MAESTRÍA EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA
Facultad de Idiomas, Universidad Veracruzana

PROYECTO DE APLICACIÓN INNOVADORA DEL CONOCIMIENTO:

TONGUE TWISTERS AND SONGS AS A MEANS TO DEVELOP PRONUNCIATION
AND ORAL FLUENCY WITH HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the most important skills in the teaching of a second or foreign language. According to Nunan (1991), “To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language” (p. 39). The aim of the present study was to document the use of tongue twisters and songs as strategies to improve the oral skills of higher education students who are at beginner’s level of English at the Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Xalapa (ITSX). The reason for doing research on this topic was because as a practicing teacher, I was deeply concerned about my students’ fluency and was intensely interested in helping them improve their speaking skill. In the last six years I have been working at ITSX and what called my attention was that students encounter many problems when speaking. My students did not speak the language fluently and were often unwilling or hesitant to produce the language orally. They only showed certain confidence during class time. During the lessons, their performance was quite normal: they participated, and did all the activities that were required but when they were asked to speak in the oral test they failed to do it well. The main objective of the present research was to help students work on their pronunciation and oral fluency of the English language. Twenty three beginner level students participated in this study. Different methods for data collection were used, such as a questionnaire, field notes, a research diary, photographs, a class survey, and a focus group. The data indicates that some of the reasons why students showed little confidence when speaking are: lack of practice,
interest and motivation in order to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions in the English language.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking has been identified as "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998, p. 13 in Kayi, 2006). Speaking is without a doubt a crucial part of second language learning and teaching. Despite its importance, for many years, the teaching of speaking has been undervalued and English language teachers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues. However, today's world requires that the goal of the teaching of speaking should improve students' communicative skills, because only in this way students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance (Kayi, 2006). Some people still think that the skill of speaking is not as important as the other skills such as reading, writing, listening and other aspects like grammar and vocabulary; but in order to maintain a conversation, people who study a different language as a second or foreign one need not only linguistics skills to master the language but also communicative abilities to perform the language properly. Additionally, learners need to exercise their face muscles, especially the ones that are around and in their mouth.

This study explores why higher education students of second level of English of Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Xalapa (ITSX) are not successful enough when trying to express their feelings, thoughts, and emotions in the English language effectively and articulately. The speaking skill is the concern of this investigation because it is a fact that, most of the time, we as practitioners do not pay enough attention to this
matter and we may ignore the possible reasons of why students do not do well in the speaking skill in the first level of English causing certain feelings of frustration.

This research is interested in students who are at a beginner level of English, since they are still inexperienced in expressing themselves in a different language. This might sound obvious but according to what I have observed, it seems that speaking is the least developed skill in most learners at beginner level as far as accuracy is concerned. This study describes how tongue twisters and songs can be used as strategies to improve the oral skills of higher education students of the school previously cited. The following research question guided the study:

a. Did tongue twisters and songs develop oral fluency in higher education students of Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Xalapa (ITSX)?

The main objective of the present research is to improve the pronunciation and oral fluency. In order to achieve this, two important specific objectives were set:

1. To help the students improve their pronunciation of the English Language.

2. To help students become more fluent and able to communicate in an effective, competent and articulate way.

Chapter one is about the importance of tongue twisters and songs as a means to develop oral skills in higher education students.

Chapter two describes the research context and the participants, as well as the various ways that data were collected along the five-week implementation of songs and tongue-twisters in class activities and the way this was carried out.

Chapter three is about the findings obtained according to the analysis of data. Conclusions are also provided.
CONTEXT AND FOCUS

In the place where I have worked for the last six years, ITSX, I have not taught the English subject as a mother tongue. The school community which I have taught has faced the spoken skill with a lack of confidence. As a consequence, one of the less favourable skills in their English language acquisition is speaking. Pronunciation and fluency have become important issues for me as a practicing teacher. Therefore, the project endeavours to find solutions to help students become more interested in and better at working on their speaking skill.

As early as the 18th century, it was already clear that the teaching of speaking was problematic. For example, Sheridan (1781, pp. v-vi in Hughes, 2002, p.6) expressed that

> With regard indeed to the pronunciation of our tongue, the obstacles are great; and in the present state of things almost insuperable. But all this apparent difficulty arises from our utter neglect of examining and regulating our speech; as nothing has hitherto been done, either by individuals, or societies, towards a right method of teaching it.

