

# 19 Using Songs to Promote Vocabulary Learning in Grade 1

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Most children enjoy listening to songs and this is one reason why they have become an important part of teaching English to young learners. Apart from these affective reason for using songs, though, a number of cognitive and linguistic benefits have also been identified in support of their use (Schoepp 2001). The particular focus of this study is on the use of songs to promote vocabulary learning.

## 2 BACKGROUND

The new Basic Education English language curriculum in Oman places great emphasis on the use of songs, especially in the younger grades. While I have always believed that learners respond positively to songs and that these facilitate language learning, I wanted to deepen my understanding of these issues. In particular, I was interested in whether songs might stimulate more effective vocabulary learning with children in their first year of learning English.

## 3 SONGS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Songs play a significant role in motivating students to learn English. They can support the development of learners' abilities in reading, writing, listening and speaking, as well as provide opportunities for learning pronunciation, rhythm, grammar and vocabulary (Lo & Li 1998). In addition, songs often offer a change from routine classroom activities.

Orlova (1997) identifies some additional benefits of songs in language learning. First, they can encourage learners to use English. In a non-English environment, the main problem for teachers is how to stimulate learners to speak English in class; songs may be the starting point for that. Second, listening to songs (especially when these are supported with pictures and actions) helps students to recognize words and meanings more easily. Finally, songs can stimulate a positive emotional attitude to language learning.

### 3.1 Songs & Vocabulary

More specifically, the role of songs in learning vocabulary has been widely discussed (e.g. Orlova 1997, Murphey 1992, Phillips 1993). Much vocabulary will be learned explicitly – through direct instruction and attention; however, we also know that learners need opportunities to learn vocabulary incidentally – i.e. when they are not paying direct attention to it

but to some other task they are performing (Schmitt 2000). Songs, by exposing learners to many examples of words used in meaningful contexts, create such opportunities for indirect vocabulary learning.

In addition, songs allow learners to repeat and to memorize chunks of language. This contributes to vocabulary learning too; repetition is needed to help learners remember words (Nation 1990) and many of the lexical items learners need to know are multi-word items rather than single words. Songs can thus be an effective method of helping children learn lexical patterns that will be stored in their minds and can be naturally recalled during oral communication (Murphey 1992). In other words, songs can help the development of automaticity – the ability to use language naturally and without conscious effort. This, according to Schoepp (2001), is the main cognitive reason for using songs in L2 learning. Through songs children can also repeat words and phrases spontaneously even if they do not initially understand them (Slattery & Willis 2001). The support for understanding which songs provide, through pictures and actions, can help learners work out meanings when these are not immediately clear.

## 4 METHOD

The aim of the study was to teach vocabulary using two different strategies – with and without songs - and to compare learners’ performance on vocabulary tests following each. The participants in the study were two Grade 1 classes who were 6-7 years old and in their first year of learning English. In total there were 49 learners, boys and girls.

### 4.1 Data Collection

The two classes were called Group A (25 learners) and Group B (24 learners). Four texts were used: Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Old MacDonald’s Farm, a classroom rhyme from the course book *English for Me Grade 1*, and the head and shoulders song, from the same course book. Table 1 summarises which texts each group studied and whether they studied them with the use of songs or not. If not, the texts were presented just through reading and with the vocabulary being taught explicitly, using a big book and flashcards. Each group thus studied all four texts, two using songs and two without. The texts which one group studied using songs, the other group studied without songs.

Table 1: Groups and activities for the study

Text	Goldilocks & the Three Bears		Old MacDonald’s Farm		Classroom Rhyme		Head & Shoulders Song	
	With song	Without song	With song	Without song	With Song	Without Song	With song	Without song
A	✓		✓			✓		✓
B		✓		✓	✓		✓	

All learners completed the same two sets of activities designed to test their vocabulary knowledge. One set of activities was completed immediately after they worked with a text, while the other was completed one month later. All learners thus did 8 tests. The activities used to measure vocabulary knowledge were similar to the kind learners were familiar with in their course book. Thus they consisted mainly of matching activities which test learners' receptive knowledge of vocabulary. Learners had to listen and write the number under the corresponding picture, listen and match numbers with the corresponding pictures, listen, cut out pictures and stick them in the corresponding box, and listen and circle the correct picture. In each test the children heard the words pronounced three times. The vocabulary tested in each case reflected that used in the texts.

