Chants in EFL Vocabulary Instruction with Young Learners: Potential, Composition and Application

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Abstract
Songs and chants in EFL education are both artistic and pedagogical acts belonging to the same family of musical expressions, whose practical use in the classroom is not unfamiliar among teachers. Nevertheless, little effort has been made to distinguish between each other. In this sense, the popularity of songs in the context of EFL/ESL education is well-manifested in research, especially in the context of young learners' teaching, yet little has been said regarding chants on formal studies. The nature of chants entails a less complex musical composition, which lends itself to favoring language development both receptively and productively. While both singing and chanting as pedagogical resources are found positive in learning a new language in aspects such as phonological awareness, pronunciation, word retrieval, and other linguistic functions; it seems that chanting works exceptionally well for stimulating young learners' vocabulary retention, which is a capacity associated with long-term memory. The ease and novelty of conveying language in an unconventional fashion allowed by chanting, afford for simplified and fun repetitions and production of the target language, which may represent the virtues responsible for its positive impact on the young learners' vocabulary learning. Practical recommendations for composing chants and guiding teaching activities based on them are explained.
Keywords: Chants, EFL vocabulary instruction, young learners

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English using music-related instructional methods plays an important role in the foreign language classroom, especially in young learners' instruction (Bourke, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Ng, 2019). Throughout the years, three categories within these music-related teaching methods, namely songs, rhymes, and chants have been considered central in vocabulary teaching and learning (Albaladejo et al., 2018; Chen, 2020; Davis & Fan, 2016; Good et al., 2014; Jarvis, 2013; Madani & Mahmoodi, 2017). However, despite the previous studies acknowledging the benefits of music in young EFL learners' attainment of lexical gains, the effectiveness of music for boosting language learning in young learners has been questioned (e.g., Racette & Peretz, 2007; Winter, 2010), and it is still submitted to test (Chen, 2020). Among those who found music as a powerful tool in EFL teaching, Shin (2017) and Werner (2018) have pointed out the need of providing practical guides to implement it into the classroom, for example, by proposing guidelines for creating songs for learning purposes addressing school and pre-school students. In this line, useful resources can be found on the web, for example, to look into techniques on how to teach songs to children (e.g., Booth, n.d.) or to revise a selection of some catchy and engaging songs for incorporation into the English language classroom (e.g., Britishcouncil.org; Education.com; Songsforteaching.com). Hence there is a variety of available sources of songs and guidelines for their instructional implementation. Nevertheless, when it comes to chants, few are the studies that shed light on their importance, creation, and use in the foreign language classroom with young learners, which is the gap that this literature review attempts to address. Here it is worth noting that although chants and songs belong to the same family of musical representations, they both entail certain particularities that mark off certain differences among each other; for example, chants can be conceived as a simplified version of songs in the sense that the latter contains longer lyric lines or a more extensive number of words and types of linguistic structures or functions—in some cases accompanied by instrumental sounds—while the former is based mainly on lyrics typically shorter or reduced in the number of words, which follow a more monotonous or less varied musical or prosodic composition. With this in mind, the questions that this literature review seeks to unravel are what is the role and potential of chants in the young learners' EFL/ESL classroom? and how to compose and employ chants in young learners' EFL vocabulary instruction?

The following sections in this paper are arranged according to these research questions in response to them.

2. CONCEPTION OF CHANTS AS A PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE

Barker (1982) considers chants as "expressions in which rhythm and melody come together." These features share both songs and chants. Thus, the nature of songs and chants are essentially the same; however, there may be certain differences that could be appropriate to distinguish in some contexts. For example, in EFL/ESL education, Omari's (2001) conceives both as methods "of teaching language […]to teach pronunciation, intonation, listening skills, and fluency"—chants through the use of patterns of rhythm and/or rhyme, while songs through the use of music and singing (Omari, 2001, p. 3). Meanwhile, Forster

(2006, p. 64) conceives chants as "stretches of real language put into a rhythmic framework." The author expands the conception of chants as follows.

