outputly

WHITE PAPER

# The Output Training System

Why you can understand a language and still not speak it, and how call-and-answer songs train the skill that is missing.

**I have time** → **Tengo tiempo**

A line from “Tengo (I Have)”, Outputly Spanish

English edition · November 2026

THE SHORT VERSION

# You've had the input. Now for the output.

## You've heard about input. That's great. But now you need to output.

That line opened our first white paper, when Outputly was still called Quiero Spanish. The idea has not changed. The evidence, the songs and the numbers in this edition are new.

### The problem

Most learners understand far more than they can say. Research on children schooled in a second language found the same thing: years of understanding did not turn into fluent speaking.

### The reason

Speaking is a skill of its own. It gets better when you practise speaking, and most of all when you try to say a phrase from memory before you hear it.

### The method

Every Outputly song is call and answer: a line in your language, then the same line in the language you are learning. Learning Mode pauses the song so that you say the answer first.

### Why songs

Sung phrases stick, a good tune replays itself in your head, and people go back to songs in a way they never go back to drills.

### The catalogue

Each course is built from a list of the verbs people really say, most used first. The finished songs cover 95% of spoken verb use.

### Where it fits

Songs do not replace listening, reading or real conversation. They train the step in between: saying it yourself. This paper sets out the research behind the method and what we measured in our own songs.

**362**

songs across two courses

**11,245**

call-and-answer lines

**95%**

of spoken verb use, covered by each course

1 · THE PROBLEM

# I understand, but I can't speak

If you have studied a language for a while, you probably know one of these.

**I've studied for years, but I freeze when I have to speak.**

**I can follow a film, but I can't order a coffee.**

**I understand what people say to me. I just can't answer.**

This is not a personal failing, and it is not rare. It is what happens when nearly all of your practice is understanding. Researchers have measured it.

SWAIN, 1985 AND 1995

### Years of understanding did not produce speakers

In Canada, English-speaking children were taught their school subjects in French for years. They came to understand French almost as well as children who had grown up with it. Their speaking and writing stayed clearly behind. Merrill Swain, the researcher who studied them, concluded that understanding is not enough. Learners also have to produce the language, and be pushed to do it well. Her idea is known as the Output Hypothesis.[1, 2]

The same pattern shows up in families. Many people grow up hearing a language at home, understand every word, and answer in another one. Linguists call them receptive bilinguals.

Most study time is input: apps that ask you to pick the right answer, videos, podcasts, reading, classes where you mostly listen. Input matters. You cannot say what you have never heard. But for most learners almost all of the hours go in, and very few come out.

**Input**
You understand it

→

**Output**
You can say it

→

**Conversation**
You use it with people

**The step most learners never train**

2 · THE REASON

# Speaking is its own skill

Understanding and speaking feel like two halves of one ability. Three findings say they are trained separately.

DEKEYSER, 1997

### You get better at what you practise

Sixty-one adults learned a small invented language. For eight weeks they practised some of its rules only by understanding sentences, and other rules only by producing them. Each rule ended up strong in the way it had been practised and much weaker in the other. Understanding practice built understanding. Production practice built production.[3]

ULLMAN, 2001

### Knowing it and saying it are different memories

One memory system holds things you know and can call up on purpose, like what a word means. Another runs well-practised skills without conscious effort, like riding a bike. Adult learners start out leaning on the first. With practice, language moves towards the second.[4]

KROLL & STEWART, 1994

### The speaking direction is the weak one

For learners, the link from a word in the new language back to their own is the stronger one. That is why recognising feels easy. Going from your own language into the new one is slower and harder, and it is the direction you need when you speak.[5]

HOW WE SAY IT IN OUR VIDEOS

**Thinking Brain**
Where you work things out. You know that tengo means I have, if you stop to think.

**Knowing Brain**
Where speech runs by itself. The phrase is out before you have thought about it.

**Feeling Brain**
Where music lands. It is why you play a song again.

These are nicknames, not anatomy. They stand for recalling facts on purpose, running a well-practised skill, and the reward you get from music.

**So more of the same input is not the fix. Practice in the speaking direction is.**

3 · THE FIX

# SAY IT BEFORE YOU HEAR IT

The most useful finding for anyone who wants to speak comes from memory research. Pulling something out of your memory strengthens it more than putting it in again.

