ENHANCING EFL LEARNING THROUGH SONGS AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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Abstract

This study examined the contribution of integrating songs and digital storytelling (DST) into vocabulary instruction for young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in North Macedonia. The study included 64 first-grade pupils, aged 6–7, at Primary School "Bratstvo Migjeni" in Tetovo. A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design was used. The pupils were organised into an experimental group (n = 32), which received instruction enriched with songs and digital stories, and a control group (n = 32), which followed regular textbook-based instruction. The intervention lasted nine weeks and consisted of two 40-minute sessions per week. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, classroom observation checklists, and a structured questionnaire completed by ten English teachers. The overall pre-test results showed that approximately 44% of pupils were at the Excellent or Good levels. In the post-test, 72% of the experimental group were classified at these two levels, compared with 47% of the control group. In the post-test, 9% of pupils in the experimental group and 22% in the control group were classified as Poor. Teachers' responses were generally positive: 70% identified vocabulary acquisition and retention as the main benefit of songs, while 80% considered digital storytelling helpful for developing listening, speaking, and sentence-building skills. The findings suggested that combining music, visual support, and narrative contexts could support vocabulary learning and classroom engagement among young EFL learners. As pre-test results were reported for the whole sample rather than separately by group, the post-test differences were interpreted descriptively.

Keywords: EFL, vocabulary acquisition, songs, digital storytelling, young learners, primary education

1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is central to foreign language learning because it enables learners to understand messages, follow classroom instructions, and communicate meaningfully. For young learners, a developing vocabulary provides the foundation for later progress in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Schmitt, 2000). However, vocabulary instruction based mainly on memorisation, translation, and repetitive drills may provide limited opportunities for learners to encounter and use words in meaningful contexts.
Songs and digital storytelling (DST) offer complementary ways of presenting language. Songs expose learners to rhythm, melody, repetition, pronunciation patterns, and recurring vocabulary. Digital stories combine images, written language, narration, and other audiovisual elements to place words within a meaningful narrative. These features can make language input more accessible and engaging for children. According to Krashen (1982), comprehensible input that is slightly beyond the learner's current level (i+1) facilitates acquisition. Songs and DST provide rich, contextualized input in an engaging format, ensuring that learners encounter new vocabulary in meaningful and memorable ways.
The use of songs can also support repeated exposure to vocabulary and encourage participation through singing, gestures, clapping, and movement. Previous research examined the contribution of songs to vocabulary development among first-grade EFL learners (Çevikbaş et al., 2018). Digital storytelling, in turn, can provide contextualised language input and opportunities to respond to stories, identify objects and actions, and retell events. It has also been discussed as a communicative approach in EFL classrooms, with potential benefits for language learning and learner engagement (Al-Amri, 2020).
This study investigated the integration of songs and digital storytelling in first-grade EFL lessons at Primary School "Bratstvo Migjeni" in Tetovo. It addressed three research questions:

1. How did pupils perform in vocabulary and listening comprehension following the integration of songs and digital storytelling? 2. How did the post-test performance of pupils exposed to songs and digital storytelling differ from that of pupils receiving regular textbook-based instruction? 3. What were teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness and feasibility of integrating songs and digital storytelling in EFL classrooms?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design and participants

The study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design. It involved 64 first-grade pupils aged 6–7 at Primary School "Bratstvo Migjeni" in Tetovo. Two intact classes were used: an experimental group of 32 pupils and a control group of 32 pupils. The use of intact classes reflected the practical organisation of the school setting; pupils were not randomly assigned individually. Participation was voluntary. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school, and informed consent was obtained from the pupils' parents before the study began. Before the intervention, all 64 pupils completed a pre-test to establish their initial performance. The pre-test results were analysed and reported for the entire sample rather than separately for the two groups.
The experimental group received instruction incorporating songs and digital storytelling, while the control group continued with regular textbook-based instruction. The intervention lasted nine weeks, with two 40-minute sessions per week.

