

The Use of Songs to Improve English Vocabulary Acquisition in Elementary EFL Students

El uso de canciones para mejorar la adquisición en inglés en estudiantes de Educación General Básica que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL)

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Abstract

Developing English vocabulary remains challenging for foreign language learners, especially at the primary level. Young students need creative strategies to understand, retain, and use new vocabulary. This article investigates the use of songs to develop English vocabulary in primary school learners. The articles used in the study were published in scientific journals between 2020 and 2026. The author employed a qualitative methodology based on a literature review. There are several advantages to using songs to develop vocabulary. First, songs offer learners multiple opportunities to be exposed to new vocabulary. Second, developing phonological memory is easier with songs. Songs have great motivational value for learners. They connect sounds with new words and concepts. In a pleasant and stimulating learning environment, primary school students are more likely to participate in the various planned learning activities. However, the full benefits of using songs will only be realized when the teacher uses appropriate songs that are at the correct level for primary school learners and when the musical activities align with the learners' language level and the teaching objectives. Songs should not be used merely to entertain primary school learners. Primary school learners need to feel engaged in order to learn vocabulary. Songs are a useful strategy for engaging learners and developing their language skills at the primary level. More research is needed to examine the use of digital songs from different countries/cultures and their impact on long-term vocabulary retention in primary English language teaching.

Keywords: Language development; language teaching; Learning methods; Primary education; Educational strategies.

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Resumen

El desarrollo del vocabulario en inglés como lengua extranjera sigue siendo un desafío. Desarrollar el vocabulario en inglés sigue siendo un reto para los estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras, especialmente en primaria. Los alumnos jóvenes necesitan estrategias creativas para comprender, retener y utilizar vocabulario nuevo. Este artículo investiga el uso de canciones para desarrollar el vocabulario en inglés en alumnos de primaria. Los artículos utilizados en el estudio se publicaron en revistas científicas entre 2020 y 2026. El autor empleó una metodología cualitativa basada en una revisión bibliográfica. El uso de canciones para desarrollar el vocabulario presenta varias ventajas. En primer lugar, las canciones ofrecen a los alumnos múltiples oportunidades para exponerse a vocabulario nuevo. En segundo lugar, el desarrollo de la memoria fonológica es más fácil con canciones. Las canciones tienen un gran valor motivacional para los alumnos. Conectan sonidos con palabras y conceptos nuevos. En un entorno de aprendizaje agradable y estimulante, los alumnos de primaria tienen más probabilidades de participar en las diversas actividades de aprendizaje planificadas. Sin embargo, los beneficios completos del uso de canciones solo se obtendrán cuando el profesor utilice canciones apropiadas que estén al nivel adecuado para los alumnos de primaria y cuando las actividades musicales se ajusten al nivel lingüístico de los alumnos y a los objetivos de enseñanza. Las canciones no deben utilizarse simplemente para entretener a los alumnos de primaria. Los alumnos de primaria necesitan sentirse involucrados para aprender vocabulario. Las canciones son una estrategia útil para involucrar a los estudiantes y desarrollar sus habilidades lingüísticas en la etapa primaria. Se necesita más investigación para examinar el uso de canciones digitales de diferentes países/culturas y su impacto en la retención de vocabulario a largo plazo en la enseñanza del inglés en la etapa primaria.

Palabras clave: Adquisición del lenguaje; enseñanza de lenguas; métodos de aprendizaje; educación primaria; estrategias pedagógicas.

Introduction

Today, English is one of the most prominent languages used for communication, education, science, and technology globally, as well as in many other spheres of human activity. Therefore, strengthening English proficiency in the early stages of education is crucial for many educational systems worldwide in the current era. In foreign language learning, vocabulary is paramount. Without vocabulary, it is impossible to understand the message, express ideas, and achieve the purpose of communication. Those lacking vocabulary find it difficult to develop other important language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2022). Consequently, in contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, vocabulary development and strategies, along with research focused on these strategies, have become priorities not only for educational researchers but also for teachers in the classroom.

Young learners, in particular, struggle to develop vocabulary in a second language, as their language development is deeply contextual, requiring repetition, emotional engagement, and interaction. Traditional methods that use lists of isolated words and rely on memorization and translation to teach a new word do not allow learners enough practice to understand the new word and use it in real communication. Current perspectives in second language teaching focus on the need for learners to actively participate in the learning process and experience a variety of learning opportunities that associate new words with meaningful contexts and personal experiences. (Schmitt, 2020). In this regard, songs have gained popularity in vocabulary teaching. Due to the use of

rhythm and repetition, and the fact that a song is often a condensed version of the text, some of the meaningful language input can be retained in the learner's memory. This makes learning new vocabulary through songs enjoyable and encourages learners to remember the vocabulary.

