

BLACK SONGS AS A TOOL FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN BENINESE ADVANCED CLASSES

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RÉSUMÉ

La performance académique des élèves en anglais langue étrangère (ALE) au Bénin reste encore un défi à relever et il serait bon de trouver une méthode d'enseignement africaine adéquate. Ce travail montre comment la musique noire d'expression anglaise pourrait être utilisée pour enseigner l'anglais langue étrangère. Les élèves sont, en effet, habitués aux chansons africaines de langue anglaise et puisqu'en pédagogie il est bon d'utiliser les choses auxquelles les élèves sont familiarisés pour leur enseigner de nouveaux concepts, les auteurs de cet article pensent que les chansons africaines de langue anglaise pourraient être d'une grande utilité, aussi bien pour enseigner l'anglais que pour préserver un tant soit peu la culture africaine. La spécificité de ce travail est de montrer l'importance des chansons africaines de langue anglaise dans l'enseignement de l'anglais. D'abord, nous définirons la musique noire anglophone, ensuite montrerons comment cette musique peut être utilisée à des fins pédagogiques.

MOTS CLÉS

Performance académique, anglais langue étrangère, chansons africaines, pédagogie africaine, culture.

ABSTRACT

Student academic performance in Beninese EFL classes is faced with a lot of challenges and finding a typical African teaching method will be welcomed. This work is suggesting a curriculum using Black songs to teach English as a Foreign Language as a proper African pedagogy to face these challenges. In fact, students are accustomed to Black songs and since in pedagogy it is good to use what learners are familiar with to teach them new concepts, Black songs could then be of great help. The specificity of this work is to show the usefulness of Black songs in teaching English. First, defining what they are, and then investigating how they can be used in the teaching of English.

KEY WORDS

Academic Performance, English as a Foreign Language, Black Songs, African Pedagogy, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

In our African society, the cradle of the "Ifa" tradition can be dated back to the former Oyo kingdom. It was in this kingdom that the consultation of the "Ifa" divinity started (Joseph 2005). This was done by the "Ifa" priest, on behalf of the citizens of Oyo, to seek for the protection of "Ifa", and also to consult on issues that concern the land. As such, the "Ifa" priest is someone who is supposed to be the spiritual eye of the community. Therefore, he is the mediator between the people and the "Ifa" divinity. And to be able to communicate with the "Ifa" divinity, he has to chant some incantations and know the meaning of each of the "Ifa" symbols. At that time (18th, 19th, 20th centuries) there were no scriptures. Besides, it was too difficult to memorize and to remember all these "Ifa" codes correctly. But the "Ifa" priest always

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succeeded in remembering and memorizing all of them. The amazing method these “Ifa” priests used to chant these incantations and to interpret the “Ifa” symbols was through songs. The songs then helped to memorize and to remember easily the interpretation of “Ifa” symbols.

This has drawn the attention of the authors of this article to the necessity to investigate the methodology of using black songs in teaching English as a Foreign Language. Considering that “the familiar is better than the unfamiliar”, and the fact that it is easier to activate productive language skills by using something we have learned through an affective filter (Cross1992), this article, after experimenting the applicability of black songs in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in advanced classes, suggests the experimentation of a curriculum using Black songs to teach English as a tool of genuine African Pedagogy. The specificity of this article is to show the usefulness of Black songs in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL); first, defining what they are, and showing why and how they should be used, and then investigating how they can be used in the teaching of English.

I- PRELIMINARY ISSUES ON BLACK SONGS

“A song is a set of words set to music produced or written” (Judy 2008). Singing is, in some ways, like speaking. When we sing, our voices make various high and low notes. Likewise, when we speak, our voices go up at certain times and come down to lower notes at other times. Songs can be easily memorized because of the rhythm that they contain. In a song, rhythm refers to the pattern of beats created by the syllables and stresses of the words in each line. In some songs, the pattern of beats may be regular and predictable. Rhythm creates cadence. And this has some positive effects on human beings since human beings are full of vibrations.