ROEDIGER & KARPICKE, 2006

### Testing beats re-reading

Students studied a short text. One group spent four study periods re-reading it, about 14 times in all. Another had one study period, then tried three times to write down everything they could remember, with no feedback. A week later the second group remembered half as much again, although the re-readers had been the more confident group.[6]

SHARE OF THE TEXT RECALLED A WEEK LATER

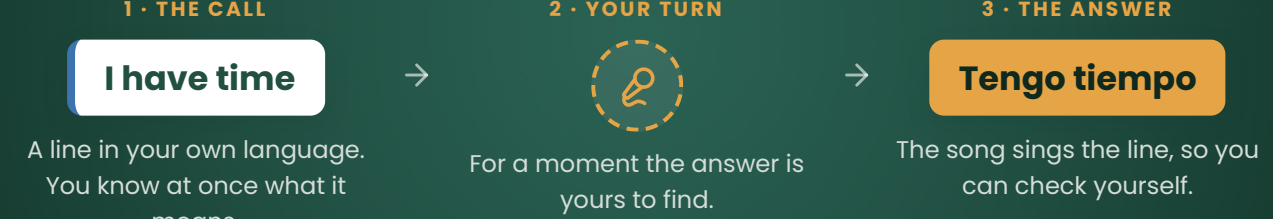



KANG, GOLLAN & PASHLER, 2013

### Don’t just repeat after me

Students learned Hebrew words in one of two ways. Some heard each word and repeated it. Others tried to say the word from memory first, and then heard it. Trying first won, both for understanding the words later and for saying them.[7]

THIS IS WHAT CALL AND ANSWER IS FOR




It should feel like a small effort. That effort is the training. If a method feels effortless, the answer is probably being handed to you.

# WHY PUT IT IN A SONG?

Call and answer would work with flashcards. We put it in songs for four reasons, each with research behind it.

ERMAN & WARREN, 2000

### Speech comes in ready-made phrases

One detailed count of spoken English found that 58.6% of it was made of ready-made phrases, not sentences built one word at a time.[8] A song line is one such phrase, ready to use.

LUDKE ET AL., 2014 · GOOD ET AL., 2015

### Singing helps a phrase stick

Adults who had 15 minutes to learn Hungarian phrases did best when they sang them, most clearly on the tests where they had to say the phrases.[9] Spanish-speaking children who learned an English passage as a song beat children who learned it as a poem, and still remembered more of it six months later.[10]

LIIKKANEN, 2012 · KUBIT & JANATA, 2022

### A good tune replays itself

In a survey of more than 10,000 people in Finland, about nine in ten said a song gets stuck in their head at least once a week.[11] In one experiment, the more often a tune came back by itself, the better people remembered the tune and the film scenes it had played over.[12] So every Outputly song is written around one hook.

SALIMPOOR ET AL., 2011

### You come back to it

Music you like switches on the brain's reward system.[13] That is why you play a good song again without being asked, and replaying is where the practice comes from.

## Nobody replays flashcards for fun. People replay songs.

**And the words are on screen**

Every song is a lyric video. A pooled analysis of the research found a large effect of on-screen text on listening, and on vocabulary too.[14]

A fair note: not every study finds that singing beats speaking.[15] The songs do not rely on singing alone. Every line is also a call and an answer, the try-first practice from page 5.

# HOW A SONG WORKS

Here is “Tengo (I Have)”, the third song of the first Spanish album, from the first line to the last.

### INTRO

| | |
|---|---|
| I have | Tengo |
| I have | Tengo |
| You have | Tienes |
| You have | Tienes |

### VERSE 1

| | |
|---|---|
| I have time | Tengo tiempo |
| I have hunger | Tengo hambre |
| You have time | Tienes tiempo |
| You have thirst | Tienes sed |

### BUILDING

| | |
|---|---|
| I have a lot | Tengo mucho |
| You have little | Tienes poco |
| I don’t have | No tengo |
| You don’t have | No tienes |

### QUESTIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| Do you have? | ¿Tienes? |
| Do you have time? | ¿Tienes tiempo? |
| Yes, I have | Sí, tengo |
| No, I don’t have | No, no tengo |

### VERSE 2

| | |
|---|---|
| I have time now | Tengo tiempo ahora |
| You have hunger now | Tienes hambre ahora |
| I have, you have | Tengo, tienes |
| We have time | Tenemos tiempo |

### OUTRO

| | |
|---|---|
| I have | Tengo |
| You have | Tienes |
| Do you have? | ¿Tienes? |
| Yes, I have! | ¡Sí, tengo! |

**The call**
Each line starts in your own language, so you know at once what you are about to say.

**The answer**
The same line follows in the language you are learning. Call, answer, call, answer, all the way through.

**It builds**
One verb, taken a step at a time: I have, I have time, do you have time? Each line leans on the one before.

