

Using Rock Music as a Teaching-Learning Tool*

Uso de la música rock como herramienta de enseñanza-aprendizaje

*Camilo Morales Neisa***

Universidad Nacional de Colombia - Sede Bogotá, Colombia

The use of rock music in English teaching-learning contexts gains relevance as many of the people involved in them listen to this kind of music. The integration of rock music into language learning can be done if the music is treated as class material, taking into account that it requires previous and careful preparation. In this article I will show my experience working with two students in classes in which the materials were based on the lyrics of rock songs. The motivations, reflections, information collected and findings made during the process compose the following article in which rock music and learning are the central characters of a research study carried out with two adult students.

Key words: Rock music in ELT, music as authentic material, teaching-learning tools

El uso de la música rock en el contexto de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés cobra relevancia dado que muchas personas involucradas en el proceso escuchan esta clase de música. La integración de este tipo de material en la enseñanza de lenguas es posible si la música se presenta como material de clase, teniendo en cuenta que requiere preparación previa y cuidadosa. En este artículo deseo compartir la experiencia de trabajar con dos estudiantes en clases cuyos materiales se basaron principalmente en letras de canciones de rock. Las motivaciones, reflexiones, información recolectada y hallazgos durante el proceso se incluyen en este artículo en el cual la música rock y el aprendizaje son los protagonistas principales de un estudio realizado con dos adultos.

Palabras clave: Música rock en la enseñanza del inglés, música como material auténtico, herramientas para la enseñanza-aprendizaje

* This is a report of a monograph project to opt for the degree of B. Ed. in Philology and Languages – English. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2007.

** E-mail: cmoralesne@unal.edu.co

Address: Carrera 74 N° 7B-25 Bogotá, Colombia

This article was received on November 14th, 2007 and accepted on January 9th, 2008

Introduction

In the context of English teaching, music has been used since long ago, but at times it is done through isolated exercises and almost as an entertainment activity to challenge the atmosphere of the class. Currently, its use for learning purposes has widened thanks to the internet and the increase of research in the English teaching and learning fields. The relevance of its use in the learning context grows as rock music gains presence in the environment of the people interested in English and the advantages of using it as authentic material can help in the teaching and learning of the language. For this reason I wanted to explore the teaching of English through lyrics of rock songs, and to register the reactions and opinions observed during the process. This document will present the information collected during a three-month period of classes with two private students. The main source from which I developed the material for the classes were rock songs chosen by the students and some exercises developed for such purpose. The information for the research was collected in the form of questionnaires, field notes, journals and the material worked on by the students during the lessons. In the frame of a case study, my intention was to work with people that also enjoy listening to rock music in English, to see how I could help them approach language through music, and to learn from their reactions and suggestions.

The Problem: Researching Rock Music

After narrowing the field of my work to rock music, the research was focused on

the previous research done related to music and rock music, and other theoretical issues that could support my work. The objectives of the research were divided into general (to explore the teaching/learning potential rock songs have in English language lessons with two adult private students) and specific objectives (to integrate the lyrics of songs into exercises worked on with two private students in private lessons and to describe the learning experiences these students had when exposed to rock songs in lyrics-based English lessons). The research was framed in a qualitative research paradigm because it was my interest to explore, to describe and to analyze *what* happens when integrating rock music lyrics to learning and *how* it could be done, rather than to find any measure accounting for its effectiveness. The idea of using this kind of material was to motivate students to practice English outside classrooms and to help them relate their interests with learning a language.

Presence of Music in Research and Theory

The use of songs has been notably present in teaching research for more than two decades. It has been mentioned in the theory and been used timidly in certain study books to which I had access at the beginning of my language learning process. I have seen some teachers that, by individual efforts and dynamics, have included songs in their classes, and I have worked with songs almost each time I have given lessons to my students. During my research, I realized that many things I thought about the use of music had already been done, yet I consider it important to

develop my own way to present rock music as a tool to learn English.

The first important thing was to make clear the definition of the type of music I used as a learning tool. Regarding this, Fornatale (1987, p. 3) says that “two of rock’s primary functions have always been to annoy adults and to take a poke at the status quo”. This explains to some extent the ideological inspiration behind music itself: to show society those aspects of reality that are too harsh to be shown amiably, though music has been revolutionary in its use of instruments as well.

After narrowing the scope of my work, the research was focused on the previous research done related to music and rock music in particular, and all the theory that could support the use of this as a learning tool. I considered particularly important: *preliminary consideration, the use of music in listening practices and songs as authentic material.*

Preliminary Considerations

The use of songs in class may be useful if it is done in a way in which the song is treated as something deeper than the entertainment of three to four minutes. The use of songs as a teaching material requires previous preparation and careful selection of those songs we may want to include in our classes. It does not mean that just few songs can be useful for teaching; instead, a great variety of music is available for this purpose, though we have to be careful with the selection. Teachers should take into account the characteristics and particularities of students, and the possibilities the song gives them in order to

present the elements of the language they want the students to have contact with.

