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## Teaching Algerian Third-Year Elementary-School Pupils English Vocabulary Through Songs: An Effective Instructional Tool to Enliven English Classes

(pp. 277–296)

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### Abstract

**Research objectives (aims), issues or problems:** The study accentuates the significant role that integrating songs into the teaching of English vocabulary has for third-year elementary-school pupils in Algeria. It aims to make English vocabulary acquisition effortless and fun for young learners and seeks to facilitate teaching English as a second foreign language for newly recruited instructors. In fact, a major query of this research concerns the incomprehensible lack of songs, poems, and nursery rhymes in the English textbook for third-year pupils, who are 8 to 9 years old, i.e., at an age when musical activities help them become motivated and interested in class activities. **Research methods:** To test the efficacy of songs in teaching English vocabulary to young third-year learners, the researchers opted for a true experimental research method. An experimental group of 26 pupils was exposed to nursery rhymes about numbers, colors, and family members, while a control group of 25 pupils was taught the same vocabulary items for three weeks using lessons from the textbook only.

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**A short description of the context of the presented issue:** The experiment took place in one of elementary schools in the city of Mostaganem, where the researchers' former student works as a teacher of English. The experiment lasted three weeks: from January 10 to January 31, 2023.

**Research findings:** The findings of this research indicate that the use of songs considerably improved the average vocabulary scores for the 26 young pupils in the experimental group compared to the control group. Therefore, this research paper concludes that songs enhance natural and effortless vocabulary acquisition among third-year pupils who are learning English for the first time.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Moreover, this study encourages elementary-school English teachers to give more pedagogical consideration to the use of children's songs in teaching English to their pupils so as to enliven the lessons and to raise the pupils' motivation to learn this foreign language.

**Keywords:** English as a second foreign language, English vocabulary, songs, Algerian third-year elementary pupils

## Introduction

It took more than a decade for policymakers in Algeria to decide to add English as a second foreign language to the curriculum of elementary-school education. On September 2022, the Ministry of National Education officially added it as a second foreign language (FL2) alongside French; the latter has been for over 40 years and still is considered a first foreign language (FL1) by thousands of Algerians. In fact, French has been taught in elementary schools since Algeria's independence in 1962, while English has been taught in middle and secondary schools since the early 1990s. It was only in July 2022 that the president of Algeria, Abdelmajid Tebboune, made a final decision on the subject of teaching English at the elementary level, and thus English has become part of the elementary curriculum since September 2022. As a matter of fact, integrating English

as a foreign language (EFL) in Algerian elementary schools has raised concerns among educators and researchers in the fields of teaching foreign languages and elementary education didactics over the viability and feasibility of including English as a new foreign language starting from the third year of elementary school. The inclusion of English in the elementary curriculum as a significant reform involves many motives, including primarily the englishization and anglicization of education in Algeria to meet globalized needs. Nonetheless, this sudden integration of English in the elementary curriculum from the third grade has been the subject of controversy on local media and social media since its announcement.

A 2018 study conducted by Berrahma (2018, p. 28) from the University of Tlemcen revealed that the majority of the researcher's participants, 40 parents, had positive attitudes toward the inclusion of English as a school subject in elementary education instead of delaying it until middle school. Conversely, the same study also disclosed that some participants had been exposed to negative attitudes toward introducing English in elementary school. These respondents reported a clear preference to maintain only French at this level of education.

In fact, other concerns were raised by experts in various fields, notably in child education and psycholinguistics. One of these concerns is Algerian children's ability to learn two foreign languages at once from an early age: 8 to 9 years old. For instance, Boualem Amoura, the general secretary of the Autonomous Union of Education and Training Workers, claims that the government's decision "is not sufficiently studied" and "hasty" (Middle East Eye, n.d.; author's translation). Similarly, Messaoud Boudiba, who is the spokesman of the CNAPEST union, contends that this decision must be subject to a profound reform of the elementary education sector and an overhaul of the language education system. The issue of learning two new foreign languages at once, French and English, has also recently been discussed and evoked by educators, researchers, and especially parents. Mohamed Belamri, the National Secretary of the Algerian Union of Educational Workers, claims that it is of paramount importance to take into account the "linguistic transmission," which should be effective and smooth. This integration must be supervised carefully,

scientifically, and well by Algerian experts who know the intricacies of such a process (Actors in education, 2022).

