

Songs in the English Class: A Strategy to Encourage Tenth Graders' Oral Production

El uso de canciones en la clase de inglés: Una estrategia para fomentar la producción oral en estudiantes de décimo grado

Marlén Cuestas Cifuentes*

mcues2002@yahoo.es

Colegio Distrital León de Greiff, Colombia

This research project examines a strategy in which English songs are used to encourage oral production of tenth graders. It aims at providing a solution to our students' low speaking proficiency in the English language and to the complexity of working with a large number of students per class. Students involved in this project provided useful data through their participation in activities using English songs. They had the opportunity of speaking in English about their favorite songs; also, we observed that they not only improved their oral production but also showed relaxed, interested and participative attitudes as they worked with songs and particularly when they focused on expressing their ideas freely rather than being concerned about accuracy.

Key words: English songs, speaking activities, attitudes, oral production changes

Este proyecto de investigación analiza el uso de canciones en inglés como estrategia para fomentar la producción oral en estudiantes de décimo grado. Busca dar una solución al bajo desempeño en la competencia oral en inglés de nuestros estudiantes y a la complejidad del trabajo con grupos numerosos. Los y las estudiantes comprometidos en el proyecto suministraron información útil a través de su participación en las diferentes actividades en las que se usaron canciones en inglés. Ellos tuvieron la oportunidad de hablar en inglés acerca de sus canciones favoritas; también observamos que los estudiantes no sólo mostraron mayor progreso en su producción oral, sino también una actitud relajada, interesada y participativa cuando usamos las canciones y particularmente cuando ellos se concentran más en la libre expresión de ideas que en la manera correcta de decirlas.

Palabras claves: Canciones en inglés, actividades de práctica oral, actitudes, cambios en la producción oral

***Marlén Cuestas Cifuentes**, M. A. in Education with emphasis in community Education from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, and B.Ed. in Philology and languages, English-Spanish from Universidad INNCA de Colombia. Currently she works at Colegio Distrital León de Greiff and at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. She participated in the PFPD programme "Red PROFILE".

INTRODUCTION

One of the main achievements of an English teacher is to teach better classes every day. Therefore, we are always searching for answers to fundamental questions such as "Are my students learning happily? Can they use their learning in life?" Throughout that search, we have applied different methodologies, some of which have been carelessly reflected upon; others are considered appropriate but, as they do not produce the expected results, we simply forget about them. The reason for finding an innovative process through classroom research is to obtain a solution in order to achieve it. From our experience, the action research process was very important since it presented many advantages. Among them, we can point out that we were able to

- Explore what happens in our classroom
- Reflect upon our pedagogical practices and improve them
- Develop action research and innovative experiences in our classrooms
- Work situations in the context of our students which allows us to provide meaningful learning
- Learn and teach how to work as teams
- Consolidate the arguments that led us to incorporate changes in our practices
- Encourage pedagogical changes in the school.

On the other hand, we consider it important to say that teachers are privileged to develop action research and innovative processes because since we have the population, the spaces and the time every day, we have everything that is necessary to develop these processes in our schools in order to help change the difficult and routine school culture. This research project was developed with the teacher Lisana Clavijo, who helped me during the project. It provided the advantages mentioned above and it also helped us solve some of our students' difficulties, such as low English speaking proficiency, in addition to the complex task we face when working with a large number of students in each class. Besides, it gave us insights into the way we can work with songs and have students speak about the meaning of those songs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Speaking English is one of the abilities that our students want to develop the most. However, it is the ability to which public schools devote less time in comparison to other abilities such as reading or writing. We noticed low speaking proficiency in the English language of our students in tenth grade; thus, we engaged in a project with the purpose of promoting oral proficiency in English through the use of songs. In this endeavor we tried to answer the following questions: How can songs in English promote students' oral production? How do students react towards the proposed activities using songs in English? And what changes can we observe in students' oral production when they are engaged in such activities?

