, consonant clusters, and intonation patterns” (Students’ FGD Makerere October 2024). In our own view, because many of them are unfamiliar with the rhythm and phonetic structure of Spanish, listening to and singing along with Despacito can help them improve their listening comprehension and pronunciation in a non-threatening way.

They expressed further, that the repetition of phrases throughout the song also provides an opportunity for students to internalize common Spanish vocabulary and expressions. For

instance, phrases like “Quiero ver bailar tu pelo, quiero ser tu ritmo” (I want to see how she moves her hair, I want to be her rhythm) and “Despacito, quiero respirar tu cuello despacito” (Slowly, I want to breathe in your neck slowly) are both memorable and easy to repeat, making them useful for learners looking to practice their spoken Spanish. In practice, in a lecture, the song’s melody, paired with its catchy chorus, ensures that students remember the vocabulary more easily than if they were simply memorizing words from a textbook.

In addition to pronunciation, Despacito also provides learners with exposure to various colloquial expressions and idiomatic phrases commonly used in Latin American Spanish. For them as students, who initially learn a more formal or neutral version of Spanish in the classroom, Spanish songs like Despacito offer a glimpse into the regional varieties and cultural contexts of the language, helping them to better understand the linguistic diversity within the Spanish-speaking world.

At Makerere University, one of the Spanish students in the Third year of study stated that “the Spanish song, Despacito is not just a song about love and romance that it also carries emotional depth that connects with listeners on a personal level. The song’s lyrics express longing, passion, and connection, themes that resonate with people across cultural boundaries”. (Students’ FGD, Makerere University October 2024). Indeed, from our observations as lecturers, we can confirm that for them as Spanish language learners, engaging with the emotional and cultural aspects of Despacito fosters a deeper connection to the Spanish language, making the learning process feel more meaningful and enjoyable.

We also observed that beyond the lyrics, this song’s infectious rhythm and upbeat tempo create an emotional response which encourages active participation. That when students sing along to the song or discuss its themes in class, they are not only practicing their language skills but also connecting emotionally with the music. That this emotional engagement helps reduce the stress and anxiety that often accompany Spanish language learning. In our view, songs like Despacito make them as students feel more confident and motivated to continue their studies. In other words, by incorporating popular Spanish songs into the curriculum, we managed to create a more dynamic and engaging learning environment, where students are motivated to learn the language and are encouraged to explore Hispanic culture in a fun and accessible way. During the students’ FGD, they added that “using Despacito in the classroom sparks interest in Spanish by connecting the language to popular culture. That when the students hear a song they enjoy and recognize, they are more ready to study the text in order to understand the lyrics, sing along, and participate in cultural discussions (FGD October 2024). Furthermore, according to our observations, as students engage with the song’s themes, they develop a broader

understanding of the cultural context in which the language is spoken, enhancing their overall cultural competence and appreciation for the Spanish-speaking world.

In a nutshell, we observed that Latin American songs like Despacito by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee serve as powerful tools for sparking interest in Spanish language learning among Spanish students in Makerere University. Through their global popularity, emotional appeal, and cultural relevance, these songs engage students in a way that traditional learning materials often cannot. By incorporating songs into the Spanish language learning process, educators create an interactive and enjoyable environment that fosters motivation, enhances pronunciation skills, and deepens cultural understanding. For many students, who have limited exposure to Spanish-speaking cultures, songs like Despacito provides a fun and accessible gateway into the world of Latin American music, culture, and language, motivating them to pursue further study of Spanish while fostering a deeper appreciation for its diverse cultural roots.

Enhancing Active Participation of Spanish Language Learners

In this study we noted that Spanish Language learning is not just about mastering grammar and vocabulary; it is also about engaging learners in ways that foster active participation, enthusiasm, and long-term motivation. Active participation in Spanish language learning refers to learners' willingness to engage with the language in both speaking and listening activities, demonstrating confidence, and contributing to discussions. Indeed, as pointed out under the teacher's blog Sanako Connect (2024), "Whilst it's vital that students understand the basics of grammar and vocabulary, the ultimate role of a language teacher is to build and nurture confident language users. Encouraging active participation and language production (in all forms) in lessons is clearly essential to achieving this goal). For Spanish language learners at Makerere University, active participation was proved crucial for language development, but it can often be hindered by factors such as language anxiety, cultural distance, or limited exposure to native Spanish speakers.

Prince Royce's *Darte un Beso*, a popular Dominican Spanish song blending romantic themes with an upbeat melody, exemplifies how Spanish music can stimulate students to engage actively with Spanish. The Spanish son by Prince Royce's *Darte un Beso*, a romantic song that expresses deep feelings of love and affection. Released in 2013, the song's catchy melody, relatable lyrics, and sensual rhythm have made it popular not only in Latin America but across the world. That the emotional depth of this song, paired with its danceable rhythm, makes it a compelling vehicle for learning Spanish, particularly for Makerere university students.

The catchy rhythm, emotional lyrics, and relatable themes offer a platform for students to practice their listening, speaking, and comprehension skills in an engaging, informal

environment. In our study, we explored how songs like *Darte un Beso* by Prince Royce enhance active participation by Spanish language learners at Makerere University, providing an emotional and cultural connection to the language, promoting motivation, and fostering a safe space for practice and interaction. In our view, and according to our experience, participating in classroom activities (like in the group discussions and debate after listening to the song *Darte un beso*) also provides students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in real-life language contexts. The practical application of the learned vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in these interactions builds understanding and makes the learning process or their progress more tangible.

During the students' FGD in October 2024, they explained that “engaging Spanish in interactive and motivating learning activities is one way to encourage active participation”. This confirms our findings whereby Spanish music crucial in our educational settings to creating an environment that stimulates interest, lowers affective anxiety and promotes active engagement. The Latin American Spanish songs, with their rhythm, emotional appeal, and relatable themes, offer an innovative and enjoyable approach to overcoming Spanish language learning barriers and encouraging active participation.