Also, according to Ben Zuhair Bilal, the spokesman of the Algerian Union of Education Workers, there must be an evaluation process in order to know the strengths and weaknesses of integrating English at this level. He suggests that English should be the first foreign language instead of French at the level of elementary education. He explains that having two foreign languages is a heavy burden on young schoolchildren's cognition. Ben Zuhair adds that there must be a careful recruitment of teachers to teach English at this level (Echaab.dz, 2023). In fact, there are thousands of professionals with a BA degree in English all across the country, and this might be itself challenging given that so far the conditions for recruiting teachers in elementary schools have not been clearly identified by the ministry. It is obvious and evident that teaching English for young learners 8 and 9 years old is quite different from teaching English to adults. For Pransiska (2016), teaching English to young learners refers to a more specialized area of teaching English that deals with younger students; it is totally different from teaching adults. When teaching young learners, we constantly have to keep in mind the fact that what we have in front of us is a mixed class with varied abilities, expectations, motivation levels, knowledge, and – last but not least – different learning styles. Thus, what seems complex and crucial is rather the way English should be taught to young learners and how to motivate them to learn this foreign language at this early age, and not whether English will compete with French.

The above statement represents the main motive behind the present study. Indeed, as experienced teachers of English, who have been practicing in various educational contexts and for different types of learners, the two researchers believe that teaching English to young learners might be more interesting and allows for a wide variety of teaching methods and techniques. In other words, the instructor is more free and independent in choosing the most suitable pedagogical tools to manage language difficulties in their classes. Correspondingly – and due to the incomprehensible lack of songs, poems, and nursery rhymes in the English textbook for third-year pupils – the two researchers hypothesized

that songs can be the most effective teaching material to make learning EFL easy and fun for young beginners, mainly with regard to learning new vocabulary items. Therefore, this study aims to emphasize how integrating children's songs in English classes for third-year pupils might be beneficial for learners and teachers in terms of facilitating the learning of vocabulary and increasing learners' motivation to learn English as a second foreign language alongside French.

## Literature review

### Child education and foreign language learning

The early childhood phase that spans the period up to age of 8 years is the most striking and remarkable stage in the life of children, as it is critical for their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. During these early years, the child's newly developing brain is highly plastic and responsive to any kind of change, as billions of integrated neural circuits are established through genetic, environmental, and experiential interactions. Therefore, favorable brain development does require support, a stimulating environment, adequate nutrition, and attentive interaction with the members of the child's social environment. In this regard, as the most influential figures in developmental psychology, Piaget's (1962b, 1964, 1972, 1983) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories explain how children develop their cognitive and social abilities. Piaget focused on providing children with opportunities and supporting them to expand their current level or input hypothesis ( $i+1$ ), as Stephen Krashen (1981, 1985) calls it.

By input hypothesis " $i+1$ " (where " $i$ " is the learner's interlanguage and " $+1$ " is the next stage of second-language acquisition), the linguist Stephen Krashen (1981, 1985) means that learning is most effective when adding one language difficulty level to the learners' current level; in other words, Krashen attempted to explain that acquiring a second language requires meaningful interactions in the target language through natural communication, in which speakers concentrate on the communicative act.

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In fact, both Piaget (1964) and Vygotsky (1978) argue that knowledge is constructed and that children's abilities would be reachable and shaped depending on their cognitive development and environments (informal/formal education and culture). They both supported child-centered learning approaches and peer learning. Also, for Vygotsky (1978), the association between culture and language helps children develop their mental abilities with the support they receive from "more knowledgeable others" to pursue their learning.

