

# Using Songs to Improve EFL Students' Pronunciation<sup>1</sup>

Nuria Villalobos Ulate<sup>2</sup>

Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica

---

## RESUMEN

Se analiza la utilidad de las canciones en las clases de inglés y cómo pueden usarse para la enseñanza de la pronunciación. Estudiantes de todas las edades tienen un gran interés por la música, de modo que es un recurso que debe aprovecharse. Con el fin de comprender y mejorar la producción de distintos sonidos y elementos suprasegmentales, se presenta a los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera para hispanohablantes estas ideas para usar canciones en la clase. Esta investigación está basada en la experiencia de la autora como aprendiente y docente de la lengua extranjera.

## ABSTRACT

The importance of using songs in the English classroom and how it can be implemented to teach pronunciation is analyzed here. Students of all ages have a strong interest in music; therefore, it is a resource that should be taken into account. To understand and improve the production of varied sounds and suprasegmental features, English as a Foreign Language teachers of Spanish speakers are given these ideas to analyze songs in class. This research is based on the author's experience as a foreign language learner and teacher.

**Palabras clave:** canciones, enseñanza de lengua extranjera, pronunciación

**Keywords:** songs, foreign language teaching, pronunciation

---

<sup>1</sup> Ponencia presentada en el *I Congreso Internacional de Lingüística Aplicada*, llevado a cabo en octubre de 2007, en el Campus Omar Dengo, de la Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica.  
Correo electrónico: nutica@gmail.com

Being a Spanish speaker myself and having learned English as a foreign language, I have found songs a very valuable tool for improving my own pronunciation. As an EFL teacher, I have noticed the obstacles that Spanish speakers face when producing certain English sounds and suprasegmental features. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to provide English instructors with a variety of activities using engaging songs for both teenagers and young adults. By focusing on the pronunciation, students will understand to distinguish minimal pairs in both vowels and consonants. At the same time, they will become more familiar with connected speech. This will lead to a better understanding of native speakers and the mastery of a native-like accent.

Nobody can deny how powerful music is or that it affects our feelings and energy levels. "Without even thinking about it, we use music to create desired moods—to make us feel happy, to enjoy movement and dance, to energize, to bring back powerful memories, to help us relax and focus."<sup>3</sup> Throughout history, people have used sounds for different purposes, and this has certainly enhanced our learning and living in many different ways.<sup>4</sup>

Many people consider music to be a very important part of their lives; however, it is not used as often at work and in school. The teaching/learning process can become a very enriching experience because music can provide an appropriate atmosphere for both the teacher and the students. In addition, it has the power to create interesting, fun activities that everyone will enjoy.

Songs have become an integral part of our language experience, and as such are a very useful tool in the foreign language classroom. They provide an excellent way to improve language skills as well as

---

<sup>3</sup> Chris Brewer, "Music and Learning: Integrating Music in the Classroom," *New Horizons for Learning Quarterly Journal* (LifeSounds Educational Services: Washington, 1995), accessed 9 August 2007, <<http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/arts/brewer.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of songs for practice in foreign languages has been recognized for over six centuries, as illustrated in: Elizabeth Eva Leach, "Learning French by Singing in 14th-Century England," *Early Music* (33) 2, May 2005: 253-270 (N. de la E.).

learn more about the target culture. “Music exposes learners to rich content, language, culture and has a tendency to relax the students and create a comfortable atmosphere in which these areas can be absorbed.”<sup>5</sup>

There are many different advantages of using songs: establishing a positive learning state, energizing learning activities, increasing attention, improving memory, releasing tension, enhancing imagination, developing inspiration and motivation, and adding an element of fun. Songs tend to have simplified, colloquial language, use natural rhythm, stress, intonation, contractions, slang, expressions, idioms, authentic material and communicative repetition, all of which help to build vocabulary and other language structures in way that is stress-free for many.

