

Songs that enliven GK, Conversation and IT skills

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Abstract

Learning the English language and trying to converse fluently has always been a challenge for tertiary learners in Kerala, the main reason being a strong influence of the vernacular. With the rapid growth of English as Second language in developing countries of the Far East and Asiatic, a number of job opportunities have begun to sprout up with the essential requirement being a post-graduate with additional skills including good communication skills and reasonable general knowledge. The power of music to spice up the tempo and improve general knowledge has been researched before but using ICT components and search technologies have revealed surprising results.

This study has been carried out on tertiary learners of II year BA Functional English in Malabar Christian College, Calicut. Interesting results have sprung up with learners encouraging the use of ICT in ELT.

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Learning the English language and trying to converse fluently has always been a challenge for tertiary learners in Kerala, the main reason being a strong influence of the mother tongue. Given an opportunity, students in Kerala will speak primarily in their vernacular. However, with the rapid growth of English as Second language in developing countries of the Far East and Asiatic, a number of job opportunities have begun to sprout up, the essential requirement for these jobs being a basic degree or post-graduation with good communication skills and reasonable general knowledge. Good communication skills include a working knowledge of English with a reasonable amount of vocabulary general knowledge. These skills are general acquired during their study in schools. Almost all tertiary learners in Kerala are fairly good in English but when it comes to speaking with someone, they are slightly hesitant to do so, the main reason being their innate fear of committing grammatical mistakes as they speak. This is, however not the case with many other learners from other parts of India. Even if there is an error, they will just speak their mind. Hence, the learners from Kerala lose out on crucial jobs not because of their lack of knowledge but the delay in breaking out of their shell.

Using the power of music to spice up the tempo and improve their general knowledge by searching for historical landmark events that happened prior to their being born but still relevant today, the researcher attempted to improve the conversational skills of a tertiary level class. Results were found to be surprising. The intervention of ICT components supplemented with general knowledge and music helped to bring out their conversational talents.

Literature Review:

Many institutes of learning include music in their L2 courses. Research conducted by Iskold showed that *adults spend 40-50% of their time listening, compared to 6% of their time reading* (Iskold, 2004). Although producing meaningful speech is a central aspect of L2 acquisition, learning actively to listen is an equally essential and closely-related skill to be encouraged in all students (Rivers 196, Omaggio Hadley 5-6, Lund 201).

Music offers a host of options to integrate culture, content and verbal communication during the language-learning process. Listening skills are cultivated, while grammar and vocabulary can be explored within a unique and aurally stimulating context (Fonseca Mora, 2000).

Songs usually last for a short duration of 3 to 5 minutes. This can easily be integrated into a lesson plan. Songs also tend to motivate and inspire students. They provide language learners with a unique entry point into the evolving mentality and traditions of a foreign country (Lacorte, 2001). Singing together in the classroom enhances pronunciation and more importantly, the rhythm and accent (Murray, 2005)

Details of the study:

This study was conducted in Malabar Christian College as part of Research activities leading towards Ph.D. The class composed of a non-probability sample of a heterogeneous mixture of 30 students comprising of twenty two girls and eight boys. All of them were tertiary level students studying for 2nd year BA Functional English and participants of an ICT learning programme in which they were accustomed to the basics of the computer. The learners were also involved in a Communicative English Course that contained 30 hours of intensive English language learning. The purpose of the case study was to foster greater understanding of the multiple factors involved in the use music to develop general knowledge, improving skills in ICT and communicative skills. Questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the class and collected after they were completed.

Songs selected were English songs which the researcher felt had depth in meaning and contained lots of information. A total of 3 songs were used as three modules in the Communicative English Course. Foremost among the songs selected were - *We didn't start the fire* by Billy Joel, 6 time Grammy award winner, pianist, singer-song writer and composer. The lyrics are written a stream of consciousness style. It is a list of events that Joel felt his generation was not responsible for. The list chronicles events from 1949 to 1989. A lot of the references are to the Cold War (US vs. Russia), a problem his generation inherited. Many of the personalities/events in the song were new to the tertiary learners.

The song was first played with everyone listening intently. After the song, it was followed by a Q & A session. Students mentioned that a lot of names and events were being mentioned but failed to understand their relevance. Next, the song was played with the lyrics displayed in tele-prompter style and a third time, the song was played with the events, pictures and scenes of the song. Many of the faces and events were recognizable proving that visual

images always played a key role in igniting young minds. Students were also made to sing along with the help of the lyrics. This helped to improve pronunciation, and accent.

Using search techniques, a mash up of the same song with events chronicled from 1990 - 2010 was also shown. Students were then asked to present a seminar on any two topics, one taken from events between 1949 -1989 and the other from 1990 - 2010. Within minutes of completion of the task, about half of the class came up with interesting combinations for Seminar presentation. It is surprising that many of the topics are even relevant in the present day such as Sally Ride, the first American astronaut to enter low earth orbit. Studebaker, Marilyn Monroe, JFK and the Queen of England along with Dacron (PET), Elvis Presley, Disneyland and timeless classics such as Ben Hur.

Evaluation Results:

With the feedback form, the researcher could gauge whether this method of imparting knowledge was useful to the students or not. Out of 30 participants, only 29 participated in the feedback since one participant contracted chicken pox. The lesson was completed within 40 min session with a 10 minute extra to answer the feedback online using Google forms.

The session was rated as well above average with over 50% of the learners rating it as very good and 21% rating it as excellent. Learners opined that the exercises gave them opportunities to improve general knowledge and improve speaking.

One of the most surprising outcomes of the survey was the answer to whether they would participate if given another opportunity. 96% replied in the affirmative with 4% as maybe. The exercise was given a rating above 70% with over 39% rating it as 80%.

Many of the respondents indicated that they preferred speaking exercises with listening and reading as their next options. Grammar was the least preferred with writing preceding it.

When the classes began 2 months ago, the students were given a sample survey in which they had to write a descriptive topic and answer a few questions in grammar. Most of them opined that their standard in English stood between 40 and 70%. However, after an intervention, the

results showed that the learners were more confident of speaking themselves and writing with more persuasion and determination. Around 74% of the learners felt that their confidence to understand and speak English increased.

Conclusions and Outlook:

This exercise proved to be an eye-opener for students. A lot of information was disseminated with each person talking about 2 events. This gave them an opportunity to scour the Internet using www.google.com and alternative search engines such as www.bing.com and www.opera.com. Further, it allowed them to present their topics in front of the class. This enhanced their speaking and reduced their fear of standing in front of others.

Since the scope of the researcher was limited, the songs that were selected were also limited. However, better songs would fit the event much better.

This exercise gave the learners an opportunity to participate in singing, pronouncing new words, collecting information using alternative search engines and get an opportunity to speak out loud thereby increasing confidence and self-motivation.

Credits:

Special thanks to www.questia.com for complimentary access.

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Website resources:

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