

GOING BEYOND 'LISTEN AND REPEAT' AND DISCRIMINATION ACTIVITIES. WAYS OF TEACHING PRONUNCIATION TO *ESO* AND *BACHILLERATO* STUDENTS BY USING SONGS

Yolanda Joy Calvo Benzies

University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain)

yolandajoy.calvobenzies@gmail.com

Dr. Yolanda Joy Calvo Benzies defended her PhD in January 2016 at the University of Santiago de Compostela. She is currently a research assistant in the SPERTUS Research Group (Spoken English Research Team at the University of Santiago de Compostela) and in September 2016, she moved to the University of the Balearic Islands to work as a Lecturer, teaching ESP for tourism. Her main research interests include language teaching (particularly the teaching of pronunciation and speaking), SLA, new varieties of English (ELF, EIL) and the use of modern techniques (games, songs, tongue twisters, new technologies) in EFL classes.

Abstract: Many general EFL textbooks addressed to Spanish secondary and post-secondary education learners continue to teach pronunciation in an isolated way, by means of tables or sections which are clearly separated from the parts which focus on the teaching of other language areas. Moreover, in spite of the large list of materials and resources currently available for teaching pronunciation in an engaging and motivating way, these materials still resemble traditional techniques, failing on many occasions to move away from isolated drills of random words and discrimination tasks. The present article hence aims at describing some ideas and activities for teaching pronunciation in an integrated, and, most importantly, in an engaging and motivating way for students. Although the activities included here have been explicitly designed for high-school students, they could easily be adapted to make them suitable for younger learners or even adult EFL students.

Resumen: Muchos de los libros de texto de inglés como lengua extranjera dirigidos a estudiantes españoles de la ESO y Bachillerato continúan enseñando la pronunciación de una manera aislada mediante tablas o secciones que están claramente separadas de las demás secciones que enfatizan la enseñanza de las demás destrezas. Además, a pesar de la larga lista de materiales y recursos actualmente disponibles para enseñar la pronunciación de una manera motivadora, estos materiales didácticos aún guardan semejanza con técnicas tradicionales y en muchas ocasiones el formato de dichas actividades no va más allá de repeticiones aisladas de palabras al azar y de tareas de discriminación. Este artículo tiene como objetivo principal describir algunas ideas y actividades para enseñar la pronunciación de una manera integrada y, asimismo, de una manera motivadora para los estudiantes. Aunque las actividades incluidas aquí se han diseñado explícitamente para alumnos de ESO/Bachillerato, pueden ser fácilmente adaptadas para aprendices jóvenes o incluso para la enseñanza del inglés a adultos.

Keywords: Pronunciation, songs, secondary education, post-secondary education, EFL.

Palabras clave: : Pronunciación, canciones, ESO, Bachillerato, ILE.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important changes in EFL pronunciation classes in the last decades has been the shift from the use of 'decontextualised

drills' of isolated and randomly selected words that belong to a certain lexical field (Grant, 2014: 1) to the teaching of pronunciation within spoken activities in which the end-goal is to express some type of message with a clear

communicative purpose (Walker, 2010: 5; Grant, 2014: 1). A direct consequence of this change towards teaching English pronunciation integrated within other language areas is that new resources and techniques are constantly being designed so as to help EFL teachers teach pronunciation in more varied ways than with listen and repeat or discrimination tasks. Some examples of these resources are games, software, apps, role-plays, tongue twisters, posters, poems and jazz chants, jokes, TV programmes and films or photos and flashcards, to mention a few (Calvo, 2016: 80).

Despite these changes, I have found that many modern EFL textbooks addressed to Spanish secondary and post-secondary education learners continue to present pronunciation in isolated sections, clearly separated from the rest of the activities designed to practise other language areas (Calvo, 2016: 575). More particularly, I have observed a tendency for pronunciation to appear either in bright coloured tables throughout the different main units, which easily stood out from the remaining page sections, or at the end of the textbooks in independent pages in which some tasks and/or lists of phonetic symbols can be found. In addition, I encountered the fact that the vast majority of pronunciation tasks present in EFL textbooks for high-school students emphasise students' receptive oral skills whilst tasks in which learners can practise their productive pronunciation skills are extremely scarce. More specifically, most of the activities registered in my data analysis were of the type 'listen and repeat', 'listen and discriminate', 'listen and check', 'read aloud' or 'segmental and suprasegmental discriminations' (Calvo, 2016: 575).

