

USING GAMES AND SONGS TO TEACH VOCABULARY IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Annotation: *Vocabulary learning remains one of the central challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This article explores the effectiveness of using games and songs to improve vocabulary retention, motivation, and communicative competence. Drawing on relevant research, it argues that both methods promote active learning, emotional engagement, and long-term memory. Games encourage collaboration and creativity, while songs enhance pronunciation and recall through rhythm and repetition. The study concludes that integrating games and songs purposefully within the curriculum transforms vocabulary lessons into dynamic and meaningful experiences that support sustainable language development.*

Keywords: *vocabulary teaching, EFL, songs, games, motivation, memory retention, communicative learning, learner engagement*

Introduction. Vocabulary is one of the essential components of language proficiency. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners cannot communicate effectively or express their thoughts clearly in English. In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, students often struggle to remember new words because they learn them in isolation or through memorization. Traditional methods such as translation lists or rote repetition do not always lead to long-term retention. Over the last few decades, teachers and researchers have begun to emphasize more interactive and engaging ways to teach vocabulary. Among these, games and songs have proven to be particularly effective because they create enjoyable learning environments that reduce anxiety and enhance memory.

The importance of using fun and motivating activities in the classroom is widely recognized in language teaching. Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (2006) note that games can make language practice more meaningful by involving learners emotionally and socially. Similarly, Schoepp (2001) argues that songs provide a natural context for language learning by combining rhythm, repetition, and emotional appeal, all of which strengthen vocabulary retention. In EFL contexts where learners often have limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom, these two methods bring the language to life. When students play a word game or sing along to a

song, they are not only memorizing vocabulary but also using it communicatively and memorably.

In addition, both songs and games encourage cooperative learning. Learners work in pairs or groups, which enhances social interaction and increases motivation. These methods also appeal to different learning styles. Auditory learners may benefit more from songs, while kinesthetic learners enjoy the movement and challenge involved in games. More importantly, such activities lower the affective filter, meaning that students feel more relaxed and confident in using new words. The emotional involvement that comes from play and music helps learners internalize vocabulary subconsciously. As Medina (1993) found in her experimental research, learners who were exposed to songs showed better vocabulary recall compared to those who studied words through traditional methods.

In the modern EFL classroom, teachers face the challenge of balancing academic rigor with student engagement. The purpose of this paper is to explore how games and songs can be effectively used to teach vocabulary, particularly in foreign language environments. The discussion will review relevant literature, explain the pedagogical benefits of each method, and highlight practical classroom applications. The ultimate aim is to show that games and songs are not just entertaining activities, but powerful tools for vocabulary acquisition when used strategically and with clear learning objectives.

The Role of Games in Vocabulary Teaching

Games have long been valued for their motivational power in the language classroom. They provide a natural context for language use, encourage participation, and promote healthy competition. According to Uberman (1998), vocabulary games are especially useful for both presenting and revising words. Through playful activities such as word bingo, memory cards, or vocabulary races, learners engage in active recall and contextual practice. Hansen (1994) also demonstrated that students who practiced vocabulary through games achieved higher retention rates than those who followed a teacher-centered approach. This suggests that the interactive element of gaming strengthens memory through repetition and meaningful use.

One of the key strengths of using games is that they transform passive learning into active engagement. Instead of simply listening to explanations, students are required to think, react, and make choices. For example, in a “word association” game, learners must connect a new word to previously learned vocabulary, activating semantic networks in the brain. This mental connection supports deeper understanding and long-term retention. Furthermore, games often involve movement and laughter, both of which contribute to positive emotional experiences. These emotions reinforce memory pathways, making vocabulary more memorable. Wright et al. (2006) point

out that well-chosen games also improve group cooperation and communication, key elements in language learning.

Digital games have also entered the classroom, offering interactive vocabulary practice through online quizzes, mobile apps, and gamified platforms. Lee and Lin (2019) found that digital game-based vocabulary learning increases motivation and allows students to take more control over their learning. Unlike traditional worksheets, games integrate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimuli, which appeal to different learner types. However, the teacher's role remains crucial in selecting games that match the linguistic level and learning goals. When properly integrated, games serve not as a distraction but as a reinforcement tool that bridges entertainment and education.

The Power of Songs in Vocabulary Teaching

Songs have an equally valuable place in the EFL classroom. They expose students to authentic language, rhythm, and pronunciation patterns while creating a joyful learning environment. Schoepp (2001) highlights three main reasons for using songs: linguistic, affective, and cognitive. Linguistically, songs provide rich examples of vocabulary in context. Affective benefits arise from the emotional pleasure of music, which lowers anxiety and boosts motivation. Cognitively, melody and rhythm enhance memory, as the repetitive structure of songs helps learners remember new words easily.