## 5 FINDINGS

### 5.1 Immediate Tests

Table 2 summarises the mean scores (out of 10) which Groups A and B obtained on the four vocabulary tests which they completed immediately after working with each text.

*Table 2: Mean scores for immediate vocabulary tests*

	Group A				Group B				Mean
	GL	OM	CR	HS	GL	OM	CR	HS	
With songs	7.3	8.9					8.1	7.9	8.1
Without songs			6.3	5.8	6	7.3			6.4

(GL = Goldilocks; OM = Old Macdonald; CR = Classroom rhyme; HS = Head & Shoulders)

These figures show that both groups performed better on the vocabulary which was taught with songs. When the scores with and without songs were combined for Group A (giving a mean of 8.1 and 6.05 respectively), a t-test showed that the difference between these means was significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). For Group B, a comparison of the combined means showed that it was also significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Comparing the with and without songs mean scores overall (that is 8.1 and 6.4) this too is significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). On the short term tests, then, there was a significant difference in performance in favour of the texts that were taught with songs.

### 5.2 After Four Weeks

A second set of tests on the same vocabulary items were administered after four weeks. Table 3 summarises the mean scores for each group on the different tests.

Table 3: Mean scores for vocabulary tests after four weeks

	Group A				Group B				Mean
	GL	OM	CR	HS	GL	OM	CR	HS	
With songs	7.3	8.7					9.1	8	8.3
Without songs			9.2	8.7	6.6	7.6			8.1

(GL = Goldilocks; OM = Old Macdonald; CR = Classroom rhyme; HS = Head & Shoulders)

T-tests for the combined means for the with and without songs tests for Group A showed a significant difference in favour of the without songs test ( $p < 0.05$ ). For Group B, the significant difference was in favour of the with songs tests ( $p < 0.01$ ). Combining the scores for both groups on the with and without songs test (giving means of 8.3 and 8.1 respectively) shows no significant difference between these. Thus, whereas overall on the immediate tests, learners did do significantly better on the with songs tests, on the tests which were conducted 4 weeks later there was no overall difference. This was largely due to the strong performance of Group A on the classroom rhyme text which was taught without songs.

## 6 DISCUSSION

These results suggest that the use of songs may support the learning of receptive vocabulary more effectively than when the same vocabulary and the same texts are taught without songs. On the immediate tests, learners performed significantly better on the with songs tests than on the without songs tests. In the later tests, there was no such difference. Songs, therefore, may be particularly useful in helping learners to use vocabulary receptively in the short term.

Considering the mean scores of each group on each test, immediately and after four weeks, some scores remained more or less the same, while others improved dramatically (e.g. Group A on the classroom rhyme scored 6.3 and 9.2; Group B on the same text scored 8.1 and 9.1). It is interesting that these two findings relate to the same of the four texts used – the classroom rhyme. It may be that the learners are very familiar with this type of text as it occurs often in their course books. It may also be that the test administered on this text after four weeks was easier than that administered initially (as explained earlier, two different sets of testing materials were used). Group A also went from 5.8 to 8.7 on the head and shoulders test, while Group B on this test scored 7.9 and 8. This pattern is harder to explain but does not suggest that the second test was easier.

### 6.1 Limitations

This study lacked the controls required to make claims about the causes of the results highlighted here. Some of the findings do indicate very clearly that, when they had been taught vocabulary using songs, learners performed significantly better on tests than when they had been taught the

vocabulary without songs. But this does not allow us to conclude that the songs were the reason for this difference in performance. In the four weeks between the first and second tests, learners will have had many experiences which may have affected how they performed on the later tests. It would also have been useful to have a measure of learners' knowledge of the vocabulary tested before these were taught in the ways described in this study. This would have allowed me to compare learners' scores before the study to those obtained on the two sets of tests. Finally, the fact that the immediate tests and the delayed tests were not the same is another factor that may have influenced the findings here.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study has allowed me to explore a hypotheses I have had for several years – that using songs can help children learn vocabulary more effectively. The results suggest that there is some truth in this view, though a more tightly controlled experiment is needed to make stronger claims for this position. The enjoyment and motivation children display when songs are used, though, was obvious to me throughout this study. One conclusion I take away for my teaching, then, is that the affective benefits of stories are just as important as the cognitive and linguistic ones.

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