Language classes can become tedious sometimes and a good solution to make them lively is by listening to music. “Songs offer a change from the routine procedures in the classroom. They are invaluable tools to develop students’ language abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing and can be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythms, adjectives, adverbs and so on.”<sup>6</sup>

## Advantages of Music

### *The Input and Affective Filter Hypothesis*

According to Stephen Krashen, comprehensible input and a low affective filter are necessary for acquisition to take place. Comprehensible input is defined by Krashen as “that bit of language that is heard/read and that is slightly ahead of a learner’s current state of grammatical knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, if the affective filter is high, input

<sup>5</sup> A. Reimann, *Music as a Medium for Language and Cultural Content Instruction* (March, 2006), accessed 14 August, 2007, <<http://actj.org/joomla/index.php?option=comcontent&task=view&id=27&Itemid=31>>.

<sup>6</sup> Regina Lo and Henry Li, “Songs Enhance Learner Involvement,” *Forum* 3, 8 (1998), accessed 20 August 2007, <<http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol36/no3/p8.htm>>.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Gass and Larry Selinker, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2001) 200.

---

is prevented from passing through; if the filter is low, the input will reach the acquisition device and acquisition will take place.

Considering Krashen's Input Hypothesis, in which he states that we acquire language instead of learning it, songs become a great opportunity for students to acquire the new language. Foreign language teachers need to change traditional learning-based activities, and use the acquisition-based comprehensible input more, considering new developments in second language acquisition theory.

Music can be very helpful as comprehensible input for students because it enables them to understand the language better and acquire new rules, as well as motivating learners and making them feel more relaxed. By creating a low affective filter and an interest in what is to be learned, songs become a useful tool for teachers when dealing with language.

### ***Motivation***

“Motivation... is as much a matter of concern for the teacher as it is for the learner; it depends as much on the attitudes of the teacher as on the attitudes of the students.”<sup>8</sup> Since motivation is an essential factor in a foreign language classroom, students need to feel encouraged to learn and use the language in different real-life situations.

We can make a distinction between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivation. The former is caused by any number of outside factors such as personal needs or goals; the methodology used in the L2 classroom also influences the degree to which the students feel motivated towards learning. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual and so a student feels motivated to learn if he or she finds enjoyment in the learning process itself. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to help learners discover this self-motivation, and provide activities in class so that extrinsic motivation will take place. Any person who is learning a foreign

---

<sup>8</sup> Rogers. 1996:66 cited in Jeremy Harmer. *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (London: Pearson, 2001) 54.

language knows how challenging this process is and so, having interesting and enjoyable activities such as listening to songs can become a key to success.

### ***Reception to Learning***

The effects of music (including all kinds of songs) on the emotions are commonly known, but the effects of music on the brain and thinking have also been explored. “Research has shown that during an electroencephalogram (EEG), music can change brain waves and make the brain more receptive to learning. Music connects the functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain so that they can work together and make learning quick and easy.”<sup>9</sup> The simultaneous left and right brain action maximizes learning and retention of information. The information being studied activates the left brain while the music activates the right brain. In addition, activities which engage both sides of the brain at the same time, such as playing an instrument or singing, cause the brain to be more capable of processing information.<sup>10</sup>

A renowned Bulgarian psychologist, Dr. George Lozanov, designed a way to teach foreign languages in a fraction of the normal learning time using a system involving certain classical music pieces from the baroque period. His experimentation has shown “that foreign languages can be learned with 85-100% efficiency in only thirty days” by using these pieces due to the effect that baroque music has on brain waves.<sup>11</sup>

### **Multiple Intelligence Theory**

In 1983, Howard Gardner, a psychology professor at Harvard University, presented his *Multiple Intelligence* theory based on many

<sup>9</sup> Maha Rahman, *Development of Language through Music in EFL Classroom* (Gaza: Al Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development), accessed 14 August, 2007, <[http://www.qattanfoundation.org/pdf/1401\\_2.doc](http://www.qattanfoundation.org/pdf/1401_2.doc)>.