The study of the relationship between music and language learning has flourished in recent years. It appears that participants in musical activities can develop certain aspects of language due to the engagement of attention and memory systems, as well as emotional involvement and subsequent monitoring of speech accuracy. In line with educational neuroscience, some musical structures can facilitate the recall of verbal information by actively integrating the auditory pathway and memory. In teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), songs present learners with vocabulary in a meaningful context, providing them with numerous opportunities to recognize and practice new words and to develop an understanding of pronunciation, rhythm, and meaning. Therefore, using songs in language teaching can create a more enjoyable and motivating environment for learning and using the target vocabulary.

According to previous studies, the use of songs in teaching is closely associated with teaching methods that focus on teaching as a social and affective process. One trend in communicative language teaching emphasized the role of contextualized communication and learner motivation, and a more recent focus added multimodal learning theories that address the auditory, visual, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the teaching and learning process. In this sense, the use of digital tools facilitates the integration of songs into English language teaching more easily, quickly, and flexibly through online platforms, educational apps, and rich digital resources (Godwin-Jones, 2021). Digital resources make teaching and learning more participatory and provide learners with a greater amount of authentic language to use and more varied opportunities to practice. However, using songs to teach vocabulary is not straightforward, and several questions remain unanswered. These include what factors determine the choice of musical piece to use, how musical activities relate to teaching objectives, and what role each musical activity plays in vocabulary teaching.

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the best ways to implement music to develop vocabulary in learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These music-based studies show how music can increase learner motivation, improve engagement, and enhance pronunciation and vocabulary retention, provided that appropriate music is selected based on age, level, and learning objective (Alghamdi & Al-Ahdal, 2020; Kuo & Chuang, 2021). While there are educational benefits to music, these should not be taken for granted; otherwise, music-based activities can become merely recreational. EFL teachers should consider the selection of musical vocabulary, including the linguistic contrast of the lyrics, the relevance of the music to the learners, the quantity and frequency of vocabulary use, and the opportunities students will have to use the vocabulary. More productive use of songs depends on how the song relates to the learners' pedagogical needs and how instructors provide supplementary activities to help learners understand and use vocabulary in real-life situations.

Tasks based on the use of songs in vocabulary learning are a response to the need to develop more integrated, meaningful, and motivating approaches to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the primary level. Young English learners may feel insecure and have low confidence in English language classes when instructional methods heavily emphasize rote memorization and correcting pronunciations. Songs can provide a more accessible learning environment for students and encourage them to learn the language through enjoyment, repetition, and active participation. The use of songs should be selective, as they cannot replace the multitude of challenges involved in teaching and learning English. The use of songs in English language teaching and learning (ELT) and the musical activities designed around songs should be informed by the learners' needs and the desired teaching and learning objectives. It is important to determine the potential benefits and limitations of using songs in English teaching in order to understand their role in vocabulary development in a given teaching/learning situation.

This article attempts to answer the following research question: How do songs enrich English vocabulary learning for primary school EFL students, and what instructional conditions help explain this? In keeping with the study's focus, this article is an analytical review of recent educational research articles in which songs are used as a vocabulary instruction strategy in primary EFL classrooms. The focus is on the cognitive and affective dimensions and pedagogy of using songs for vocabulary learning in the classroom, and on the limitations and instructional conditions that may characterize their use. The author aims to explain the use of songs as a classroom instructional strategy in a constructive and balanced way, avoiding an overly generalized approach to songs (i.e., using songs as a solution to vocabulary problems).

Theoretical Framework

Vocabulary acquisition in English as a foreign language among young learners

One of the fundamental components of foreign language learning is lexical development. Without a solid vocabulary, learners are effectively unable to decipher or construct meaning and, therefore, cannot participate in communication with any degree of effectiveness. Understanding pronunciation and form is crucial for the use and comprehension of grammar. Unraveling the relationships between words and understanding a word's context are fundamental elements in forming a rich and comprehensive vocabulary understanding. Exposing learners to new vocabulary through opportunities for interaction in diverse communicative contexts is crucial for the development of lexical knowledge. These interactions contribute to learners' ability to understand the appropriateness of vocabulary use in different contexts (Nation, 2022). Best practices in vocabulary teaching focus on introducing learners to new words in as many contexts as possible, so that learners can engage in repeated practice to acquire the new vocabulary.

