

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON USING SONGS FOR VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN PRIMARY ESL CLASSROOMS

Noor Syazwana Shamsaimi¹, Moganashwari Kandasamy²

g-ipgp21301154@moe-dl.edu.my¹

Jabatan Pengajian Inggeris,
Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Tuanku Bainun^{1,2}

Abstract

This study investigated pre-service teachers' perceptions of using songs for vocabulary acquisition in primary ESL classrooms. Vocabulary development is essential for young learners' language proficiency, and songs are recognised as an interactive medium that enhances motivation, engagement, and memory retention. The objectives of this study were to explore pre-service teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of songs, identify factors contributing to their reluctance to use songs, and examine the criteria they consider when selecting songs for vocabulary teaching. A mixed-method research design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected from 112 pre-service TESL undergraduates through a closed-ended questionnaire using convenience sampling. Subsequently, five participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into their experiences. Findings indicated strong positive perceptions regarding the effectiveness of songs in enhancing vocabulary learning. However, reluctance was influenced by limited formal training, insufficient confidence in integrating songs into lesson planning and assessment, and pressure to prioritise exam-focused instruction. Participants also emphasized clear lyrics, syllabus relevance, age appropriateness, and suitability for Total Physical Response (TPR) as key criteria for song selection. The study highlights the need for enhanced pedagogical support and training to encourage effective song-based teaching practices in primary ESL classrooms.

Keywords: songs, vocabulary acquisition, pre-service teachers, ESL, primary education

Abstrak

Kajian ini meneliti persepsi guru pelatih terhadap penggunaan lagu sebagai alat pemerolehan kosa kata dalam bilik darjah ESL sekolah rendah. Pemerolehan kosakata merupakan asas kepada penguasaan bahasa bagi murid, dan penggunaan lagu dikenal pasti sebagai pendekatan interaktif yang dapat meningkatkan motivasi, penglibatan, serta keupayaan mengingat. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk meneroka persepsi guru pelatih terhadap keberkesanan lagu, mengenal pasti faktor

yang menyumbang kepada keengganan mereka menggunakan lagu, dan meneliti kriteria pemilihan lagu untuk pengajaran kosa kata. Reka bentuk kajian kaedah campuran digunakan. Data kuantitatif dikumpulkan daripada 112 pelajar pelatih TESL melalui soal selidik tertutup menggunakan pensampelan kemudahan. Seterusnya, lima orang peserta dipilih melalui pensampelan bertujuan untuk temubual separa berstruktur bagi mendapatkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam. Dapatan menunjukkan persepsi yang sangat positif terhadap keberkesanan lagu dalam meningkatkan pembelajaran kosa kata. Namun, keengganan dipengaruhi oleh kekurangan latihan formal, kurang keyakinan dalam perancangan pengajaran dan penilaian, serta tekanan untuk menumpukan kepada pembelajaran berorientasikan peperiksaan. Peserta turut menekankan kejelasan lirik, kesesuaian dengan silibus, kesesuaian umur, dan penggunaan Total Physical Response (TPR) sebagai kriteria utama pemilihan lagu. Kajian ini menekankan keperluan sokongan pedagogi dan latihan yang lebih sistematik bagi menggalakkan penggunaan kaedah pengajaran berasaskan lagu dalam bilik darjah ESL sekolah rendah.

Kata kunci: lagu, pemerolehan kosa kata, guru pelatih, ESL, pendidikan rendah

INTRODUCTION

English is an important language in Malaysia's education system, functioning as a tool for global communication, academic advancement, and access to opportunities. While the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing form the foundation of English learning, vocabulary is often regarded as the core component that enables learners to understand and convey meaning (Sari et al., 2023). Vocabulary mastery is particularly crucial for young ESL learners, as it supports early language development and contributes to long-term language proficiency.