> "this same rhythmic framework lends itself well to teaching a stress timed language since a certain number of syllables have to fit into specific time pattern. This is an efficient way of teaching where the stresses lie in a phrase and which syllables or words have less emphasis." (Foster, 2006)

According to Cammeron (2001, p. 65), the use of chants works "at two levels: discourse and phonological". The author underlines the interaction that occurs between the "sounds of the language" with "the meaning of the words and the form of the whole", which is what may contribute to developing children's attention to word pronunciation and to the spoken language rhythm. As Barker (1982) notes, chants are a means of vocabulary strengthening and give "a sense of order to language." These features may be responsible for the effects of chants favoring vocabulary retention over time, as Chen (2020) reported. In this line, both Kahneman (2011, pp. 63–64) and Halpern (2014, p. 100) concurred that verse, rhyme, and prose help learn words more memorably. According to Kahneman (2011), in recalling a set of words more effectively, not only prose is beneficial but also the association of related words or a "triad of [related] words" which activate cognitive processes linking words almost automatically (p. 68). These are features and powers found in chanting. Given these virtues of chants, they can not only be a relevant tool for language education but, as Heywood (2004) notes, for teaching a wide variety of subjects since "the simple nature of chants makes them quick and easy to learn, allowing other concepts to be taught effectively and efficiently."

The next sections are devoted to emphasizing the relevance and potential of chants in EFL/ESL education in line with the questions posed in this paper.

3. THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF CHANTS IN ESF/EFL EDUCATION

Chants have been claimed to be an effective teaching technique for different purposes, such as developing English communicative skills (Colgin, 2003; Mostafa, 2019); pronunciation development (Nurhayati & Nurhamdah, 2019; Stephenson, 2016); sentence construction (Azhar & Naidu, 2017); reading achievement and attitude (Cochran, 2009); literacy and language development (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2012; Richards, 2008); academic content learning (Steve & Steve, 2020), classroom management (Shin, 2017), and for improving English speech rhythms as well as pronunciation and intonation (Forster, 2006, p. 63).

Chants—like rhymes, songs, and stories—are carried out not only as a source of stimuli received passively; that is, leading learners to listen to them alone without any further speaking practice; but also, they are often taken as a source for triggering active language production, where students actively verbalize the patterns and learn the selected to-be-learn content. Therefore, chanting may be employed for developing both listening and speaking skills (Colgin, 2003), although the latter, in a particular fashion. In this line, a study carried out in Singapore by Gan and Chong (1998) with preschoolers employing chants, rhymes, songs, and stories receptively and productively with the purpose of developing awareness of different English sounds during an academic year—1.5 hour lesson once per week—revealed that singing or chanting in the EFL classroom reduces students' inhibition when using

English and increases confidence in some exceptionally shy students compared with plain speaking. Besides, the study indicated that the students were more able to express their desires and needs to the educators using the target language; at the same time, improved their listening skills concerning the understanding and remembrance of complex instructions. From Barker's (1982) explanation, it can be inferred that these effects favoring children's emotions and behavior that facilitate oral expression may be caused due to the fact that chants can be used by children for playing with language in an easy and fun way provoking enjoyment when using and interacting with language.

Meanwhile, Cochran (2009, pp. 187–188) noted in her study that the employment of singing and chanting in daily reading lessons can help students boost their reading performance and to have a more positive attitude towards it. Similarly, according to Hill-Clarke and Robinson (2004), reading skills grow when children learn chants or nursery rhymes. Furthermore, according to Buchoff (1994), chants promote successful language experiences for all young learners regardless of their background or individual differences and talent; and stimulate imagination as well as aid memory development.

Chanting and singing as music-related activities endow an intriguing power—particular in these kinds of expressions—which is that they allow sharing two or more actions performed simultaneously. This is observed, for example, in the act of singing, whistling, or humming, while driving or taking a shower, somewhat as Underwood (1974; in Malim, 1994, pp. 24-25) explained. It is also noted in singing and dancing performed simultaneously, which entails a motor coordination performed in harmony with a lyrical or verbal act, denoting a divided attention (Shaffer, 1975; in Malim, 1994). In the classroom, this implies that the employment of singing or chanting for linguistic purposes can be performed—shared—with other activities such as moving, gesturing, or in a less conscious way, with drawing, writing, or even playing. Since "some tasks require more attention than others" (Malim, 1994, p. 24), it may entail that these kinds of musical acts employed for EFL teaching-and-learning purposes demand less attention than other pedagogies based on seeing or listening to plain word sounds (i.e., without musical rhythm), such as those based on flashcards, images, videos, and the like. This capacity that enables a divided attention or *shared attention* is especially true in the case of chants in contrast with songs due to the simpler nature of the former.