**The hook**
The song opens on “I have, tengo” and comes back to it at the end, to a tune made to stay with you.

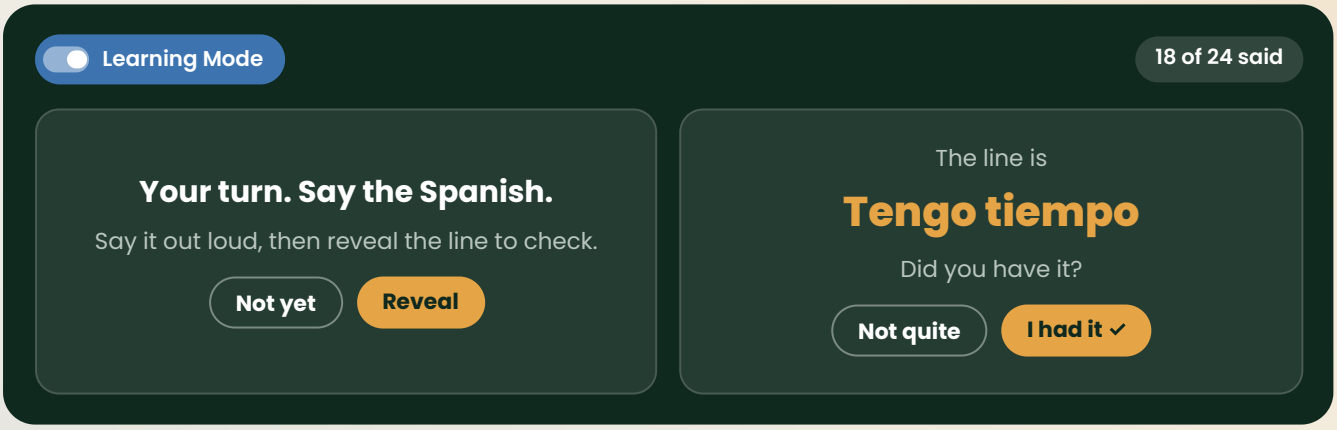
| 24 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| call-and-answer lines | sections | verb: tener | minutes, roughly |

6 · LEARNING MODE

# NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

At full speed the answer arrives fast. In our English course it starts about two seconds after the call begins. That is time enough to sing along, and it makes a good game to try to beat the singer. To be sure you find every phrase yourself, switch on Learning Mode.

1. **The song stops**
   After each call the video pauses and says: Your turn.
2. **You say it**
   Out loud. Not in your head.
3. **You check**
   Tap Reveal to see the line.
4. **You score it**
   Tap I had it or Not quite. The song carries on and sings the answer.




Your score for each song is saved, so you can watch it climb. This is the try-first practice from the research (page 5), with a number attached.

## THREE WAYS TO USE EVERY SONG

### Listen

Let the tune and the phrases settle in.

### Sing along

Say every answer with the singer, or just before.

### Learning Mode

Say every answer first. It is the hardest of the three, and the one the research backs most strongly.

# START WITH THE VERBS

Every sentence needs a verb, and a small number of verbs do most of the work. So an Outputly course begins as a list, before a single song is written.

**11**

verbs make up half of all verb use in Spanish film and TV dialogue

**435**

verbs cover 95% of spoken verb use in Spanish

**394**

verbs cover 95% of spoken verb use in English

**1 Rank the verbs**

We count how often each verb is used in film and television subtitles, the largest record we have of everyday speech, and check the ranking against a broader collection of the language.

**2 Draw the line at 95%**

We go down the list until it accounts for 95% of spoken verb use. That takes 435 verbs in Spanish, 394 in English and 606 in French. Every language gets its own list.

**3 Write the songs in that order**

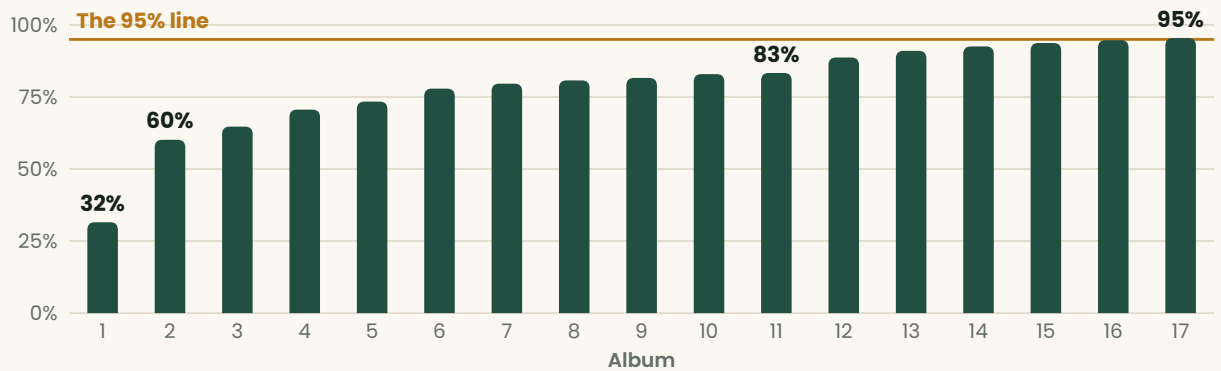
The first albums give the most-used verbs a song each. Later albums carry about five verbs a song. Every verb comes with the everyday words that make it usable in a sentence.