Effective vocabulary development among primary learners requires teaching methods that are engaging, meaningful, and appropriate to their developmental needs. Songs are widely recognised as an effective instructional tool for children because they combine rhythm, repetition, and melody, which support memory and reinforce language exposure (Kholid, Rini, & Winasari, 2024). Songs also offer a natural and enjoyable medium through which learners encounter vocabulary in context. Young learners, who often have short attention spans or limited motivation, benefit greatly from the use of songs, as these can increase classroom engagement, reduce anxiety, and create a positive learning environment (Neithanantan & Hua, 2023). These features suggest that songs can be a valuable resource for vocabulary instruction in primary ESL classrooms.

Despite the potential benefits, songs remain underused in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Traditional practices such as drilling, memorisation, and textbook-based exercises continue to dominate instruction, even though they may not cater to all learners' needs. Research indicates that Malaysian ESL teachers often acknowledge the usefulness of songs but do not implement them consistently due to limited training, lack of suitable materials, or uncertainty about how to integrate songs effectively (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021). This challenge is even more pronounced for pre-service teachers, who may lack practical experience and confidence when selecting songs or managing music-based activities (Khumairo, Inayati, & Tyas, 2022).

Current research on the use of songs in Malaysian ESL education tends to focus on general beliefs about music-based learning or on its impact on listening skills, with limited studies examining vocabulary teaching specifically (Al-Saggaf, Sumali, & Abdulkhaleq, 2021; Uthaya Kumar & Sandaran, 2018). Additionally, little is known about how Malaysian pre-service teachers perceive the role of songs in vocabulary instruction or how prepared they feel to implement such strategies in real classrooms. This lack of localised research creates a gap in understanding teacher readiness, perceived challenges, and the pedagogical considerations involved in using songs as teaching tools. Understanding pre-service teachers' perspectives is important because they represent the next generation of ESL educators who will implement student-centred, CEFR-aligned teaching practices in Malaysian primary schools (MOE, 2018). Their perceptions can provide valuable insight into the practicality, feasibility, and challenges of incorporating songs in vocabulary lessons. Moreover, their views can inform improvements in teacher education programmes by identifying areas in which additional training or guidance is needed.

This study focuses on Malaysian pre-service teachers' perceptions of using songs to teach vocabulary in primary ESL classrooms. It aims to explore their beliefs about the effectiveness of songs, the factors that make them reluctant to use songs in teaching, and the criteria they consider when selecting appropriate songs. The study is limited to pre-service teachers' perspectives and does not measure learners' vocabulary outcomes or long-term retention. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how music-based approaches can be integrated into ESL instruction and highlights the importance of equipping pre-service teachers with the knowledge and confidence to adopt innovative, engaging strategies for vocabulary development.

This study aims to (i) explore pre-service teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of using songs for vocabulary acquisition in primary ESL classrooms, (ii) identify factors that contribute to pre-service teachers' reluctance to incorporate songs in their future ESL teaching practices and (iii)

examine the criteria pre-service teachers consider when selecting songs for vocabulary instruction in primary ESL classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary acquisition is a central component of ESL learning, and innovative strategies have been explored to support young learners. Songs have emerged as an effective pedagogical tool, offering rhythmic, repetitive, and contextualised input that can enhance comprehension and retention. Unlike traditional approaches, which rely heavily on memorisation and drills, songs provide a multisensory, engaging, and meaningful learning experience (Neithanantan & Hua, 2023; Kholid, Rini, & Winasari, 2024).

Songs can facilitate vocabulary development through authentic language exposure, including idiomatic expressions and cultural references, which improves learners' awareness of language use in real contexts (Bsharat, Barahmeh, & Turkman, 2021). Songs also reduce anxiety, increase motivation, and encourage participation among primary learners, supporting the notion that a positive affective environment enhances language acquisition (Eboli, 2020; Placer et al., 2024). The integration of music into classroom instruction thus aligns with learner-centered approaches, providing repeated input that reinforces vocabulary naturally and enjoyably.