<sup>10</sup> Laurence O'Donnell, “Music and the Brain”, *Music Power* (1999), accessed 4 September, 2008, <<http://www.cerebromente.org.br/n15/mente/musica.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> O'Donnell, 1999.

years of research. Gardner has claimed that there is not just one intelligence, but different forms of it. Multiple Intelligence teaching methods recognize eight forms of intelligence: visual-spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and most recently naturalist. This has influenced the way that teaching and learning are approached. Teachers are now more aware of the need to offer a variety of activities in the classroom to fulfill students' needs.

Development of musical intelligence can be greatly aided by the use of songs throughout the curriculum. "In addition to learning about musical elements and how to create music, the musical intelligence involves developing an ability to respond to musical sound and the ability to use music effectively in one's life."<sup>12</sup>

### ***Learning Styles***

Students take in and process information in different ways: by seeing, hearing and doing, and the teaching methods also vary. When mismatches exist between the learning styles of many students in a class and the instructor's teaching style, the students can become bored and get discouraged about the course. Listening to songs takes advantage of the different learning styles students have and by carrying out activities with music, students can practice the language the way they prefer.

### **Importance of Pronunciation**

Songs are used regularly by language teachers for purposes such as grammar practice, listening comprehension, vocabulary enhancement and even as inspiration for writing exercises. Why not use them to help students improve their pronunciation in English? When studying a second or foreign language, it is essential to have

---

<sup>12</sup> Brewer, 1995.

good pronunciation for clear communication. Students at all levels should work on their pronunciation skills to ensure success in the language. Often, however, pronunciation considered less important than other skills and is given less importance in a teacher's lesson planning. As Miyake has pointed out: "Pronunciation has been called the Cinderella of ELT (being locked away and out of sight). One of the criticisms of pronunciation teaching is that it is thought to be boring. Perhaps this is due to the dominant image of audio-lingual methods drilling minimal pairs."<sup>13</sup> If speaking is such a necessary skill when learning a second or foreign language, pronunciation is essential to be understood.

Pronunciation plays a very important role in language learning because even when grammar and vocabulary are used correctly, if vowel and consonant sounds and aspects such as intonation, linking, rhythm and stress are not produced accurately, the intended message cannot be delivered comprehensibly. This leads to misunderstanding and a failure to communicate, and in turn learner frustration. Song lyrics are different from other kinds of texts because they are closely linked with rhythm. This makes them useful for teaching different pronunciation aspects naturally. All the features of connected speech, including reductions can be identified easily and practiced using songs.

Several long-term investigations about language learners' demands in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language have shown that pronunciation is one of the highest-ranking aspects of student interest in many different countries.<sup>14</sup> Through surveys and teaching experience, it is clear that students frequently mention a desire to understand the speech of native speakers, and to sound like native speakers themselves.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Miyake. *Pronunciation and Music* (2004), accessed 9 August, 2007. <<http://www.jrc.sophia.ac.jp/kiyou/ki24/miyake.pdf>>.

<sup>14</sup> Willing, 1988 cited in Miyake, 2004.

## Common Pronunciation Problems for Spanish Speakers

Students learning English as a second or foreign language might have difficulties in pronunciation, depending on their native language and how similar its sounds are to those of the target language. Spanish speakers, for instance, find it hard to pronounce vowel sounds such as /ə/ and recognize the difference between /i:/ vs. /ɪ/ and /u:/ vs. /ʊ/. Regarding consonants, making the distinction between /b/ vs. /v/ vs. /f/, /θ/ vs. /ð/ and /ʃ/ vs. /tʃ/ is what represents the biggest challenge for them. By listening to songs, Spanish speakers can learn to identify these sounds and perceive the difference among them. In addition to vowels and consonants, they can understand connected speech by analyzing assimilation, linking and reductions, and other aspects such as -ed endings, since song lyrics provide lots of examples.