#### **Piaget's cognitive theory in relation to how children learn**

As one of the most influential figures in the field of cognition and early childhood child development, Jean Piaget (1964) highlights in his theory of cognitive development four significant stages of childhood cognitive growth:

- A. sensorimotor stage: birth to 2 years
- B. preoperational stage: ages 2 to 7
- C. concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11
- D. formal operational stage: ages 12 and over

For Piaget (1964), children are more active in receiving knowledge and understanding the nature of intelligence through a continual process of building children's cognitive abilities. He believes that children take an active role in the learning process to discover the world through observation, going through assimilation and accommodation. They easily interact with their environment, continually add new knowledge, and build upon existing knowledge in order to develop their innate linguistic competence. In this respect, learning at the age of 5 to 9 years establishes the foundation from which the child learns. This stage is challenging in a child's educational journey. It is a crucial childhood phase, so parents and teachers should pay adequate attention to the child's physical, cognitive, and psychological growth during this phase. Both parents and teachers must impart sufficient knowledge to children at this stage regarding academic concepts, play activities, arts, sports, games, and good manners (Saracho, 2021). On the other hand, teachers and parents must

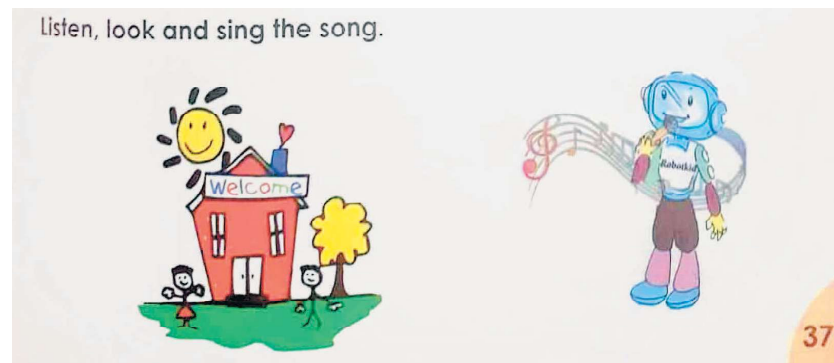
ensure that children learn playfully and joyfully. Teachers, in particular, must believe that play versus learning represents a false dichotomy in education (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008). By the same token, Zosh et al. (2018) contend that play and learning mutually support one another and that teachers must connect learning goals to children's play. Therefore, by maximizing children's choices, promoting wonder and enthusiasm for learning, and leveraging joy, playful learning pedagogies support development across domains and content areas and increase learning relative to more didactic methods (Alferi et al., 2011; Sim & Xu, 2017).

As for learning foreign languages during early childhood, this process represents both a challenge and a reward for children and their parents. In this respect, many experts believe that learning a foreign language before the age of ten allows children to speak it correctly and fluently. Therefore, the earlier children become familiar with a foreign language, the better chances they have of speaking it proficiently. In fact, because language learning does improve many skills – cognitive, psychological, and communicative – young learners need lifelong abilities for different walks of life; many researchers and child education experts advocate learning at least two foreign languages at an early age (Wanninge et al., 2014; Gimatdinova, 2018; Qu & Damian, 2019). Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011) contend that children learn foreign languages naturally. They believe that exposing children to a foreign language allows them to optimize their learning potential and helps develop their brains at their most flexible stage. With this logic and for this purpose, Algeria's policymakers have decided to incorporate English into elementary education since September 2022.

Nonetheless, as former instructors of EFL in elementary education, we strongly argue that exposing our children to foreign languages only in schools does not develop their language skills. Moreover, when reading through the textbook of English for third-year pupils, we noticed that there are very few interesting games that may make learning playful and joyful. Nevertheless, we are skeptical regarding the practicality of these games, knowing that the time allotted for English during a week is only an hour and a half. We contend that this amount of allotted time does

not allow the English teachers to introduce these games since, in most elementary schools in Algeria, the minimum number of pupils per class exceeds 20. Therefore, we believe that the few games that the textbook contains do not bring enough fun and playfulness to English classes. Moreover, as for the exposure to the language, the number of English sessions per week needs to be increased for learners to be exposed to the language. Two sessions a week does not provide teachers with extra time to have gamified activities such as those contained in the textbook *My Book of English 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Elementary School* (2022, p. 37).