Implementing song-based instruction requires substantial teacher preparation, yet many pre-service teachers are not adequately equipped for this task. Research shows that limited confidence, insufficient training in music-based pedagogy, and uncertainty about how to align songs with curriculum objectives remain persistent challenges (Abdumutalibovich, 2024; Bokiev & Ismail, 2021). These pedagogical gaps are compounded by structural constraints such as time pressure, heavy syllabus demands, and limited institutional support, all of which reduce opportunities to adopt participatory methods like songs (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021). Effective implementation also depends on teachers' ability to select pedagogically appropriate songs, those that are age-suitable, linguistically accessible, and capable of reinforcing target vocabulary while connecting to learners' experiences (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Collectively, these studies highlight that both pedagogical readiness and contextual conditions must be strengthened for songs to be integrated meaningfully into primary ESL classrooms.

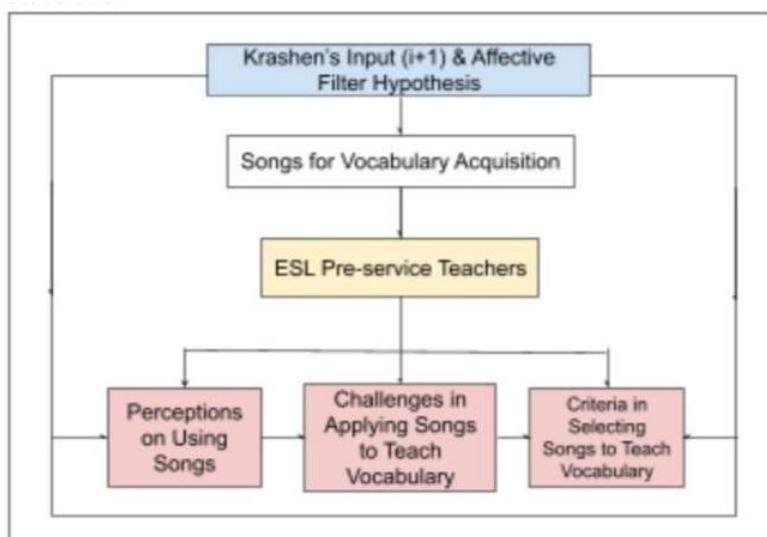
The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis. The Input Hypothesis posits that language is acquired most effectively when learners receive comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level ($i + 1$) (Krashen, 1985). Songs provide such input by embedding vocabulary in authentic, meaningful, and memorable contexts. The Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights the role

of motivation, anxiety, and confidence in learning. Low affective filter allows learners to process and retain input more effectively. Music, by creating an enjoyable and supportive environment, can reduce anxiety and increase engagement, facilitating vocabulary acquisition (Neithanantan & Tan, 2023).

While international and regional studies highlight the benefits of song-based learning, research examining Malaysian pre-service teachers' perceptions remains limited. Most studies focus on teachers' general beliefs about music or its impact on listening and general language skills (Al-Saggaf, Sumali, & Abdulkhaleq, 2021; Uthaya Kumar & Sandaran, 2018), with little attention to the specific use of songs for vocabulary acquisition in primary ESL classrooms. Understanding pre-service teachers' perspectives is essential for designing teacher education programs that encourage innovative, interactive, and curriculum-aligned vocabulary instruction.

The conceptual framework, illustrated in Figure 1, integrates these theoretical and empirical foundations. It demonstrates how songs, by providing comprehensible input and reducing affective barriers, can support vocabulary acquisition, while also considering the perspectives and practical considerations of pre-service teachers.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method design to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of using songs for vocabulary acquisition in primary ESL classrooms. The respondents comprised 100 pre-service teachers enrolled in Malaysian teacher education programmes specialising in ESL, all of whom had completed at least one practicum in primary classrooms. Five respondents were purposively selected for follow-up interviews to gain deeper insights into their experiences, challenges, and criteria for selecting songs.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire adapted and adopted from Nguyen and Nguyen (2020). The instrument included items measured on a five-point Likert scale, along with other close-ended questions, to examine the effectiveness of songs, challenges in implementation, and song-selection criteria. The instrument was reviewed by ESL and research methodology experts to ensure content validity and was pilot-tested with 30 pre-service teachers, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.743, indicating acceptable reliability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conference with the five selected respondents, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. All respondents provided informed consent, and anonymity was maintained through coded identifiers (T1–T5).

Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, with SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data from the interviews were examined through thematic analysis following Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019) six-phase approach, which involved familiarisation with transcripts, coding, theme development, and interpretation. By integrating survey and interview findings, the study provided both breadth and depth, offering a comprehensive understanding of pre-service teachers' perspectives on song-based vocabulary instruction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored pre-service teachers' perceptions of using songs to teach vocabulary in primary ESL classrooms. Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics to establish trends, while qualitative data from semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into these perceptions. The findings are organised according to the three research questions.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Effectiveness of Songs (RQ1)

Items	N	Mean	SD
1. I think it is necessary to use songs to teach vocabulary to pupils.	112	4.62	.617
2. I think it is effective to use songs to teach vocabulary to pupils.	112	4.69	.570
3. I think songs are important in developing pupils' vocabulary.	112	4.71	.514
4. I think songs can create opportunities for pupils to learn and practice vocabulary.	112	4.71	.576
5. I think songs facilitate pupils' vocabulary retention.	112	4.65	.532
6. Songs help pupils pronounce and use new vocabulary correctly.	112	4.71	.527
7. I think songs can offer pupils opportunities to review vocabulary.	112	4.68	.573
8. I think songs create a meaningful context for pupils to gain vocabulary.	112	4.70	.534
9. Songs encourage pupils to practice new vocabulary confidently.	112	4.69	.520
10. Songs provide repeated exposure that supports both understanding and use of vocabulary.	112	4.66	.546
11. Songs increase pupils' motivation to learn new vocabulary.	112	4.73	.520
12. I think songs should be used regularly to teach vocabulary to pupils.	112	4.67	.543
13. I think songs provide pupils with opportunities to learn new English vocabulary.	112	4.71	.496
14. I believe songs are suitable for teaching vocabulary to primary ESL learners.	112	4.74	.498
15. Songs help pupils recall vocabulary during speaking or writing tasks.	112	4.68	.524

The descriptive statistics revealed that pre-service teachers held overwhelmingly positive views on the effectiveness of songs in vocabulary instruction. Across all 15 survey items measuring perceived effectiveness, mean scores ranged from 4.42 to 4.74 on a 5-point Likert scale, with standard deviations between 0.45 and 0.57, indicating strong consensus among the 112 respondents. The item with the highest agreement was "I believe songs are suitable for teaching vocabulary to primary ESL learners" (Item A14, $M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.498$), followed closely by "Songs increase pupils' motivation to learn new vocabulary" (Item A11, $M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.520$). The lowest-rated item, though still strongly endorsed, was "Songs are better than flashcards for vocabulary learning" (Item A5, $M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.690$), suggesting that while

songs are valued, they are seen as complementary rather than a replacement for traditional tools.

Qualitative data supported these results. Interviewees highlighted three primary benefits which are enhanced memory through repetition, reduced anxiety and increased motivation, and contextualised vocabulary use. T4 noted, “Songs help pupils recall words faster... remembered days of the week very well after singing the song repeatedly,” while T2 added, “The melody acts like glue for the words. Once they know the tune, the vocabulary just sticks to it.” Pre-service teachers also emphasised the affective benefits of songs, with T1 explaining, “Even the shy pupils joined in. The movement with the song really boosted their participation.” These findings align closely with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis, showing that songs provide comprehensible input and create a low-anxiety learning environment conducive to vocabulary acquisition.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Factors Contributing to Reluctance (RQ2)