Both English language and songs observe their own rules for metre, rhythm and tempo. So, there is a direct link between the English language and English songs. By *Black* we mean Africans in Africa and Africa’s Diaspora. Black songs are *songs produced by Africans in Africa and Africa’s Diaspora*. Black songs, as Stone (1995) views them in his work, are embedded in many things in Black culture. According to him, rhythm and harmony on the African continent are expressed through a dazzling variety of events, instruments, costumes and forms. He states that highlife singers promote candidates for political office, for example. As Kofi Busia campaigned for the presidency of Ghana in 1970, a musical warning was piped from a roving van about the political activities of Kwame Nkrumah, a former leader of the country.

Before it rains, the wind precedes
I told you but you did not listen

African continent has a rich cultural heritage, which, if well managed and made use of, will go a long way to bolstering the educational system capacity of African countries. African educational curricula must confront the child with social activities, ethical aspiration and the appreciation of the culture of our past. We need to have a philosophy of education that places much emphasis on our values. The curriculum should be characterized by African patterns whereby students can adapt and grow up as full Africans and not half baked. The responsibility of the contemporary African education system in promoting cultural awareness should aim at restoring African cultural values.

This technique of using Black songs as a way to restore African values may pose a question. Could one teach one’s values in a foreign language? Today, it is good for the Africans to safeguard their identity in terms of linguistic medium, especially in this context of globalization with African languages undergoing changes as far as their essence is concerned. But at the same time Africans must communicate in a written language that is universally spoken. Our solution today does not consist in the rejection of the English language as a medium of teaching our values but one of the solutions lies in the African singers infusing the English language with the idiosyncrasies of the African language. Many African writers like Wole Soyinka, Kofi Anyidoho and Chinua Achebe have already started this experience in their writings (Apedo 2008). Seeing the values of songs, especially in our tradition, considering the importance of English today, and regarding the difficulties students encounter in reading English, we

instead think that Black songs may be used as an instrument to facilitate the acquisition of the English language.

II- CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

A cursory look at Dahomey kingdom shows that this kingdom flowered in rich and cultural show pieces. Dahomey society had plenty of rich values that shaped the behaviour and life of the people. Its system of education was continually oriented and had clear objectives and purposes. It was functional, i.e. relating memory or theoretical work to practices. The way professional singers of praise and criticism, or griots, keep records of the history of the whole land is one illustration among many others. In fact, the praise singer represents the people's mind, the king's daily programmes. He reminds the king of his daily activities. He sees to the respect of the land's regulation, how an event could be well organized, the sacrifices that need to be performed when someone is dead, etc.

The praise singer plays then the role of the keeper of the "constitution" of the land. In those days, no sort of written records existed. Yet, the praise singer always succeeded in recalling events accurately. To be able to do this, he had a peculiar way of keeping things in his mind. The amazing method he used was to put events and facts into melody. He composed songs into which he inserted events or whatever the matter was. By remembering a song, he recalled details on what was to be done, what had happened, etc.

In the same Dahomey kingdom, every evening, grand-fathers and grand-mothers would gather the children around the fireplace and would tell them stories of the land as they were told by their forefathers. Each story told always had a song that went along with it, summarising the story and the lesson to be drawn from it. Once such a song is remembered, it draws one back to the story told and to the lesson to learn from it.

African peoples make and listen to music that is intimately bound to the visual and dramatic arts as well as to the larger fabric of daily life. Highlife singers promote candidates for political office. Women improvise comfortable calls and response patterns as they bend to hoe the soil for rice planting, and sing the songs of work. Elsewhere, a "money bus" driver plays a tape with his tape player, and the lyrics of Bob Marley and the sounds of reggae rise in the urban bustle. Music is integrated into life in many settings in Africa, and though diversity throughout Africa is apparent, some common elements penetrate the myriad of details. Sound in Africa is everywhere noticed, admired and shaped. Virtually everything is subject to portrayal with sound, and many voices may combine for such a purpose. It appears that there is a need for Benin EFL teachers to improve their teaching methods and work with the population of 21st century Benin students who usually complain that English is difficult to read, speak and understand. What we suggest here is the methodology of using Black songs to make English language learning attractive and enjoyable.

III- DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS

The method of investigation used in this study is based on the use of two Black songs to assess their applicability in EFL teaching. The objective here is to see if the students who are familiar with the Black songs used perform better than those who are not. The first lyric used is entitled "*It's not easy*" by Lucky Dube. This lyric is used to check understanding. The experimentation is carried out through a sampling based on a contrastive work. The target population is the students of *Terminale D2* of *CEG les Pylônes*.