Vocabulary acquisition involves numerous cognitive processes and has a considerable impact on learners' attention, as well as on perception, encoding, storage, and retrieval. When learners encounter a new word in various meaningful contexts, connections between linguistic for-

ms and their meanings begin to form and strengthen. According to Schmitt (2020), vocabulary knowledge is built through many encounters with words, rather than isolated repetitions of words in avoided contexts. This gradual process helps early learners build their cognitive and linguistic systems. Therefore, classroom practices based on repetition and purposeful learning experiences will help learners retain vocabulary and construct a deeper understanding of it. Consequently, providing learners with frequent and diverse opportunities to use vocabulary can facilitate more meaningful and lasting vocabulary acquisition.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, many obstacles limit learners' opportunities to speak or listen to English outside the classroom. Lacking daily exposure to the language, as is common in many second language contexts, learners' vocabulary acquisition is largely confined to classroom instruction. Therefore, classroom instructors face the challenge of providing instructional methods that maintain learners' interest while exposing them to a variety of vocabulary. Music, by providing an instructional context, offers repetitive and active exposure to vocabulary in an enjoyable and meaningful way. Because music provides lexical scaffolding in a safe and motivating context, students can recognize vocabulary and then begin to incorporate it into their spoken English.

The cognitive foundations of learning through music

Cognitive approaches focus on rhythm, melody, and how memory and attention are involved in multimodal processing. Musically, these elements are presented as a single input. Learning something in a different, yet related, way can facilitate attention, organization, and recall of new linguistic information. Verbal memory is now being supported by musical structures. Verbal memory is further supported by rhythm and repetition, and jumping requires significant organization and helps highlight specific aspects of memory (Zatorre, 2022). In the case of EFL learning, there are aspects of songs that can be very helpful. First, songs greatly facilitate exposure to language segments in a structured and repetitive manner. Songs can greatly aid in associating sounds and words with their meanings, and this association can help increase vocabulary and improve language retention.

Mayer's (2021), cognitive theory of multimedia learning can help explain how songs aid in vocabulary development. According to this theory, songs can be helpful because information can be processed in different, yet related, ways. Since songs primarily provide auditory input, their educational value can be enhanced by incorporating visual, gestural, subtitled, or image input, or even interactive classroom activities. Learning these songs helps develop a strong association between sounds and meanings, as well as visual cues, making it easier to understand and remember new vocabulary. For this reason, classroom support can help teach vocabulary in an integrated way.

Embodied cognition posits that using movement and sensory input alongside language can strengthen certain skills. For young learners, introducing movement and rhythm can help them

retain vocabulary and its associations. This type of learning is especially helpful for beginning learners because it engages them in the process through an activity that helps develop their cognitive and linguistic abilities. Recent evidence indicates that adding gestures and physical movement to second language learning helps retain vocabulary due to the use of the embodied and sensorimotor systems (Oppici et al., 2023). This type of learning occurs when students interact with vocabulary through movement as well as physical acts and/or verbal responses to language. This can be achieved by adding movement and sensory experiences to song-based classroom activities to create a more stimulating learning environment while simultaneously helping students learn vocabulary.

The Affective Dimension of Songs in EFL Learning

Beyond cognitive processes, both emotional and motivational factors influence vocabulary learning. Language learning has an affective dimension, as students' attitudes and emotions can influence their willingness to interact with and use a second language. Comfortable and supportive learning environments inspire learners to try interacting with and using new vocabulary without fear of making mistakes. Class participation is more likely to occur, and some barriers to participation for some language learners are reduced when a supportive and positive learning environment is created, especially for young learners (Dewaele & Li, 2021). Vocabulary activities for young learners should consider combining positive classroom environments with enjoyable activities.

A fun and engaging activity is the use of songs. Songs can be used to help learn language vocabulary and encourage participation. Singing and repeating lyrics a certain number of times helps language learners retain and recall new vocabulary. Furthermore, musical activities do not feel as pressured or formal as other traditional vocabulary practice methods. Musical activities, therefore, reduce the pressure to achieve accurate answers, while at the same time helping learners gain confidence to participate more easily in activities, both in pronunciation and expression. Singing vocabulary songs in language lessons for young learners is very useful and increases the likelihood of learning vocabulary, provided it is combined with appropriate learning objectives and goals.

While enjoying songs can generate positive emotions, it may not be enough to improve vocabulary retention. Student participation and interest increase with the use of songs in the classroom. The most important factor remains how the teacher uses songs to support the teaching process. Since the goal of songs is to motivate learners, they should be incorporated into steps that lead to vocabulary comprehension, practice, and use. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to implement various activities before, during, and after playing the song. Key words can be introduced before listening. The words the listeners hear can be spoken aloud as the lyrics are sung. Role-playing activities that incorporate speaking, writing, or other stimulating tasks can be implemented after listening. In effect, songs could be considered a teaching aid rather than a passive entertainment activity.