As a practicing teacher of the English language, I know that pronunciation and fluency are two aspects which develop during the students’ learning. Unfortunately, both accuracy and fluency can only be achieved over a long period of time and as often as not, they are not improved at all, on account of the lack of practice of the students. This is the reason why there is a focus on teaching strategies to foster the development of the oral skill. These were applied over a period of five weeks. The data were analysed and used to see whether it was possible to improve students’ pronunciation and foster their oral fluency in a short period of time while they were learning and acquiring all the other language skills at the same time.
This is a federal higher-education college in the capital of the state of Veracruz with almost 5,000 students. It offers nine different degrees in engineering. The participants in this research were 20 engineering students coming from different specializations forming a morning group of beginner level students of English. Some tongue twisters and songs were used as strategies to help them improve oral skills with the final aim of helping them become more fluent and able to communicate in an effective, competent and articulate way. This investigation is therefore also focused on helping improve the pronunciation and oral fluency of the English language students of the whole of
LITERATURE REVIEW

English language teaching as a second language or as a foreign language has become an essential subject in the classroom; that is to say, for those whose goal in professional life keep on studying and shaping their professional profile; also for those who have the chance to travel abroad for different purposes. English language plays a very important role in our Mexican society because it is a necessary tool for those whose goal in life is to become qualified and competitive in some fields of study; and English is a specific tool to improve and shape their work. However, teaching English has not been an easy job in Mexico (Davies, 2009), because of the lack of support in most of the schools. Additionally, there are still many English teachers who have limited knowledge of the language. Course books are often not very attractive or are not aimed at the specific needs of our students. Often, there is lack of updated equipment in schools, or the equipment is kept under lock and key. Perhaps there are more reasons of why students are not completely successful when learning a different language like English, but what is true is that certain population of learners show lack of confidence when speaking a different language like English. According to Hadfield & Hadfield (2001), “English is taught all over the world, by all sorts of teachers to all sorts of learners. Schools and classrooms vary enormously in their wealth and the provision of equipment. Learners are very different from place to place.” (p. 1).

Because of the differences previously cited and taking into account that there may be others that have not been investigated, students seem to develop some skills more than others. When a language is taught there are four skills that have to be developed: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The last one listed is one of the least reinforced by both students and teachers, thus causing students not to be inarticulate and fluent when speaking English.
However, teaching speaking is not as easy as it seems to be. In the words of Rebecca Hughes, “One of the central difficulties inherent in the study of speaking is that it overlaps with a considerable number of other areas and activities.” (Hughes, 2002, p. 6). Perhaps, we as teachers forget that teaching the oral skill implies much more than asking a student to repeat something. The same author continues: A further complicating factor is that when the spoken language is the focus of classroom activity there are often other aims which the teacher might have: for instance, helping the student to gain awareness of or to practice some aspect of linguistic knowledge (whether a grammatical rule, or application of a phonemic regularity to which they have been intruded), or to develop production skills (for example rhythm, intonation or vowel-to-vowel linking), or to raise awareness of some sociolinguistic or pragmatic point (for instance how to interrupt politely, respond to a compliment appropriately, or show that one has understood). (Hughes, 2002, p. 6).

In the words of Hayriye Kayi:

Teaching speaking is a very important part of second language learning. The ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learner in school and success later in every phase of life. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired. (Kayi, 2006).

The skill of speaking should be reinforced in order to be a very important role in English language teaching as well as in English language learning. The first skill that is put into practice when both teaching and learning a different language is speaking because we do it, for example, teachers introduce themselves when starting the first lesson and ask our students to produce very simple sentences in the language they pretend to learn. We help them by modelling the expected answers and making them repeat the modelled sentence but we should monitor our students constantly to make them feel more confident when speaking. When looking at a textbook written especially for the
development of speaking, such as the one by Lynch & Anderson (1992), the aims expressed by their authors give insight into the difficulties that learners have to overcome to master the spoken skill. These authors focus their attention to the activation and extension of the linguistic competence of the learners, but aim specifically to build up these learners’ confidence in using spoken English. Additionally, they draw the learners’ attention to how they can analyse their oral skill and evaluate it. Their final aim is to extend their range of strategies to interact successfully with others in real-time conversations.

Another source of information that throws light on this study is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages which is a parameter and a guide for the activities implemented during this research.

It is also essential to make some history and cite why the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was designed. In the webpage of the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (2011, p. 2), the CEFR is said to be created by the Council of Europe with the aim to provide the European community with a common framework for their language courses. This framework aimed at common standards for the design of language programmes, textbooks, and examinations, and was expected to standardize programs in all the European countries. It was started mainly as a tool for planning, to promote ‘transparency and coherence’ in language education.”

According to the University of Cambridge, “The Framework aims to be not only comprehensive, transparent and coherent, but also open, dynamic and non-dogmatic.” (p. 3).