CONTEXT

This research project was developed at León de Greiff public school, zone 19, Ciudad Bolívar, in Bogotá. This school has about 2,000 students in three shifts. The students selected to work on this research project were 45 tenth graders divided into small groups of 5 or 6 students. We focused the project on 5 of those groups of students who study in the afternoon shift. They are between 14 and 17 years old. This group of students is interested in finishing high school with a good level of English, particularly in the speaking area. In spite of the fact that these students have many problems, they are very dynamic and happy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to have a solid background in which to develop our project, the following two theoretical aspects were kept in mind: The use of songs in English to develop oral production and the selection of activities using songs to promote speaking skills.

Using English Songs to Develop Oral Production

There are different authors and studies that consider music to be an important part of language learning. Phillips (2003) considers music and

rhythm essential parts of language learning for young learners because they enjoy learning and singing. In addition, she refers to the use of music as an element that is much easier to imitate and remember and states that there are many songs that give them the advantage of being part of the English speaking culture.

Also, there are different methods by which we can choose songs depending on the objective. Lieberstein (1996) expresses that songs have to promote participation among students and that the approach used will depend on the song and the linguistic objective. In our case, it is speaking about songs. Also, she proposes four important factors that can be worked with music in children and adolescents in any kind of context. We took them into account for our research, to wit:

- Music focuses students' attention, encourages group unity, involves everyone and allows creative self-expression.
- Everybody has the ability to sing. From the earliest cultures, probably before humans learned to speak, they had contact with words through some celebrations or rituals.
- Working with songs provides the teacher with the opportunity to reinforce vocabulary and grammar structures and with the possibility of developing the students' four skills.
- Songs have to fulfill students and teachers' expectations.

Regarding teaching English through songs and the relation with communicative abilities, there are authors such as León (1998), who specifically refers to the enthusiasm provided by songs. Discussion among students arises easily since students propose topics, not the teacher. When students select a song or activity that is meaningful for their life, they learn its meaning quickly and well.

Selecting Activities Using Songs to Promote Speaking Skills

There are key activities in which songs are used to promote speaking skills. Authors such as Lindstromer (2004) and Molinsky and Bliss

(2000) propose some activities using songs in English, and Phillips (2003) states that many English pop songs are well-known even by the youngest learners, especially theme songs of films or television series. Although the language is difficult, students love using them in class. Also, she proposes some activities along with lesson plans, which can be used to promote speaking skills. Among them we can find the following:

- Finding the word: Ask students to listen for words and note them down with certain sounds in the song.
- Song pictures: Draw simple pictures to illustrate the story of the song, cut them out, and make a worksheet with the pictures placed randomly. Ask students to listen to the song and put the pictures in order.
- Mixed - up lines: Mix up the order of the lines; then, ask the adolescents to listen to the song and put the lines in the correct order.

In addition, there are articles that describe music as a stimulus for speaking. For example, Madylus (2004) in the Magazine for English Language Teachers presents different activities such as discussion of themes, presentation of songs, song-translation activities, etc., which teachers can use to help stimulate students' imagination and to encourage them to speak to one another. Furthermore, it presents some reasons why songs and music are used with this age group. Some of them are the following: First, children or adolescents like songs and music and have strong personal preferences about what they like. Second, songs often include a lot of repetition that helps them to make language memorable. Third, songs contain chunks of language that students can remember and use. Fourth, there are many songs that are about issues of interest to this age group. Fifth, songs are sung at a reasonably fast speed; they contain natural phonological features like linking and weak forms that students learn to recognize and become comfortable with. Lastly, music can stimulate strong feelings that can be channeled to enrich the language learning experience.

The literature that was reviewed and was mostly used to develop this project was based on studies concerning activities using the songs in English, particularly those proposed by Phillips (2003) and Molinsky and Bliss (2000). It was observed that many of their statements or arguments suggest considering music and more specifically songs in English as promoters to develop speaking abilities.

METHODOLOGY

This action research project involved the use of a series of data collection instruments applied to students and the development of four stages. In those stages, we designed several activities using English songs that were used in an English class in which students worked in small groups. We examined the effectiveness of the activities observing and registering in field notes and video recording students' attitudes or reactions, and their changes in oral production when they engaged in such activities. The information gathered was classified using conventions and then analyzed to identify categories.