**4 Measure the finished songs**

We count the verbs in the finished lyrics. A course is finished when it is over the line, and not before. Page 10 has the results.

## The first albums do the heavy lifting

Share of spoken verb use covered by the verbs sung so far, after each album of the Spanish course




After two albums, the verbs sung already account for 60% of all verb use in Spanish film and television dialogue. From album 12 on, every song carries five new verbs from the list, and album 17 takes the course over the 95% line.

8 · THE NUMBERS

# WHAT IS IN THE SONGS

We went through the lyrics of every song, line by line, and compared the words with large collections of film and television dialogue. These are measurements, not targets.

| | Spanish<br>for English speakers | English<br>for Spanish speakers |
|---|---|---|
| **Songs** | 172 in 17 albums | 190 in 17 albums |
| **Call-and-answer lines** | 6,263 | 4,982 |
| **Different words taught** | about 1,560 | about 1,230 |
| **Share of film and TV speech those words cover** | 73 to 82% | 84 to 86% |
| **Verbs on the 95% list** | 435 | 394 |
| **Share of spoken verb use** | 95% | 95% |

Where a row gives a range, the lower figure counts only the exact word forms sung, and the higher figure counts every form of each word taught.

Both courses are over the line. The verbs in their songs account for just over 95% of all verb use in film and television dialogue. That is the rule every course is built to (page 9).

### ONE ALBUM UP CLOSE: THE FIRST SEVEN SPANISH SONGS

| Hablo | Entiendo | Tengo | Soy | Estoy | Voy | Como |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I speak | I understand | I have | I am | I am | I go | I eat |

Seven songs, one verb each: hablar, entender, tener, ser, estar, ir and comer. Together those seven verbs make up almost a third of all verb use in Spanish film and television dialogue.

**What 95% means, and what it does not**

It means that when someone uses a verb in everyday speech, 95 times in 100 it is a verb from the course. It does not mean 95% of the language. In spoken Spanish the 1,000 most common words cover about 88% of what is said, and it takes 3,000 to reach 94%.[16] No course of songs covers a whole language, and we will not claim that ours does. That is why the table keeps the two measures apart: all words, and verbs.

9 · WHERE IT FITS

# Keep your input. Add output.

Outputly trains the speaking side of a language. It is built to sit beside whatever you already use to listen and read.

KEEP

**Input**

Podcasts, series, classes, reading

+

ADD

**Output**

Call-and-answer songs, Learning Mode

→

USE

**Conversation**

Real talk with real people

## WHO IT IS FOR

### You understand, but you freeze

You have done the apps, the classes or the box sets. The words are in your head. The songs train you to get them out.

### You are starting from zero

The first album starts with the most-used verbs of all, a song each. Add listening and reading as you go.

### You grew up hearing it

You follow the family language and answer in another one. The phrases already sound right. You need the practice of saying them.

KRASHEN, 1998

### Beside input, not instead of it

Stephen Krashen, the best-known advocate of learning through input, has argued that speaking practice is not what builds a language.[17] We agree with him on two things. You need a great deal of listening and reading. And you learn best when you are relaxed and enjoying yourself. We disagree on the third. The studies in this paper show that speaking improves when you practise speaking. So keep the podcasts, the series and the classes. Add the songs.

A FAIR COMPARISON

### What is new, and what is not

Speaking practice built on a prompt and a pause is not new. Audio courses such as Pimsleur, Michel Thomas and Language Transfer have used it for years, and Earworms sets phrases to music. What Outputly brings together is full songs made to be replayed, a call and an answer in every line, an order set by how often verbs are really spoken, and a mode that makes you try first.

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# Check it yourself


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### How we measured the songs

**Lyrics.** The answer in every call-and-answer line of the 172 Spanish songs and the 190 English songs.

**Words.** Compared with word-frequency lists built from film and television subtitles (Spanish, 27.4 million words; English, 29.2 million words). Forms of a word are grouped together, so tengo and tienes count as one word, tener. Subtitles are full of names and film vocabulary, so no course reaches 100% on this measure.

**Verbs.** Counted in samples of the OpenSubtitles 2018 collection (Spanish, 4.5 million words; English, 6.3 million), with software marking which words are verbs. The French count comes from the Lexique 3.83 film subtitle list.

### About this edition

This edition replaces our first white paper, written when Outputly was still called Quiero Spanish. The songs were counted in November 2026. The findings quoted here were checked against the published studies or their published summaries in the same month.

# STOP STUDYING. START OUTPUTTING.

The language you have been learning is already in your head. Outputly gets it out of your mouth.

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