Language schools in many parts of the world, including Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Xalapa (ITSX), use the CEFR as a guide to design their syllabuses, and also to establish their guidelines for the oral skill. The reason for this is that the framework
describes language learners’ ability in terms of speaking, reading, listening and writing at six reference levels (p.4) (University of Cambridge, 2011, p. 4). In the book Using the CEFR: Principles of Good Practice, six different levels of competence are described (from most advanced to least developed):

C2 Mastery

C1 Effective Operational Proficiency

B2 Vantage

B1 Threshold

A2 Way stage

A1 Breakthrough

There are three stages or classifications in these six levels which are: Basic user that covers A1 and A2, the second stage is Independent user and levels B1 and B2 are in it. The last one is Proficient user and in this one the levels C1 and C2 are in it. The level of the participants at ITSX in this study is A2, according to the CEFR. The Way stage level is described in the following way:

- “Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).

- Can communicate in simple and routine task requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.

- Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.”

(University of Cambridge, 2011, p. 8).
One of the aims of this investigation is to help the students improve their speaking skill in class through the use of some oral strategies, such as tongue twisters and songs. According to the *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, a tongue twisters is a *phrase or sentence hard to speak fast, usually because of alliteration or a sequence of nearly similar sounds* (Ex: *six sick sheiks*). Another meaning for tongue twisters, is *a word or phrase difficult to articulate because of several similar consonantal sounds*, e.g. ‘*She sells seashells on the seashore*’. *Océano Compact English Dictionary.*

Tongue-twisters exist in all languages and are well-known by children and adults alike. Who hasn’t tried out *Tres tristes tigres* in Spanish? Or *Peter Piper Picked A Peck of Pickled Peppers* in English? These tongue-twisters are tricky rhymes or phrases that we are supposed to pronounce as fast as possible “without tripping over the verbal challenges and hurdles lurking within these tongue-tying sentences” (at: fun-with-words.com)

Tongue-twisters usually combine 2 linguistic devices: alliteration and tricky phrases. Alliteration refers to a repetition of an initial sound, as in the slogan: You’ll never put a better bit of butter on your knife (a slogan for Country Life English Butter). The phrase that has to be produced has the hidden intention of making it very easy for us to produce a slip of the tongue. A special kind of slip is referred to as *Spoonerism*. William Archibald Spooner (1844-1930) had a problem with words: he swapped letters or syllables between words, as in: *Tease my ears* vs. *Ease my tears*. Or: a lack of pies, vs. a pack of lies.

Tongue twisters can be used on purpose in the language classroom. There, they do not only provide fun, but also interesting pronunciation practice. English tongue twisters
can help to improve the students’ accent and can even be used to overcome speech difficulties.

The second strategy that was used in this research is songs, as a speaking activity to improve the students’ pronunciation and fluency in the English language.

Tongue-twisters and songs were the two strategies used to increase and improve oral interaction in the students. If students are engaged in activities that they enjoy, they will be learning without even realizing it. As Nunan (1991) states: “…learning to speak in a second or foreign language will be facilitated when learners are actively engaged in attempting to communicate.” (p. 51). This is also the case for the oral skill, as Swain (in Nunan, 1991) suggests.
METHODOLOGY

Type of study

The study is an example of action research, understood as “a form of self-reflective enquiry” undertaken by teachers in educational situation in order to improve their own educational practices, their understanding of them, and the institutions in which these practices are carried out. (adapted from Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

This action research used mixed-method, with an emphasis on qualitative data collection. It is qualitative since it collects and analyzes data of the students’ perspectives on tongue twisters and songs as a means to develop their oral skill in English. The most important aspect and intention of this study is to observe, through the use of a number of instruments, the participants’ reactions and attitudes when working with tongue twisters and songs applied during their English lessons. According to Denzin & Lincoln (1998),

Any description of what constitutes qualitative research must work within this complex historical field. *Qualitative research* means different things in each of these moments. Nonetheless, an initial, generic definition can be offered: Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researches study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials -case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts- that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (p. 3).

This does not necessarily mean that quantitative elements are not present in the study, because in action research both types can be used. A quantitative focus may help complement or extend the findings of this study. Silverman (2001) supports this idea:

I want to make some practical suggestions about how quantitative data can be incorporated into qualitative research. These suggestions flow from my own recent
research experience in a number of studies... I do not attempt here to defend quantitative or positivistic research per se... I want to try to demonstrate some uses of quantification in research which is qualitative and interpretive in design. (35).

Denzin & Lincoln (1998) also affirm that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in a research project. Perhaps, both methods are not applied in the same way; but undoubtedly these two methods can be complemented.