**Figure 1. Listen, look and sing the song activity (*My Book of English for 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Primary School*)**



Indeed, the two hours a week of English lessons are by no means sufficient for young learners to be exposed to the language, as argued above. The two sessions of English are not long enough to create a productive language learning environment. In the words of Baroto (2017, pp. 3–4), the language learning environment includes macro-environmental and micro-environmental factors. The former refer to exposure to the target language, whether natural or formal, while the latter are the broad overall characteristics of the language environment – the specific structures the learner hears. Dulay et al. (1982) investigated the effect of micro-environmental factors: salience, feedback, and frequency. The effect of a macro-environmental factor refers to the naturalness of exposure.



Therefore, exposure can be categorized into two types: natural and formal. When the speaker's focus is on the form of the language, the language environment is formal and when the focus is on the content of communication, the language environment is natural. By the same token, Galatro (2022) asserts that children have environmental advantages over most adults when learning a language. For Galatro, young children should not be formally instructed in languages like adults and older children. Young children learn by being immersed in multilingual environments. They passively "absorb" the language through contact. When formally instructed, it is through games and songs, not verb conjugation and exams. Unfortunately, foreign language learning in Algerian elementary education, whether for French as a foreign language or EFL, does not correspond to what Galatro refers to. As a response to this inadequacy of the Algerian elementary curriculum in child language learning, the aim of this research is to emphasize and draw attention to the priority that should be given to exposing third-graders to a natural language learning environment through songs, games, and role-playing – through which they get immersed in learning.

In the foreign language classroom, songs and games in particular promote pedagogical diversity and contribute to effective learning, especially in regards to pronunciation, fluency, listening comprehension, memorization of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and cultural awareness (Arleo, 2000, p. 5). In the following section, we analyze how songs, music, and nursery rhymes are an effective pedagogical foreign language teaching tool in elementary education.

### **Songs, music, and nursery rhymes for playful foreign language learning in elementary education**

As EFL instructors for more than ten years, we assert and emphasize that one of the best ways for learners to learn a foreign language is by listening to songs and nursery rhymes. This claim is backed up with a myriad of arguments by many other researchers (Degrave, 2019; Jamouille, 2017; Tse, 2015; Engh, 2013) who have revealed that foreign language teachers are often positive regarding the crucial role that songs and nursery rhymes

play in child language learning. Many language teachers believe that songs can promote foreign language acquisition and can help learners gain major language skills, mainly for children. Songs also serve as motivational tools for encouraging young learners to learn the foreign language outside the classroom, as they continue singing and repeating the songs and nursery rhymes pleasurably. Many researchers, like Jamoulle (2017), also argue that songs create a good, enjoyable, relaxing atmosphere and that they lower stress levels mainly for children who are learning a foreign language for the first time, as is the case for third-year pupils in Algerian elementary schools.

In fact, it is obvious that songs significantly impact the young learners' capacity to memorize vocabulary in a foreign language. In this regard, numerous studies have proved that the potential effect of musical foreign language teaching methodology on vocabulary recall is highly significant. For instance, De Groot's study (2006) analyzes the effect of background music on vocabulary recall in 36 university students, while Murphy (1990, pp. 55–56) argues that songs could help one easily remember vocabulary or phrases. Murphy states that an involuntary mental rehearsal does occur after a period of contact with a foreign language in which the new information repeats without the speaker's intentional effort. He adds that the rehearsal of language from music, or the phenomenon of a song "stuck in one's head," helps foreign language learners remember a significant number of words effortlessly (1990, p. 59). Unfortunately, in the Algerian context, very few studies and surveys have been undertaken to test and prove the viability of integrating songs and nursery rhymes in English classes, mainly for middle school learners, given that teaching English in elementary schools, as mentioned earlier, is recent and incompletely implemented.