One of the advantages of using songs in teaching is that the texts in the lyrics represent authentic examples of English structures and real uses of the language, and here is when the work with songs takes paramount relevance at the moment of teaching the language. Lopera (2003) considers that the inclusion of social contexts, the interaction with students’ moods, and the possibility of accessing authentic texts in English are important reasons for the inclusion of songs into teaching contexts.

Relaxation is another factor that is mentioned by several authors that write about music in their works. Dubin & Olshtain (1977, p. 198) consider that the inclusion of music in English lessons is effective because “music is a pleasurable outlet...is a good way for students to relax and feel more at ease in using the new language”. Coromina (1993, p. 27) says rock songs “provide a break from the text book and workbook routine”. Eken (1996, p. 47) says: “These activities provide a relaxed, friendly and cooperative classroom atmosphere”.

In addition, it is interesting to see that Saeki (1994), working only with background music, found several similar reasons shared by other teachers working with music. Saeki (ibid., p. 30) says that music can be used for many purposes in language teaching: “BGM (background music) is important because I believe it can do the following: (1) relax students, (2) activate students, (3) get students to be attentive, (4) let students have fun, (5) Change the classroom atmosphere,

(6) create learning situations”. Saeki also mentioned a very interesting fact dealing with the psychological aspects of the use of music, “Music may also engage the right hemisphere of the brains more, and make learning a more holistic experience”.

On the other hand, the use of songs is directly related to the identity of the people who listen to it, and the use of songs within the classroom can help the class to overcome indifference from the students due to the inclusion of their interests. Segura & Villalba (2005, p. 70) mention that using songs related to the students’ interests can help the class to engage willingly and meaningfully in the activities involving things they like; though in order to exploit the lyrics of songs, specific activities should be designed taking into account the English level of the students and the complexity of the language in the song.

Another advantage of the use of songs is their easy availability in our current environment, since technology has provided ways in order to get it easier and cheaper. All these reasons make me think that the use of songs is really beneficial in teaching contexts; however, I have other personal reasons for the inclusion of music in my classes. The characteristics of the texts given in songs (full context [both musical and linguistic], complete meaning [not a fragment], pronunciation, etc) lead me to consider them as excellent sources of English samples. Another reason is the easy access students have to music in English, since it can help people who cannot have permanent contact with native speakers in the language. In the light of this, I believe that music is a great way to be in contact with the language inside and outside the classroom.

The Use of Music in Listening Practices

Listening is regarded as one of the most difficult aspects in the mastery of the language, and the material used for this purpose in traditional teaching is not always the most effective, nor the most interesting. In relation to listening activities, Cárdenas (2000) considers that in most cases listening is carried out through practices that produce boredom, panic or frustration. In order to avoid these circumstances, music may be useful to improve the conditions of the listening activities thanks to its entertaining and authentic nature. In fact, many authors agree that songs help to increase motivation. Another reason is the teaching possibilities that the lyrics of songs provide in order to design exercises for an English class.

Concerning these possibilities, Lopera (2003) mentions that songs provide the opportunity to work on specific teaching points. Among others, these are:

- To have a contextualized topic for compositions or discussion
- To make associations in English with other aspects of our lives
- To facilitate translation exercises
- To provide listening material

Discussion about feelings and attitudes is another teaching point mentioned by several authors like Eken (1996) and Lopera (2003), and it is related to other skills besides listening. Discussion means oral practice, since it requires the participants to interact and interchange their ideas by speaking. Music is also related to writing skills because interpretations can

be manifested through compositions or essays, and it can also stimulate creativity and imagination at the time to produce other responses as drawings. Reading is directly related to listening activities since all listening involves a script, words and sentences making a text. Guerrero (1999) states that listening and reading interact reciprocally with each other, since the words that could not be heard can be understood in the written text and vice versa.

Concerning this, Dubin & Olshtain (1977, p. 5) consider that “listening-comprehension and reading are linked to each other since they both represent language understanding at deep levels of cognition.”

Therefore, the use of different skills at the same time is not a new discovery in teaching theory. Cárdenas (2000, p. 15) states that “listening comprehension is added on to established stages of reading, writing and speaking”. According to this, if other skills are required for listening comprehension, interaction is inevitable. With music it seems that skills not only interact but also integrate a single unit of meaning, a complete text with many of the contextual references necessary for the interpretation of the message and the activation of the four skills in an interconnected way. A song can be listened to, read, written or written about; it can be sung or talked about. The use of more than one skill at the moment of listening to songs makes the practice of English through this option an integral learning activity.