3.1 A framework of chants in EFL/ESL education

The literature rarely shows an organized or systematized framework of the educative application of chants in the context of EFL/ESL education. However, Carolyn Graham (Graham, 1986, 1993, 2002) has elaborated a chants-based approach called "Jazz Chants" that offers a guide for EFL teachers in the employment of chants in the classroom. Carolyn Graham (Graham, 1986) exploited the potential of chants by creating "Jazz Chants" where jazz rhythms are used to exemplify "standard American English" with its natural intonation and stress patterns. In Jazz Chants, not only authentic spoken language is reflected but also American-English-natural conversation' stress, intonation, and rhythm are practiced as well. Jazz Chants offer a wide variety of chants to teach diverse topics to different language levels, where particular vocabulary and language structures are included. They contain easy and

simple patterns of natural language for teachers and alumni to follow and can be used with large and small classes; also, they do not need any musical ability (Thompson, 2018).

These above and other similar advantages of Jazz Chants have been proved by research in different contexts (e.g., Alfajri et al., 2020; Azhar & Naidu, 2017; Nurhayati & Nurhamdah, 2019; Singh, 2019; Singh & Hashim, 2020). In these studies, several reasons have been explained to use Graham's set of chants in the teaching-learning process. One of them is that they provide most of the basic themes required in the formal curriculum to teach in a structured and organized fashion. Nevertheless, Thompson (2018) recommends teachers should not be restricted or limited to apply a fixed set of chants but to use their creativity to compose their own according to particular learning demands, as no special skills are needed to create them. Similarly, Edwards (2013) notes that neither a beautiful voice is required to bring meaningful musical experiences to young learners. In this vein, the last section prior to the conclusion in this paper presents some recommendations for creating original chants.

4. THE POTENTIAL OF CHANTS IN EFL VOCABULARY LEARNING

According to Kelly et al. (2009) "Learning words is one of the major challenges in acquiring a foreign language." Similarly, in second language acquisition, "the need to acquire vocabulary has always been a core concern for teachers and learners" (Coady & Huckin, 1997; in Macedonia, 2014). Among others, this demand may be met by chanting, which has been proved to be an effective teaching method in terms of acquiring novel vocabulary in EFL learning in the context of young learners' education (e.g., Chen, 2020; Mejzini, 2016).

Particular benefits of using chants for vocabulary learning or vocabulary growth have been reported in prior research (e.g., Colgin, 2003; Foster, 2006; Singh, 2019; Singh & Hashim, 2020). For example, Forster (2006, p. 63) suggests that the use of chants increases children's "vocabulary bank of lexical items and multi-word structures", also facilitates the memorization of longer word strings. In this line, a recent study carried out by Chen (2020) examined the potential of music exposures, namely "chanting", "singing", "music-video-only", and "music-video-plus-caption" for young EFL learner's vocabulary acquisition and retention. Results revealed that "chanting" and "music-video-plus-caption" conditions showed better gains in terms of novel vocabulary learning (receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge) and retention (of the acquired vocabulary knowledge) in an EFL context. Particularly, Chen emphasized that the rhythm provided by the "chanting" condition played "a more effective role in retaining the observed vocabulary gain." Meanwhile, the melody provided by "singing" and "music-video-plus-caption" did not seem to provide the same effect yet one on the short-term memory. This is the "singing" and the "music-video-plus-caption" conditions showed better gains in the immediate vocabulary test in comparison to the other two conditions—including chanting—that showed better gains in the delayed vocabulary test. Results from this research recommend the use of chants when the major goal is to boost retention of novel vocabulary over time in young EFL learners but to include the use of songs when immediate retention is expected.

Furthermore, to explain this phenomenon mentioned above, Chen (2020) notes that according to Peretz et al. (2004), music or melody and language or prosody both imply a marked difference since a particular melody or tune, as provided by music or songs, can be

mapped onto different lyrics and text possibilities (one-to-many mapping) while language prosody (e.g., intonational) as provided by chants, is "rarely set to different melodic lines" (one-to-one mapping). Chen goes on to explain that the consequence in memory of the above mapping discrepancy is that "a melody will be a poor[er] index for a specific text" […], whereas (the enhanced) language prosody (as provided by chanting) can provide a more reliable and durable memory frame and index for the accompanying text", which is implied from the participants' superior retention performance observed in the delayed receptive and productive vocabulary tests in Chen's report. Moreover, according to Coyle and Gracia (2014), other virtues inherent in chanting that contribute to new language retention are given by the fact that when a chant is practiced, not only multiple repetitions of words or phrases are performed but also body movements and gestures are can be added—as cues for young learners to understand the meaning of the selected vocabulary—bringing joy and fun to the foreign language classroom and facilitating the new language retention.