### Selection of songs

Song lyrics can now be found easily on the Internet, so language teachers have access to an enormous variety of music to bring to class. How should songs be chosen? It is important to think of the students. What level are they in? How old are they? What kind of music/songs do they like? In addition, it is essential to evaluate the song itself. Does the rhythm make it comprehensible? Is the singer's voice clear enough? How fast is the song? How complex are the structures and the vocabulary?

Songs contain many different aspects that can provide the teacher and students with a valuable opportunity to practice English pronunciation.

The use of music in the classroom requires instructors to select the songs carefully. The students' level is very important; short and slow songs should be used with beginners so that they will be easier for them to understand. On the other hand, advanced students would feel more challenged if songs have a certain degree of difficulty.



Moreover, the students' age is significant because perhaps adults and teenagers would not necessarily like to listen to a children's song. A very important aspect that cannot be left out is students' likes and dislikes. Many teachers decide to use songs in classes, but they choose of their own preference. If we use songs that students feel attracted to, there is more stimulus; hence, it is definitely something to consider. "Students are often strongly motivated to learn the lyrics of a new pop song or an old favorite they have heard and never understood, so their choices for classroom music should not be overlooked."<sup>15</sup>

Besides keeping in mind students' level, age and preferences, teachers should analyze the song that they want to bring to class. Evaluating the song's level of difficulty, its content, vocabulary, rhythm, pace, popularity and artist is essential because those factors can determine the attitude students have towards the song, as well as success in the objectives. "Songs should be pre-screened for potentially problematic content, such as explicit language, references to violent acts or sex, or inappropriate religious allusions."<sup>16</sup>

### ***SURVEY RESULTS***

To obtain information about the importance of using songs to improve pronunciation, a survey (see Appendix 1) was carried out among sixty EFL university students (Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica). Some of the most interesting results include the following:

- Learners consider pronunciation to be the second most important language area.
- Students listen to songs all the time.
- When selecting and listening to a song in class, learners believe it is essential to consider the level of the students, their likes, level of difficulty level of the song and its rhythm.

<sup>15</sup> Kristen Lems, "Using Music in the Adult ESL Classroom." *Eric Digest* (Washington DC: National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, 2001) accessed 6 July, 2007. <<http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-3/music.htm>>.

<sup>16</sup> Lems, 2001.

- Students listen to songs to practice listening comprehension and pronunciation.
- Listening to songs creates enthusiasm and challenge for learners.
- Students recommending listening to songs to practice pronunciation because they have found them useful for that purpose.

With songs and other related activities, teachers can help their students distinguish difficult sounds and improve their production. This enables learners to be more aware of the importance of having clear pronunciation in English and practice it while having fun. Music is a useful source that all language teachers can have access to and which will definitely make a difference in the classroom.

### **Pronunciation Exercises Based on a Song**

Let's take a look at one particular song and the way it could be presented in class for different aspects which Spanish speakers find very difficult. The song "Sand in my Shoes" (Dido), as well as many others, could be used for identifying differences in vowels, consonants and other features such as assimilation, linking, reductions and *-ed* endings. The following are examples of ideas for English teachers to use with students to help them practice their pronunciation in the target language. These activities were applied to the same song to show how it can be used for different purposes. Depending on the aspect to be practiced, teachers should select the song carefully to ensure that it provides many examples and that it is suitable to the students' level, age and likes.

#### **1. Vowels /i:/ vs. /ɪ/: Choose the correct pronunciation from that given in parentheses.**

Two (/wi:ks/ /wɪks/) away (/fi:lz/ /fɪlz/) like the whole world should've changed

but I'm home now, and (/θi: ηz/ /θɪηz/) (/sti:l/ /stɪl/) look the same  
 I (/θi: ηk/ /θɪηk/) I'll (/li:v/ /lɪv/) it (/ti:l/ /tɪl/) tomorrow to unpack,  
 try to forget for one more night  
 that I'm back (/i:n/ /ɪn/) my flat on the road...