Medina (1993) conducted one of the earliest empirical studies showing that songs significantly improve vocabulary retention. She explained that music acts as a mnemonic device, helping learners associate meaning and sound. Murphey (1992) also emphasized that the repetitive nature of song lyrics supports pronunciation and fluency, as students unconsciously mimic rhythm and stress patterns. In early education, Paquette and Rieg (2008) observed that songs help young learners develop both vocabulary and literacy skills by connecting words with sound and rhythm. When teachers use songs purposefully – by pre-teaching key words, providing visuals, and engaging students in follow-up activities – songs become more than entertainment; they turn into structured vocabulary lessons.

In the classroom, teachers can select songs according to themes such as daily routines, emotions, or nature. For instance, teaching the song “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” helps children learn body-part vocabulary through repetition and movement. Adult learners might benefit from pop songs that include idiomatic expressions or phrasal verbs. The key is to design follow-up exercises such as gap-filling, synonym searches, or lyric rearranging, which help consolidate the vocabulary. As Nation (2013) reminds teachers, vocabulary learning should include both receptive and productive use, and songs can support both by offering input and encouraging output through singing and discussion.

Comparing the Two Approaches

Although games and songs differ in form, they share common pedagogical foundations. Both promote active learning, repetition, and emotional engagement. Games are more dynamic and often involve competition, while songs appeal to musical intelligence and auditory memory. The choice between them should depend on the age, proficiency level, and interests of learners. For example, younger students may respond better to songs with actions, while teenagers and adults might enjoy word puzzles, quizzes, or role-playing games.

Moreover, the combination of the two methods can produce even stronger results. Teachers may introduce new vocabulary through a song and then reinforce it with a game-based review. For instance, after listening to a song about food, students could play a “menu memory” game where they recall and categorize food-related vocabulary. Such integration ensures that vocabulary is learned through multiple channels – auditory, visual, and kinesthetic – leading to better retention.

Research by Chen (2005) also supports the communicative function of games, emphasizing how they foster interaction and negotiation of meaning. When combined with the musical and emotional influence of songs, games can transform a routine lesson into an immersive experience. Both strategies help overcome the monotony of traditional vocabulary lists, encourage spontaneous language use, and support natural acquisition rather than forced memorization. As Wright et al. (2006) suggest, the success of these activities depends largely on the teacher’s creativity and ability to adapt them to classroom needs.

Pedagogical Implications and Classroom Practice

To use these techniques effectively, teachers should consider several practical factors. First, the activity must have a clear learning objective. For example, a vocabulary bingo game might target adjectives of personality, while a song could focus on prepositions or phrasal verbs. Second, preparation and scaffolding are important. Before playing a song, teachers can introduce key words through pictures or simple definitions. During or after listening, students might fill in blanks or answer comprehension questions to reinforce meaning. For games, instructions should be clear, and the teacher should monitor language use to ensure English is practiced meaningfully.

Another important point is adaptation to proficiency level. Beginner learners need simple songs with clear repetition, whereas advanced students can analyze complex lyrics. Similarly, simple games like matching or flashcard races work well for children, while role-playing or debate games engage older learners. Teachers can also combine digital and traditional resources: for instance, using an online vocabulary game followed by group discussion or song-based reflection.

Conclusion. The use of games and songs in vocabulary teaching represents a shift from traditional teacher-centered instruction toward more learner-centered, interactive pedagogy. Both approaches have proven effective in promoting engagement, motivation, and long-term retention of new words. The literature clearly supports their value. Games, as Wright et al. (2006) and Uberman (1998) show, provide active, social, and enjoyable contexts for vocabulary practice. Songs, as emphasized by Schoepp (2001) and Medina (1993), combine rhythm and emotion to aid memory and pronunciation. When teachers integrate both methods thoughtfully, students experience vocabulary not as isolated items to memorize but as living words that carry meaning, emotion, and use.

Furthermore, these strategies foster collaboration, creativity, and confidence. They encourage learners to take risks, speak more freely, and connect emotionally with the language. In EFL contexts, where exposure to English is limited, such interactive experiences are essential. The challenge for teachers is not whether to use games and songs, but how to integrate them purposefully and align them with learning objectives. With careful planning, these methods can transform vocabulary lessons into dynamic sessions that students look forward to. As modern classrooms increasingly incorporate technology, teachers can adapt games and songs into digital formats, ensuring vocabulary learning remains both effective and enjoyable.

In conclusion, vocabulary teaching should not be confined to memorization or translation. It should inspire curiosity and creativity. Games and songs provide exactly that – an environment where language is not only learned but lived. Their combination of joy, movement, and memory ensures that words stay with learners long after the lesson ends, making them invaluable tools for every English teacher.

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