

DEVELOPING VOCABULARY THROUGH SONGS AND CHANTS IN PRIMARY EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary constitutes the single most critical determinant of communicative competence in a foreign language: without words, no grammar and no phonological system can enable meaningful communication. This article examines the theoretical and empirical bases for using songs and chants as primary vehicles for vocabulary development in primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, with particular reference to the developmental characteristics of learners aged six to eleven and to the national educational context of Uzbekistan.

Keywords: *vocabulary development, songs and chants, primary EFL, phonological loop, formulaic language, lexical acquisition.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is the cornerstone of communicative competence in a foreign language. Nation's foundational research established that learners need to encounter a word in meaningful context approximately ten to twelve times before it is reliably acquired for productive use in speech and writing, and that these encounters must be varied, contextually embedded, and emotionally engaging if they are to consolidate genuine word knowledge rather than merely surface recognition.¹ The implications for primary EFL methodology are profound: if vocabulary acquisition requires multiple, varied, and engaging encounters with target words, then the single-exposure, definition-centred approach to vocabulary teaching is fundamentally inadequate.

¹Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press, p. 24.

The dominant contemporary framework for understanding vocabulary acquisition is Nation's model, which identifies two fundamental dimensions of word knowledge: breadth (the number of words known) and depth (the richness and accuracy of knowledge about each known word). Nation's research demonstrates that productive vocabulary knowledge – the ability to use a word spontaneously in speech — lags considerably behind receptive knowledge, developing only after multiple varied and meaningful encounters with the word in a range of contexts.² For primary EFL, this implies that vocabulary instruction must provide a programme of graduated, varied, and emotionally engaging encounters with target words – precisely the programme that a carefully planned sequence of song- and chant-based activities can provide.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Songs and chants promote vocabulary development through several distinct but mutually reinforcing mechanisms. The first and most fundamental is repetition. Nation's multi-exposure model establishes that vocabulary acquisition requires repeated encounters with target words, and songs and chants provide this repetition in its most educationally effective form: each repetition of a song is embedded in an emotionally engaging, contextually rich, and physically participatory activity rather than a mechanical drill.³ The song 'If you're happy and you know it' provides an illustration: the repeated structure of each verse – 'If you're happy and you know it, (action word)' – exposes learners to a changing vocabulary item (clap, stamp, shout, wave) in a fixed, supportive, and physically engaging frame, making each new vocabulary item highly salient against the background of the familiar surrounding text.

The second mechanism is contextual embedding. Research on incidental vocabulary learning demonstrates that words encountered in meaningful, rich contexts are acquired more readily and retained more durably than words encountered in isolation or in decontextualised lists. Songs embed vocabulary in narrative or descriptive contexts that make word meanings inferable and memorable: the word 'rainbow' learned in the context of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' is encountered in a vivid imaginative context that makes its meaning apprehensible even to learners who have not previously encountered the word, and the emotional resonance of the musical context deepens its encoding in long-term memory.

A third mechanism is the exploitation of multiple memory pathways. Paivio's dual coding theory proposes that information encoded simultaneously through

²Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press, p. 24.

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multiple sensory channels is more robustly stored in memory than information encoded through a single channel.⁴ Songs and chants, particularly when combined with actions, gestures, and visual materials, engage auditory, motor, and visual memory pathways simultaneously, creating a richer and more redundant memory trace for each target word. The chant ‘Heads, shoulders, knees and toes’ is a particularly clear example: each body part vocabulary item is encoded simultaneously through hearing (the sung word), movement (touching the corresponding body part), and visual feedback, creating a multi-channel memory trace that makes the vocabulary highly resistant to forgetting.

Baddeley’s influential model of working memory identifies a phonological loop – a component of working memory that temporarily holds and rehearses phonological information – as the primary mechanism for encoding new word forms in long-term memory.⁵ Research demonstrates that the phonological loop is particularly sensitive and responsive to rhythmically organised, melodically structured input: musical sequences are processed more efficiently by the phonological loop than unstructured linguistic sequences of equivalent length, and words embedded in musical contexts are retained more accurately and for longer periods than words encountered in purely verbal contexts.