Another advantage of songs in teaching is that songs seem to deal with some of the main worries of teachers researching listening skills, activities and comprehension. To illustrate, Gray (1983,

p. 67) mentions some relevant issues about effective listening: *Learners must want to listen*, the idea of working with songs is to take into account students’ interest and likes; *Learners must understand the particular reason for learning*, the intention is to understand something one likes, and therefore, the reason for learning is personal; *Learners must enjoy and look forward to listening*, if students enjoy the songs they are using for learning, each time they listen to these songs will be an opportunity to practice English.

Concerning the topic of listening skills, Willis (1981, p. 135) argues that in order to improve these skills, students have “to get the chance to listen to different types of English, so they will be able to listen with understanding to spoken English outside the classroom”. In the light of this, songs serve perfectly as exponents of different types of English because, as English has become the language of rock, speakers from all over the world are writing their lyrics and singing in English. Besides, songs give the students the opportunity to be in contact with different forms of this language. Music can help second language students to participate in the culture (Carrier, 2000); it is an accessible and enjoyable way to have contact with the culture and structures of the language we are learning. In relation to this, Barfield (2001, p. 47) states that “preferably, there should be times when the activities are carried out as activities completely separate from any text and book. Is this approach not more in keeping with the way we learn the first language?”

The use of songs in language teaching offers plenty of possibilities to teachers

and learners. It allows the language to be presented and manipulated in a variety of forms. It can be used as presentation of cultural issues, brief narratives, new vocabulary and expressions in context, familiarization with the pronunciation of native (international) speakers, topics of discussion, etc. The teaching possibilities of songs are not limited to those mentioned above; they depend on the creativity of the teacher and accurate selection when choosing those songs we want to work with.

Songs as Authentic Material

The context of language teaching in our country is very different from that of an English-speaking country. The process of learning a language in a place where the contact with native speakers is difficult has to be very different from those processes of immersion that are carried out in English-speaking countries. However, and despite the lack of native speakers of English to talk to, our Colombian context and current processes of globalization give us access to plenty of cultural productions of this language. In our immediate environment we can find movies, advertisements, catalogs, instructions for devices, videogames, products, documents, academic information, magazines, music, etc. All these productions are possibilities to enter in contact with English.

This kind of material that has not been exclusively designed for teaching purposes is considered authentic material. Arias, Duque, & Mitchell (1996, p. 125) include songs as part of this kind of material because they are “not graded material, produced by native speakers and for the users of

that language, without any modification, and with the purpose of helping English language instruction”. The contact that people have with songs is of a completely different nature. If people like music, they are likely to listen to it outside classrooms, and this is a circumstance that may be really helpful when learning a language. It can release the practice of English from the pressure of academic duties, and help students face real use of the language in real contexts.

Authenticity in language learning material is a condition mentioned by several authors. Widdowson, cited by Cárdenas (2000, p. 12), claims that authenticity “is a function of the interaction between the hearer and the text, which incorporates the intention of the speaker”. In addition, songs combine linguistic and extra-linguistic elements in one single unit of meaning; they provide text, co-text, cultural and aural (artistic) context, autonomous narratives and reflections. Thus, the intention is integrated to other elements that help the message convey its meaning in a real and meaningful situation.

Another advantage of songs in language learning is availability. Crystal (1997) cited by Lopera (2003, p. 138) declares: “Throughout the world, English is probably encountered more often today in music than on the printed page.” In the case of rock music it has become a world-wide expression, and the availability of this kind of music extends around the globe. Murphey (1990) cited by Lopera (Ibid., p. 138), stated that “English language music was readily available in most EFL environments and extensively listened to by youth.” However, I would say that rock

music extends to older populations, since the popularity of this music began almost 50 years ago, and I know there are rock fans older than 60. Therefore, the possibility of working with rock songs is not limited to young people.

Songs are part of the culture of the people engaged in language learning, and it is the duty of teachers to relate the teaching of English to those cultural productions students have access to. For this purpose Barfield (2001, p. 44) affirms that “Movies, songs on the radio and on cassettes... are some of the many options the language learner has at his/her fingertips today.” It would be a waste not to take advantage of materials that are already prepared and that students enjoy.

The presence of music in diverse contexts and the variety of uses and situations in which it is involved are an important reason to believe that music plays a remarkable role in people’s lives. To include this kind of element in the process of learning a language must have a particular influence over student’s perception, since the stimuli perceived involve more than one sense working on cognition (listening: *aural*, reading: *visual*, singing: *oral*, and even writing: *tactile*, *kinesthetic*). To relate music to learning is similar to relating language to everyday life, and to do that is to use it for real purposes.