2. **Vowels /u:/ vs. /ʊ/:** *Classify the underlined words according to their pronunciation.*

I've still got sand in my shoes  
 and I can't shake the thought of you  
 I should get on, forget you  
 but why would I want to  
 I know we said goodbye,  
 anything else would've been confused  
 but I wanna see you again

/u:/	/ʊ/

3. **Schwa /ə/:** *Fill in the blanks with the correct words.*

Tomorrow's back to \_\_\_\_\_ and down to \_\_\_\_\_  
 should run a bath and then clear up \_\_\_\_\_ mess  
 I made before I left here  
 try to remind myself that I \_\_\_\_\_ happy here  
 before I knew that I could get on a plane and fly \_\_\_\_\_  
 from \_\_\_\_\_ road where \_\_\_\_\_ cars \_\_\_\_\_ stop going  
 through \_\_\_\_\_ night  
 to real life where I can watch \_\_\_\_\_ sunset  
 and take my time, take all our time

4. **Consonants /b/ vs. /v/ vs. /f/:** *Complete the song with one of the words below.*

flat | never | but | feels | have (2) | for | 've | forget | back | life

Two weeks away \_\_\_\_\_ like the  
 whole world should \_\_\_\_\_ changed  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I'm home now, and things still look the same  
 I think I'll \_\_\_\_\_ it till tomorrow to unpack,  
 try to \_\_\_\_\_ one more night  
 that I'm \_\_\_\_\_ in my \_\_\_\_\_ on the road  
 where the cars \_\_\_\_\_ stop going through the night  
 to real \_\_\_\_\_ where I can't watch the sunset,  
 I don't \_\_\_\_\_ time, I don't \_\_\_\_\_ time

**5. Consonants /θ/ vs. /ð/: Choose the correct symbol and write it in the space provided.**

Tomorrow's back to work and down to sanitation  
 should run a /bæ\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_ɛn/ clear up /\_\_\_ə/ mess  
 I made before I left here  
 try to remind myself /\_\_\_æt/ I was happy here  
 before I knew /\_\_\_æt/ I could get on a plane and fly away  
 from /\_\_\_ə/ road where /\_\_\_ə/ cars never stop going /\_\_\_ru:/ /\_\_\_ə/  
 night  
 to real life where I can watch /\_\_\_ə/ sunset  
 and take my time, take all our time

**6. Consonants /ʃ/ vs. /tʃ/: Select the correct transcriptions and write the words.**

Two weeks away feels like the	1. /ʃʊd/
whole world _____ 've _____	2. /ʃeɪk/
but I'm home now, and things still look the same...	3. /ʃu:z/
I've still got sand in my _____	4. /tʃeɪndʒd/
and I can't _____ the thought of you	5. /ʃʊd/
I _____ get on, forget you	
but why would I want to...	

7. **Assimilation: Write the symbol corresponding to the sound you hear.**

I've still got sand in my shoes  
and I can't shake the thought of you  
I should get on, forget you / \_\_\_\_/  
but why would I want to  
I know we said goodbye,  
anything else would've been confused but  
I wanna see you again

8. **Endings with -ed: Write the word you hear and the -ed ending it belongs to.**

Two weeks away, all it takes,  
to change and turn me around I've fallen  
I \_\_\_\_\_ / / away, and never said,  
that I \_\_\_\_\_ / / to see you again

9. **Linking: Draw the symbol (◡) to show the linked sounds and classify them.**

Two weeks away feels like the  
whole world should've changed  
but I'm home now, and things still look the same  
I think I'll leave it till tomorrow to unpack,  
try to forget for one more night  
that I'm back in my flat on the road  
where the cars never stop going through the night  
to real life where I can't watch the sunset,  
I don't have time, I don't have time

CONSONANT + CONSONANT	VOWEL + VOWEL	CONSONANT + VOWEL

**10. Reductions. Fill in the blanks with the words you hear.**

I \_\_\_\_\_ still got sand in my shoes  
 and I \_\_\_\_\_ shake the thought of you  
 I should get on, forget you  
 but why would I want to  
 I know we said goodbye,  
 anything else would \_\_\_\_\_ been confused  
 but I \_\_\_\_\_ see you again