2.2 Instructional materials and procedure

The songs were selected according to their relevance to first-grade vocabulary modules and their suitability for young learners. They included "Hello Kids Greeting and Feeling Song", "School Supplies Song", "Color Song for Kids", "If You Are Happy and You Know It", and "The Wheels on the Bus". The songs provided repeated exposure to vocabulary related to greetings, feelings, classroom objects, colours, actions, and transport.
Digital stories were designed around familiar themes, including family members, toys, animals, daily routines, and food. The instructional resources included educational songs, teacher-designed PowerPoint presentations with audio, animations, and visuals, as well as short digital stories created using Canva and StoryJumper. Flashcards, real objects, worksheets, and other visual aids were also used to support comprehension.
In the experimental group, lessons included an initial listening stage, visual and gestural support, repetition and imitation, interactive participation, digital-story presentation, comprehension questions, and guided retelling or acting out of story events. Vocabulary introduced through the stories was reinforced through songs, matching activities, colouring, drawing, and other worksheets. The control group continued with regular textbook-based instruction and classroom exercises without integrating songs and digital storytelling as part of the intervention.
Both the pre-test and post-test were designed by the researcher to assess pupils' vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension related to the instructional content. They included picture-matching, listening, and identification tasks. Structured observation checklists were used throughout the nine-week intervention to monitor pupils' participation, engagement, and vocabulary performance. Separate checklists were completed for all 32 pupils in the experimental group and all 32 pupils in the control group. Each criterion was scored on a three-point scale (0–2), with a maximum of 10 points per pupil. Although the activities differed between the groups, the common scoring system enabled the observation of pupils' classroom

engagement and vocabulary development under the two instructional approaches. In addition, ten English teachers completed a structured questionnaire consisting of ten multiple-choice questions concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness and benefits of songs and digital storytelling, as well as the practical challenges of using these approaches in the classroom.

2.3 Data analysis

The study employed descriptive quantitative and qualitative analysis. Test results were summarised as numbers and percentages across four performance levels: Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor. The experimental and control groups were compared based on their post-test distributions. Questionnaire responses were summarised as percentages, while the observation checklist results were examined descriptively, focusing on pupils' participation, vocabulary pronunciation, vocabulary use in sentences, engagement, and word recognition. The comparisons were descriptive, and no inferential statistical tests were conducted.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Pre-test results

As shown in Table 1, all 64 pupils completed the pre-test before the intervention began. Eleven pupils (17%) were classified as Excellent, 17 (27%) as Good, 21 (33%) as Fair, and 15 (23%) as Poor. Thus, 44% of pupils were at the Excellent or Good levels, while 56% were at the Fair or Poor levels. The overall pre-test results indicated that a substantial proportion of the pupils needed further support in vocabulary and listening comprehension.

Table 1. Overall pre-test performance (N = 64)

Performance level	Number of pupils	Percentage
Excellent	11	17%
Good	17	27%
Fair	21	33%
Poor	15	23%
Total	64	100%

3.2 Post-test comparison of the two groups

The post-test results, presented in Table 2, revealed a more favourable distribution of performance levels in the experimental group than in the control group. In the control group, 8 pupils (25%) achieved an Excellent level, 7 (22%) a Good level, 10 (31%) a Fair level, and 7 (22%) a Poor level. In comparison, in the experimental group, 13 pupils (41%) achieved an Excellent level, 10 (31%) a Good level, 6 (19%) a Fair level, and 3 (9%) a Poor level. When the two higher performance categories (Excellent and Good) were combined, 72% of pupils in the experimental group achieved these levels, compared with 47% in the control group, representing a difference of 25 percentage points. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils classified at the Poor level was 13 percentage points lower in the experimental group (9%) than in the control group (22%). Overall, these descriptive findings indicate more favourable post-test performance in the experimental group, which received instruction enriched with songs and digital storytelling. However, the results should be interpreted cautiously, as the pre-test results were reported for the entire sample rather than separately for each group. This finding is broadly consistent with Fadhila (2022), who reported a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary mastery among elementary EFL students following instruction with English

songs. Similarly, Maya and Al Halim (2021) reported an improvement in young learners' vocabulary mastery following the implementation of digital storytelling.

Table 2. Overall post-test performance: control and experimental groups

Performance level	Control group (n=32)	Experimental group (n=32)	Difference (percentage points)
Excellent	25% (8)	41% (13)	+16
Good	22% (7)	31% (10)	+9
Fair	31% (10)	19% (6)	−12
Poor	22% (7)	9% (3)	−13
Excellent + Good	47% (15)	72% (23)	+25

The results are consistent with the instructional rationale of the intervention. Songs offered repeated and rhythmically structured exposure to target words, while digital stories presented vocabulary through images, narration, and a narrative context. Pupils could hear, see, repeat, identify, and use vocabulary during connected activities rather than encountering words only as isolated items. This combination may have supported recognition and recall while also encouraging active participation. The findings are in line with research discussing the role of songs in vocabulary development (Çevikbaş et al., 2018; Mannarelli & Serrano, 2024) and the pedagogical use of digital storytelling in EFL contexts (Al-Amri, 2020; Sadik, 2008).