Data Collection Instruments

- Surveys: We applied two surveys with one hundred tenth graders, including the selected groups to participate in the research. These were administered in Spanish and used in the first stage to explore the importance students give to the English language (see survey N° 1, in Appendix 1) and to gather different opinions about the methodology used in English classes (see survey N°2, Appendix 2).

- Audio and video recording of the activities done in English classes: These were used in the first stages and during the implementation of activities using songs in English. They allowed us to observe and analyze aspects such as reactions or attitudes toward the proposed activities and the changes in students' oral production. Each one of the activities was recorded, some in video and others in audio.

- Field notes: We took field notes for each English class. These let us identify students' attitudes and the changes in their oral production.

- Focus group interviews: These were applied in the first and second stages. These were made to collect more data and to compare them with the video recordings and field notes. For each implemented activity, we interviewed some students in groups and others individually.

Stages

The next four stages were followed simultaneously during the process. We took into account some of the proposed stages by Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988), cited in Burns (1999).

- Gathering data using different techniques

This stage was done at the beginning. We designed the different instruments (surveys, interviews, formats for field notes and observation of classes) in order to collect data. To do so, we followed the ideas proposed by Burns (1999), Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) and Wallace (1998). Then we applied them. The information that was gathered was transcribed and organized by type of instrument using a portfolio.

- Designing and Implementing activities using songs in English

This stage was developed simultaneously with the first one. In this second phase we focused on the four oral activities using English songs. In order to do so, it was necessary to review some authors who have proposed activities using songs in English such as Phillips (2003) and Molinsky and Bliss (2000). Then we designed the following activities: choosing the song, interviewing the singer, explaining the selected new words of the song, and discussing topics of the song. Such activities were implemented one by one in each English class; similarly, they were repeated, including aspects observed in order to be able to validate the data and compare the results.

- Interpreting and analyzing the data

To analyze and interpret the data, we followed four steps (Burns, 1999):

- Assembling the data: We did the transcriptions of observation of classes and interviews, and tried to scan the data in a general way.

- Coding the data: We classified the data according to the implemented activities and used symbols to identify each one: the data gathered in class observation in bold, the data gathered in interviews in italics and the data gathered in field notes, underlined.

- Comparing the data: We compared the previous data with field notes (triangulation) and lastly,

- Building interpretations: We read all the data over and over and established some relations that led us to finding answers to our research questions. Then we identified some categories and presented them.

- Writing the project report

In the final stage, we presented the description of all the aspects worked and developed during the research process. Likewise, we related and supported the findings and conclusions of our study with other sources.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

The focus of our project was to encourage students' oral production using English songs in class. Therefore, a set of activities was designed. Each one was designed in a lesson plan that included specific goals, resources, the teacher's role, the students' roles, the organization of students, specific skills to develop and a detailed description of the activity. Below we present the four activities that we implemented.

- Choosing the song

Here, each group of students selects a song and presents its lyrics and melodies. Then, they describe some aspects of the singer and explain why the song was chosen.

- Interviewing the song's singer

In this activity the students role play interviewing the singer or musical group of the selected song.

- Explaining new words of the song

Here, the students explain the meaning of the

new words or vocabulary, unknown for them, using synonyms, antonyms or short phrases.

- Discussing topics of the song

In this, the students discuss the topics or themes of the selected song, present some arguments and support them with the lyrics or melody of the song.

It should be clarified that each one of the previous activities was carried out with some songs chosen by the students themselves according to their likes. They were *Don't Cry* (Guns N' Roses); *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* (Britney Spears); *Complicated* (Avril Lavigne); *My Immortal* (Evanescence) and *Always* (Bon Jovi). Additionally, these activities led students to speak about musical albums produced by their favorite singers.

FINDINGS

Our data analysis showed two kinds of students' attitudes toward activities when using English songs. Some attitudes appeared with more frequency than others did; therefore, they are described according to that order. Our findings also showed important changes in students' oral production.