This study is also a case study. As Richards (2003) explains, different people have different ideas about what a case study is:

“While some would use the term as almost synonymous with qualitative research, others allow that case studies can be quantitative; and while some researchers claim that case study is nothing more than a method, there are those who would elevate it to the level of paradigm... All that really matters is that the focus of the research should be on a particular unit or set of units – institutions, programmes, events and so on – and the aim should be to provide a detailed description of the unit(s). (p. 20)

This study focuses on observation of a specific situation that occurred in the English classroom of my beginner level engineering students at ITSX) in order to construct my own ideas, opinions and answers about the issue that was being studied in this project. The obtained data aimed to clarify the doubts and hypotheses about why students of this institution were not very successful in the oral skill. In this regard, Burns (1999) summarizes my intention and my selection of type of study:

The aim of qualitative approaches is to offer descriptions, interpretations and clarifications of naturalistic social contexts. Thus, in contrast to formulating, testing and confirming or disconfirming hypotheses, qualitative research draws on the data collected by the researcher to make sense of the human behaviour within the research context. The researcher treats the context as it occurs naturalistically and no attempt is made to control the variables operating in the context as these may be the very sources of unexpected or unforeseen interpretations. Observation and description and the gathering of data from a range of different resources are the main methodological
tools. The process of observation and the emerging descriptions and insights of the researchers themselves become an important aspect of the research findings. (p. 22)

Context and participants

The research context was a federal higher-education institution in Xalapa, the capital of the state of Veracruz, providing studies in nine different type of engineering: Industrial engineering, Civil engineering, Business Management engineering, Engineering in Electronics, Computing Systems, among others. This institution has been given education to students for over 15 years. Today, it has a student population of around 5.000 students. It is located on the outskirts of Xalapa.

The participants that I selected formed a group of second level English at the college cited above. Taking into account the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), their level corresponded to A2. The class consisted of twenty students: six female and fourteen male students. The students’ age varied from 19 to 22. The lessons were scheduled from Monday to Friday, from 8:00 to 11:00 a.m. There were only four students from Xalapa and the rest came from different places of the state of Veracruz, such as Juchique de Ferrer, Plan de las Hayas, Naolinco, La Joya, Perote, Coacoatzintla, Lencero, Jalcomulco, Jesús Carranza, Emilio Carranza, Buena Vista, Tantoyuca, Tuxpan, Gutiérrez Zamora, Martinez de la Torre, and only one student was from México, D.F.

The fact that the majority of the participants came from locations outside the capital of the state can explain partially that at least some of time are withdrawn and shy and therefore do not show a lot of self-confidence, especially when speaking in English.
Data collection

The instruments that I used for data collection were several: a questionnaire, field notes, a research diary, photographs, a class survey, and a focus group. Of these data collection techniques, notes, diaries, photographs and focus group correspond to observational techniques for collecting action research data by Ann Burns, while surveys and questionnaires are non-observational techniques. Both types of techniques were used to gather and analyse the data.

The observation of the participants’ behaviour and actions in class is said to be routine for most classroom teachers. Nevertheless, Burns (1999) points out that “in the action research process the daily personal experiences of ‘just looking’ are made more systematic and precise. This gives us a basis for examining underlying assumptions, sharing them with others, and opening them up to alternative viewpoints.” (p. 80).

Using observation techniques can be truly useful to discover if participants were able to improve their oral skills and pronunciation. There are some advantages when using these kinds of observation techniques in research projects. For example, Bailey (1978, in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) expressed that

Observation studies are superior to experiments and surveys when data are being collected on non-verbal behaviour. In observation studies, investigators are able to discern ongoing behaviour as it occurs and are able to make appropriate notes about its silent features. (pp. 187-188)

a. Questionnaire

An initial questionnaire focused on students’ difficulties when speaking was administered at the beginning of the research process. It contained both closed and
open-ended questions. Some of the reasons I decided to use this instrument was because questionnaires are easy to administer, quick to fill in and easy to follow up. They also provide direct comparison of groups and individuals, and give feedback on attitudes, adequacy of resources among other advantages. The data gathered from questionnaires are quantifiable. According to Hopkins (2002)

> Questionnaires that ask specific questions about aspects of the classroom, curriculum or teaching method are a quick and simple way of obtaining broad and rich information from pupils. (pp. 117-118).

The advantages of this research instrument in the context of this research are several. They are easy to administer and need less time to administer than other instruments, such as the interview. A number of responses can be collected in little time with no effort on the part of the researcher. (Burns, 1999)

**b. Field notes**

During classes, field notes were made during the lesson in order to note down information about the class and the student behaviour. The intention of this was to find a clearer focus for the research in the initial stages. According to Burns (1999)

> The cumulative effect of recording observations and reflections through notes or journals is very illuminating as over time they build a picture of classroom participants and interactions and provide a record of the processes of problematising and elucidating the teaching and learning issues. (p. 85).