The total number of students is thirty. This number has been divided into two groups of fifteen students. The first group is given the hard copy of the song for reading comprehension whereas the second group is given the hard copy of the song and also listens to the music with its lyric. Then, they are given some comprehension questions to answer. The second lyric used is "*African queen*" by Two Face. The same first group is taught some similes and metaphors used in the second lyric; whereas the second

group is taught those figures of speech and also listen to the music. After that, the two groups are assessed.

IV- THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

IV-1: FIRST EVALUATION

Group N° 1

Total number of students: 15

	Grade Under Average (<10/20)	Grade Over Average (>10/20)
Number of students	3	12
Percentage (%)	20	80

Table one showing the results of the first evaluation of Group 1

Group N° 2:

Total Number of students: 15

	Grade Under Average (<10/20)	Grade Over Average (>10/20)
Number of students	2	13
Percentage (%)	13.33	86.67

Table two showing the result of the first evaluation of Group 2

The percentage of the number of students with whom Black songs were used, and who got more than 10/20 average, is respectively:

80% for Group one

86.67% for Group two.

By and large, the group with whom a Black song was used performed better than the group with whom only the hard copy of the lyric was used.

IV-2: SECOND EVALUATION

Group N° 1

Total Number of students: 15

	Grade Under Average (<10/20)	Grade Over Average (>10/20)
Number of students	4	11
Percentage (%)	26.67	73.33

Table three

Group N° 2

Total Number of students: 15

	Under Average (UA)	Over Average (OA)
Number of students	6	9
Percentage (%)	40	60

Table four

60% of the students who did not use the Black song as teaching material got more than the average of 10/20 while 73.33% of the students who used the black song got more than the 10/20 average, which is obviously greater than (>) 60%. Once more, the result was better with the students who used the black song as teaching material than with those who did not use it. In conclusion, for both evaluations, the performance scores of the students with whom Black songs were used were higher than the performance scores of the students who were not favoured by Black songs. As a matter of fact, the students with whom

Black songs were used as teaching material had more advantages than the other students. Not only did they read, since they also had the hard copy of the song, but they also listened to the lyrics. Moreover, they were favoured by the factors of motivation and enjoyment. During the teaching of the figures of speech through the Black song "You are my African Queen", we could see that the music generated wonder in the students. This could be seen on their faces. The group with whom songs had been used personalised the learning and this was shown in their performance. The Black songs used generated enthusiasm in the students while they were learning.

Learning a language may be very demanding at times. A better and more pleasant way to learn can be through songs as far as African students in general and Beninese students in particular are concerned. Black music is appropriate as Black singers generally live in environments that are similar to the students' environment. All our students enjoy listening to Black rhythms no matter how young or old they are. Children do so at any moment of the day without realising that sometimes they get so emotionally involved that they unconsciously end up memorising the lyrics. This can be the best way to learn a Foreign Language as it is so close to natural language learning. They also get to know the context in which the words could be used. Black songs help them build up their vocabulary in the sense that they incite the listeners to seek for the meaning of the words they are listening to. Adding the lyrics to the music makes the learning process easier and enjoyable and the learner is generally able to follow the message of the song without fearing that s/he might get lost in case the singer speaks too fast. S/he might get to know the spelling of all the words, especially the new words s/he comes across, as he or she rushes to a dictionary for their meanings. The most important feature of learning that way is that we do so while having fun, whereas learning through books and in other similar ways usually appears to be a mission. In a word, we can say that students do benefit from Black songs used to teach them English and that such songs can be used to enhance performance and commitment.

V- SUGGESTIONS

There are various ways of using Black songs in the classroom. The level of the students, the interests and the age of the learners, even the songs themselves have determinant roles in the procedure. Apart from these, the other thing that matters is the creativity of the teacher. In fact, in the selection of a Black song, one should first consider the grammatical structure to be presented, practised, or reviewed, then the level and the age of the students, next the theme and the length of the song and its appropriateness to the classroom objectives. Reasonably long lyrics may sometimes be appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language.

Besides, it is more advisable to select contemporary Black songs than old ones as older songs often provide a more difficult old English and incorrect grammatical sentences. Contemporary Black songs which reflect cultural themes, humanistic values, universal features, or emotional aspects, should be selected when they are grammatically well designed.

