

The use of songs as a tool to work on listening and culture in EFL classes*

*El uso de canciones como herramienta metodológica
para desarrollar escucha y conciencia cultural
en clases de Inglés como lengua extranjera*

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Abstract

This article presents an action research study applied in a second level EFL course at a university in Tunja. The study examines the listening performance of students throughout the development of six workshops based on the songs: Englishman in New York, Imagine, Mercedes Benz, Cats in the cradle, Zombie, and Where is the love? Findings of this study indicate that this type of material can foster listening skills and engage students in discussion about cultural and social issues. Likewise, results show that practicing listening with songs can become a good way to train students in the development of higher levels of comprehension.

Key words: Listening, songs, authentic materials, culture, workshops.

Resumen

En este artículo se presenta una investigación acción llevada a cabo en un grupo de inglés de segundo nivel en una universidad en Tunja. El estudio examina cómo fue el desempeño de escucha de los estudiantes mientras trabajaban seis talleres basados en canciones en inglés. Estas canciones fueron: *An Englishman in New York*, *Imagine*, *Mercedes Benz*, *Cats in the cradle*, *Zombie*, and *Where is the love?* Los resultados del estudio indican que esta clase de material puede promover la habilidad de escucha e involucrar a los estudiantes en discusiones alrededor de temas culturales y sociales. De igual forma, los resultados muestran que practicar escucha con canciones puede convertirse en una buena forma de entrenar a los estudiantes a desarrollar altos niveles de comprensión.

Palabras clave: Escucha, Canciones, Material Auténtico, Cultura, Talleres.

Introduction

Due to the fact that in Colombia the academic and professional world is more demanding every day, there exists the necessity of improving foreign language learning; this means, a good development of the four skills (listening, speaking, writing, and reading) when learning English. However, this development is not being well done by a significant amount of teachers. An example of this is the low level of listening comprehension some students have of the English language.

This article addresses how when we create authentic listening activities based on English songs, students' listening skill can be fostered and how these activities can be culturally meaningful and motivating for them. The results obtained in the research done will not attempt to make a wide-scope generalization, but, they will suggest changes for future listening practices and hopefully will be the point of departure for new projects with the same or similar goals.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical support of this study is based on three main elements: listening, songs as authentic material and the link between songs and culture.

Listening, definition and difficulties

As defined by Oxford (1993, p. 206), listening is a complex problem solving skill and it is more than just perception of the sounds. Listening includes comprehension of meaning words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and connected discourse. Furthermore, according to Saricoban (1999), listening is one of the fundamental language skills. It is a medium through which children, young people and adults gain a large portion of their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation.

Rivers (1978) says that listening is a creative skill. It means we comprehend the sound falling on our ears, and take the raw material of words, arrangements of words, and the rise and fall the voice, and from this material we create significance. He also states that listening skill is listening with comprehension, attention and appreciation. Then, listening activity needs to integrate skills of language, such as pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, writing, speaking, and reading.

Underwood (1990) mentions some kinds of difficulties in listening that are directly related to the students themselves. One of the problems is based on the fact that students have established learning habits in the sense that they have been encouraged to understand everything by listening carefully to teachers who probably speak slowly and clearly. Hence, when they fail to understand every word while listening, they stop listening and lose the thread, which seems to be the reason for the state of panic and worrying they usually show before and during listening. In relation to those problems, we cannot deny that students' motivation plays important role in learning listening. As mentioned in Brown (2006), another theme will be motivation. Because listening is so challenging, teachers need to think carefully about making the activities successful and the content interesting. We can create interesting and motivating activities when listening such as using English songs. Thus, the students will be stimulated and not be frightened or worried when they are practicing listening.

Songs as authentic material

According to Hornby (1990), a song is a piece of music with words that is sung. Song is also a great language package that bundles culture, vocabulary, listening, grammar and a host of other language skills in just a few rhymes. Songs can also provide a relaxed lesson. They can also form the basis for many lessons (Futonge, 2005).