This kind of method was really useful in order to carry out the present study since it provided important information about very specific moments during the lesson. Making field notes is not as profitable as recording an essential detail at the moment it happens, but field notes are very simple to keep; they provide a good on-going record if kept daily and give continuity to the research in process. They also act as a reminder and help to relate incidents, and explore emerging trends.
Field notes can be of two types with different implications. They can be ‘issue-oriented’ when the classroom observation aims to register and understand one element only of teaching or of student/teacher behaviour. This type of observation is on-going. They can also be of a more general nature. In this case, they make a record of the researcher’s general impressions about the lesson, and everything related to the lesson. (Hopkins, 2002).

Field notes are a method that provides descriptive rather than speculative information (Hopkins, 2002, p.103) Although it is time consuming when collecting information through field notes, it is useful to carry out the investigation. Burns (1999) includes an interesting description of field notes:

Notes, or field notes as they are often referred to in qualitative research, are descriptions and accounts of events in the research context which are written in a relatively factual and objective style. They generally include reports of non-verbal information, physical settings, group structures and records of conversations and interactions between participants. The observation recorded in notes can be oriented in different ways, from overall impressions of the classroom, to specific aspects of the research, to recordings made about one or two students. Note information focuses on answering who/what/where/when/how/why questions and can be organised in different categories to record descriptions, reflections or analysis of events. (Burns, R.B., 1994 in Burns, 1999, p.87).

c. Diary entries

After the class sessions, I wrote a diary (or journal) to supplement the field notes mentioned above. This method is not as formal as field notes but they helped me in taking into account more details of the observation I did during class. In fact, diaries can be used instead of field notes, or can be carried additionally to them (Burns, 1999). As Burns describes them,

They provide continuing accounts of perceptions and thought processes, as well as of critical events or issues which have surfaced in the classroom. Diaries and journals contain more subjective and personal reflections and interpretations than the relatively formalised recordings or notes. (p.89).
Looking at diaries and field notes together, are different to each other and Hitchcock & Hughes (1995: 134 in Burns, 1999, p. 89) define them as different from each other:

The journal or diary allows the researcher to let off steam, to complain, or to moan. They enable some of the pressures which are inevitably placed upon the researcher in such work to be taken off. But the significance of keeping a journal or diary is not only the emotional security it may afford but also for the researcher to reflect on the research, step back and look again at the scenes in order to generate new ideas and theoretical directions. The fieldwork journal or diary is the place where the researcher in conversations with herself, can record hopes, fears, confusion and enlightenment. It is the place where the personal side of the fieldwork equation can be recorded. These kinds of journals or diaries need to be distinguished from other kinds of field notes.

d. Photographs

Photographs were made during the research. This is not yet a very common tool for data collection as expressed by Burns (1999): “The use of photographs is under-explored in action research and, indeed, in qualitative research in general.” (p. 101). Burns was not the only author that mentioned the usefulness of photographs. Hopkins (2002) agrees with her in this respect and adds: “Photographs, and the more recent use of the digital camera, are useful ways of recording critical incidents in classrooms or of illustrating particular teaching episodes.” (pp. 115-116). The aim of taking photographs is to collect visual material that supports and describes the progress of a study. Through the obtained images, I was able to observe the students’ reactions towards the specific speaking strategy that was implemented on a given day. Consequently, they enabled me to make the necessary adjustments to the implemented oral strategy, in case it needed any changes. Over the five-week period during which the two oral teaching strategies, songs and tongue twisters, were implemented and the data were collected, the implementation underwent changes due to data obtained previously.
Photographs have certain disadvantages, mentioned by Hopkins (2002). They can only show situations in isolation, detached from everything else that is going on at the moment that the picture was taken. It is also complicated for the researcher to be able to take the best photo, and only of individuals or small groups, rather than whole classes, at the right time, especially if the researcher is also the teacher in action, as is the case of this action research. It may also be the case that the teacher is biased and only registers events that are favourable to the research outcome, or that are not truly relevant.

However, photographs also have a number of advantages. Burns (1999) argues in favour of them:

Photographic data holds promise as a way of richly illuminating numerous aspects of the classroom quickly and relatively inexpensively and providing new angles of the context being researched. Used with other qualitative techniques, photographs are a way of greatly enhancing classroom analysis and providing visual stimuli which can be integrated into reporting and presenting the research to others. (p. 101).