5. CHANTS COMPOSITION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THEIR USE

Given the advantages of chants in the language classroom, it urges equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to create and apply chants and other forms of music in a creative way according to their students' particular learning demands. To this end, this section presents practical guidelines for creating chants provided by different authors, although taking into consideration that the ideas discussed only scrape the surface considering the large number of creative ways that can be found for the composition and adaptation of chants to the language classroom, echoing Bokiev's et al. (2018) assertion.

For starters, teachers may consider taking advantage of the existent chants as the ones elaborated by Graham (1986, 1993, 2002, 2006) or found them in other sources available on the Web (e.g., Songsforteaching.com/chantsraps, n.d.). Existent chants may also have some adaptations or variations according to particular learning needs, and they may be incorporated following the guidelines discussed in the next paragraphs. Another option—the one highlighted here—is to follow the recommendations proposed by different authors (e.g., Edwards, 2013; Forster, 2006; Stephenson, 2016) to create one's own chants and teach them according to the students' learning demands. The next paragraphs are devoted to present some of the most relevant criteria and recommendations in this respect.

In creating original chants, one of the first things to consider is to take into account the selected/target vocabulary or the particular phrases to be taught that may vary according to the age group, language level, or curriculum demands. Besides, chants may be highly relevant to teach or use them with "basic communication acts or classroom situations" as Forster (2006, p. 65) states. It is recommended teachers make up their own chants based on children's interests, themes, and other relevant subject matter (Edwards, 2013), or in general, based on students' needs (Graham, 2006), as noted earlier. When selecting words for a chant, it is worth noting again that verse, prose, and a triad of related/associated words favor learning new lexical items in a more memorable way (Kahneman, 2011).

Other general recommendations when creating a chant are noted next. For example, teachers may bear in mind that they should "maintain a clear, steady beat and rhythm" (Graham, 1986) as the patterns established for the rhythm and intonation are retained by

students while practicing the chant (Graham, 1993). In the same line, Shin (2017) and Wallace (1994) remark that in order to facilitate the learning and recall of the material to be taught through music, it is important to consider a simple and easy melody. Similarly, Shin (2017) explains that when selecting or writing songs for a lesson, they are suggested to be "attractive in melody and rhythm, musically simple and repetitive, and motivating to children" (p. 17), also that the repetition applied to songs should be meaningful and enjoyable and always taught with gestures as Coyle and Gracia (2014) also suggested. Even though some of the recommendations above referred to songs, these can perfectly apply to chants due to the nature that these two musical expressions share.

Concomitantly, Werner (2018) concurs that chants can include gestures paired with the selected target words, considering movements in accord with the words and distinct gestures for each lexical item. In the same way, Shin (2017) asserts that teachers should carefully prepare the appropriate gestures according to the song. As she states, "The use of meaningful gestures linked to the song's context and vocabulary will enhance language learning and engagement" (p. 19). Since gestures can apply to both songs and chants, note that, here, songs and chants can be conceived indistinctively or with the consideration that chants enclose a simpler musical manifestation, which may ease the performance of gestures, somewhat consistent with Werner's (2018) accounts on the use of chants coupled with gestures. For instance, when comparing songs and chants in the teaching practice, Edwards (2013) affirms that teachers can take advantage of the rhythm of chants which is more interesting to young children than the melody of songs. This may happen as chants may be easier to follow by children rather than songs, which can, in turn, ease the performance of gestures or movements in coordination with the chant, as noted earlier. Table 1 shows a list of potential activities based on chants and gestures for teaching EFL vocabulary to young learners.

Table 1 Chants-gestures-based teaching activities

- Guess the meaning of the gesture.
- Listen and look at the teacher chanting and gesturing.
- Listen to the word/phrase and practice the gesture (repeat after the teacher)
- Chant each word/phrase and make the gesture (repeat after the teacher)
- Chant all the words/phrases and make the gestures (perform simultaneously)
- Chant and gesture fast and slowly (according to teacher's commands)
- Form a circle, chant, and gesture accordingly
- Listen to the word/phrase and show the gesture (produce without teacher's chanting)
- See the gesture and say the word/phrase
- Complete the chant saying the word and making the gesture

Furthermore, Buchoff (1994) recommends teachers snap their fingers while chanting in order to emphasize the chant's rhythm and encourage young children to listen to or get the awareness of the beat. Similarly, Graham (2006) and Forster (2006) remark that both the educator and the children can use any percussion instrument if available or clap along with the beat. As an alternative, Edwards (2013, p. 94) suggests teachers "begin with simple chants in the children's native language to help them get used to the rhyme and rhythm before introducing chants in other languages." Besides, Buchoff (1994) suggests modifying

the volume and pace of the chant in order to fit the message or mood. These recommendations are given to find a suitable rhythmical pattern that suits children's performance.