There could be many reasons behind the disregard for the pedagogical role of songs and nursery rhymes in English classes in Algerian schools. One of the main factors that cause teachers to avoid using songs in teaching English in Algerian schools is the overloaded curriculum and the insufficient time allotted for such activities. While private schools may allow teachers some space or freedom to include musical activities and

songs, teachers in public schools are often reluctant to add these activities due to the condensed syllabus and the crowded classes they have. In fact, teachers must be aware of the salient role that nursery rhymes, in particular, can play in EFL classes for young children between 7 and 8 years old. York (2011) describes children's songs as simple poetry in nature written with a specific language that young children can learn and enjoy. Mello et al. (2022, p. 1916) explain that language acquisition among elementary school children can be heightened by using rhymes and songs in the classroom, because they enclose new lexis, culture, pronunciation, and intonation in an easy and adaptable package. This done in a way that is quite easy for the children to follow and learn steadily. Based on this assumption, the research study was embarked upon, as we believe that what is lacking in the pedagogical aspect of the English textbook for third-year elementary pupils is songs.

Knowing that many Algerian parents nowadays make their children watch and listen to children's songs and nursery rhymes in English on YouTube, and having noticed that English language learning among young children has become very common in Algerian society over the last few years, we can anticipate that the integration of songs in teaching English for young learners will receive positive attitudes and perceptions from the schoolchildren, their parents, and therefore, the teachers. In the following sections, then, we present various details of our research study, including the context, participants, and data collection tools.

## Method

To test our hypothesis about employing songs in English classes for third-year pupils and its benefits for the learners and teachers in terms of facilitating vocabulary learning and increasing learners' motivation, we opted for a true experimental design. In the words of Skidmore (2008), experimental designs are distinguished as the best method to respond to questions involving causality; in our study, the ultimate objective was to investigate whether the integration of songs in teaching English to

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young learners would augment the vocabulary memorized and/or increase the learners' motivation.

To put our experiment into effect, we agreed with our former student, who is currently an elementary-school English teacher in one of Mostaganem's schools, to involve her and her pupils as our participants. The teacher's two classes represent our control and experimental groups. The first class consisted of 25 pupils and comprises the control group, which was not exposed to changes: they were taught only with the textbook. The second class consisted of 26 pupils and comprises the experimental group, which was taught through nursery rhymes.

### Procedure

The experiment lasted only three weeks because of the short time allotted for English classes. It started on January 10 and ended on January 31. Pupils of the experimental and control group were observed during their English lessons so as to identify the changes that would have occurred throughout the experiment. Both groups were administered the pre-test during the first week, consisting of 20 questions that test the pupils' knowledge of basic English vocabulary. These questions were divided into two tasks. The first task entailed ten questions about numbers and colors in English. The second task also contains ten questions, and it asks the pupils to match pictures with the corresponding words about family members (father, brother, grandpa, grandma, etc.).

During the first week, at the end of the session and in no more than ten minutes, the teacher started preparing the learners for the second-week experiment to find out their preferences and prepare them by asking some questions: (1) Do you watch YouTube song videos at home? (2) If yes, with whom and how often do you watch song videos per day? (3) Would you please name one or two songs? At the same time, the teacher began to observe the learners' reactions and attitudes toward the given songs.

Starting from the second week, the experimental group pupils were taught lessons about numbers, colors, and family members using song

videos. The children’s songs selected for these lessons were “Number Song 1–20 for Children | Counting Numbers | The Singing Walrus,” “Dream English Kids’ Color Song for Kids: Learn 9 Colors,” and “Our Family – Nursery Rhymes for Children.” We selected these videos for the funny and cartoonish animations they contain and for their conciseness. The three lessons took place over two weeks. As for the control group pupils, they were taught the same vocabulary items using the textbook only. The teacher used Task 11 on page 12 to teach the pupils numbers. She used Tasks 3 and 4 on page 20 to teach them colors and Task 8 on page 11 to teach “family members” vocabulary.