In addition, the popularity and variety of rock music gives countless options at the moment of choosing a song for teaching/ learning/practicing purposes. I have already mentioned some teaching possibilities when working with songs, but it is important to take into account the attitude toward rock music. Coromina (1993, p. 27) exemplified

the willingness to work with rock songs from teacher’s perspective: “I favor the use of rock songs in class, because in today’s society rock music is everywhere”. This willingness is also claimed by other authors like Dubin & Olshtain (1977, p. 199): “Pop, rock, and folk music is an idiom which is embraced by a broad span of young people –and not only those living within English-speaking countries. It is familiar to students both in academic and non-academic settings”. Rock music is enjoyed by many people; it is almost part of the culture of those interested in English. Learners listen to it outside the classrooms and that is quite an advantage to take into account. Music can positively influence learning because learning the language better may enable learners to have access to what songs say; hence, learning the language would be a motivation for students to understand parts of the culture they like.

The use of songs in class must be accompanied by tasks or materials designed in order to help the students have access to the language and messages embedded in songs. Also, it is recommendable to take into account the three phases of listening (pre-, while- post-) in order to take deeper advantage of the contents and teaching possibilities existent in songs. The interests of the students should be taken into account, but the teacher should decide whether they are appropriate or not according to the language elements present. The level of the students must also be taken into account, though the same song can be useful for beginners or advanced students depending on the kind of activity planned. The idea is to encourage students to use English outside the class environment, and

to motivate them when including songs as part of the language lessons.

Participants

In order to develop the current research I carried out three private lessons with two students, Daniel (21) and Alfredo (27). The lessons were developed at their home in Bogotá, where the participants and the researcher agreed a schedule. Each lesson had a lesson plan that involved one song chosen by the students and the activities designed in order to present and study the language involved in those songs. The lessons took from one to two hours and were developed in weekends during the first semester in 2006.

The level of English of the students was that acquired in secondary education and some later study in institutes and the SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) respectively. According to the *Lineamientos curriculares para las lenguas extranjeras* (Ministerio de Educación, 1999) in Colombia, students are expected to demonstrate mastery of the following aspects:

- **Communication:** The participants are able to understand commands in English and they give written answers to the questions asked. They express feelings, emotions and opinions mainly in written form. Their oral expression is limited to short sentences but their understanding of listening material is high (they understand about 50 to 60 per cent of the lyrics of the songs involved in this research).
- **Culture:** The participants understand the songs as a cultural expression from another culture and recognize the differences in the structure and perspective of the language studied. They interpret the messages of the songs in the context of their own culture.
- **Connections:** The participants understand a high percentage of songs in English and make connections with other personal interests related to professional areas and entertainment activities like movies and video games.
- **Comparisons:** The participants recognize the different phonetic values of English and try to emulate correct pronunciation through the comparison with the singer's pronunciation in the songs. They understand the distinction between words and expressions in the mother language and English but have some difficulty when trying to translate these elements into Spanish.
- **Communities:** The participants use English in their daily lives when listening to music, watching TV and movies, playing video games and looking for information on the internet. They use the language to understand what they need more than to interact with other people.

For the development of this research I asked two friends, Alfredo (27) and Daniel (21), who I knew share my interest in rock music. Alfredo is an architect from the Universidad Nacional and his last academic contact with English was a short course in an institute. The situation is similar for Daniel, who studied bakery at SENA, and

took English classes there. They have been my students in some informal lessons we have had when we have been able to arrange time to share music and English. Both of them studied English at CAFAM School during high school, and both of them undertook further studies in institutes and in the SENA respectively.

Procedure

The present research is framed in a qualitative research paradigm because it was the interest of the research to explore, to describe and to analyze WHAT happens when integrating rock music lyrics to learning and HOW it could be done, rather than to find any measure accounting for its effectiveness. I thought this kind of research fit my work because qualitative research is non-standard, unconfined, and dependent on the subjective experience of both the researcher and the researched (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). The authors also stress that qualitative methods aim to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. This approach helped me to give more relevance to the reactions and opinions of my students, and let me integrate my own reflections into the research instruments and data analysis.

With the kind of instruments I used to observe the reactions of my students, it was more relevant to explore the information gathered than to measure any of it. I used the methodology of a case study because it seemed to me the most appropriate approach to the exploratory observation of the “case” of two adult students learning English through the lyrics of songs.

The exploratory nature of this kind of study was chosen because it allows deep and close observation of individual phenomena and it is suitable for the characteristics of the group I worked with. Regarding case study, Hillway (1964, p. 238) declares that “while there may very well be a good proportion of the subjective element in this type of study, the method nevertheless tends to uncover information which might otherwise be overlooked”.