**11. Understanding Transcription: Order the slips of paper according to the song.**

/traɪ tu: ri: 'maɪnd maɪ'self ðæt aɪ wəz 'hæpi: hi:r/  
 /tu: ri:l laɪf hwɛr aɪ kæn wɒtʃ ðə 'sʌnsɛt/  
 /bɪ'fɔʊr aɪ nju: ðæt aɪ kʊd gɛt ɔn ə pleɪn ænd flɑɪ ə'weɪ/  
 /təm- 'arɔʊz bæk tu: wɜ:k ænd daʊn tu: sænə'teɪʃən/  
 /ʃʊd rʌn ə bæθ ænd ðɛn kli:r ʌp ðə mɛs aɪ meɪd bɪ'fɔʊr aɪ lɛft hi:r/  
 /ænd teɪk maɪ taɪm, teɪk ɔl ɔr taɪm/  
 /frʌm ðə roʊd hwɛr ðə kɑ:z 'nɛvər stɒp goɪŋ θru: ðə naɪt/

**Conclusions**

The use of songs in the EFL classroom can make learning more enjoyable and interesting. At the same time, students acquire the target language and feel comfortable in a relaxing atmosphere. This helps them lower their affective filter, and become more receptive to learning. In addition, songs help learners improve their understanding and production of important pronunciation features. Finally, teachers should choose the songs carefully, taking into account different aspects such as the students' level, age and preferences, as well as the level of difficulty of the song and its rhythm.

<sup>17</sup> The following activity could be used with advanced students or with those who take pronunciation courses, and therefore need to know the IPA symbols very well. It is very useful for practicing the symbols and improving their pronunciation.

## Appendix 1: Survey

*Universidad Nacional*

*Facultad de Filosofía y Letras*

**Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje**

*Esta encuesta será usada para una investigación sobre de la importancia de usar canciones para mejorar la pronunciación en inglés. ¡Muchas gracias!*

1. Clasifique las siguientes áreas del lenguaje de acuerdo a su importancia:

Escucha    Escritura    Lectura    Habla    Pronunciación

2. ¿Piensa usted que la pronunciación es importante cuando se aprende un segundo idioma?

Sí    No ¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Seleccione los aspectos fonéticos más difíciles para usted:

Vocales    Consonantes    Entonación    Terminaciones *-ed*  
 Acento    Unión de sonidos    Reducciones    Grupos de consonantes

4. ¿Cuáles son las vocales y consonantes más difíciles para usted a la hora de reconocerlas y pronunciarlas?

Vocales: \_\_\_\_\_

Consonantes: \_\_\_\_\_

5. ¿Con qué frecuencia escucha usted canciones en inglés?

Siempre    Con frecuencia    A veces    Rara vez    Nunca

6. ¿Con qué propósito escucha usted canciones en inglés?

Gramática    Pronunciación    Vocabulario    Otros  
 Comprensión auditiva    Herramienta para la lectura/escritura

7. El escuchar una canción en inglés genera en usted:

Entusiasmo    Indiferencia    Estrés    Reto

8. ¿Cuáles aspectos piensa usted que deben ser tomados en cuenta a la hora de escuchar canciones en la clase?

- Nivel de los estudiantes     Cantante/grupo     Ritmo de la canción  
 Edad de los estudiantes     Nivel de dificultad de la canción  
 Gustos de los estudiantes     Popularidad de la canción     Otros

9. ¿Ha escuchado usted canciones en el aula para mejorar su pronunciación?  Sí     No

10. Si respondió *sí* a la pregunta anterior, ¿cuán útil lo considera?

- Muy     Algo     Nada

11. ¿Cuántas veces, en un curso, ha usted escuchado canciones en el aula para mejorar la pronunciación?

- Menos de 3 veces     De 6 a 9 veces     De 3 a 6 veces  
 De 9 a 12 veces     Más de 12 veces

12. ¿Recomendaría el uso de canciones para mejorar la pronunciación?

- Sí     No ¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_