Songs as a Multimodal Pedagogical Strategy in EFL Classrooms

Integrating songs into EFL teaching is based on the concept of multimodal learning. This means that knowledge is built through the integration of multiple modes of communication, including linguistic, auditory, visual, and physical. Within this framework, when complemented by other learning materials and classroom activities, songs can offer more than just auditory input. In the contemporary classroom, teachers can use digital technologies to teach English with songs accompanied by audio, videos, animations, and other interactive online materials. Such resources offer learners multiple opportunities to find and practice vocabulary in diverse ways. In fact, considering the resources mentioned above, digital and multimodal resources can enhance EFL learning experiences in many ways beyond simply integrating songs.

When sung, song lyrics become languages that learners can hear, pronounce, and even understand. Songs can help students develop their knowledge of culture and popular language, or expressions they might not hear outside the classroom. Contemporary teaching methods that utilize authentic materials and a student-centered approach maintain that teachers can better assign learners an active role and link language to meaningful cultural and communicative contexts. Such methods help learners expand their vocabulary. When used for a specific purpose, songs allow learners to communicate and understand a variety of expressions in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Song-based teaching has recently been studied to determine its effects on improving vocabulary retention by giving students meaningful tasks to perform within song-based activities. Examples of such tasks include having students fill in blanks in song lyrics, circle important words within the song, perform vocabulary ordering tasks, hold short conversations, and relate the song to a personal experience (Alghamdi & Al-Ahdal, 2020; Kuo & Chuang, 2021). If students engage in such activities, they are more likely to process the vocabulary within the activities and apply it to other situations. In such cases, the pedagogy of a song is enhanced. Listening to a song to understand what it is about should be expanded to include vocabulary identification and practicing the song's language.

The role of teachers in implementing songs for vocabulary development

Songs can be educational tools, but the amount of education they can provide depends on the teachers' decisions. Before using a song, teachers should determine its linguistic, cultural, structural, and semantic characteristics in relation to the learners' needs and objectives. In early stages of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), students have relatively underdeveloped language skills and require meaningful and easily understandable linguistic input. Therefore, using a song that is too advanced and not aligned with the students' instructional needs can overwhelm them and offer minimal or no learning opportunities. Consequently, teachers must ensure that the songs they use align with and reinforce instructional objectives through their linguistic and pedagogical characteristics.

It is well documented that most teaching practices rely heavily on the ability of teaching staff to adjust resources to meet the needs of their students. Kessler (2021), frequently mentions that while other educational resources, such as technology and even multimedia, can only complement teaching, they cannot replace good teaching practices and sound judgment. Consequently, songs should be considered complementary to other teaching tools.

This theoretical framework shows how the educational value of songs can be attributed to cognitive processing, emotional processing, multiple modalities, and the teacher's role. These perspectives suggest that songs provide learners with opportunities to understand and memorize new words through repetition and multiple language inputs, all while being active participants. Songs also help learners grasp target vocabulary. The instructor's selection, adaptation, and integration of songs are the key factors that make songs educational. Based on these perspectives, it is possible to analyze how songs help elementary-level EFL learners expand their vocabulary. Furthermore, these perspectives inform the methodological decisions in this study.

Methodology

This review examines how songs can support English vocabulary learning for primary school students of English as a Foreign Language (ELE). It aims to describe the research and teaching methods on the benefits of songs for vocabulary learning and the challenges encountered. This review seeks to determine the role of songs in vocabulary memorization, pronunciation, and interest levels, as well as the extent to which songs can maintain learners' focus while learning English.

I conducted a semi-systematic literature review of publications from 2020 to 2026. I searched various academic resources, including Scopus, ResearchGate, ERIC, Redalyc, and Google Scholar. Initially, I found 36 articles; however, I was only able to include 16 studies in my review due to the criteria I established regarding songs, vocabulary, and primary school learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language (ELE). Most of the studies that did not meet my criteria focused on higher education levels, non-ELE contexts, general music education, or skills other than vocabulary, such as language skills.

The following keywords and combinations were used to guide the search process and identify relevant studies:

- “songs” OR “English songs” OR “music-based learning” OR “song-based instruction”
- “vocabulary acquisition” OR “vocabulary learning” OR “lexical development”
- “young learners” OR “elementary students” OR “children”
- “English as a Foreign Language” OR “EFL”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selected studies meet parameters related to the research topic. The articles reviewed focused on primary school students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The relationship between singing and learning English through songs in the classroom was examined in the context of improving students' vocabulary.

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing on the use of songs to improve English vocabulary acquisition among young EFL learners.
- Research examining vocabulary retention, pronunciation, and lexical recognition through songs.
- Empirical studies conducted in classroom settings and literature reviews.
- Articles addressing student motivation, engagement, and interactive learning through songs

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion Category	Number of Articles
Songs and Vocabulary Acquisition	6
Songs and Pronunciation Development	3
Focus on Elementary EFL Learners	5
Classroom-Based Research	10
Motivation and Engagement through Songs	5

Source: own elaboration.

