

IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS OF PRIMARY EFL STUDENTS THROUGH SONGS AND POEMS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20593964>

Abstract. *The development of speaking skills in primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms presents both a pressing pedagogical challenge and a fertile area for methodological innovation. This article examines the theoretical and empirical foundations of using songs and poems as systematic instruments for improving the oral speech capacities of primary school learners aged six to eleven.*

Keywords: *speaking skills, primary EFL, songs and poems, phonological awareness, affective filter, scaffolding.*

The acquisition of spoken English represents one of the most consequential and most challenging goals of primary foreign language education. Young learners who develop strong oral communication skills in the early years of schooling are better positioned to build upon those foundations across their entire educational trajectory. The centrality of speaking skill development in primary EFL is recognised in Uzbekistan's national educational framework, where Presidential Decree No. PF-134 of May 2022 calls for a communicative and learner-centred approach to English teaching with particular emphasis on meaningful oral communication from the earliest years of instruction.¹

This article proposes that songs and poems, deployed within a principled, theoretically grounded methodological framework, offer one of the most powerful and practically accessible solutions to this challenge. The argument rests on convergent evidence from developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition research, all of which support the conclusion that musical and poetic texts provide an optimal environment for primary EFL speaking skill development.

The theoretical case for using songs and poems in primary EFL speaking instruction rests on several converging bodies of evidence. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) — the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with the assistance of a more competent other — has profound implications for EFL speaking instruction.² Songs and poems function as powerful scaffolding tools within the ZPD: their rhythmic and melodic structure, combined with the teacher's modelling and the protective cover of choral group performance, allows children to produce language that they

¹ Presidential Decree No. PF-134 (2022). On approval of the national program for the development of public education in 2022–2026. Republic of Uzbekistan.

² Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press, p. 86.

could not yet generate independently, while repeated encounters gradually move this language into the zone of autonomous competence.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that learners possess a psychological filter that, when raised by anxiety, self-consciousness, or low motivation, prevents comprehensible input from being processed and acquired.³ Songs and poems are uniquely effective at lowering this affective filter: they are inherently enjoyable, they permit participation within the safety of the group voice, they generate positive emotional engagement through melody and rhythm, and they create a sense of shared communal experience that reduces the threat of individual exposure. The Input Hypothesis further supports song-based instruction by emphasising that acquisition is driven by comprehensible input slightly beyond the learner's current competence — input whose comprehensibility is maximised by the contextual scaffolding, visual support, and repetition that songs provide.⁴

One of the most direct and well-documented benefits of song and poem use in primary EFL is the development of phonological awareness — the capacity to perceive and manipulate the sound structure of language at the levels of syllables, rhymes, and phonemes. Phonological awareness is a foundational skill for all subsequent language development: research consistently shows that it is among the strongest predictors of both reading development and spoken language proficiency in first and second language contexts.⁵

Songs and poems develop phonological awareness through multiple, mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Rhyme draws the learner's attention to the shared sound structure of words, building implicit knowledge of phonemic categories and the internal sound structure of lexical items. Consider the following verses from the classic English nursery rhyme 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star':

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.*

The rhyming pairs star/are and high/sky make the shared phonological structure of these word-pairs highly salient to young listeners, developing sensitivity to the internal sound patterns of English without any explicit metalinguistic instruction. The rhythmic beat of the song further amplifies English stress-timing — the alternation of strong and weak syllables that organises the rhythmic structure of spoken English — making it physically participable through clapping and movement, and helping Uzbek-speaking learners, whose native language is syllable-timed, to internalise the fundamentally different rhythmic framework of English.

For Uzbek-speaking learners of English, this prosodic dimension of song-based instruction is of particular urgency. The stress-timed rhythm of English represents one of the most profound prosodic differences between the two languages, and one of the most significant sources of foreign-accented speech. Songs and poems that embed language in strongly stress-timed musical structures provide an environment in which this new rhythmic framework can be

³Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press, p. 31.

⁴Krashen, S.D. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. Longman, p. 2.

⁵Goswami, U. (2006). Phonological and lexical processes. In M. Traxler (Ed.), *The Handbook of Psycholinguistics*. Blackwell, p. 593.

felt in the body and heard with the ear across dozens of repetitions, gradually consolidating into the automatic, embodied prosodic knowledge that underlies natural-sounding spoken English.⁶

Beyond their role in phonological development, songs and poems make a substantial contribution to the vocabulary growth and oral fluency that are prerequisite to effective speaking.

Psycholinguistic research on formulaic language — the prefabricated sequences of words that fluent speakers store and retrieve as wholes rather than assembling from their component parts — highlights the particular value of songs and poems as sources of high-quality formulaic input.⁷ Every repetition of a song reinforces the formulaic strings it contains, increasing the speed and automaticity of their retrieval and moving them progressively toward the effortless, native-like deployment that characterises fluent speech.

The chant 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' illustrates this principle clearly. As children repeat the chant across multiple lessons, the formulaic sequences head, shoulders, knees and toes and eyes and ears and mouth and nose are stored as lexical chunks in long-term memory, available for rapid retrieval without the processing cost of rule-governed word-by-word construction. The physical actions accompanying the chant simultaneously deepen the contextual encoding of these chunks, creating multiple retrieval pathways that reinforce retention and accelerate automatisisation.

The 'song-stuck-in-my-head' phenomenon documented by Murphey — the well-known tendency of songs to replay involuntarily in the listener's mind long after the original hearing — is of additional significance for vocabulary consolidation.⁸ It means that the linguistic content of songs continues to be rehearsed cognitively outside the classroom, providing additional exposures and consolidation that no other teaching material can match without deliberate learner effort.

In conclusion, songs and poems occupy a uniquely powerful and well-grounded position in primary EFL speaking instruction. The convergent evidence of sociocultural theory, SLA research, cognitive neuroscience, and psycholinguistics supports the conclusion that musical and poetic texts simultaneously provide optimal conditions for phonological awareness development, formulaic language acquisition, oral fluency building, and the affective engagement that speaking skill development requires.

For primary EFL learners in Uzbekistan, where the prosodic challenges of English stress-timing and the undervaluation of oral language learning create particular barriers to speaking development, songs and poems represent a methodological resource of exceptional practical value. Consistent, principled implementation of a graduated song- and poem-based methodology has the potential to produce measurable improvements in primary learners' oral confidence, phonological accuracy, and speaking fluency.

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⁶Patel, A.D. (2008). *Music, Language, and the Brain*. Oxford University Press, p. 96.

⁷Wray, A. (2002). *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*. Cambridge University Press, p. 9.

⁸Murphey, T. (1992). *Music and Song*. Oxford University Press, p. 3.

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