Items	N	Mean	SD
1. I am confident in selecting appropriate songs for vocabulary teaching.	112	2.28	.796
2. I have received adequate training on how to use songs in vocabulary instruction.	112	2.40	.854
3. I believe songs can align well with the curriculum.	112	2.52	.958
4. I can manage my lesson time to include songs effectively.	112	2.54	.986
5. I am confident in assessing vocabulary learned through songs.	112	2.43	.908
6. I feel songs are more suitable for entertainment than for learning vocabulary.	112	2.27	.794
7. I have sufficient access to suitable audio-visual equipment.	112	2.38	.923
8. I find it easy to design vocabulary tasks based on songs.	112	2.38	.841
9. I believe using songs does not cause classroom management problems.	112	2.51	.977
10. Pupils can remain focused and engaged when songs are played.	112	2.55	1.003
11. I feel supported to use creative methods like songs alongside exam preparation.	112	2.59	.982
12. I do not know how to integrate songs into lesson plans effectively.	112	2.35	.908

13. Some parents or mentors may disapprove of using songs for vocabulary learning.	112	2.40	.885
14. I feel songs are appropriate for pupils of different proficiency levels, including higher ones.	112	2.22	.856
15. I think it is challenging to find culturally suitable songs for vocabulary teaching.	112	2.45	.919

Despite this positive perception, respondents identified barriers that may limit the consistent use of songs in classrooms. The analysis of survey items related to reluctance indicated generally low levels of concern. Mean scores ranged from 2.05 to 2.59, with the highest-rated barrier being “I feel supported to use creative methods like songs alongside exam preparation” (Item B11, $M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.982$). The lowest-rated factor was “Lack of resources (audio equipment, projector) is a problem” (Item B3, $M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.701$), suggesting that pre-service teachers did not perceive practical constraints as major obstacles.

Interview data provided further explanation for this pattern. Participants highlighted institutional and pedagogical factors that could hinder implementation, such as curriculum pressure and limited formal training. T3 remarked, “I integrate songs during the lesson introduction to get attention, then continue with the textbook. That way, it’s aligned with the curriculum,” while T5 added, “The pressure is always to cover the syllabus, so songs feel like a luxury that I cut when I’m running out of time.” Pre-service teachers also identified assessment challenges, noting the difficulty in measuring vocabulary learned specifically through songs. T1 stated, “It’s difficult to mark if their learning came from the song or from the flashcards we used. There’s no clear rubric.” These findings indicate that reluctance is not due to lack of interest or belief in songs’ effectiveness but rather to institutional pressures and limited pedagogical skills.

The descriptive statistics for song selection criteria demonstrated near-unanimous agreement on the importance of all 15 items, with mean scores ranging from 4.64 to 4.75 and low standard deviations (0.493–0.628). The highest-rated items were “I choose songs that are interesting and appealing to pupils” (Item C7, $M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.493$) and “I prefer songs that can be integrated with movement or actions (e.g., TPR) to reinforce vocabulary” (Item C15, $M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.562$). The lowest-rated criterion was “I ensure the song is culturally sensitive to the Malaysian context” (Item C6, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.546$), which still indicates strong agreement.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Song Selection Criteria (RQ3)

Items	N	Mean	SD
1. I prefer songs with clear and simple lyrics to ensure vocabulary comprehension.	112	4.71	.564
2. I select songs that contain target vocabulary from the syllabus.	112	4.71	.527
3. I consider the cultural appropriateness of the song.	112	4.66	.546
4. I ensure the song is age-appropriate for primary learners.	112	4.74	.498
5. I prefer songs with repetitive vocabulary patterns that aid retention.	112	4.66	.609
6. I consider the tempo and rhythm to match pupils' ability to follow along.	112	4.74	.549
7. I choose songs that are interesting and appealing to pupils.	112	4.75	.493
8. I prefer songs that can be easily linked to follow-up vocabulary activities.	112	4.71	.531
9. I prioritise songs that align with the lesson objectives.	112	4.73	.520
10. I select songs with visual support (e.g., videos, flashcards, or animations).	112	4.74	.533
11. I prefer songs that allow pupils to sing along and actively participate.	112	4.73	.537
12. I choose songs that contain everyday, practical vocabulary.	112	4.64	.628
13. I avoid songs with too much complex or unfamiliar vocabulary.	112	4.69	.644
14. I consider whether the song can be reused for review or reinforcement.	112	4.69	.570
15. I prefer songs that can be integrated with movement or actions (e.g., TPR) to reinforce vocabulary.	112	4.75	.562