5.1 Three approaches to creating original chants

In the following lines, three approaches on how to create chants are introduced with their corresponding examples for practical guidance, where teachers may select the option that best suits their needs, interests, or abilities.

A) One of the most basic ways to create chants is proposed by Graham (2012), who suggests defining three related words in a 2-3-1-syllable pattern (e.g., baseball, basketball, golf) from which variations may be framed to create different chants. For example, *helicopter, motorbike, ship* where three related words are included in the chant with this syllable pattern (4-3-1), representing the number of syllables of each word that prompt the number of claps for every item which are used for creating rhythm or defining the beat of the chant—the *syllable-and-clap method*. These patterns may vary from simple to complex ways as the educator develops the ability. A description including this approach presenting key steps following the *syllable-and-clap method* for creating chants is displayed below, whereby an extra step suggesting the implementation of gestures is added to enhance meaningfulness and fun to the young children while learning new vocabulary more memorably.

1. Select words according to a specific topic (target words). Associated words, preferable.
2. Identify the number of syllables of each word with the use of claps.
3. Define a rhythm and speed for each word by using claps according to the number of syllables, accent, and preferred tune.
4. Verbalize each word using claps for each syllable to create the chant rhythm as a whole with all the words.
5. Figure out an appropriate gesture that well-represents the chosen words and perform the whole chant with the gestures for each word in a coordinated way to add meaningfulness and a better remembrance.

B) Another way to create chants is suggested by Forster (2006, p. 66), who claims that "chants are usually organised into 4 rhythmic beats." She suggests that in order to design a chant, it is important to decide a language structure first, and secondly, put that structure into a rhythmic pattern, "using the basic 4 count pattern." Forster explains this design through the following example where the bold words indicate a stronger emphasis:

"**Hang** up **coats**, **bags** a**way**
Put your **snacks in** the **tray**"

C) A third approach to create chants is presented by Stephenson (2016), who explains a method to create chants as follows:

1. Brainstorm ideas inspired by a student's book unit, an event at school, or by any other topic that might be needed to teach.
2. Invent a catchy sentence according to the selected idea and repeat it.
3. Find a phrase that rhymes with the previous sentence.

4. Invent another sentence related to the selected topic and repeat it.

5. Finally, invent another rhyming sentence or phrase.

　　　The following example follows the steps posited by Stephenson to create a chant.

"Look at the rain!

Look at the rain!

We can't go out. What a pain!

Now it's sunny!

Now it's sunny!

Let's go out. That will be funny!"

Finally, Graham (2006) encourages teachers to create their own chants by saying: "The most important thing is that you believe in your ability to make your own chants. So, my message is, You can do it!"

6. CONCLUSION

　　　While more empirical research is needed, theory and some prior studies have shown that the use of chants in language education provides important advantages for boosting learning. The appropriate employment of chants favors the development of linguistic skills for both listening and speaking abilities while signifying a powerful source of enjoyment, motivation, and interest for young learners, providing a pleasant and relaxed teaching-and-learning atmosphere. The rhythm, repetition, and use of gestures that can accompany chants ease learning—helping to memorize and retain new words, expressions, or linguistic material. These virtues found in chants seem to equip children with effective retrieval cues, prompts, or mnemonic resources for later recall-retrieval of the targeted vocabulary in terms of long-term memory gains. Besides, language repetition prompted by chants in a simplified verse-form facilitates the awareness of the foreign spoken language rhythm, intonation, word sound and pronunciation, which may enable producing the target language more accurately. Both songs and chants may share these features and powers; however, chants' nature is more straightforward, facilitating its performance, even sharing it with one or more acts. In this sense, chants can be applied with learners of all ages while constituting an age-appropriate tool for teaching vocabulary or the first linguistic expressions to young and very young learners. Teachers are called to give more attention to the use of chants by creatively thinking activities around their application, aiming to produce enjoyable and effective learning experiences for their students. Finally, chants can be applied or adapted from existent ones or created as an original composition. The latter can be achieved by following different approaches and recommendations. Some key hints in this respect are: use a triad of words or associated words (words belonging to the same family or implying some relationship); realize/identify the syllables of the words carefully; use claps, snaps, or percussion instruments to mark and define a rhythm based on the syllables; play with the words grouping them up in different order until finding one with a suitable rhythm, and add gestures related to the word to convey meaning and making the words more meaningful and memorable.

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