The Spanish students at Makerere University during the FGD (October 2024) also confirmed that one of the most compelling features of *Darte un Beso* is its emotional appeal. That the song's lyrics are filled with themes of love, passion, and romantic desire, which resonate universally. That regardless of cultural background differences, emotions like love and affection are central to human experience, making the song highly relatable for them as students from various cultural contexts. The emotional content of the Spanish song helps them as learners connect with the language on a deeper level, leading to increased motivation and more active engagement.

In addition, in the class observation sessions, we noted that themes of love and romantic expression are particularly engaging, as many Ugandan cultures also place a high value on relationships and courtship. Hence, the use of a simple, yet emotionally charged vocabulary in *Darte un Beso* helps them as learners practice essential words and phrases in a context they can relate to. In their discussions, they shared examples like the phrase *dar un beso* (to give a kiss) is repeated throughout the song, making it easy for learners to internalize and use the language in other situations. The repetition of emotionally evocative phrases, such as “*cantar para calmar tus miedos*” (singing to calm your fears), help them reinforce Spanish language vocabulary in a meaningful and engaging way. In the class observation session, we realized that when the

students enjoy the activity they are more likely to participate and take risks in the language production, whether through singing, dancing, or discussing the song's content.

Figure 1: *Verbs Extracted from the song “Darte un beso” by Prince Royce.*

Verb	Verb Form(s) in the Song	Meaning/Usage
Dar	Darte (to give)	To give; used in the phrase dar un beso (to give a kiss)
Querer	Quiero (I want), querer (to want)	To want; used in the phrase quiero darte un beso (I want to give you a kiss)
Estar	Está (he/she is) To be (temporary states)	used in está mi corazón (my heart is)
Sentir	Sentir (to feel)	To feel; used in siento que te quiero (I feel that I love you)
Tener	Tengo (I have)	To have; used in tengo miedo (I'm afraid)
Poder	Puedo (I can)	To be able to; used in puedo decirte (I can tell you)
Venir	Vengo (I come)	To come; used in vengo a verte (I come to see you)
Besar	Besar (to kiss)	To kiss; used in dar un beso (give a kiss)
Ver	Ver (to see)	To see; used in te quiero ver (I want to see you)
Ir	Voy (I go)	To go; used in voy a besarte (I am going to kiss you)

Examples shared by students from this song show that it frequently uses the verb dar (to give), which is central to many Spanish language constructions. That repeated exposure to dar in different contexts such as “dar un beso” (to give a kiss) or “dar amor” (to give love); so listening to it helps them as Spanish learners to identify the multiple uses of this verb in the different contexts that allow them as students to internalize these constructions more easily, building their confidence in using Spanish language actively. The students reported in their FGD (October 2024), that Darte un Beso presents them as students with practical, everyday language that is easy to remember and use. That this song includes common expressions used in daily conversations, particularly those related to affection and desire. That by listening to this song repeatedly, they “get to reinforce their vocabulary and gain a better understanding of grammatical structures”. (Students' FGD, October 2024).

Moreover, as the observation sessions showed, group activities centered around *Darte un Beso* in the Beginners' class fostered collaboration and communication among Spanish students. They could be seen asking their fellow students how to work together to translate this song's lyrics, discuss the meaning of specific phrases, or create their simplified version of the song according to their understanding. These collaborative activities not only reinforced Spanish language learning but they also encouraged peer interaction, helping students feel more comfortable and confident in their ability to use Spanish. In brief, our study demonstrated that Latin American songs like *Darte un Beso* by Prince Royce can play a crucial role in enhancing active participation among Spanish language learners.

By incorporating such Spanish songs into language instruction, we demonstrated that as educators we can create a supportive, interactive, and low-anxiety environment where students feel motivated to speak, listen, and collaborate. Songs like *Darte un Beso* exemplify how Latin American music can serve as an effective catalyst for active participation, fostering confidence and helping Spanish language learners in an African university to overcome the barriers of language anxiety. Through music, language learning becomes a more engaging and empowering experience, leading to enhanced proficiency and greater self-confidence.

Conclusion

The literature review affirmed that learning a foreign language often induces anxiety, particularly among students who lack confidence in their ability to speak or comprehend the target language. This study has shown that Spanish songs from Latin America help mitigate such anxiety by creating a more relaxed and enjoyable learning environment. The rhythmic and repetitive nature of music enables students to practice language patterns without the fear of mistakes in formal settings. This supportive atmosphere reduces performance pressure and encourages learners to take risks in language use.

The findings further confirm that Latin American songs provide learners with authentic linguistic input presented in a practical, memorable, and engaging way. Lyrics that narrate stories or convey cultural values make the learning process meaningful and enjoyable. Themes such as love, identity, and national pride resonate with students' own experiences, prompting discussion and debate in Spanish. By integrating songs into lessons at African universities, learners gain exposure to real-world Spanish, viewing the language not merely as a set of grammatical rules but as a medium for cultural and personal expression.

Overall, the study concludes that Spanish songs from Latin America offer a fun and immersive experience that accelerates learning in ways that textbooks and drills alone cannot.



The combination of repetition, cultural immersion, and emotional connection helps to strengthen vocabulary, enhance listening skills, and improve fluency. Songs therefore function as powerful motivational tools, enhancing engagement and comprehension while fostering a deeper emotional bond with the language. Educators are encouraged to incorporate such songs into their teaching to stimulate sustained learner interest and motivation. While this study has primarily focused on oral, lexical, and cultural competencies, future research could explore the role of songs in developing written and creative skills in foreign language learning.

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