To begin with, the first outcome that emerged from our data indicated that songs are generators of favorable factors such as motivation, participation, cooperation, relaxation and self-confidence. On the contrary, songs may also be generators of unfavorable factors such as instances of anxiety and lack of confidence. Moreover, the use of the aforementioned activities showed important changes in students' oral production. For example, they expressed their ideas freely, spoke more when the topic was interesting for them, expressed several reasons and opinions about the proposed songs, interacted more with one another, and spoke clearly and quickly.

Songs: Generators of Favorable and Unfavorable Factors

We identified some favorable factors such as motivation, participation, cooperation, relaxation and self-confidence.

- Motivation: We noticed that during the development of the activities, students showed

behaviors, emotions or feelings particularly related to interest in or enthusiasm for the work the activities proposed. This same factor appeared frequently in collected data (video recording and field notes). The attitude was evidently noticed through behaviors such as paying attention when the teacher or a classmate spoke in English, concentrating on the activity, having a willingness to speak English and prepare the activity, having a positive mood towards the class and trying to understand peers and the teacher when they spoke English.

Additionally, this same attitude was found in interviews with students as evidenced in these statements: *We acquire a lot of knowledge about other cultures through their songs (Isabel G.); We consider that this activity is important and it encourages us to speak in English (Ivone C.)*. Furthermore, students believe that they learn better and more quickly with this kind of activities. They stated: *We get better English through this kind of activities (Daniel G.); We learn better English with the vocabulary of the songs and we have freedom to choose the topics we like to learn (Yuly A.)*. With respect to this, similar considerations are presented by Madylus (2004), where she asserts that students like songs and music and have strong personal preferences about what they like. This supports the fact that the use of English songs in English classes increased motivation and, above all, students could speak English about their favorite topics.

- **Participation:** This attitude was constantly shown during the development of the different activities. Collected data shows students made interventions in class and asked for, prepared and presented activities. In regard to these ideas, Lieberstein (1996) suggests that songs themselves promote participation in group work because students like the lyrics, the melodies and the singers themselves. In addition, this attitude or factor was ratified in interviews with students as can be seen in the following statement: *We like to participate in these activities because we can discuss the ideas about the songs and there is interaction between us*

because everyone has participated in class and we are fascinated with the English class (Wendy D.).

Also, Forero (2000, p. 44) concluded in her research that group work bettered students' participation. We could observe and prove the level of this participation because we worked the class in small groups as a solution to the complexity of working with a large number of students per class.

- **Cooperation:** According to our findings, cooperation was frequently observed during the proposed activities. This frequent cooperation was perceived when we implemented different activities using some principles of cooperative learning as a teaching strategy. We observed this attitude when students explained and asked each other questions, gave ideas to the group's monitor, and helped the other groups enthusiastically. These aspects are related to some elements proposed in the definition of cooperative learning (Kagan, 1994 and Forero, 2000). Furthermore, a cooperative attitude was confirmed through statements made by students in the interviews. They stated: *In these activities there is more interaction among students (Angie E.); The group work is easier, we are more integrated in the class and we help each other a lot (Leidy E.)*. This shows that they like to work with songs in English as well as in small groups.

- **Relaxation:** A relaxed environment was observed most of the time. Students were quiet and calm while engaged in activities, smiled and enjoyed them. They considered the activities fun. These aspects were presented by students in most of the interviews as shown in the following statements: *I feel very well in the class, the activities were fun and I enjoyed them (Michael M.); We in our group feel very calm while preparing the presentation of the activity (Luisa E.)*. Then, we can say that activities using English songs help create a good learning environment to facilitate learning English quietly and cheerfully.

- **Self-Confidence:** It was evident in observations that students understood the activity and prepared it. They spoke freely about

something they knew in the selected song and they felt confident speaking because they liked the fact that their opinions and suggestions were taken into account. Additionally, in the interviews they stated that *We work with songs that we like because we research about topics that we like to know and learn about. Also we clearly know what we are doing and we like to express our opinions and thoughts (Alejandra A., Diana C.)*. These testimonies evidence self-confidence. In view of the findings, we consider that this attitude is a key element to be generated in the classroom because it allows students to feel motivated, improve learning and become more spontaneous when speaking in English.