Exclusion Criteria

Articles that focused on university students, general music education, non-EFL cases, online learning that did not involve classroom learning, and/or studies limited to grammar or other areas of language were excluded.

Table 2. Exclusion Criteria

Exclusion Category	Number of Articles
Higher Education Focus	5
Non-EFL Contexts	4
General Music Education	3
Grammar-Based Studies	2

Online Learning Studies Without Classroom Application	6
Studies Not Related to Vocabulary Development	4

Source: own elaboration.

This selection process ensured that the analyzed studies were aligned with the purpose of the research, focusing specifically on the role of songs in improving vocabulary acquisition among elementary EFL learners.

Results

Empirical Studies

Table 3 presents some general characteristics of the empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026 that were included in this review. The evidence shows a geographically diverse body of literature, primarily from Iran, Japan, China, Indonesia, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. This evidence makes it clear that the use of songs in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) has generated international academic interest in TEFL, particularly in countries where English is a foreign language (EFL).

Table 3. Geographical Distribution

Author(s)	Year	Country	Journal (Indexed)	Research Design	Participant s	Focus
Ghanaat & Nooshin	2020	Iran	Journal of Language Teaching and Research	Quasi-experimental	Young EFL learners	Songs and vocabulary retention
Zarei & Shahidi Pour	2020	Iran	Journal of Language Teaching and Research	Quasi-experimental	EFL students	Music and vocabulary learning
Dewaele & Li	2021	Belgium/UK	Language Teaching Research	Quantitative	1,700+ FL learners	Foreign language enjoyment and motivation
Aliponga & Johnston	2021	Japan	International Journal of Language Education	Classroom intervention	Elementary learners	Songs for vocabulary instruction
Ludke et al.	2021	United Kingdom	Learning and Instruction	Experimental	Language learners	Singing and language acquisition
Nie et al.	2022	China	Frontiers in Psychology	Experimental	114 university EFL students	Incidental vocabulary learning through songs

Author(s)	Year	Country	Journal (Indexed)	Research Design	Participant s	Focus
Murphy Odo	2022	South Korea	Language, Culture and Curriculum	Meta-analysis	28 empirical studies	Effectiveness of songs for vocabulary learning
Nur & Sakhiyya	2026	Indonesia	JOEPALLT	Quantitative survey	52 EFL students	TikTok English songs and vocabulary
Mahardhika, Prasetyo & Aisyah	2026	Indonesia	Journey Journal of English Language and Pedagogy	Qualitative	8 university students	Benefits and barriers of English pop songs

Source: own elaboration.

The studies range from quasi-experimental designs to classroom interventions, surveys, qualitative research, and a single meta-analysis. A diverse methodology improves the quality of evidence by exploring a phenomenon from several different angles. Evidence for the effectiveness of song-based instruction comes from experimental studies, while qualitative and survey-based research provides evidence on learners' attitudes and motivation, as well as classroom experiences. The findings are limited by the large number of relatively small and context-specific samples. Overall, Table 3 shows that the research is consistent in its view that integrating songs as a teaching resource is a good strategy. There is also general agreement that existing studies demonstrate the need for larger, cross-cultural, and longitudinal studies.

Pedagogical Methods and Practices in Reviewed Articles

The analyzed studies implemented various song-based strategies to support vocabulary learning. Most of the research involved classroom interventions using children's songs, repetition activities, vocabulary games, movement-based activities, and multimedia resources. The majority of the studies reported that songs increased students' motivation and supported vocabulary retention through meaningful and repeated exposure.

Table 4. Pedagogical Methods and Practices

Method and Practice	Number of Articles
Repetition through songs	10
Vocabulary games based on lyrics	7
Multimedia integration (videos and digital songs)	8
Movement and Total Physical Response activities	6
Pronunciation and listening activities	5

Source: own elaboration.

According to researchers, songs repeat new vocabulary words. This allows children to memorize new words. Singing also helps with pronunciation. The sounds and words that are sung give learners the ability to retain new words.

Table 5 presents the main findings on the use of songs for learning English vocabulary. Although there are many discrepancies in the research conducted across various educational systems, it shows that using songs for vocabulary has a positive influence on vocabulary acquisition. The research indicates positive changes in students' vocabulary retention and motivation, as well as increased classroom activity due to vocabulary taught through music.