Interview data revealed three overarching themes in song selection, prioritisation of active engagement (e.g., TPR), alignment with syllabus and clarity, and reusability for revision and reinforcement. T2 explained, "I always look for songs that have actions... After a song, I usually play a game like 'Simon Says' with the same vocabulary," while T4 added, "The song must have a chorus that is easy to follow with hand movements. That's the key to making the vocabulary stick." Participants emphasised curriculum alignment and clear lyrics as essential for comprehension, and short, memorable songs were preferred to facilitate repeated practice and review. These results highlight a systematic, instructionally-driven approach to song selection that balances pedagogical effectiveness with pupil engagement.

Overall, the study demonstrates that pre-service teachers recognise the cognitive and motivational benefits of songs for vocabulary acquisition. However, institutional constraints and limited training constitute the main barriers to effective implementation. The findings highlight the need for institutional support, professional development, and curriculum flexibility to ensure that songs can be fully leveraged as a pedagogical tool. By integrating respondents' perceptions with theoretical principles, the study provides evidence that song-based instruction is both effective and aligned with best practices in second language acquisition, while also emphasising the importance of bridging the gap between belief and practice.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both educational theory and classroom practice. The strong support pre-service teachers expressed for using songs aligns with Krashen's Input and Affective Filter Hypotheses, demonstrating that songs provide comprehensible input while simultaneously lowering learner anxiety. Moreover, the observed cognitive benefits, including enhanced memory retention and quicker vocabulary recall, reinforce the value of multimodal instructional approaches that engage both linguistic and musical channels. These results suggest that future theoretical models of primary ESL instruction should formally integrate affective and cognitive considerations, recognising that emotional engagement, embodied learning through Total Physical Response (TPR), and music-based scaffolding are central to effective vocabulary acquisition.

Practically, the study highlights the urgent need for teacher education programmes to move beyond theoretical discussions and equip pre-service teachers with hands-on, competency-based training in song-based pedagogy. Structured activities such as micro-teaching simulations, lesson demonstrations, and guided planning exercises can build confidence and pedagogical content knowledge, enabling teachers to align songs with curriculum objectives, integrate TPR techniques, and design meaningful assessments. Time-efficient strategies for lesson planning, supported by centralised digital song repositories with curriculum-aligned resources, can also address preparation constraints and encourage consistent classroom implementation. Furthermore, mentorship programmes and professional development workshops are recommended to enhance teacher self-efficacy and reinforce practical skills, ensuring that pre-service and in-service teachers are confident in using songs as a legitimate instructional tool rather than a supplementary activity.

At the policy level, the study underscores the importance of institutional support to legitimise creative, student-centred approaches within the Malaysian ESL curriculum. Curriculum frameworks should formally acknowledge song-based and other multimodal strategies as legitimate

instructional methods, while school leadership and evaluation systems should recognise and reward teachers who successfully implement these approaches. Administrative backing, clear assessment guidelines, and provision of ready-to-use pedagogical resources can alleviate institutional pressures and promote sustainable integration of song-based instruction. Collectively, these theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented recommendations provide a roadmap for ensuring that the pedagogical potential of songs is fully realised, enhancing engagement, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition in primary ESL classrooms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study affirms that songs are a highly effective and valuable tool for vocabulary instruction in primary ESL contexts. Pre-service teachers perceive them as engaging, enjoyable, and conducive to both cognitive and affective learning. Yet, limitations such as insufficient training, time constraints, and institutional pressures restrict consistent implementation. Addressing these gaps through targeted teacher education, practical resources, mentorship, and supportive policy measures is essential to ensure that song-based pedagogy is implemented meaningfully, sustainably, and in alignment with curriculum objectives, ultimately fostering enhanced vocabulary development and long-term language proficiency among learners.

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