After two weeks, the researchers provided the teacher with the post-test tasks and questions to test the difference in vocabulary acquisition in the two groups. These were the same as the pre-test tasks to detect the improvements that each group had made. In the following section, we present the scores of each group. By analyzing these scores, we deduce whether the pupils were able to learn effortlessly and joyfully the English vocabulary through songs or textbook tasks.

### Results and Discussion

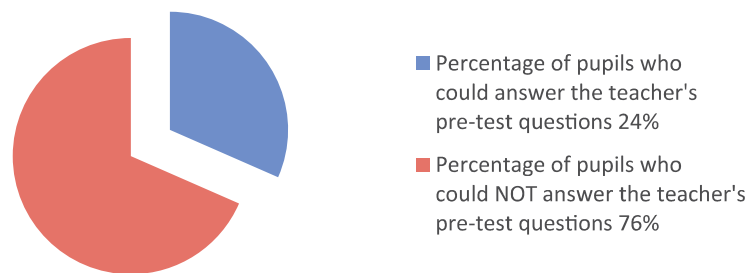
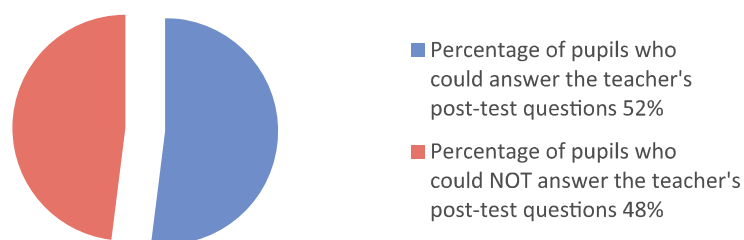
In the pre-test, both groups performed similarly in answering the questions. In the control group, 19 out of 25 pupils (76%) could not respond to the two tasks, while six pupils (24%) could easily answer our questions properly. These six pupils are exposed to English in their family environment through YouTube videos and mobile applications. In the experimental group, 21 pupils (80.77%) could not answer the two tasks and only five pupils (19.23%) responded to the two tasks almost correctly. Thus, these percentages reveal that there was no significant difference between the scores of the control group and the experimental group in terms of vocabulary knowledge.

In the post-test, however, the scores of the experimental group had significantly increased, while those of the control group remained average, as presented in Table 1.

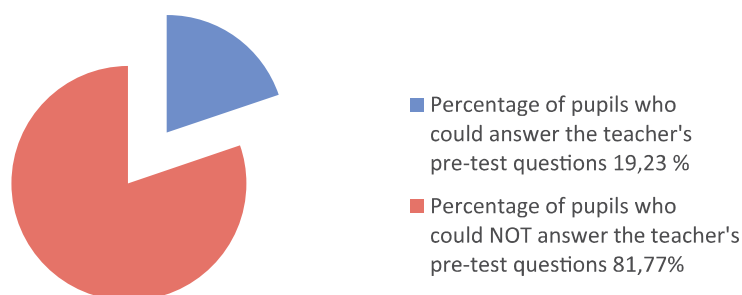
**Table 1**

Group	Pre-test score	Post-test score
Control group	24%	52%
Experimental group	19.23%	70.03%

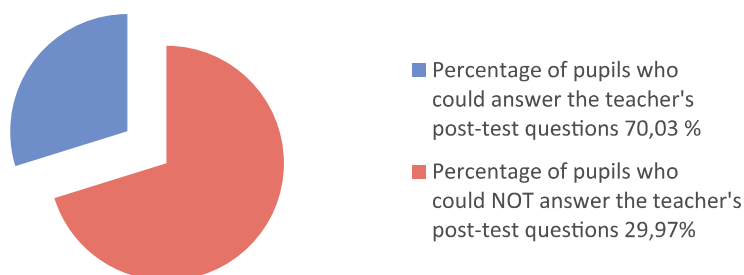
Below, the researchers recapitulate the results they obtained from their former student, who was in charge of the experiment.