Additionally, Hopkins (2002) adds:

Advantage may be obtained by looking at images of kids working, or at end products of their work, and as a stimulus for discussion. As an instrument which helps you get observation and comment from other teachers who were not present at the time. (p. 116).

e. Surveys

A survey was also administered in this research. Apart from being an alternative form of data collection, it is easier and less time-consuming to administer and the responses of a large group of informants can be gathered in a short period of time. Despite the above-cited advantages of surveys, it is important to take great care when designing the survey, since misunderstandings in questions or sentences can make the survey unsuccessful or unreliable. The survey that I designed for use in class took into consideration the students' level of English in order to help them understand each item
of the survey and provide me with essential information for the study. In other words, designing a good survey is time-consuming “as the researcher needs to be confident that the questions can be interpreted independently as well as easily and unambiguously.” (Burns, 1999, p.129). Therefore the design of a survey needs to consider the construction of the items, taking into account brevity and clarity to ensure correct understanding and proper responses; knowledge required to answer the items; use of the language adapted to the students’ comprehension level. (Burns, 1999).

f. Focus group

A focus group was used to evaluate students’ perspectives on the use of tongue twisters and songs as a means to develop my students’ oral skills. The group of seven students from the same class, where this research was carried out, was asked to participate. The aim of using this technique was to gather all participants’ perceptions, thoughts, experiences and opinions about the way they felt when speaking in English in class and generating a real conversation with another member of the group; and the problems they had faced when they had not been able to communicate effectively and had not been articulate when speaking. In the words of Kitzinger (1995), "Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data." (p. 299). One of the advantages of this data collection tool is that “focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method. “ (idem). The researcher ‘invites’ discussion and interaction among the members of the focus group about each others' experiences and points of view, and “can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way.” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299).
Procedure

The five-week period of implementation of two strategies, namely the use of songs and of tongue-twisters was registered and evaluated by the data collecting tools mentioned before. In order to make the whole process clear, the following table shows the frequency of implementation of each of the strategies to improve the oral skill of the participants, together with the administration of the data collecting tools. In the table, the strategies have been marked darker than the data collecting tools.

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Once the data were collected, or at the same time of collecting the data, comes a “substage” that involves “the generation of hypotheses”, as Hopkins (2002) suggests: “We are always generating ideas to explain classroom events. Even at the earliest stages of research, we are interpreting and explaining to ourselves 'why this is happening' and 'what caused that'. It is inevitable that as individuals we bring our experience and beliefs to bear upon situations that we wish to understand better." (p. 133). The analysis of the collected data provided me with elements to formulate my own hypotheses about this investigation. Burns talks about this stage in similar terms: "Analysis, then, involves us in making some kind of sense of the data by identifying broad trends, characteristics or features across an event or a series of events. We can then begin to draw out theories and explanations and attempt to interpret the meanings of these trends or features. In action research, however, activity does not stop at analysis, description and interpretation. The whole point of action research is that analysing the data, interpreting it and developing theories about what it means are constantly fed back into practice." (Burns, 1999, p. 155).
FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the data collection instrument that was used to obtain them. Students showed a very positive attitude to each instrument. Few learners did not enjoy one of the songs which were given as an activity to foster students’ fluency. They are presented in the same order as they were administered to the students during the five-week period of the investigation:

**Questionnaire 1**

In the data obtained in the initial questionnaire (see appendix), administered before the intervention, it was found that speaking was reported as the hardest skill by the students in English. They said that the activities they did at home in order to help themselves improve their fluency and pronunciation were listening to songs and seeing movies in English. Also, they answered, in the second question of the first questionnaire that they practiced their English when they were doing their homework and extra exercises that they were given to do at home. However, they reported having some difficulties when doing these types of activities at home. Pronunciation was said to be their main difficulty as there was nobody to point out to them that they were mispronouncing and correct them. Because of their lack of good pronunciation in English, they said they would like to have more conversations, interaction activities in class to support and improve their fluency and pronunciation. Additionally, they would like their teacher to administer to them more pronunciation exercises to carry out in class and at home. Another suggestion that the students provided in the first questionnaire in order to improve their fluency and pronunciation was that they would like to have dynamic activities where they compete in groups and the speaking skill is used or performed. They thought they would be able to improve their fluency in that way.

**Survey1**
In week 2, a class survey was given to the students after tongue-twisters had been given to the class in week 1 and 2. The participants were asked to rank their working class preferences with the aim of finding out their preferred way of working in class to promote the use of tongue twisters and songs as strategies to help them improve their fluency and pronunciation. Most students reported they preferred to practice the speaking skill in pairs. Many students expressed that they prefer doing this in small groups of 3 to 4 people. Some of them said they felt better when doing this in larger groups of 6 to 8 people. Not many students preferred practicing the speaking skill alone, and just a few students reported that they preferred doing it as a whole-class activity.