The present article aims at describing different types of tasks that high-school EFL teachers in Spain can use to teach pronunciation. These tasks will revolve around one particular engaging and motivating resource that can

and should be used in EFL classrooms, that is, songs. It is true that music and songs have been used in EFL classrooms for some years now (Villalobos, 2008: 94) and some activities with songs do tend to appear in EFL learning materials designed for students in our country; however, in the data I collected for my doctoral dissertation I have observed that the activities in the form of songs present in EFL textbooks mainly focused on the practising of grammatical and lexical points or on improving students' reading and/or listening skills. Additionally, I have found very few examples of tasks in which learners could actually practise English pronunciation by listening to and/or singing to songs.

This paper, therefore, intends to be a contribution to this lack of general EFL materials to teach pronunciation with songs. I will both describe some ideas as to how to use this teaching technique in the classroom and outline some specific activities, mostly of my own creation to teach pronunciation via songs. The different activities have been ordered according to their degree of difficulty, that is, it will most likely be easier for teachers to begin with any of the first group of tasks since they allow students to get familiar with English sounds and then gradually introduce more difficult ones.

REASONS FOR USING SONGS IN EFL CLASSES

There are many reasons why songs are perfect resources teachers can use in the classroom to teach many language areas, including pronunciation. To begin with, music is all around us - when we go out, on television programmes, on the radio, on public transport, in supermarkets and shopping centres (Pietrala, 2007: 14). Moreover, Spain is a country extremely influenced by music sung in English. Many Spanish teenagers are fond of bands and singers like Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Auryn, One Direction or Demi Lovato, whereas

adults will probably prefer singers like James Blunt, Robbie Williams, Dire Straits or AC/DC. Therefore, introducing songs students are in contact with outside the classroom (but do not know by heart) will most likely motivate them. Furthermore, songs have been pointed out to be “good motivational tools (...) fun and relaxing, and they provide a class with variety and a break from textbook study” (Lorenzutti, 2014:14).

Similarly, Villalobos (2008: 95) claims that using songs in the classroom helps to establish “a positive learning state, energizing learning activities, increasing attention, improving memory, releasing tension, enhancing imagination, developing inspiration”. Songs can be used to teach many aspects of English, not only to develop productive and receptive oral and written skills but also to emphasise grammatical, lexical, cultural or pronunciation points. Regarding the latter, many scholars do in fact recommend using songs to help students improve their pronunciation abilities and more especially, to practise suprasegmental features (Orlova, 2003; Harmer, 2007: 91); however, I believe teachers can also use songs to focus on the learning of different English sounds (see below for some examples).

All in all, songs are a good way of entertainment for people of nearly any age and they are an engaging and motivating type of activity for teaching many language points in EFL classes (Orlova, 2003), even for outlining and emphasising pronunciation skills since they are a useful way “of breaking the monotony of classic drills and other methods for teaching this complicated subject” (Pietrala, 2007: 14).

EXAMPLES OF TASKS

LEVEL 1: GETTING FAMILIAR WITH SOUNDS

Teachers select a song they believe their students will enjoy. Since English is a language in which

there are few correspondences between spelling and pronunciation (Fernández, 2009: 2) and the words at the end of the different lines of songs tend to rhyme, it should be quite easy for teachers to select a sound or group of sounds to work on. Finally, as mentioned above, it is important that the learners do not know the song off by heart to avoid them knowing all the answers to the questions beforehand. To exemplify, by using the chorus of the song *Shame* sung by Robbie Williams and Gary Barlow, teachers can focus on the teaching of /s, ʃ, z/ and the diphthong /eɪ/ (words containing any of these sounds in the chorus of this song are in bold type below):

*What a shame we never listened I told you
through the television
And all that went away was the price we paid
People spend a lifetime this way
And that's how they stay
Oh what a shame.
People spend a lifetime this way
Oh what a shame
Such a shame, what a shame.*

Idea 1: For receptive and productive purposes, ask students how some words within the song would be pronounced if they contained a different sound. For instance, how would *listened* be pronounced if the /s/ sound was replaced by /ʃ/, /z/ or /z/ or *shame* by /æ/, /e/ or /a:/. This technique, known as *nonsense words*, has been found to help students improve their intonation in English (Lane, 2010: 91) and is currently used in some courses on English phonetics such as the annual SCEP course at the University College of London (Summer Course in English Phonetics).

Idea 2: Ask students to think of any minimal pairs and/or rhyming words with *shame* (tame, came, name, frame), *price* (rice, ice, nice, dice) or *went* (tent, sent, meant, rent). If the learners cannot think of any minimal pairs, the teacher could suggest that they make use of websites

like www.rhymezone.com, which contains a detailed database of rhyming words and homophones.

Idea 3: Make the most of songs to make students aware of the high number of homophones that exist in English. For instance, in this song, explain that *way* has a homophone spelt *weigh*.

Idea 4: Tell students that *price*, which appears in the song, is pronounced with voiceless /s/, whereas the word *prize* is pronounced with the voiced sound /z/. Spanish students tend to have problems distinguishing between these two sounds since only the former exists in Castilian, causing problems such as pronouncing “Sue and zoo (...) in the same way” (Estebas, 2012: 74); however, Castilian Spanish does have an allophone for the /z/ sound in words like *mismo*, *asno* (Palacios, 2001: 21) and so teachers should also bear these similarities in mind when explaining these sounds to their students.

LEVEL 2: SEARCHING FOR A SONG THAT CONTAINS A PARTICULAR ENGLISH VOWEL

Now that students have seen that many words in songs sung in English rhyme, it is their turn to search for a song containing quite a few instances of a specific English short or long vowel.

Idea 1: The teacher gives each student/pair/group an English vowel and tells them that they have to look for a song they have at home, on the Internet, etc. that contains at least six or seven words with their sound. If the students are unable to find a song on their own or the teacher is worried the songs chosen by the learners themselves will lack pedagogical goals, they could give students a list of songs to choose from. Each week, there will be an oral presentation by one of the students/pairs/

groups. They should, first of all, play the song they have chosen for their classmates to hear and afterwards they have to identify the words that contain the sound they were assigned with. To exemplify, a song full of words with English diphthongs is *Story of my Life* by One Direction (see below; the words containing diphthongs have once again been placed in bold). Of course, instead of vowels, consonants and/or consonant clusters could also be used.

*Written in these walls are the stories that I
can't explain
I leave my heart open but it stays right here
empty for days
She told me in the morning she don't feel the
same about us in her bones
Seems to me that when I die these words will
be written on my stone
And I'll be gone, gone tonight
The ground beneath my feet is open wide
The way that I been holding on too tight
With nothing in between
The story of my life
I take her home
I drive all night
To keep her warm
And time is frozen
The story of my life*

Other songs that can be used are: *Change your life* by Little Mix for /ɔ:/, ɜ:/, *Skyscraper* by Demi Lovato for /æ/, /eɪ/, /aɪ/ or *All that Matters* by Justin Bieber for /aɪ/.

Idea 2: The teacher could prepare some exercises for each song, either related to the sound that the students in each group have worked on or not. For instance, “Identify how many different spellings the sound X is represented by in the song”, “Can you think of any minimal pairs of at least five words in the song?”, “Find three examples of homophones” or “Explain the connected processes used by the author in these lines”. Since these types of activities are perhaps less engaging, it may be

best not to them too much to avoid students from getting bored since the main aim of these activities is, as explained above, for students to have fun and enjoy themselves while learning English pronunciation.

Idea 3: Instead of giving students the sound they must work on, learners could choose a song they like and analyse the different predominant sounds present in the lyrics and then present their results orally to the class. For instance, “We found many examples of words with the short /æ/ vowel”; “We had problems with the pronunciation of X and Y and had to look them up in the dictionary”; “The sound /dʒ/ is spelt in three different ways”.

Idea 4: If the students are familiar with phonetic symbols, teachers could ask them to transcribe part of a song of their choice as the singer actually pronounces the different words, that is, if they do not pronounce final /d, t/, students should not include these consonants in their transcription, for instance. These transcriptions could represent the chorus or just 4 or 5 lines from a certain song in order to avoid spending too much time on this type of task. However, if teachers would like their students to transcribe a whole song, it could be designed as an activity to be done in small groups outside the classroom over a few days or weeks.

LEVEL 3: FIGURING OUT THE LYRICS OF A SONG

Mark Hancock (2016) refers to people who understand the *lyrics* of a song wrongly, that is, we sometimes misinterpret the lyrics of a song sung in a language that is not our native one. These misinterpretations can be due to homophones or ambiguous language, or because we simply believe the singer sang something different from what we understood. For instance, they believe the first verses of

the song *Yesterday* by the Beatles could be misunderstood in the following way:

Original version

*Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away
Now it looks as though they're here to stay
Oh, I believe in yesterday
Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be
There's a shadow hanging over me
Oh, I believe in yesterday
Why she had to go? I don't know, she wouldn't say
I said something wrong. Now I long for yesterday*

Wrong lyrics version

*Yes, today. Old men's doubles teams so far away
Now it seems they're over here to say
Oh, why be leaving yesterday?
Certainly, why not have the man I used to be
There's a chateau hanging over me
Oh, why be leaving yesterday?
Why she had two goes, eyes and noes, she wouldn't say
Eyes, head, something wrong. Now along, for chess today!*

Hancock's idea was hence an inspiration when creating the following activities on using songs to help students realize the number of homophones and minimal pairs there are in English as well as getting familiar with connected speech processes.

Idea 1: Teachers could ask their students to listen to part of a song they are not familiar with and write down what they hear. Depending on the rhythm of the song, teachers would have to pause more or less often between the different lines; the whole section of the song under analysis would probably have to be played two or three times. This activity could be done in groups of 3 or 4 students right from the beginning or each

person could write their own lyrics first and then in small groups of 3 or 4. The different students have to compare their answers and then come up with their final version. The next day, the teacher corrects the task together with the students going over every misunderstanding with them and asking for their help to explain why certain groups could have understood X instead of Y. For instance, by quickly listening to the beginning of the song *It's time* by Imagine Dragons (see below), I believe Spanish students may have trouble with several aspects such as those which have been marked in bold below. As can be inferred, some of the possible misunderstandings have to do with minimal pairs (for instance, understanding *bit* rather than *pit* or *no* instead of *now* – note that some students may even write the word *know* as a homophone of *no*; hence teachers could explain the differences between these words and other homophones). Others are due to connected speech processes such as the dropping of final *-d* in *hold*, which may make students believe that the singer says *hole* or the singer's slow pronunciation of *packing*, causing students to understand two different words, *pack in*. Another group of misunderstandings may simply be due to the way that the singer pronounces specific verses like *when you said you were cement* or *I'm just the same inside worlds*. Another possibility would be for the teacher to give the students an incomplete script of the lyrics in which the difficult parts students have to focus on are in blank. In addition, teachers could use a kind of jigsaw activity in which the different groups of students have different parts of the lyrics in black and their aim is to complete the entire text after exchanging information with the other groups of learners.

Original version

So this is what you meant

When you said that you were spent

And now it s time to build from the bottom of the pit

Right to the top. Don t hold back
Packing my bags and giving the academy a rain-check

I don t ever wanna let you down

I don t ever wanna leave this town

Cause after all

This city never sleeps at night

It's time to begin, isn t it?

I get a little bit bigger but then I ll admit

I m just the same as I was

Now don't you understand

Possible wrong lyrics version

So this is what you meant

When you said you were cement

And now it s time to build from the bottom of the bit

Right to the top. Don t hole back

Pack in my bags and giving the academy a rain cheque

I never wanna let you down

I never wanna leave this town

Cos after all,

The city never sleeps tonight

It s time to begin, easining

I get a little bit bigger but there I ll admit

I m just the same inside worlds,

No don t you understand

It is highly likely that some of the options given by some groups will sound awkward or will be ungrammatical, but this will benefit their learning process even more since they may end up discussing grammatical or lexical points. For example, in the previous song, students may have understood *pack in my bags* because they interpreted *packing* as two different words; however, in their group discussion they may come to the conclusion that *pack in* does not exist without an object placed between these words, i.e., *pack it in* for instance. Consequently, the members of a certain group may hence decide to write down *pack in* as one single word, also because they discuss that one *packs their bags*, not *packs in their bags*. At the end of these sessions, the teacher should give their

students the original lyrics of the song so that they can compare their work to the target version.

Idea 2: Teachers could ask students questions to test their receptive or productive skills, such as “Can anyone tell me how the singer pronounced this word?” “Were there any letters or syllables he did not pronounce?” or “Does anyone know another spelling for X?”.

Idea 3: Instead of listening to the lyrics of a song and trying to figure out what has been said, students could choose a song they like and invent a new version by transforming some words for others that sound similar/rhyme with each other and then test their classmates. As this activity may be quite difficult for some students, the teachers may once again provide them with a list of songs to choose from and give them strict guidelines to follow.

LEVEL 4: TALKING ABOUT THEIR FAVOURITE SONG

Another interesting activity to emphasise the practising of oral skills as well as other language areas such as writing, reading and grammar could be to get learners to choose their favourite singer/band or their favourite song/s and ask them to do a small project in which they have to create a poster to orally present to their classmates. Students can freely choose whether they would like to include pictures, material extracted from the Internet, books, the lyrics of the song, the biography of the singer/band, etc. Depending on the amount of time available according to the schedule and to the number of students per class, this activity could be done individually, in pairs or in small groups of 3. So as to make this activity even more challenging, perhaps teachers could turn it into a competition so that the people/groups with the best voted project/s in terms of originality, creativity or level of English would receive a small prize.

LEVEL 5: WRITING A SONG

In this final stage, students by now should have practised how to identify and distinguish between some English sounds by paying attention to the rhythm and rhyming words of songs; they may also have learnt some English homophones and minimal pairs and realised that English pronunciation is a difficult language area and it is normal for both native and non-native speakers to misunderstand the lyrics of a certain song sung in English due to homophones, speed or other ambiguities. It is now time for students to create their own song, which includes many examples of particular sounds. Teachers could once again give students a list of words to use or, if they are creative enough, they could entirely invent one by themselves. So as not to intimidate the students, it will not be obligatory to sing their song in the classroom but they should give a presentation on what their song is about, the problems they had creating it, whether they can compare their song to any other songs they know, the type of people who would most likely like their song and so on. Although this activity is not directly related to English pronunciation, the more students express themselves orally in class, the better their pronunciation may get. Thus, getting them to speak about their projects is also getting them to pronounce words (minimal pairs, homophones, etc.) used in the classroom.

As mentioned above, this article intends to be a contribution to the field of teaching English pronunciation to Spanish students. Although some prior knowledge of English pronunciation is required, it is not necessary for teachers to be expert phoneticians to use songs for teaching pronunciation; with a few ideas like the ones discussed here, they can make their pronunciation classes much more useful and, what is most important, much more fun for their students than constantly listening to and repeating different random words or short phrases.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For generous financial support, I am grateful to the following institutions: Galician Ministry of Education (grant I2C 2011-2014, European Regional Development Fund, Autonomous Government of Galicia), Directorate General for Scientific and Technological Promotion (grants CN2011/011 and CN2012/081) and the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation (grant FFI2012-31450). These grants are hereby gratefully acknowledged.

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