The idea of this research was to take a close look at the impact that songs have in the context of language learning, specifically within the group of two students I was working with. For this reason, I chose the participant observation approach of the case study, since it allowed me to follow the language development of my students while keeping an informal relationship with them. Bailey (1978), cited by Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000, p. 188), mentions that in case studies “researchers can develop more intimate and informal relationships with those they are observing, generally in a more natural environment than those in which experiments and surveys are conducted”. This kind of approach turned out to be very useful in my research because of the friendly relationship I had with my students before the research. In relation to case study, Bell (1993, p. 8) states that it “allows the researcher to concentrate on a specific instance or situation”, and it allowed me to dig deep into the reactions and experiences my students have while receiving language lessons based on the lyrics of songs.

Instruments for Data Collection

For the purpose of data collection I developed three research instruments. The first instrument was the questionnaires. The second instrument was the research journal, which was closely connected to the lesson plan for each class, and was improved by another minor instrument which was the field notes. The third instrument was the artifacts, those written materials developed by my students which showed the way they developed the exercises proposed and kept a record of their answers and written work during the lessons.

Questionnaires

The first questionnaire consisted of five questions, the first of them about personal information. I also asked about previous experiences with English, and the places where they had taken place. The second questionnaire was focused on specific information I thought useful in order to start the lessons. I included some of the activities that they wanted and mentioned in the lesson plans. The third questionnaire was more focused on the objectives of my research. Through this questionnaire I realized that there are specific elements of the language that require grammar explanations in order for students to understand the use and functions of other elements of the language. I also found in these answers that they had developed skills in other areas different to listening, and that both students considered the inclusion of images as something important for the future development of the lessons.

Research Journals

These journals evolved each time I carried out a lesson, analyzed the data, and wrote the research journal for the lesson involved. The information collected in the first two journals was useful in the data analysis and some of the reflections written there were relevant for the development of the research. The last journal was the most focused account of the lessons; it revealed specific students' reactions in relation to the objectives of the research and provided vital information for data analysis. Its relevance improved thanks to the evolution of the previous journals.

Lesson Plans

Although not considered as an instrument, the lesson plans (Appendix 1) were vital for the organization of the classes and the inclusion of the lyrics of the songs into the exercises proposed. The first lesson plan included listening exercises, dictation, vocabulary search, reading comprehension, brief discussion of the topics proposed and a translation exercise. The second lesson plan included the song "*What do you want from me?*" by Pink Floyd. This time the students organized jig-saw lyrics, filled the gaps in the text, looked for unknown vocabulary and gave oral and written examples with those words they already knew. The third lesson plan included the song "*Winter retreat*" by Judas Priest. This time the class started with the discussion about the title of the song, and then we listened to the song and tried to organize scrambled lyrics. There was a crossword about the vocabulary and some reading

comprehension through short questions. The planning of these lessons played a significant role in the research because it was the exemplification of the inclusion of rock lyrics into class material. These plans enable me to help my students approach English through songs they like, and to start thinking about an efficient way to present rock music lyrics when teaching the language.

Field Notes

Although I did not consider this instrument in the first stages of my research, I realized during the first lesson that I needed an instrument to help me with the reconstruction of the events during the lesson; it was better not to rely only on memory when writing the important facts in the journal. For this instrument I did not use any specific format but the free notes I wrote during the lessons. It was like having “raw” notes during the lessons and “cooked” notes in the journal, and it helped me a lot in the improvement of the journal writing.

Artifacts

My students’ productions improved during the development of the lessons. In the first lesson I just gave my students a sheet of paper in which they wrote important information and carried out the exercises proposed. The second lesson materials included a translation exercise, listening activities and work with vocabulary and expressions. For the last lesson I designed a worksheet in order to have their answers and relevant

productions organized. It gave me good results despite the difficulties we had in the last lesson concerning the high level of the vocabulary and the listening skills required to understand the song. Later I realized that the worksheet was necessary because it allowed the students to read and to answer questions about the song in a very clear way. The use of the artifacts helped me realize that my students were good when producing written answers to the questions I proposed, though they were not as skilled when speaking skills were required. There were always good answers and examples recorded in the students’ productions, but they were much better in written than spoken answers. Through the analysis of the artifacts I realized that there is a need to find a balance in the exercises proposed, in which the different skills involved have to be equally present.

Data Analysis

Music and its impact in the context of language learning and teaching has been the main force that makes me move into the exploration of the role of this kind of cultural production in specific private lessons with a couple of students. In order to develop the lessons and examine the role of songs in these students’ language learning processes I designed questionnaires and lessons intended to identify students’ needs and to analyze what happens when students engaged in language learning activities focused on the lyrics of songs. The learning experiences of the students were also collected through the questionnaires and the reflections recorded in the research journal.