Survey 2
A second survey was given to the students at the end of week 3, when they had been exposed to songs in class (as well as tongue-twisters). It seemed interesting for the researcher to explore the students' feelings with the aim of discovering how they felt about the speaking activities based on saying tongue twisters and singing songs. In this survey only nineteen students out of twenty answered it. (They had been given a letter from the alphabet (A to T) to identify each one and thus monitor way their responses along the data collection.) All students indicated in the ranking activity that they felt great, good and fine, rather than so-so or bad (which were the other possible choices) when they were given activities to work with tongue twisters to improve their fluency and pronunciation. This finding matches with one of the field notes taken during the course in which students were observed: "Most students were enjoying the tongue twister while they were repeating it for several times" (July 2nd.) This observation is also related to picture 5, one of the photographs which were taken and used as another instrument of this study and that are attached in the appendix. In picture 5, students look like enjoying the tongue twister they were practicing that day in small groups. The tongue twister was "She sells seashells in the seashore, the shells she sells are surely seashells" and it was implemented in the first week of the course. However,
they felt tired after repeating the tongue twister for several times. A significant commentary was expressed by one of the students: "se me entumeció la boca" (field note taken on July 4th.) This was because of the fact that several times students repeated the tongue twisters several times. Despite feeling tired after practicing each tongue twister, they really tried to say the tongue twister as fast as they could. Although they were tired, they seemed to enjoy it: "some students played with the tongue twister repeating it very fast, in a way they mispronounced some words, but they were laughing about it." (Field note taken on July 8th.) The tongue twisters were applied in different ways. Some were written on the board and the students repeated them; others were written on the board but with some blanks in the text and students had to read the context and complete it with the missing words that were written on colour cards attached to the board. So some volunteers completed the tongue-twister by choosing the right word and sticking it in the right blank. Yet another way had students practice the tongue twisters in small groups and in pairs, too. These types of dynamics were used because the students had suggested these ways of practicing the speaking skill in the classroom.

**Backed up by final questionnaire on tongue-twisters**

It really worked because in the last questionnaire that was administered in the last week of the course, students mentioned in the first question that they felt very good when working on speaking activities in class: 11 out of 20 mentioned that they felt fine working on tongue twisters as speaking activities in class, and 7 out of 20 expressed in the same question that they felt very good working on the same speaking activity in class. 2 out of 20 mentioned they felt excellent. Knowing that my students enjoyed the activities with the tongue-twisters and seemed to learn from them was very encouraging.

**Backed up by focus group**
Some of the commentaries obtained during the focus group (with only 8 of the 20 students present during the application of last instrument were very positive, too. They made the following comments about the speaking activities in general, and especially the tongue twisters: "A mí me gustaron bastante, sobre todo los trabalenguas, el de 'wish'... ese el 'wish' como que me entumía la boca" (the same student kept on commenting "pues siento que ayuda más que nada en la parte de tener que pronunciar las oraciones difíciles como que... una vez después de estar haciendo varias veces, ya cuando veo algo muy difícil ... como que sale nadamas"

A different student said: "Te agilizan el aspecto de... de cuando vas a pronunciar... lo haces más fluido... lo haces un poquito... no tal vez al 100% pero si te ayuda de menos en un 80, 70%, si te ayuda bastante". Another field note that expressed the importance the students gave to this kind of practice was the following: "no, it's not [bitch], it's [biich]" (Field note taken on July 11th.)
I was able to observe that my students were more or less aware of their pronunciation. I consider that this practice needs time to observe strong results, but taking into account the short period of time the present study was carried out, the findings were surprising and very positive.

**Survey 2 on the use of songs**
Analyzing the findings of the same survey (survey 2) in week 3, but this time focusing on the question about the way they felt when they were given some lyrics to practice their oral skill in class, ten out of nineteen answered they felt *good* when they were asked to carry out this activity. It was administered in the third week according to the strategies and research instruments table. To this respect, 10 students out of 19 answered, in the fourth question, that they felt *good* when their teacher gave them
some lyrics to practice their oral skill in class, 5 out of 19 said that they felt fine with this strategy and 4 out of 19 answered great.