Wallace’s foundational experiments demonstrated that adults were significantly better at recalling prose passages learned to a melody than the same passages learned without music.⁶ Subsequent research has replicated and extended this finding across multiple age groups and language learning contexts, consistently demonstrating superior vocabulary retention for music-embedded learning compared to spoken or written presentation. For primary EFL learners, whose phonological loops are still developing and who are in the most neurologically sensitive period for phonological learning, the advantage of musical vocabulary presentation is likely to be even greater than for adult learners.

Translating the theoretical and empirical foundations reviewed above into effective classroom practice requires a principled approach to the selection and use of songs and chants. The first strategy is thematic chant design, in which chants are created or selected to target specific thematic vocabulary sets specified in the curriculum. The following original chant illustrates the approach for a colours theme:

*Red is an apple, red is a rose,
Red is the colour of my little toes.*

⁴Paivio, A. (1986). *Mental Representations: A Dual Coding Approach*. Oxford University Press, p. 53.

⁵Baddeley, A.D. (2003). Working memory and language: An overview. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 36(3), p. 189.

⁶Wallace, W.T. (1994). Memory for music: Effect of melody on recall of text. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 20(6), p. 1471.

*Blue is the sky, blue is the sea,
Blue is the colour of the world for me.
Yellow is the sun, yellow is the sand,
Yellow is the colour in my little hand.
Green is the grass, green is a tree,
Green is the colour I love to see!*

This chant embeds the target colour vocabulary (red, blue, yellow, green) in a strongly rhythmic, rhyming framework while simultaneously recycling familiar object vocabulary (apple, rose, sky, sea, sun, sand, grass, tree) that deepens the contextual encoding of each colour word. The parallel structure of each verse pair creates a predictable linguistic frame that supports comprehension and makes the vocabulary items maximally salient.

The second strategy is the action chant technique, in which physical movements are paired with each vocabulary item in a chant, exploiting dual-coding to deepen encoding. This technique can be applied to virtually any concrete, actionable vocabulary set: animal movement vocabulary (hop like a rabbit, swim like a fish, fly like a bird), daily routine vocabulary (wake up, wash your face, brush your teeth), or weather vocabulary (shine like the sun, blow like the wind, fall like the rain). The physical action simultaneously deepens the encoding of each vocabulary item, provides a comprehension check, and transforms vocabulary practice into a genuinely enjoyable physical activity.

The third strategy is substitution chanting, in which a fixed chant frame is used repeatedly with different vocabulary insertions, recycling new vocabulary sets across multiple lessons. Consider the following flexible frame:

*What do you eat for breakfast today?
I eat (FOOD WORD), hip hip hooray!
What do you drink in the morning, I say?
I drink (DRINK WORD), hip hip hooray!*

The fixed rhyming frame (today/hooray, say/hooray) remains constant across lessons while the target food and drink vocabulary are varied, allowing the teacher to recycle the same chant structure for multiple vocabulary sets without the learner experiencing monotony. The celebratory refrain transforms vocabulary practice into a positive affective experience.

The fourth strategy is the cumulative song technique, exemplified by traditional cumulative songs such as 'Old MacDonald had a farm', in which the vocabulary set grows progressively across verses, requiring learners to hold an increasing number of vocabulary items in working memory while simultaneously reviewing all previously

encountered items. Each new verse introduces a new animal and its sound, while the refrain and earlier verses require the review of all previously encountered animals – by the fifth verse, learners have encountered the target animal vocabulary five, four, three, two, and one times respectively within a single song performance, approximating the decreasing-interval repetition schedule recommended by spacing effect research.⁷

In conclusion, songs and chants represent a theoretically grounded, empirically supported, and practically effective vehicle for vocabulary development in primary EFL classrooms. The practical strategies proposed – thematic chant design, action chants, substitution chanting, and cumulative songs – translate these theoretical foundations into classroom activities that are simultaneously pedagogically principled and genuinely enjoyable for primary learners. Future research should investigate the differential effectiveness of songs and chants for different types of vocabulary, the optimal number and distribution of exposures across a teaching sequence, and the relationship between singing ability and vocabulary acquisition in primary EFL contexts.

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⁷Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (2002). *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*. Penguin, p. 162.