



Composing and Recording Original Songs in French

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Introduction

This action research project, undertaken as part of the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC) Action Research Program, explored the effects of an assignment requiring students to compose and record original French-language songs on the engagement and achievement of a group of nine 8th-grade boys. The students were enrolled in the second half of a two-year introductory French course at Chestnut Hill Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

My aim in designing this project was to address the concern that a number of students had expressed about the development of speaking skills. The boys' anxiety about the accuracy of their pronunciation sometimes inhibited their participation in class activities. I decided to assign this songwriting project in an effort to enhance my students' engagement by embedding oral skills practice in a creative endeavor, using the language as a means rather than an end. I hoped that each student's investment in the music and lyrics he had created would motivate him to perfect the pronunciation of that limited text, ultimately improving the students' confidence in their ability to speak French and their willingness to take risks in the classroom.

An action research approach to this project appealed to me because of the qualitative nature of action research inquiries, which afforded me the opportunity to hear frank accounts of the subjective experiences of my students and to address their needs directly.

The Action

The class devoted two weeks to writing lyrics, setting them to music, practicing pronunciation, and recording the songs. The goal of this self-contained unit was to improve the students' pronunciation and confidence in their speaking skills as well as to provide an opportunity for engagement in a creative pursuit in the target language. During this unit, all class time and homework assignments related to the songwriting project. Each student wrote and recorded his own lyrics, and I checked individual students' progress on a daily basis.

Data collection and analysis

As my primary goal in implementing this study was to determine the extent to which writing and recording an original song could enhance my students' confidence and perception of their own speaking skills, the most significant data I collected was from surveys taken during class time before and after the project. Students identified themselves on the surveys with numbers rather than names, so that their responses to the two surveys could be compared while remaining anonymous.

In both surveys, students rated their confidence in using the four communicative skills. The pre-project survey also included short-response questions about students' long- and short-term goals in the study of French, while the post-project survey provided an opportunity for students to reflect on the effectiveness of the project as they work toward those goals.

I also noted my own observations of students' progress throughout the course of the project, aided by video recordings taken of students at work in the classroom (while writing lyrics) and in the computer lab (setting their lyrics to music) and audio recordings of my one-on-one interactions with students as they practiced pronouncing the lyrics they had written.

Results and discussion

I compared each student's responses to the pre-project survey questions related to self-assessment of communicative skills to his assessment of his skills after completing the songwriting project.

- All of the students felt that their communicative ability had improved or remained the same over the course of the project.
- Five of the nine students reported an improvement in their reading and listening comprehension.
- Four of the nine students reported an improvement in their writing and speaking skills.



I also evaluated students' responses to the narrative questions in the post-project survey.

- Students were asked to identify the communicative skill they used the most in the course of this project, as well as the skill area in which they felt they had improved the most. All of the boys indicated that they used either their writing (five boys) or speaking skills (four) the most. The largest number of boys (four) indicated that their speaking skills had improved the most, followed by listening (three) and writing (two).
- The students' feedback about the project was overwhelmingly positive, with comments falling into three main categories. Some students commented that the project was a welcome change of pace and provided an opportunity for them to be assessed according to different criteria than those applied to most assignments: "*It was easier for me to do well with this project,*" one wrote. Others mentioned that they had particularly enjoyed working with Garage Band, whether in a new context or for the first time. By far the most common opinion, however, was that the students appreciated the elements of creativity and choice afforded them by the project. One student wrote, "*I enjoyed trying to make beats and writing our own lyrics. I felt free to do what I wanted.*" Others wrote, "*I liked that we got to be creative and make our own song,*" "*I liked how we could work freely on multiple areas,*" and that the best part of the project was "*that we were allowed to have a lot of freedom in our creation of the song.*"



Conclusions

I am very glad that I pursued this project with this group of students. I had hoped to increase my students' achievement and confidence in their pronunciation and overall speaking skills, and some students reported improvement in that area. Since the completion of the songwriting project, I have noticed that several of the boys are less hesitant when working in small groups or when called on to speak in class.

This action research project has also enhanced my students' engagement, including in some ways that I had not anticipated. The overall attitude of these students toward the study of French has become much more positive, and I attribute the change to two factors: the students' camaraderie as they each worked on a task that seemed very difficult to them, and the individual time and positive feedback that I was able to offer each student as he produced a creative work unique to him. These students found that, even at this introductory level, it is possible for them to express their sense of humor in French and be understood by their teacher and classmates.

While I will experiment with variations on this assignment (adjusting the schedule and allocation of resources, and possibly assigning song production as a group project), I have been very pleased with the results of this first attempt at writing songs with novice-level learners. The success of this project has also prompted me to consider making use of some other activities and authentic materials that I had previously thought out of reach for students at this level. Despite the limitations of their communicative skills at this stage of language study, the boys in my class exceeded my expectations and had the valuable experience of using the target language as a means for self-expression.

Literature informing the study

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Further information

For more information on this project, I can be contacted at lnagle@sch.org. The full reports of this and similar projects undertaken as part of the IBSC's Action Research Program can be viewed at <http://www.theibsc.org/>. An online copy of this poster is also available on the IBSC site.