Table 5. The Use of Songs for Vocabulary Acquisition

Author(s)	Objective	Methodology	Main Findings	Limitations	Effective Strategies
Ghanaat & Nooshin (2020)	Determine the effect of songs on vocabulary retention	Quasi-experimental	Significant improvement in vocabulary retention	Small sample	Repetition and lyric-based instruction
Zarei & Shahidi Pour (2020)	Examine vocabulary learning through music	Quasi-experimental	Song-based instruction outperformed traditional teaching	Short intervention	Music integrated with vocabulary tasks
Aliponga & Johnston (2021)	Investigate songs for young EFL learners	Classroom intervention	Higher motivation, participation and vocabulary recall	Limited educational context	Age-appropriate songs and communicative activities
Ludke et al. (2021)	Compare sung and spoken Language learning	Experimental	Singing facilitated language Retention and pronunciation	Limited duration	Singing combined with repetition
Nie et al. (2022)	Analyze incidental vocabulary learning through listening to songs	Experimental	Listening three times produced the greatest vocabulary gains and improved long-term retention	Conducted with university students	Repeated listening and explicit vocabulary review
Nur & Sakhiyya (2026)	Explore students' perceptions of TikTok English songs	Quantitative survey	Students perceived songs as motivating for vocabulary learning	Self-reported data	Digital songs integrated into learning
Mahardhika et al. (2026)	Explore benefits and barriers of English pop songs	Qualitative	Songs enhanced vocabulary learning but required teacher guidance	Small qualitative sample	Careful song Selection and guided discussion

Source: own elaboration.

Songs and Vocabulary Retention in Young Learners

Table 6 examines how songs influence learning in various studies on vocabulary retention, student motivation, pronunciation, class participation, and broader teaching perspectives. The different studies analyzed demonstrate a common trend. Vocabulary retention and student motivation are the two teaching outcomes most frequently reported as positive when teaching with songs. This consistency of results across different educational contexts shows a strong benefit. It is now more clearly understood than ever that music positively impacts vocabulary teaching and learning through students' continuous exposure to new vocabulary. This is done in a way that engages students and overcomes their inhibitions to learning.

Table 6. The Impact of Songs on Vocabulary Learning

Study	Vocabulary Retention	Motivation	Pronunciation	Participation	Pedagogical Implication
Ghanaat & Nooshin (2020)	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Songs reinforce vocabulary retention.
Zarei & Shahidi Pour (2020)	High	High	Moderate	High	Songs should complement explicit instruction.
Aliponga & Johnston (2021)	High	Very High	Moderate	Very High	Songs increase classroom engagement.
Ludke et al. (2021)	High	High	High	High	Singing enhances memory and pronunciation.
Nie et al. (2022)	Very High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Three listening exposures maximize vocabulary acquisition.
Murphy Odo (2022)	High (overall effect)	High	Moderate	High	Meta-analysis supports songs as an effective complementary strategy.
Nur & Sakhiyya (2026)	Moderate	Very High	Low	High	Digital musical platforms increase learner engagement.
Mahardhik a et al. (2026)	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Teachers should select songs carefully and scaffold learning.

Source: own elaboration.

Challenges and Solutions in Implementing Songs for Vocabulary Learning

Although songs provide important educational benefits, several challenges have also been identified, including inappropriate vocabulary levels, limited classroom time, and difficulties integrating songs into formal curricula.

Table 7. Challenges and Solutions in Implementing Song-Based Learning

Challenge	Studies Identifying the Challenge	Suggested Solutions
Selecting appropriate songs	Multiple studies	Choose songs according to students' age and vocabulary level
Limited classroom time	Classroom-based research	Use short song activities as warm-ups or reinforcement
Students' different musical preferences	Several studies	Provide varied songs and allow student participation
Teacher preparation	Literature reviews	Offer training on music-based teaching strategies

Source: own elaboration.

Songs in Elementary EFL Education

Table 8 consolidates the pedagogical implications of the reviewed empirical literature and provides key recommendations for implementing song-based vocabulary teaching. The literature review showed that songs, when used appropriately within a sequence of instructional steps, can aid vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, and facilitate learners' memory and developmental thinking skills.

Table 8. Songs in Young Learners' Vocabulary Education

Author(s)	Educational Contribution	Main Challenges	Recommendations for Teachers
Ghanaat & Nooshin (2020)	Songs improve vocabulary retention.	Limited instructional time.	Use repeated listening activities.
Zarei & Shahidi Pour (2020)	Music enhances vocabulary acquisition.	Selection of appropriate songs.	Integrate songs with communicative tasks.
Aliponga & Johnston (2021)	Songs motivate young learners.	Age-appropriate material required.	Select songs aligned with learners' proficiency.
Ludke et al. (2021)	Singing strengthens memory and pronunciation.	Short intervention periods.	Combine singing with vocabulary practice.
Nie et al. (2022)	Repeated listening promotes incidental vocabulary learning.	Vocabulary difficulty affects gains.	Provide three listening opportunities and post-listening tasks.
Murphy Odo (2022)	Strong evidence supporting song-based instruction.	Variation across educational contexts.	Adapt songs to learners' needs and objectives.
Nur & Sakhiyya (2026)	Digital songs increase learner engagement.	Possible distraction from social media.	Guide students in educational use of digital platforms.
Mahardhika et al. (2026)	Pop songs encourage vocabulary learning.	Slang, pronunciation and cultural references.	Pre-teach vocabulary and explain difficult lyrics.