Coping with Unfavorable Factors:

We found only two attitudes of this type. Anxiety and a lack of confidence were observed in some moments, but they were reduced using the proposed activities.

- **Instances of Anxiety:** These were registered in some video recordings. Some students felt nervous when speaking because they were afraid of pronouncing words incorrectly and some of them were shy when they began to speak. In the interviews, they referred to this aspect of anxiety only when they said, *I felt nervous to begin to speak because some classmates laughed at me when I mispronounced words but after all the activities I have overcome my fear (Camilo G.)*. This attitude was noticed in some students during the first activities and the use of songs helped reduce it. During the development of the activity, the few students who were anxious observed that their classmates and other groups carried out their presentations calmly and actually enjoyed them.

- **Lack of Confidence:** It was registered in some video recordings when students spoke and tried to look at the notes at the same time. It was also observed when students began to speak and did not finish the idea. Besides, some interviews presented statements such as, *Some of us spoke slowly because we forgot the idea easily, also we*

sometimes needed a lot of vocabulary to express an idea and we didn't know it (Ibeth F, Sergio A.). This attitude was minimal because most students left their notes aside and switched from reading to speaking. They spent more time preparing each activity and it led them to participate and feel more confident.

Changes Observed in Students' Oral Production

In relation to this category, we observed important changes in students' oral production. Some of them expressed ideas freely, spoke more when the topic was interesting for them, and gave several reasons and opinions about the proposed songs. These changes are contrasted against what was observed before the project. They are presented in Table 1.

- **Expressing Ideas Freely**

In relation to this aspect, it was observed and registered in the field notes that before implementing the project, our students had low levels of oral production. They did not take any risks speaking more because they were concerned about accuracy more than about expressing their ideas. Then, during the development of the activities, the collected data showed that students focused on expressing their ideas freely more than when they were concerned about accuracy. Thus, these kinds of activities encourage them to speak English. They speak because they wish to express what they know about their favorite songs and singers. Some of these previous ideas are also shown by Gutiérrez (2005) when she refers to the importance of creating an interactive and communicative context to contribute to the development of speaking skills and the improvement of oral production. In our case, this creation of context was evident in each activity developed around songs.

- **Speaking More when the Topic Is Interesting for Students**

Before the project, we observed that our students did not participate much in class. The video recordings showed they were shy and afraid

BEFORE	WHEN USING SONGS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They were concerned about accuracy more than about expressing their ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They focus on expressing their ideas freely more than when they were concerned about accuracy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They didn't participate much in class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They speak more when the topic is interesting for them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They used words or short phrases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They speak using reasons and opinions about chosen songs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They reduced their interaction with the teacher to present the lesson or homework. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students interact more with one another.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They spoke slowly and mispronounced words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most students speak clearly and more quickly.

Table 1. Major changes observed in students' oral production.

to speak in English. Most of them preferred for the teacher to speak in Spanish. After the new activities around songs were implemented, students spoke more in English; they showed more willingness to speak when the situation was meaningful for them. This coincides with Gutiérrez (2005, p. 89) in the sense that students "used the foreign language by engaging in situations that replicated normal language use". Moreover, many reasons were expressed by our participants in the interviews and video recordings. These reasons support the previous facts. They can be summarized as follows:

- The topic was interesting for them. In this case, it was their favorite song.
- They know a lot of songs because they like to listen to music all the time.
- They had the chance to choose the songs they liked and learn more about them.
- These songs helped build a more comfortable atmosphere in the classroom.

Additionally, as stated before, changes in oral production were shown in students' participation and motivation.

• Expressing Several Reasons and Opinions about the Proposed Songs

The different registers of data showed that most students participated orally and spoke using complete sentences or ideas. For example, in the activity where they were to choose the song, they expressed

different opinions about their favorite songs. For instance, *I like much this song (Don't Cry) because its lyric and melody remember me a special person in my life. (Ivone C.)*. Likewise, in the activity where students were to interview the singer of the song, they spoke about each member of the group. They also commented on their favorite albums, concerts or public presentations of musical groups, instruments, etc. Finally, during the discussions of themes, they expressed ideas such as *We consider that the main topic of this song (Don't Cry) is the feelings because its lyric show much sadness, love, and pain for separating (Yury S.)*.