The idea of this research was to explore the role of music as a pedagogical tool that can cross the threshold of the academic context and stimulate people to learn English through activities they like. Music is perfect for this purpose since the lyrics of songs are not only texts for teaching purposes but real artistic and cultural productions that people listen to even without the purpose of learning English. Its field of action is broader than many methods of language teaching because through songs English can be practiced almost anywhere and the fact that it has purposes beyond teaching (entertainment, relaxation, social interaction, cultural identities, etc.) makes it have a stronger impact in populations that do not have direct contact with English speakers, nor any academic context (classes) in which the practice of English may be a common activity.

The validation of the data collected was possible due to the identification of different relevant issues present in the information collected, analyzed and contrasted through the triangulation of the different instruments proposed. The relevance of the topics found in the literature review was taken into account for the extraction of the fragments mentioned in the findings and their focus were tightly linked to the bibliographic research. It was difficult to find patterns in such a brief period of time, although this period showed clear suggestions about the matters that should be taken into account when using rock music for learning purposes.

Codification

The coding procedures I used were very basic but helped me to organize the information collected in the different

instruments. Each reference to the instruments is made by the mention of the initials of the instrument and the data required to finding the information. For the questionnaires I used the abbreviation Q (Questionnaire), the date, and the number of the question (Qs) involved. For instance, in relation to the category *interconnection of skills*, we can see QIII, 29/06/06, Qs2; the third Questionnaire, June the 29th 2006, Question N° 2:

How have the activities with songs in English developed so far influenced your learning process?

A: Well, I've done, and improved in listening, grammar and vocabulary exercises.

D: They have taught me vocabulary and helped me to recall words and uses.¹

Findings

The categories found were linked to those proposed in the literature review. I decided to choose these because I consider they are related to the relevant information I found during the data analysis. Besides, I think the inclusion of these categories may help the coherence of the findings and the theory considered for the literature review.

Learning More than Vocabulary

There were several instances in the data collected that made me think of this as a category because there are many more aspects than vocabulary that have to be taken into account at the moment of using lyrics of songs as a teaching/learning

¹ For the coding procedure I identify my students through the initials of their names A for Alfredo and D for Daniel.

tool. Some of these I mainly found in the research journals:

“I asked my students to underline unknown vocabulary; they did it while listening to the song and asked me about the meaning of those words. As there were not many words, I asked my students to look for them in the dictionary and to write a short glossary of the song. I realized that some of the words were related to conditional sentences and were difficult to include in a glossary. They asked me examples with those words and I gave them some; nevertheless, I told them we will have to check those words and conditional sentences more carefully afterwards”. RJ 2, 02/04/06, lines 18-24

It is important to have in mind, when using lyrics of songs as teaching material, that the linguistic elements present in songs are not only vocabulary; they all cannot be included in a glossary because there are words with specific functions that only work in a specific way and context. The most evident case I faced during the lessons was the case of conditionals, because my students did not know how to include such words like: *would*, *if* and *should* in the glossary I asked them to write. At the end I had to devote some unplanned time of the class to explaining conditional sentences, but it was useful because the students could use those words within sentences created by them.

D example: “I should control my anger if I want take care myself”

A example: “If I were rich I would buy a motorcycle”.

PD 2, 02/04/06

The Interconnection of Skills

The interconnection of skills is nothing new in language teaching. As Cárdenas (2000, p.15) said “listening comprehension

is added on to established stages of reading, writing and speaking”. Listening requires that the hearer knows the words and elements presented in the lyrics, and these elements (words) are fundamental part of reading, writing and speaking skills. While listening to a song we can read the lyrics and clarify pronunciation issues, we can sing and practice speaking and pronunciation skills, and we can write opinions or answer questions about our understanding of the songs. Guerrero (1999) also mentions the close relation between listening and reading. She states that listening and reading interact reciprocally with each other, since the words that could not be heard can be understood in the written text; in the same way, doubts about pronunciation can be solved thanks to the oral component.

Let us see some examples of this interconnection in the instruments of this research. In order to exemplify this, I will take some extracts from the journals.

“After they finished translating, we listened to this class song. I gave them the lyrics in disorganized pieces of paper. Students try to organize the papers while listening to the song but, as they could not in a single try, I played the song again. As they were organizing, they sang the parts of the song they recognized in the pieces of paper. They finished organizing after having heard the song twice”. RJ 2, 02/04/06, lines 8-12

The exercise of translating involves deep reading skills in order to get closer to the meaning intended by the author. In this exercise, the students read and listened to the song at the same time in order to organize the lyrics, and they even practice

speaking and pronunciation when singing the song while they listened.

Real Texts and Promoters of Students' Interests

Regarding students' interests, the most relevant instruments were the journals and the questionnaires. Through the earlier questionnaires it was evident that my students were interested in songs and in the things songs said. When they were asked about the activities of their daily life that involved English, songs appeared in the answers of both students.