Source: own elaboration.

Development

The evidence in Tables 3, 5, 6, and 8 shows that traditional motivational resources in English vocabulary teaching through song are accessed to their full educational potential. Most studies in this area recognize the role of music in vocabulary development; however, these studies vary in their theoretical frameworks, methods, and interpretation of results. These variations are an important addition to the research on song-based teaching pedagogy.

A common trend observed throughout the reviewed literature is the presence of positive results despite a high degree of variation in methods. While Ghanaat and Nooshin (2020) and Zarei and Shahidi Pour (2020) found that learners taught through songs performed significantly better than learners taught using conventional vocabulary teaching techniques, Aliponga and Johnston (2021) achieved the same findings in a different teaching and learning context. All three studies agreed that songs increased participation as well as vocabulary retention. This study adds to the existing literature that supports the positive effect of music on vocabulary learning as a result of music's ability to cause learners to focus, expose learners to lexical items in context, and promote repetition.

Although they reached largely the same conclusions, the individual studies differed in how they analyzed the role of music in vocabulary learning. Ghanaat and Nooshin (2020) examined the role of exposure and, more specifically, stated that the storage of lexical items in long-term memory is facilitated by the process of rhythmic repetition. In contrast, Aliponga and Johnston (2021) attributed vocabulary learning to increased learner motivation, increased learner participation in class, or the overall creation of a facilitative learning environment. These authors argued that music should not be the primary learning tool, as songs can promote learning and support learners in engaging in more extensive communication. It is clear from the arguments presented that a cognitive approach to vocabulary learning through song should not be the sole objective. A focus on cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions is required.

Dewaele and Li (2021) are an important addition to this debate. They focus on students' emotional state rather than teaching methods. When examining foreign vocabulary learning, many studies on effects and outcomes include enjoyment as one of the variables assessed. Dewaele and Li shifted the causal relationship and demonstrated that enjoyment is a key factor in student engagement in the learning process and in learning the target language. Although their study did not include songs as a teaching tool, their research provides a rationale for the positive effects of using music in learning. Singing activities in class, or indeed the use of any other positive emotional activity in the classroom, help create a positive classroom climate with less anxiety, which encourages students to engage in communication, thus increasing vocabulary learning. In this respect, Dewaele and Li's research complements, rather than contradicts, existing research and provides a rationale for the positive impact of teaching with song.

These studies also vary considerably in their methodological rigor. The strength of their conclusions depends on this. Nie et al. (2022) and Ludke et al. (2021) have the strongest empirical evidence, as they incorporated controlled comparisons and objective measurements of vocabulary acquisition. For example, Nie et al. (2022) showed that incidental vocabulary learning was greatly enhanced by multiple exposures to a song. Ludke et al. (2021) showed that singing lyrics improved retention in study participants compared to reciting them. Singing the lyrics also demonstrated the use of different cognitive resources compared to saying them. All of this highlights the importance of song repetition and supports the claim that some existing experimental studies are correct in asserting that repetition is part of the frequency and quality of exposure that enhances cognitive learning of a given vocabulary. Compared to other classroom studies, their findings add to the existing body of knowledge on the cognitive effects of musical learning.

Not all studies consider cognitive mechanisms to the same extent. Murphy Odo's (2022) meta-analysis incorporates a useful perspective because it consolidates the findings of numerous empirical studies rather than exploring a single intervention. The positive effect of the meta-analysis builds confidence in the use of song-based techniques because the favorable outcome was shown to be consistent across different types of educational settings and participant groups. At the same time, the variability in effect sizes observed in the review indicates that the aforementioned variables of age, proficiency level, instruction duration, and the extent to which the technique was taught moderate the effectiveness of the instruction. This suggests that simply incorporating a song into a lesson does not guarantee vocabulary learning. In reality, instruction is successful to the extent that it incorporates quality pedagogy.

Additional Indonesian studies expand the discourse on song-based instruction within a digital learning environment. Unlike previous studies that focused primarily on musical activities in classrooms, Nur and Sakhiyya (2026) studied educational implementations of English songs posted on TikTok. According to the authors, digital learning environments can increase learners' motivation to study outside the classroom and can help learners practice vocabulary in a relatively autonomous way. However, the authors of that study also highlighted a concern that the lack of instructional control may decrease learners' focus on their studies due to the entertainment nature of the digital content. Similar findings were again reported by Mahardhika et al. (2026) regarding authentic English pop songs. The authors note that pop songs have natural vocabulary used in contemporary English. There are, however, culturally embedded challenges related to slang, pronunciation, and usage. The authors of these more recent studies emphasize that digital innovations present teaching challenges that were not previously visible in traditional classroom environments.