Ross (2006) says that the example of authentic listening materials is listening to song to learn more about well-known bands that sing in English. As we know wherever we are, songs always follow us at home, at school, at office, at cars, and so on. So, we can directly listen to the song and also interest to learn the value of language in it. When designing lessons and teaching materials to further develop listening comprehension skills, students need to be motivated and stay motivated. This is best accomplished by determining the suitable of the listening material such as the use of song as authentic material. The use of song stimulates and motivates students to comprehend the content of materials.

The possibility of using songs in English as a foreign language class has been actively considering for the last two decades. It is considered because songs have many value of language. Orlova

(2003) states that it is possible to suggest that among the methodological purposes with songs used in class, it is possible to rank the following: Practicing the rhythm, stress and the intonation patterns of the English language. Teaching vocabulary and grammar. Developing listening comprehension, writing skills, and speaking. For this last purpose, songs and mainly their lyrics are employed as a stimulus for class discussion.

The use of song procedure

There are various ways of using songs in the classroom. The level of the students, the interests and the age of the learners, the grammar point to be studied, and the song itself have determinant roles on the procedure. Apart from them, it mainly depends on the creativity of the teacher.

According to Brown (2006), procedure of any listening activity can be done by activating prior knowledge, helping students organize their learning by thinking about their purposes for listening, and if speaking is also a goal of the classroom, using well-structured speaking tasks informed by research. The author explains the following steps to focus on a listening practice:

a. Activating prior-knowledge

Prior knowledge is organized in schemata: abstract, generalized mental representations of our experience that are available to help us understand new experiences. The idea of prior knowledge is one part of the cognitive model of language processing. That model says that when people listen or read, they process the information they hear both top-down and bottom-up. Top-down means using our prior knowledge and experiences. Bottom-up processing means using the information people have about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like *first*, *then* and *after that* to assemble their understanding of what they read or hear one step at a time.

b. While-listening

Having a purpose for listening helps us listen more effectively. For example, when listening to a weather report, if our purpose is to decide whether to wear a coat, we want to focus on the temperature. In the listening activities, teachers should explain students which the purpose of the activity is. Students could listen for the main idea, for details, and for making inferences. Therefore, students develop a sense of why they listen and which skill to use to listen better. Teachers can build skills by asking students to focus on their reason for listening each time they listen. This is a form of strategy training. The idea of knowing the

purpose of listening is a very effective first strategy to teach because it helps students organize and reflect on their learning (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

c. Post-listening

When teachers think of listening activities, they have a tendency to think of students listening to a recording and doing a task. Students overhear other people talk and then react to that conversation. Brown (2006) states that this sort of task is important because it allows teachers to isolate students' responses and thereby gauge the progress the students are making on listening skills. Teachers can use post-listening activities to check comprehension, evaluate listening skills and use of listening strategies, and extend the knowledge gained to other contexts. A post-listening activity may relate to a pre-listening activity, such as predicting; may expand on the topic or the language of the listening text; or may transfer what has been learned to reading, speaking, or writing activities.

Link between songs and culture

Communicative competence involves sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, sociocultural, social as well as linguistic competence (Van Ek, 1986). According to this, we know that competence in speaking with native speakers is far more than a question of knowing the grammar and lexis and being able to operate them in real time. Broadly speaking, we can say that language teaching has been influenced by internal factors above all in the search for methods of teaching the linguistic dimension and more by external factors as far as the cultural dimension or cultural awareness is concerned.

When Byram and Risager (1999) refer to cultural dimension, three related aspects of foreign language teaching and learning are referred. First of all, there is that aspect of communicative competence which enables a foreign-speaker of a language to understand the ways in which a language can be used in specific sociocultural contexts and can refer to the cultural knowledge and pre-suppositions of specific groups of native-speakers. Second, there is the ability of a foreign-speaker to reflect upon his/her own culture, how it appears to outsiders, and how a relationship can be established between it and the cultures of others in order to facilitate communication, despite different cultural perspectives. Third, there is the ability of the teacher of foreign languages to mediate between learners' cultures and others, to help learners to acquire their own capacity for mediation, and to stimulate learners' interest in other cultures in general, irrespective of the link with a specific language.