CONCLUSION

Black songs have many beneficial aspects. They are the tools for the transmission of phonetic expression and moral values. Black songs deal with many aspects of African life and may take the form of dirges, spiritual songs, narrative songs, love songs, war songs, and aphorism songs. They are precious resources to develop students' abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They can also be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, adjectives, and adverbs. As stated by Lo and Fai Li (1998: 8), learning English through songs can also provide a non-threatened atmosphere for students, who are usually afraid when speaking English in a formal classroom setting. Attempting to enumerate all the advantages of Black songs is like "a blind man looking for a black hat in a dark room." Learning English as a foreign language through Black songs is productive. It is a means of expression that provides a sense of accomplishment and profound understanding.

It is true that many Black songs do not respect certain syntactic rules. Others, morally, are not acceptable. It is the example of "I'm bad" by Michael Jackson, which at a given moment was subject to serious criticism by some parents. In this respect, listening to British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on a Saturday morning, some parents once said: "We are spending a lot of money to educate our children, but some people earn a lot of money to uneducate them". These difficulties would be removed if the teacher could select a Black song that is syntactically and thematically appropriate according to the level, age and interests of the students.

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Appendix A

Below is the lesson plan we used with one of the Black songs.

Level: class seven (*Terminale*)

Lesson Title: figures of speech

Objective of the lesson: By the end of the lesson students should be able to use appropriately:

a- Similes

b- Metaphors

Materials Needed:

Cassette (or CD) player and a cassette (or CD) of the Black song "African Queen" by Two Face, a lyric of the song.

Blackboard for sentence completion

Lesson Steps:

Elicit background knowledge;

Introduce the song;

Sing or listen to the song for children. Play the cassettes first so that students listen to it. Pass out the copy of the song to the students. At this moment students listen once more to the song with its lyric;

Vocabulary check;

Teach the point to be taught: Similes and metaphors;

Sing the song together with children;

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Appendix B

Lyric of "African queen"

(Singer: Two Face)

Echo

You are my African queen, oh uh uh uh lord huhn!

Just like the sun light up the earth

(you light up my life)

The only one I ever see

(with a smile so bright)

But just yesterday you came around my way

you change my whole sin way

(with your astonishing beauty) oh, you could have

made a broda sin not an ordinary thing

It's a super natural dream

I know you are,

brighter than the moon

brighter than the stars

I love you just the way you are. And,

you stand as one

(the outstanding one)

when I look into your eyes girl what I see

(is paradise)

You've captivated my

Soul

that everyday I want you more

and more

I cannot deny this feelings I'm

feeling inside

Oh! No one that's gonna take

your place

that's gonna take your space

and it's the fact I cannot erase

I know you are the one that make me smile make

me float like a butter spoon knife

Chorus:

You are my African queen

the girl of my dream

you take me where I've never

being

you make my heart go jinger-

linger-ling oh hai!

You are my African queen

the girl of my dreams

and you remind of a thing

and that is the African

beauty

You are my African queen

and I know oh! yes I

know.....

you are my African queen

oh! yes I know see I know

see I know what I am feeling in

my heart and my soul

oh! I know that it's sweet sweet

love

and I know trial (bis)loving

was surely sent from up above

surely only you I think of

you are my African queen and I

know that is means that,

(its only you trial I will serve)

'll give you my heart, my love

my body, und my money

(every other thing you think of)

in a man

Who could think o! anything

better than you

Who could think of ever hurting

better than you

sacrifice my world I'll give it all

to you; you are my African queen

Used Figure of speech evaluation

Identify whether the following are similes or metaphors.

1-"The perfect sky is torn."(Natalie Imbruglia, "Torn")

2-"Juliet is the sun." (Shakespeare, ROMEO and

Chorus ,,
You are my African queen
the girl of my dream
you take me where I've never
been
you make my heart go jinger
linger-ling oh hai !
You are my African queen
the girl of my dream
and that is the African
beauty.....
Out of all my land

Juliet)
3-The traffic is murder.
4-Tom is as death as a post.
5-Life's but a walking shadow. (Shakespeare,
Macbeth)
6-She ran like the wind.
7-I'm as light as a feather.
8-The sun's a thief.
9-Everyday is a windy road. (Sheryl crow,
"everyday is a windy road.")
10-His feet are as black as coal.