• Interacting More with One Another

Another change in students' oral production was observed when students interacted among themselves, especially among members of small groups. Then, the video recordings showed students asking each other questions, sharing information and speaking in Spanish or sometimes in English during the preparation of the activities. Group work functions as an integration tool. "It lets them know more about their partners", says Forero (2000, p. 44). Besides that, this change was shown in the cooperative attitude they manifested and in the relaxed atmosphere in which interaction took place.

• Speaking More Clearly and Quickly

This change was observed in most students' oral production. We could see during the development

of all the proposed activities that many students were more spontaneous and confident when speaking. This aspect was also supported by motivation manifested in singing the song chosen, concentrating on the activity and trying to understand peers when they spoke about a song. Also, support was evidenced in the interviews, to wit: *We consider important this activity and it is motivating for us to speak in English (Daniel G.) and in this statement, I like to speak in English now, because I know enough about this song (Dayana M.)*. In addition, we could observe that they would always concentrate and relax while preparing each activity. As a result, they exposed their ideas clearly and quickly during the presentation revealing a longer and more fluent oral production.

All in all, the research findings show that by using songs in English in the classroom, teachers can not only encourage students' oral production but also promote many favorable attitudes towards English language learning. Since students like to listen to music and love the lyrics and melodies of the songs, they speak rather easily and share what they know about their favorite songs and the lives of the singers. In addition, the use of songs in English can be extended to promote other skills. The key element is to know how to design appropriate and pertinent activities.

CONCLUSIONS

After the implementation of this action-research project, we can conclude that classroom research processes definitively helped improve our classes and achieve very good results with our students. In our specific case, we aimed at encouraging oral production through the use of songs and, from that point of view, we can say the following:

When students were given songs in English in their class activities, they showed some attitudes that we considered favorable to promoting their oral production. Some of them are motivation, participation, cooperation, relaxation and self-confidence. In addition, they were pleased with the different proposed activities around songs given

because they love their lyrics, melodies and music groups or singers. This factor was enhanced by the fact that most of them were their favorite songs. Furthermore, the use of songs helped diminish some unfavorable factors students often face when learning to speak English; for example, anxiety and lack of confidence.

Equally important were the changes that were observed in the students' oral production. There was improvement in oral production when they focused on expressing their ideas freely more than when they were concerned about accuracy. Students spoke more in English when they talked about songs in English because the topics were interesting for them. As a result, they showed much more motivation, participation and better class work. They also explained that the reason they felt more inclined to talk in English was because they knew the songs and they wanted to research them more. These facts made them interact more with one another when talking about songs in English. Working in small groups helped them improve their oral production since they were together and developed values such as solidarity.

In summary, the implementation of the different activities using songs in English was a successful strategy to encourage oral production in students and it showed satisfactory results for them, for us teachers, and for the school. Therefore, I will continue working on this strategy and I will try to get the project developed in the different grades of high school. To do so, it is necessary to disseminate results among my colleagues and share with them to make them aware of the pedagogical procedures that guided us to accomplish the goal of our project.

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APPENDIX 1: SURVEY N°1

Colegio Distrital León de Greiff

Grade: _____ Woman _____ Man _____ Date _____

Answer the following questions:

1. It is important for you to learn English in school?

Yes _____ No _____ Why? _____

2. What do you like about the current English class?

3. What do you not like about the current English class?

4. How would you like the English class?

5. What is the methodology that you suggest for your teacher to teach you English?

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY N° 2

Colegio Distrital León de Greiff

Grade: _____ Woman _____ Man _____ Date _____

What do you consider to be the best methodologies to work the next English classes?

a. Using English books _____

b. Using music _____

c. Using readings _____

d. Using games _____

e. Using films or videos _____

f. Using explanations of the teacher _____

g. Using the Internet _____

h. Other, What? _____