A systematic use of songs to initiate discussions of culture enables EFL teachers to avoid the historical divide in most departments between language and cultural studies, what Hiram H. Maxim (2000) calls «the various curricular dichotomies that characterize our discipline: language versus content, [. . .] form versus meaning, [. . .] cultural fact versus cultural inquiry» (p. 12). A song-based approach relies on authentic texts as the underlying linguistic linchpin to connect language acquisition to cultural literacy and thereby addresses concerns raised recently about how to develop a practical classroom pedagogy that leads students to more knowledge about the target language while pursuing a cultural studies agenda. Teachers, therefore, might want to elaborate on songs with a particular sociopolitical context or literary history that lie within a specific musical genre closely associated with their language of instruction.

Research design

The research study that I conducted was a classroom action research. It means a research which is conducted in a classroom to increase the quality of learning teaching practices. According to Burns (1999), the major focus of action research is on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to particular social groups or communities. It is conducted in naturally occurring settings, primarily using methods common to qualitative research such as observing and recording events and behaviors. It can also be defined as an action that is done to solve an identified problem in the classroom.

Research Question

The main research question that guides this study was: How can English songs be used as a tool to foster listening skill as well as to engage students in cultural knowledge?

Setting and participants

This project was carried out at a university foundation in Tunja, Boyacá. The specific setting for this research study was the regular English II classes of the first academic semester of 2010, which I directly addressed. English as a foreign language is a subject taught in the different undergraduate programs from the 5 faculties of the university. Most of the time, students from the same program take English class in the same schedule; however, there are some cases in which students from different programs meet together in the same English group. These groups range between 8 and 20 students because of the total number of students of the university and also due to the different schedules offered by the English Department. All the students need to take 6 English levels during their programs. Four

hours a week are programmed by level. Therefore, as the semester lasts 16 weeks, a total of 64 hours are worked by level.

Instruments and procedures for data collection

In order to collect the information needed to answer my research question; I considered the pertinence of using a questionnaire, classroom observations, students' documents and a semi-structured interview. First, I applied a questionnaire to know listening students' background as well as their interests. Second, I collected students' documents and based on the six workshops and observed the performance of the students during the lessons. Finally, I developed an interview in order to analyze students' final reflections about the whole achievement of the study.

Pedagogical design

I adapted an initial listening test taken from the textbook we follow at the university to have a starting reference for the process. In this test, the students reviewed the topics studied last level. Then, I designed and applied six lesson plans (See Annex 1 for sample), taking into account Van Duzer's bottom-up and top-down processing when listening as well as Brown's procedure of any listening activity (pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening). Each lesson plan had a workshop based on a song. I also presented for every song its corresponding video clip. Although some common parameters were added to each one of the lesson plans designed, I focused my attention on Dumitrescu (2000) because this author presents a complete and detailed explanation for choosing the type of material properly. Therefore, I chose different types of musical genres to make the activities more dynamic and provide my students with different input. I did not take into account the speed of the song because I wanted my students faced authentic materials. However, as I needed to follow the English syllabus in this institution, I tried to find songs which grammar and language focus complemented the topics studied in the textbook. These topics and language focus were: Cultural aspects of England and USA (use of present simple and continuous), the biggest problems of our world (use of WILL for predictions), the hippie movement in USA (use of phrasal verbs), family relationships (use of simple past), Irish history (use of present simple), and world problems (use of slang).

All the activities were observed following a format and monitored with an interview. This interview was used to know to what extent the listening comprehension skill was developed through songs. The six workshops had clear established goals which were divided into four

main sections (warming-up, presentation, practice, and production) in order to make students feel it was a learning experience and not a listening test. The songs I chose for each workshop were the following: *An English man in New York* (by Sting), *Imagine* (by John Lennon), *Mercedes Benz* (by Janis Joplin), *Cats in the Cradle* (by Ugly Kid Joe), *Zombie* (by The Cranberries), *Where is the love?* (by Black Eyed Peas). Finally, at the end of the process, I applied a final listening test including the new topics worked along this semester. I compared the results of this final test with the results of the initial test to analyze to what extent my students developed their listening comprehension after working with the six workshops.