Final questionnaire about songs
However, in the last questionnaire, administered at the end of the intervention, half of the group answered in the third question that they felt fine with this speaking activity. It seems that, in general, the application of songs as a strategy for speaking was received as positive, although there were 2 students out of 19 that mentioned they felt bad when doing this activity. Their commentaries were: "no me gustaban mucho" (student A), "pues algo incomodo" (student I). In the same questionnaire, students were asked how they felt when they were asked to speak to their group and the next question had to do with speaking aloud to their teacher. Some of them answered that they felt ashamed: "a veces me daba pena pero sí me sentí bien" (student B), "pues bien aunque un poco apenado" (student C), and "un poco apenada" (student K). These commentaries were useful for this investigation too, because one of the reasons students feel inadequate when speaking in English is because of some embarrassment they feel when trying to speak in English. Nevertheless, they also mentioned that at the end of the course they felt better than the beginning which they thought had helped them to carry out the activities more successfully: "me sentía con menos nervios que al principio" (student D), and "Pues bien, eso ayuda a perder mas los miedos" (student E).

Embarrassment and other facts that hinder students’ becoming more fluent and articulate when speaking in English were aspects that can be solved with strategies, like the ones that were applied in the present study, because in the application of each instrument, the findings showed that they were useful practices to help students improve their fluency and pronunciation of the English language. Perhaps, it takes more time in other groups, taking into account that every class and course is completely different, but the main point is that these kinds of strategies do seem to
work. I am conscious that my students’ oral work did not change drastically, as far as fluency and pronunciation are concerned, but in these activities, they demonstrated that they were able to improve their fluency and pronunciation and that was the aim of this study, to demonstrate if these strategies could be useful to help my students in their oral skill, no matter if it was going to be in a long or short term.

In my experience as a practitioner of English language teaching, I have observed that there are lots of methodologies, techniques, or strategies which can be applied in an educational context and be successful as long as they are applied correctly. However, I should say that a comfortable rapport, positive attitude from the teacher to the students, the encouragement of a teacher to promote learning are essential elements to carry out all kinds of techniques to help students acquire a foreign language. The tongue twisters and songs I administered in this research as strategies to help my students improve their fluency and pronunciation of the English language were very useful and I recommend the application of these kinds of techniques to my colleagues. They provided my students with a certain confidence when speaking. Although my students need more practice with these strategies to reach an outstanding level of fluency and pronunciation, in a short period of time, when they were administered these strategies, they showed more confidence when speaking. I would say that the continuous practice of tongue twisters and songs may contribute to more effective oral skills for them in the long term. However, it is essential to mention in the present research that learners did not enjoy an activity of one of the instruments applied. It was one of the songs to practice the Simple Past Tense; some students did not want to sing because they said they did not like romantic pop music and they preferred other type of music rather than pop music. I noticed that when choosing the songs to be applied, it is very important to think about the students’ likes in order to be successful when administering the songs.
CONCLUSIONS

The present study had the aim to seek whether the communicative strategies of tongue twisters and songs would be helpful for higher education students from Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Xalapa (ITSX) with their fluency and pronunciation. This research was carried out with different instruments with a group of twenty students of second English level of this institution.

It is also important to mention the pros and cons of this investigation. Time was one of the factors that were not of help because there was not enough time to observe all changes that students showed while the instruments were being applied. However, I consider that the speaking skill is one of the communicative skills that take time for the learner to master. It is essential to take into account that there are students whose learning process is completely different from others. Speaking is not as easy as it may seem to be. Another problem that I faced was the moment when this study was carried out. It was in the summer course, which means that the students take the course because they are in need of obtaining some more credits fast. It means that they do not have a complete positive attitude. However, I can say that the atmosphere established in the classroom as well as the attitude of the group were helpful factors. The effect of a comfortable environment, patience on the part of both teachers and students, and the interest in helping students to help them learn the language may be other issues for further research.

According to their attitudes and responses to the different instruments that were applied in this research I can say that tongue twisters are helpful to make students improve their fluency and pronunciation. On the other hand, the application of songs as strategy to help my students improve their fluency and pronunciation I found that the methodology was fine, although, it is important to make a very good selection of
songs. It is recommended to analyze the group profile and seek the students’ likes about music, but it does not mean they did not enjoy it. Both strategies, tongue twisters and songs, made students feel more comfortable when speaking in English. It is also essential teacher’s positive attitude. As a practitioner I really feel fine and comfortable when applying these techniques to help students improve their fluency and pronunciation. However, I have to say that not all students were really convinced with all applied instruments. Learners’ attitude and accessibility to carry out each activity are fundamental aspects to intend to be successful.

I highly recommend the practice of tongue twisters and songs in class. They will help your students improve their fluency and pronunciation. If I was able to observe positive outcomes in a short period of time, I would say that this practice may benefit students in a long period of time because practice makes perfect.
References:


