PRONUNCIATION

Going for a song

Robin Walker finds that music provides pronunciation practice for free.

The use of songs in the classroom is a very powerful technique: vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, discussion – songs offer a world of language practice, as anybody who has used them will know. However, I wonder if any of us has ever stopped to analyse just how much pronunciation practice they provide us with, especially for groups that often are reluctant to take on the sounds of a new language – teenagers, in particular.

A few years ago I was using 'Englishman in New York' (Sting) with my tourism students with the intention of bringing up the topic of cultural differences, an important issue in their field. As we listened to the words, I could see my students trying to mouth them, until finally the inevitable happened, a voice from the back asking, *'Can we sing?'*

Seeing no reason why not, I rewound the tape to the beginning. But *could* they sing it? The simple truth is that they couldn't, and a number of lines proved to be real tongue twisters.

Getting the rhythm

Surprised at what had happened, I listened to the song with a pronunciation ear, and it didn't take me too long to discover why they had found it hard to follow the words. Take, for example, this apparently innocent line from the third verse:

It takes a man to suffer ignorance and smile

We all know that English is technically a *stress-timed* language. This means that in any piece of speech, some syllables will be stressed more than others, and, as a result, the less-stressed syllables will tend to be squashed together and pronounced weakly. What determines where the stresses fall in normal speech is quite a complex issue, but in a song they are fixed by the beat of the music. For example, we will get:

it TAKES a MAN to SUffer

IGnorance and SMILE

where the stressed syllables (the shaded dots) follow the beat, and the other syllables squeeze in as best they can.

As is evident, only five of the twelve syllables in the line are stressed, in marked contrast to the system in Spanish, Greek, Italian or Japanese, say, which would stress all twelve much more evenly, and consequently take longer to say. Worse still, between the last two stressed syllables there are three unstressed syllables, and they will need to be squeezed into almost the same time that only one unstressed syllable occupies on each of the three previous occasions!

The situation becomes more complicated if you ask your students to listen carefully to the pronunciation of ▶▶▶

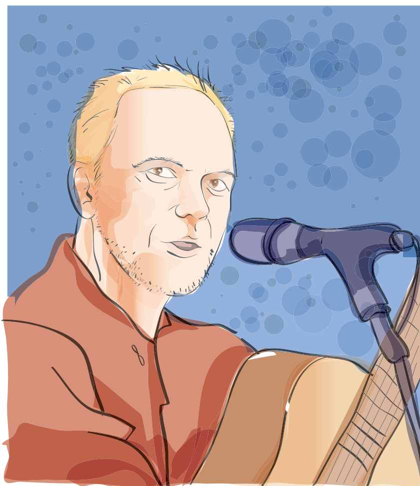
Going for a song

the vowels in the unstressed syllables. I have done this on many occasions with my own students, who are always surprised, and sometimes quite indignant at what they hear. Instead of the strong, clear vowels they expect because of their native Spanish, they pick up weak, obscure sounds they usually cannot identify. Technically, the sound they are mostly detecting is called 'schwa', and it is the commonest vowel sound in the pronunciation of native-speaker English. In practical terms, however, an exact imitation of schwa by most students is unnecessary. As long as they put all their effort on the stressed syllables, and get past the weak syllables as best they can, they will have the rhythm more or less right.

To help them to do this, try putting a nonsense symbol (∂, for example) wherever there is a weak vowel. This will produce something like:

it TAKES ∂ MAN t∂ SUFf∂r IGn∂r∂nce ∂nd SMILE

Insist that it does not really matter what exact sound they pronounce for ∂, and that the best thing to do is to concentrate on the stressed syllables and the beat of the music. In this way they should get to the end of the line still in time with the music, which many learners find rewarding in itself.



S(tr)inging it together

Of course, if we were to listen carefully to this same line of the song, we would soon discover a number of other, typical features of connected speech in English, some of which could be useful to our students if they really want to sing well, and ultimately speak fluently. *Linking*, for example, occurs in groups of words that are said together without pausing. When one of these words ends in a consonant and the next begins with a vowel, we link the consonant across the word boundary to the vowel. In our line from Sting's song, the 's' sounds at the end of *takes* and *ignorance* link up to the following vowel, as does the 'r' at the end of *suffer*. The result is something like:

itTAKES∂MAN
t∂SUFf∂rIGn∂r∂ns∂ndSMILE

Here we have two blocks of words, with a slight pause after man, and with two and three stressed syllables, respectively. The second group of words is actually quite a mouthful, and we will come back to it after we have looked at a second type of linking. This is where one word ends in a consonant, and the next word begins with the same sound. In this situation, the two consonants are pronounced with no pause between them, rather as if they were a single 'long' consonant. This situation occurs with *it takes*, and so we now have:

iTAKES∂MAN
t∂SUFf∂rIGn∂r∂ns∂ndSMILE

If these ideas on rhythm are new to your students, the real surprise comes if they listen very carefully to the last two words of the line. By doing so, they will discover that the final 'd' sound of the word *and* is just not there! This is an example of *elision*: in normal-speed English the 't' and 'd' sounds are generally not pronounced when they come between two consonants, even by educated native speakers. This is *not* lazy speech. Rather, it is a question of being pragmatic; *and smile* creates a sequence of four consonants (ndsm), and it is, quite simply, very hard to get your tongue around them. Because of this difficulty, 't' and 'd' are left out, which produces 'ansmile':

iTAKES∂MAN
t∂SUFf∂rIGn∂r∂ns∂nSMILE

Five stressed syllables in two blocks of continuous sound – this is a far cry from what many students try to pronounce if left to their own devices, and this important difference is one of the main reasons why many students have so much difficulty when trying to sing in English, or indeed, speak with any fluency.

> *The desire to 'clone' the pronunciation of someone the students idolise is a resource that we cannot turn our backs on*

Practice makes perfect

There is no doubt that songs are strongly motivating for students, and if we take advantge of those that our learners bring to class, and use them to help them to sing better, then we are going to get good pronunciation practice at little or no cost. This practice is especially valuable with adolescents, who, for different reasons to do with their age and the peer-group pressures they are subject to, are generally not keen on practising the sounds of a foreign language. It is quite another thing, however, to be shown how to sing in the same way as one of their current music heroes. The desire to 'clone' the pronunciation of someone they idolise is a resource that we cannot turn our backs on when it comes to motivating these sometimes reluctant learners.

In addition, whether the singers be British, American, Australian, native-speakers or non-native speakers, they represent good models of successful accents of English, and therefore are excellent targets for adolescent students to aim at.

Selecting suitable songs

Of course, if you decide to use the songs your students bring to class, you need to be sure that these are suitable in various ways. In this respect, I am generally willing to accept anything that my students bring, provided that (in descending order of importance):

- The words of the song will not be seen as offensive to anybody in the group.
- The words are not too difficult to hear because of the nature of the music.
- I am given a good quality recording of the song.
- I am given a *minimum* of 72 hours, and preferably a week, to prepare the activity.
- I am given the lyrics already typed out (and preferably as a Word file).

Using songs in class

Once you take a song into the classroom, there are a number of ways you can proceed, but you might like to include some of the following (although not necessarily all on the same day!):

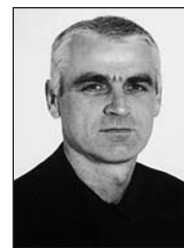
- Play a very short part of the song without saying what it is. Ask the students to tell you the title, the singer, the group, the year, etc.
- Get the student(s) who brought the song to tell the class anything they want about it, about the group who sings it, or about why they personally like it.
- Give the class the lyrics of the song and class dictionaries, and let them check that they understand the meaning. This is an important step since learners cannot concentrate on pronunciation if they do not understand the meaning.
- Comment on any aspects of meaning that are not obvious even with dictionaries. Often these reveal interesting things about the singer's cultural background, and as such are a very valuable insight into worlds other than the students' own. In the song described above, for example, you could point out the different habits of the British and the Americans with respect to tea and coffee.
- Play the song and let the class follow the words in silence. This is an interesting activity as often what students silently predict for the pronunciation on reading the written version, differs from what they actually hear. In fact, you can often end this step by asking the class if they found anything unusual about how the song was pronounced. In practice, quite often nothing is brought up, partly because learners do not like offering suggestions that may be wrong, and partly because when 'singing' silently we invariably feel that we have got the pronunciation right.

- Tell the class that you are going to play the song again and ask them to sing along out loud. Warn them that they may get lost from time to time, and invite them to underline where they got lost on their handout. Remind them that if they *do* get lost, the best thing is to pause and then join in again at the next stressed syllable. Play the song for the second time.
- Elicit comments on where people got lost. Discuss the reasons for this, and then focus the rest of the lesson on explaining the pronunciation point behind *one* of the areas brought up in the discussion. Use suitable exercises to practise this point. A mixture of choral and individual repetition of the practice exercises is useful here.
- Finish by everybody singing the song for the last time, hopefully much better than the first!

Of course, if you decide to use the songs your students bring to class, you need to be sure that these are suitable in various ways

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PHILLIP BURROWS

Given just how many different features of pronunciation are present in almost any song, it is little wonder that our students often find them hard to sing. It is not a good idea, of course, to attempt to practise everything outlined above in a single class. This would just confuse the students and probably do more harm than good. In fact, in order to be well-prepared for the discussion step, it is very important that you listen to a song many times at home, in the car or in the office in order to decide which feature of pronunciation is most dominant, and therefore what sort of pronunciation practice you can best do with your class. Rhythm, linking, elision, sounds – some songs 'suggest' practice in one or other of these areas, whilst others seem the ideal platform for work on the rest. The key is to familiarise yourself with the song's pronunciation. ETp



Robin Walker has been involved in English language teaching and teacher education since 1981. His special interests are ESP and pronunciation, and he is a member of the IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group, and Vice-president of TESOL-SPAIN.

walker@fade.es

Visit the ETp website!

The ETp website is packed with practical tips, advice, resources, information and selected articles. You can submit tips or articles, renew your subscription or simply browse the features.

www.etprofessional.com