Data analysis

To find a possible answer to the research question, I used the triangulation technique based on the fact that it is used when two or more methods are employed for the data collection process. The categories that emerged in the data analysis were:

<i>Categories and Subcategories</i>
<i>1. Songs as a vehicle for motivating and training students when working in listening practices</i>
<i>1.1 Students' attitudes and reflections towards the listening activities based on songs:</i> From reading the data provided in the class observations, students' documents and interviews, I perceived that the attitudes students had when working on the workshops was really positive for the development of the lessons. It was also evidenced that the perceptions students had on the kind of music listened and the video clips worked determined their performance in the class. When applying the workshops in the action stage, the students seemed more motivated towards the listening activities. They were very enthusiastic during performing listening with songs.
<i>1.2 The extent students had of understanding the songs:</i> This analysis leads to affirm that at the beginning of a listening process understanding songs can become difficult for EFL learners, but through time and with a lot of practice, ears start being acute to identify details in any speech. Next subcategory involves the issues related to pronunciation and reduced forms that are used in spoken language and how students started practicing those forms in their speech.

1.3 Practicing pronunciation and natural reductions that occur in spoken English:

Practicing listening with songs gives students experience and tools to understand more details during any speech. The ears become more acute and comprehension becomes easier for them. Students also become familiarized with sounds and natural reductions of English that can put into practice at the moment of speaking.

2. Cultural themes involved in songs

2.1 Students' reflections on the social context around them:

When students reflect on social and cultural issues, they feel that their English learning is supported on a meaningful and real environment, so they can perceive and understand the importance of learning a foreign language. Culture, language, and communication are inseparable. Students identify problems in the society they are immersed on and need to propose solutions for those problems. They are active listeners and participants of the society.

2.2 Using songs to compare cultural differences:

Therefore, a song in an EFL classroom can be exploited in many ways depending on the learning purposes and on the systematic lesson planning teachers do. If a song is used only for creating a relaxing atmosphere or just for fun, students are going to waste not only many enriching issues that can be worked, but also different details of content or characteristics of language that can be studied to understand differences between English-speaking countries.

Fuente: El autor.

Conclusions

Based on the results of the information gathered, it is possible to say that songs are the most suitable type of authentic material to develop listening comprehension. This is because students feel motivated when working with this kind of material; furthermore, learners' ages and social contexts really fit with the kind of music we select to work in class.

I also found that the use of songs in the classroom motivates the students to attend lessons and pay attention in class. Songs are the product of a culture and share values, commitment, responsibility, love, history, traditions, customs, and specific characteristics of spoken language. Understanding the language and culture students are learning through songs is much more attractive for them. Songs are also easily available; songs present new vocabulary and expressions in context. Through songs students become familiar with the pronunciation of native speakers, and they also provide topics for discussion. Most students enjoy listening and analyzing songs because of the fact that music is everywhere and they are always in

contact with music. The effectiveness of using songs can also be seen from the results obtained in the tests as well as in the students' performance during the activities proposed.

Songs in general use simple conversational language with a lot of repetition. They can strongly activate the repetition mechanism of the language acquisition, which is just what many teachers look for in sample texts. This type of repetition presented in songs will activate the students to get a lot of pattern drills automatically without realizing it. I also concluded that songs offer a lot of practice for students to link the sounds of phrases or sentences naturally as they listen and sing, following the tape, so that they can improve their pronunciation and the use of natural reductions of English without noticing it.

Songs facilitate the learning of a language in interesting and effective ways. Most of our students have access to this form of culture. Songs that touch upon social issues and cultural aspects are appropriate choices. By adopting a learner-centered approach, students are able to participate, exploit and experience the meaning of the songs themselves. The interactive and reflective learning process will generate an abundance of language output from the students.