**Figure 2. Pre-test results of the control group****Figure 3. Post-test results of the control group**

**Figure 4. Pre-test results of the experimental group**



**Figure 5. Post-test results of the experimental group**



Figures 2–5 present the overall results of the study conducted by the teacher of the two groups. These graphs clearly show that the percentage of pupils who were able to answer the tasks given to them before the experiment (pre-test) was very low in both groups in comparison to the percentage of who could answer the post-test questions and had retained the target vocabulary in the experimental group. Figures 2 and 3 represent the scores of the control group, which was not exposed to nursery rhymes, before and after the experiment. The percentage of pupils in this group who remembered the vocabulary about numbers, colors, and family members increased from 24% to 52% (from 6 pupils to 13); obviously, this is not a significant improvement. This result was expected by the teacher herself.

As for Figures 4 and 5, they display the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group, which was taught the selected vocabulary items with nursery rhymes. The percentage of the pupils who were able to answer the tasks and had retained the target vocabulary increased from 19.23% to 70.03%, that is to say, from 5 to 19 pupils; this is a significant and remarkable improvement.

The other variable we tested before and after the experiment was the pupils' motivation. The teacher observed that the level of motivation to learn English vocabulary in the two groups was almost the same in the pre-test, but increased after the experiment in the post-test; in other words, the pupils in the two classes were excited to learn English words through meaningful interactions (Krashen, 1982) and to develop their cognitive and social abilities. Pupils' excitement and motivation significantly increase when they are learning in a playful, joyful, and fun environment, as already proven by Piaget (1962b, 1964, 1972, 1983) and Vygotsky (1978). In fact, the pupils' level of motivation was related to the teacher herself in the pre-test phase. However, according to the teacher again, during the experiment, pupils in the experimental group were highly motivated and energized to learn and sing. There was clear playfulness during her sessions with the experimental group, as the whole class sang the songs cheerfully. However, most pupils in the control group were passive during the same sessions when reading and doing tasks from the textbook. The rise of motivation for the experimental group while learning through nursery rhymes and music corresponds to what Piaget (1964) referred to when he argued that children take an active role in the learning process to discover the world through observation – going through assimilation and accommodation – and they can easily interact with their environment. This is exactly what happened with the experimental group when they learned in a joyful, playful, and fun environment through singing.

Therefore, the results above show that the use of nursery rhymes with the experimental group significantly increased the vocabulary acquisition scores among pupils in this group. As for the results of the control group, they clearly need to improve in terms of vocabulary acquisition



and even the level of motivation. Therefore, we can deduce from comparing the two scores that using children's songs during English class does help young pupils in developing their vocabulary.

### Conclusion

The aim of the study was to reveal the significant role of songs in teaching English to third-year learners of elementary school in Algeria. As a response to the absence of songs and nursery rhymes in the third-year textbook of English, this research aims to expose this weakness – mainly to novice teachers of English who are chiefly responsible for successfully teaching this new foreign language to our elementary school-children. In fact, this article has proven that teaching English vocabulary in the classroom for young learners through songs not only increases the rate of retaining various vocabulary items effortlessly, but also raises the pupils' motivation to learn in a joyful, lively environment.

On the other hand, although our experiment was with only one teacher and her two classes of third-year elementary level, we contend that the findings of this study are replicable in other socioeconomic contexts; in other words, whether in rural or urban areas of Algeria, or in private or public schools, young children will always love to learn English through songs because it is amusing and cheerful.

Indeed, this research targets novice teachers of English in Algerian elementary schools, mainly those recruited without prior experience in teaching children this foreign language. We also estimate that this study will represent for other researchers a good perspective from which to embark upon similar research so as to authenticate the present study's findings.

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