The post-test distributions should not, however, be interpreted as proof of statistical significance or as evidence that the intervention alone caused every observed difference. The design used intact classes, and the results are reported descriptively. The study nevertheless provides classroom-based evidence that the combined approach was associated with a more favourable distribution of performance levels in this sample.

3.3 Teachers' perceptions

Ten English teachers completed a ten-question questionnaire. Munajah et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of teachers' perceptions when considering the use of digital storytelling in classroom practice. Overall, their responses reflected positive perceptions of the educational value of songs and digital storytelling. Seven teachers (70%) identified vocabulary acquisition and retention as the main benefit of songs, while two (20%) emphasised motivation and participation, and one (10%) selected grammar learning. Regarding digital storytelling, eight teachers (80%) considered it helpful for developing listening, speaking, and sentence-building skills; one teacher (10%) selected listening, and one (10%) selected speaking.

Nine teachers (90%) considered primary school pupils the age group most suited to learning through songs. Eight teachers (80%) associated digital storytelling with creative thinking and learner engagement. All ten teachers (100%) considered analysing song lyrics important for language learning. In relation to the challenges of using digital stories, six teachers (60%) identified a lack of resources, while two (20%) mentioned limited student motivation and two (20%) mentioned technical difficulties. Nine teachers (90%) selected student-created video stories with music as the most effective way to combine songs and digital storytelling.

These responses suggest that teachers viewed the two strategies as potentially useful for language learning and engagement, while also recognising practical barriers to their implementation. The reported lack of resources and technical difficulties highlight the importance of considering schools' available facilities when planning digital activities. The use of adaptable resources, shared materials, printed pictures, and classroom objects may offer practical alternatives when digital equipment is limited.

3.4 Classroom observations

Separate observation checklists were completed for all 32 pupils in the experimental group and all 32 pupils in the control group throughout the nine-week intervention. The checklists included five criteria: participation in activities, vocabulary pronunciation, vocabulary use in sentences, engagement in lessons, and ability to recognise words. Each criterion was assessed on a three-point scale (0–2), with a maximum score of 10 points per pupil.

The observation process provided additional descriptive information about pupils' participation, engagement, and vocabulary performance during the intervention. In the experimental group, pupils participated in song-based activities, imitated phrases from digital stories, and engaged in related classroom tasks. These observations complemented the post-test findings by providing insight into pupils' classroom participation. However, they should be interpreted descriptively and do not independently establish a causal relationship between the teaching approach and learning outcomes.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the use of songs and digital storytelling in vocabulary instruction for first-grade EFL learners. The descriptive comparison of post-test results showed that 72% of pupils in the experimental group achieved Excellent or Good performance, compared with 47% in the control group, representing a difference of 25 percentage points. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils classified as Poor was lower in the experimental group (9%) than in the control group (22%). The teacher questionnaire also indicated generally positive perceptions of the contribution of songs and digital storytelling to vocabulary learning, language skills, creativity, and classroom engagement.

The findings suggest that combining music, visual support, and narrative contexts can be a practical way to enrich early EFL instruction. Teachers may consider selecting age-appropriate songs, linking target vocabulary to familiar story themes, using gestures and real objects to support meaning, and revisiting new words through short interactive tasks. At the same time, successful implementation requires attention to available equipment, preparation time, and access to suitable digital resources.

The study had several limitations. It involved 64 first-grade pupils from one school and lasted nine weeks. The lessons were delivered by the researcher, who was also the classroom teacher, which may have influenced the results. The groups consisted of intact classes rather than individually randomised participants. In addition, pre-test results were reported for the entire sample rather than separately for each group, limiting the possibility of establishing whether the groups had comparable starting levels. Therefore, the post-test differences should be interpreted descriptively rather than as definitive evidence of a causal effect. The study also did not include a delayed post-test to measure long-term vocabulary retention.

Future research could involve more schools and age groups, extend the intervention period, include delayed assessments, and use appropriate inferential statistical procedures. These steps would help determine whether the observed differences are maintained over time and whether similar patterns can be found in wider educational contexts.

Nomenclature

EFL - English as a Foreign Language
DST - Digital Storytelling

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