Listening comprehension through songs can be developed based on the correct material selection and systematic and coherent lesson plans. To select the appropriate songs it is necessary to consider learning purposes as well as the applicability and adaptability of the chosen texts. In order to do systematic lesson planning, we should pre-establish goals carefully stated for each lesson plan; design careful listening tasks from the simplest to the most complex; ask for an active, overt students' participation; and have a teaching not testing purpose when listening. Moreover, it is necessary to develop listening for gist, selective listening, and listening for predictions which are the relevant skills when developing listening comprehension.

Based on the criteria to design a lesson plan, it is important to state that a degree of development has been evidently reached. During the progress of the last three lesson plans, it was noticed that learners were not misunderstanding what the song said. At this point, they comprehended and followed instructions in an easier and more efficient way than before. Besides, students' concentration spans have significantly increased. Today they are able to focus their attention on an authentic spoken text and comprehend its essential meaning; this is probably because of the principle of teaching listening but not testing it. They feel immersed in a continuous listening practice which provides them with enough self confidence to face this sort of material. In short, it was found that this set of lesson plans really helped students to accomplish a higher listening comprehension and engagement in cultural knowledge.

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Annex 1

Lesson plan sample (Workshop 1)

Objectives

1. General: To practice listening comprehension, guessing, prediction, and descriptions.

2. Specific:

- ✓ To identify pronunciation differences between British and American English.
- ✓ To describe differences between English and American culture.
- ✓ To reflect, critique and defend his/her point of view orally.

Topic: Cultural aspects about England and the United States.

Language Focus: Simple present, present continuous.

Material and Equipment: Video clip of the song “An English man in New York”, lyrics of the song, TV, DVD, handouts, markers, paper.

Previous knowledge: At this point students know how to use the simple present and the present continuous in active voice as well as countries’ names, and facts about American families.

Student organization: Whole group, individual work, and pair work.

Time: 90 minutes.

Procedure

❖ **Warming-up: Runners and secretaries**

The group will work in pairs sitting face to face and having enough space around them. A short biography of the singer “Sting”, the author of the song to work on, will be stuck on the board. One of the students of each pair is going to receive the name of “runner”. He/She is going to be in charge of going to the board, reading and remembering as much as

possible in order to dictate to the “secretary”, who is the person that copies accurately what his/her partner says. Then, the teacher is going to read and correct the biography and the group with the best quality and quantity of information will be the winner. Then, students guided by the teacher are going to clarify vocabulary from the biography. This activity will help students to contextualize their knowledge with the new knowledge they are going to construct.

“Sting” biography: Gordon Matthew Sumner was born in Wallsend, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, UK, on October 2nd 1951. His mother was Audrey, and his father was Ernest. He received his name Sting from his striped sweater in which Gordon Solomon said that he looked like a bee. Primarily a musician, he worked in the band The Police until 1984, when he went solo. Before his music career he was a ditch digger, a school teacher who taught English and a soccer coach. He received an honorary Doctorate of Music degree from Northumbria University in October 1992, and from Berklee College of Music in May 1994. He plays guitar, bass guitar, mandolin, piano, harmonica, saxophone and pan-flute, and he gave a name to his bass (Brian). Along with his wife Trudie Styler and a Brazilian Indian, he started the Rainforest Foundation in 1989 to help save the rainforests. Sting owns a Jacobian castle in Wiltshire, which he calls «Lake House», where he records his albums, a place in London, an apartment in New York, and a place on the beach in Malibu, California. He has been called pretentious and is accused of intellectual arrogance for stepping into territory not usually covered by “pop stars”.

❖ **Presentation**

● **Activity one: Debate**

In this activity the whole group is going to reflect and answer some questions according to the title, vocabulary, and sayings taken from the song.

Questions:

What does the title of the song suggest?

What do these words have in common?

- modesty
- propriety
- sobriety
- gentleness

Which of these two sayings do you agree more with and why?