In which kind of activities of your daily life is English involved?

A: When I try to understand the lyrics of my favorite music groups.

D: I started studying English in high school and got interested in it because I saw it in video games, listened to it in music and saw it in advertisements.

QI, 2nd semester 2005, Qs 4

The relevance of promoting students' interests in the language through activities they like is to help them use and practice English without the necessity of an academic environment, because not all those interested in learning English have the possibility of accessing to formal education. Besides, and taking into account that motivation is a force that moves students to carry out the activities intended for language learning, the relation between the desire to learn and the practice of English is increased by the integration of the students' likes within the frame of language learning. Students are attracted to music for reasons different to learning a language; instead,

they feel attracted to English in order to understand better a part of their world they like and want to know for very personal reasons. To include students' interests in the development of lessons for any student would help to increase the student's will to learn the topic studied, and in the case of language learning, to improve their desire to know about the language in which their favorite songs are sung and composed.

Conclusions

Listening is much more than just a matter of hearing. We have to pay attention to the sounds and give interpretations and meaning to what we hear; and we can do that thanks to our skills in the language concerning other aspects like reading, speaking, and writing. In the case of listening to music there is another factor that is fundamental concerning the reasons for listening. It is not just a matter of interpretation of a message but of taking pleasure in the activity we are involved in, and the fact that lyrics of songs go together with instrumental features ameliorates the experience of paying attention to what is coming into our ears. This is an advantage I found in the use of songs for teaching/ learning purposes, that there are reasons stronger than just learning a language.

However, regarding other aspects of the language, the interconnection of skills makes the use of songs something very relevant if we take into account that we cannot focus only on specific aspects of the language but must try to interrelate different instances of the linguistic elements involved in the lyrics of songs. The lyrics of songs in English offer plenty of possibilities

in connection with other language skills different from listening. To understand the lyrics of songs, reading skills are necessarily involved. Both reading and listening are reciprocally supported by each other because you can check pronunciation while listening and check spelling while reading.

Other skills can be also integrated with the use of songs for teaching/learning purposes; for instance, we can sing and practice pronunciation skills that can help us improve our speaking skills, in addition we can discuss the topics presented in the lyrics, and in this way we can practice speaking by expressing opinions and reflections about the contents of the songs.

Writing skills can be present as well through the design of questions related to the contents of the song. By answering in written form questions about the understanding of songs we could integrate the last language skill and have a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of the language. Another skill that lately has been regarded as very relevant in language learning is vocabulary, and this is an aspect of English in which the use of songs is very appropriate, because the vocabulary presented in songs is framed in a context and the meaning of words can be easily identified, avoiding the inconvenience of learning non-contextualized words in isolation.

It is crucial to keep in mind that the lyrics of songs do not work by themselves as language teaching/learning material. It is necessary to design activities integrating the language present in the songs, and to adapt those activities to the level and needs of the students. Grammar issues cannot be avoided if we try to teach the language

of songs, hence it is necessary to integrate grammar explanations into the activities planned. There are also additional materials that can help the utilization of music for language learning; for example, videos and other visual material can help to better contextualize the contents of the songs and to catch the attention of those students who do not enjoy music at all. Music goes beyond the threshold of language learning, and the integration of an activity like this with the learning of English may improve both the experience of listening to music, and the motivation necessary to learn a second language.

References

- Arias, R., Duque, A., & Mitchell, Y. (1996). Efectividad del empleo de los materiales auténticos en el proceso de adquisición de una lengua extranjera. *Íkala*, 1(1), 125-153.
- Barfield, R. (2001). Drawing on the familiar to create new listening exercises. *PROFILE*, 2, 44-47.
- Bell, J. (1993). *Doing your research project*. Buckingham: Open Press University.
- Cárdenas, M. L. (2000). Helping students develop listening comprehension. *PROFILE*, 1, 8-16.
- Carrier, M. (2000). Teaching language with music. Retrieved May 30, 2006, from <http://gs.fanshawec.on.ca/tlwm/>
- Cohen, L; Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.
- Coromina, I. S. (1993). An original approach to the teaching of songs in classrooms. *Forum Journal*, 31(3), 27-28.
- Dubin, F., & Olshtain, E. (1977). *Facilitating language learning*. USA: McGraw-Hill.
- Eken, D. (1996). Ideas for using songs in the English language classroom. *Forum Journal*, 34(1), 46-47.
- Fornatale, P. (1987). *The story of Rock 'n' Roll*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Morales Neisa