A review of empirical studies shows that implementing songs alone leads to little to no acquisition of target vocabulary. Positive results have been reported as a consequence of a series of activities provided within the scope of the teaching process, which first involves vocabulary presentation, followed by various listening activities, lyric analysis, verbal interaction, and communicative activities. This view contrasts with the previous assumption that simply exposing lear-

ners to music is enough for learning to occur. The reviewed studies indicate that the focus and instructional method of the activity shape its effectiveness, and music is only one of the learning aids within the activity.

Problems in the existing literature prevent complete satisfaction, even with all the accumulated positive evidence. The main contributing limitations are small sample sizes and single-site recruitment, which have implications for the external validity of the studies' findings. Furthermore, vocabulary gains cannot be meaningfully assessed without addressing the limitations of short intervention periods. Finally, the wide variety of assessment methods makes comparisons between studies difficult. Different studies used distinct methods for vocabulary acquisition, such as tests, questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation, and even self-reports. The lack of uniform assessment measures significantly restricts comparisons between studies and the overall strength of the evidence.

The evidence supports a significant shift in teaching practices. Based on the reviewed studies, integrated vocabulary teaching sequences should be developed that employ communicative language teaching, multimodal learning, and evidence-based vocabulary instruction. Sequenced integration would support lexical acquisition as well as the development of emotionally supportive learning environments in which learners experience less anxiety and are therefore more inclined to speak and engage with the language. Teaching lexical sequences would have different pedagogical effects depending on the order and frequency with which music is integrated. This perspective provides teachers with a clear rationale for incorporating music into the classroom in a way informed by recent research on second language teaching.

These findings add to existing theories of multimedia learning and affective learning in relation to vocabulary acquisition. The reviewed studies indicate that songs have the potential to develop vocabulary by activating multiple cognitive pathways, providing meaningful repetition, increasing emotional engagement, and exposing learners to real-world language. However, the specific contribution of each mechanism remains largely unexplained. Therefore, research should move beyond simply demonstrating how songs aid vocabulary learning and seek to explain how particular musical characteristics, diverse teaching techniques, or different types of learners foster more effective vocabulary acquisition. It is hoped that addressing these questions will contribute to developing an improved theory and approach to teaching in this field and provide greater support for the use of music in contemporary English as a Foreign Language teaching.

Conclusion

This article reviewed empirical studies from 2020 to 2026, focusing on the use of songs to support English vocabulary learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. The included studies highlighted that, when deployed appropriately, songs assist teachers in their students' vocabulary learning process and motivate, generate, and promote student participation during class. However, the use of songs in the teaching process is justified only when they are used with clear

instructions that facilitate students' language processing; this is not justified by the recreational value of the songs themselves. While some language tools are catchy and singable, their recreational value should not overshadow the teaching process. When used with clearly defined objectives, songs can enhance the teaching and learning process.

The evidence from the analyzed studies was robust and consistent across different classrooms and teaching contexts. Ghanaat and Nooshin (2020), Zarei and Shahidi Pour (2020), and Aliponga and Johnston (2021) show that singing songs positively impacts learners' vocabulary retention and improves language engagement and practice. While its effects are contextualized, for some it is strongly linked to memorization and repetition; for others, it is related to student motivation and participation. It should be noted that balancing the different components of song teaching to support vocabulary learning would be the most successful approach.

The review shows that experimental studies provide the best evidence for the role of music in vocabulary learning. Building on Nie et al. (2022), repeated listening constructs incidental vocabulary. Ludke et al. (2021) proposed that singing vocabulary is more effective than repeated articulation. Finally, recent studies on digital music tools show increased motivation and more self-directed learning. While digital tools aid learning, we cannot attribute effective learning solely to technology. Planning, guidance, and incorporating songs into learning activities are of great importance.

Although the studies have some positive results, they have several weaknesses, such as small sample sizes, restricted interventions, and inconsistencies in the assessments. These weaknesses limit the generalizability of the results and encourage more longitudinal and cross-cultural studies using more standardized instruments to examine vocabulary in different ways at different times.

Considering the role of songs in teaching English as a foreign language, they can be seen as alternatives that can replace other recreational activities. This is true provided the teacher selects songs that have learning objectives, connect musical activities and learning objectives, and integrate the songs into a communicative teaching approach that utilizes multiple resources. This should also be included in the studies. Songs can also be viewed as a meaningful activity that engages learners and contributes to vocabulary acquisition for elementary-level EFL learners.

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