- “Be yourself no matter what they say”
- “When in Rome, do as Romans do”

● **Activity two: Silent viewing (Predicting)**

In this activity students are going to predict what is happening in the early part of the video by answering some questions while they see the video without sound.

Questions:

What can you see? What are the colors? What is he wearing?
Where is this person? Can you guess? What is in the background?
What expression is on the person’s face? What is he doing?
What kind of personality do you think this person has?

❖ **Practice**

● **Activity one: Listening for the gist**

At this point, students are going to listen to the song while they answer some general questions about its content.

Questions:

What is Sting singing about?
Write words that you understand.

● **Activity two: Selective Listening**

1. In this activity, the students are going to be given a photocopy of the lyrics with some words and phrases left out. In parentheses, the number of words left out is indicated. They first read the text together for overall comprehension, trying to think of words which might fit the blanks. The teacher will explain any words the students do not know.
2. Then, the teacher plays the video and asks the students to fill in the missing words. There is a glossary of the missing words at the bottom of the worksheet.
3. Finally, the teacher asks them to tell their answers. If there is disagreement or doubt over a given word or phrase, the video will be played again.

Students' guide

An Englishman in New York (by Sting)

I don't drink coffee _____ (3) my dear
I like my toast done on one side
And you can hear it in _____ (2) when I _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York

See me walking down Fifth Avenue
A walking cane here _____ (3)
I take it everywhere I walk
I'm an Englishman in New York

I'm an _____ (1), I'm a legal _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York
I'm an _____ (1), I'm a legal _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York
If "manners make the man" as someone said
Then he's the hero of the day
It takes a man to suffer ignorance and smile
Be yourself no matter _____ (3)

I'm an _____ (1), I'm a legal _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York
I'm an _____ (1), I'm a legal _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York

_____ (1), propriety can lead to notoriety
You could end up as the only one
Gentleness, _____ (1) are rare in this society
At night a candle's brighter than the sun

Takes more than combat gear to make a man
Takes more than _____ (4)
Confront your enemies, avoid them when _____ (2)
A gentleman will walk but never run

If "manners make the man" as someone said
Then he's the hero of the day
It takes a man to suffer ignorance and smile
Be yourself no matter _____ (3)

I'm an _____ (1)
I'm a legal _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York
I'm an _____ (1)
I'm a legal _____ (1)
I'm an Englishman in New York

Teachers' guide

I don't drink coffee I take tea my dear
I like my toast done on one side
And you can hear it in my accent when I talk
I'm an Englishman in New York

See me walking down Fifth Avenue
A walking cane here at my side
I take it everywhere I walk
I'm an Englishman in New York

I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York
I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York

If "manners make the man" as someone said
Then he's the hero of the day
It takes a man to suffer ignorance and smile
Be yourself no matter what they say

I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York
I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York

Modesty, propriety can lead to notoriety
You could end up as the only one
Gentleness, sobriety are rare in this society
At night a candle's brighter than the sun

Takes more than combat gear to make a man
Takes more than license for a gun
Confront your enemies, avoid them when you can
A gentleman will walk but never run

If «manners make the man» as someone said
Then he's the hero of the day
It takes a man to suffer ignorance and smile
Be yourself no matter what they say

I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York
I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York.

❖ **Production**

● **Activity one: Discussion**

In this stage, the students are going to answer some questions about the cultural content of the song.

Questions:

1. What do these phrases mean? Can you explain with daily life examples?
 - Be yourself no matter what they say.
 - “Manners make the man”
 - “At night a candle’s brighter than the sun”
 - Takes more than combat gear to make a man.
2. What are some of the challenges of being yourself in a foreign country? Why is it good to be yourself sometimes?
3. What are the pronunciation differences between British and American English? What sentence in the song clearly captures the idea of differences in accents?

● **Activity two: Post-listening**

1. In this stage, the students are going to prepare and present next class a poster session in which they explain with examples some of the main differences between English and American cultures. This activity will be in pairs.
2. The students are also going to prepare and explain a comparison between Colombian culture and American culture by answering the following question:
If you were a Colombian in New York, what would be your greater challenges?