- Gray, J. (1983). Effective listening. Focus on the learner: Bologna conference. Oxford: British Council.
- Greenhalgh, T., & Taylor, R. (1997). How to read a paper: Papers that go beyond numbers (qualitative research). Retrieved October 25, 2006 from <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/315/7110/740>
- Guerrero, M. (1999). La integración de la audición y la lectura en inglés para la especialidad de economía. Cuba: Universidad de Camagüey.
- Hillway, T. (1964). Introduction to research. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lopera, S. (2003). Useful ideas when taking songs to a class. *Íkala*, 8(14), 135-149.
- Ministerio De Educación. (1999). *Idiomas extranjeros. Lineamientos curriculares*. Bogotá: Enlace Editores.
- Saeki, K. (1994). Stimulating classes with background music. *Forum Journal*, 32(2), 30-31.
- Segura, C., & Villalba, V. (2005). Las canciones en inglés como medio para promover el pensamiento crítico en estudiantes de octavo grado. Trabajo de grado. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Willis, J. (1981). Teaching English through English. UK: Longman.

About the Author

Camilo Morales Neisa, holds a B. Ed. in Philology and Languages (English) from Universidad Nacional de Colombia. He is currently the director of *Anonyma*, a journal of the students of Philology and Languages and assistant to the editor of *Capital Letter*, a periodical publication of the Foreign Languages Department at the same university.

Appendix 1: Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan 1: March the 26th, 2006

The class: Two students: Alfredo (27) and Daniel (20)

Level: Pre-intermediate (advanced beginners)

Materials: Song “*One of the few*” by Pink Floyd, CD player, paper, pens

Time: 75-90 minutes, Sunday.

Topic: Introduction to the lessons, English language level diagnosis

Objectives:

- To have an overview of the student’s level of English
- To start periodic lessons.

Procedure:

1. The students listen to the song “One of the Few”. They have to take notes while listening to the song. (5’)
2. Students complete the lyrics of the song through a dictation. (5’)
3. The teacher asks students to underline unknown vocabulary. The students do dictionary work and write a glossary of the song. The teacher helps with examples. (25’)
4. Students listen to the song again. The teacher asks a couple of questions about the song. The students must answer in written form. (10-15’)
5. The teacher asks students about the song’s title’s meaning. They have to answer orally. (10-15’)
6. Students translate the song. (15-20’)
7. The teacher gives a preview of the next class. (5’)

Lesson Plan 2: April the 2nd, 2006

The class: Two students: Alfredo (27) and Daniel (20)

Level: Pre-intermediate (advanced beginners)

Materials: Song “*What do you want from me?*” by Pink Floyd, jig-sawed pieces of lyrics, translation sheets, paper, pens

Time: 120 minutes, Sunday

Objectives:

- To exemplify grammar structures through authentic material
- To provide written, oral, listening and speaking practice

Procedure:

1. Review: Teacher gives students the translation sheet. They have to translate the song (“*One of the few*”) by comparing and improving their last class translation. (20’)
2. Students listen to the song “*What do you want from me?*” and organize jig-sawed lyrics. (10’)
3. Students listen to the song again and fill the gaps in the lyrics. (10’)
4. With the organized lyrics, the class checks sentences one by one and extract unknown vocabulary and grammar. Students write a glossary of the song. (25’)
5. The class gives new examples with the structures found and writes sentences with those already known. Difficult structures (according to the students) will be explained and exemplified by the teacher. (20’)
6. Students translate the song. (20’)
7. The class discusses the difficult expressions they found hard to translate. (10’)
8. The class agrees new songs to be worked in future lessons. (5’)

Lesson Plan 3: June the 27, 2006

The class: Two students: Alfredo (27) and Daniel (20)

Level: Pre-intermediate (advanced beginners)

Materials: Song “*Winter retreat*” by Judas Priest, worksheet, music player, dictionaries

Time: 70 minutes, Tuesday

Objectives:

- To have students explore a song in English related to their interests
- To develop activities intended to help students understand the lyrics of the song.

Procedure:

1. Review: The class read the song “*What do you want from me?*” and talk about its meaning and possible interpretation. (10’)
2. Pre-listening: (speaking) The class talks about what they know about the band or a possible interpretation of the title of the song “*Winter retreat*” by Judas Priest. (10’)
3. While-listening: (listening) The students listen to the song and rewrite scrambled lyrics. (10’)
4. Inter-listening: (vocabulary) The students fill a crossword puzzle with some of the vocabulary of the song (nouns, verbs). (10’)
5. While-listening: (writing) The students complete the lyrics of the song with the vocabulary in the crossword or a dictation if necessary. (10’)
6. Post-listening: (reading-writing) The students read the complete lyrics of the song and answer in written form some questions about it. (10’)
7. Closing: (speaking) The teacher contextualizes the song with other two songs from the same album “*Rockarolla*” by Judas Priest. The class will talk about the relation of the three songs and the meaning of the third (winter retreat). (10’)