

# MEMORISING SONG LYRICS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION DURING THE MUSIC LESSON

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of the study is to identify what techniques students use to memorise song lyrics, how much time is needed to do that, and whether and in what way their parents help them learn the song. The theoretical part of the study analyses previous researches on memorisation in the context of general psychology, age-related psychology, and music psychology.

**Method.** The empirical study involved 47 (N=47) second-grade students of the comprehensive school (25 girls and 22 boys). Three study questions are raised in this paper: What techniques do students use to learn how to memorise song lyrics? How much time does a student need to learn singing a song by heart? Do parents help students memorise the song lyrics and in what way? To answer these questions, after having sung a song by memory, each student was asked to write an essay about his/her thoughts on how he/she had learned this song at home. The content analysis was used in order to process the information contained in the essays and thus obtain a concise and detailed description of the song memorising techniques.

**Results.** As a result of the obtained data analysis, it was determined that the most commonly used memorising techniques were: reading the song lyrics, singing the lyrics, and repeating them several times. The study also revealed that slightly more than half of the students did not get any parental assistance to learn a song by heart.

**Conclusion.** The students who learn to sing a part of a song by heart during music lessons need less time to learn the whole song at home when compared with those students who do not learn parts of the songs in class.

**Key words:** song lyrics, memorizing, music lesson, primary education

## INTRODUCTION

Although the modern education system is increasingly focused on creativity and problem solving, and one can even hear that learning by memory is meaningless, memorisation and reproduction of information remain an essential part of the learning process.



Singing is a type of musical activity undertaken during music lessons in primary school. The national primary education standard in Latvia requires that every student should sing 16 songs by heart by the end of grade 3 (Regulations of the National Standard in Primary Education and the Primary Education Subjects Standards and Program Samples, 2004). How fast and whether a student will learn to sing a song by heart depends mostly on the ability to memorise and reproduce the lyrics. Memorisation and reproduction are administered by the memory that stores the new information – in this case, the lyrics – either in short-term memory or in long-term memory. From the psychological perspective, it is believed that a limited amount of information can be stored in short-term memory (Mazur, 2017) for a short time (Castle & Buckler, 2018). In the context of the stages of human development, it is determined that a seven-year-old student can reproduce 4 units, while a twelve-year-old student can reproduce 7 units, which is equivalent to an adult's reproductive ability (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016).

Education for sustainable student development has foreseen that learning to sing a song by heart allows the student to perform it not only on the following day but also after a week and even several months. To achieve this, it is necessary to store new information in long-term memory. The student, who learns music at the primary education level, should be encouraged to do that by implementing a variety of memorisation strategies. Arnett believes that starting from the age of six, a child should learn different memorisation strategies, such as the rehearsal, organisation, and elaboration. The need to do that is justified by the researcher with the rapid expansion of knowledge at this age (Arnett, 2016). Chase and Delaware believe that human memory is associative, so it is easier to memorise new information if it is associated with the knowledge that is already well established in memory (Chase & Delaware, 2016). Baddeley claims that imagination and association building is essential for storing information in the long-term memory. Not all words are equally easy to remember. For example, words associated with a specific object that can be visualised are easier to remember than abstract words that cannot be visualised (Baddeley, 2014). Organizing information is very important for memorising words and subjects (Bower, Clark, Lesgold, & Winzenz, 1969). One of the technologies for organising information is visual imagery. To memorise several couplets of the song, they must be linked together, for instance, with the aid of a visual story.

The question raised here is why some students still fail to cannot succeed in memorising the lyrics and are not able to sing the song by heart. That might be due to several reasons indicated in previous studies. For instance, the student might be unable to make a meaningful connection with the previously acquired information (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014; Hess, 2018) or he/she might not understand where the memorised information could be used in the long term (Sousa, 2011). Several authors (Khansir, & Dehkordi, 2017; Shaheen, Perveen, Malikz, & Malikz, 2013) emphasized that motivation is essential in the teaching and learning process of the subject. At the same

time, a study conducted by Nilsson found that the effect of motivation on learning was indirect. What is important is how much attention is paid to the material that one is learning. Attention is driven by interest (Nilsson, 1987). According to Nilsson's study, if the student is interested in the song being learned, he/she will paid attention to learn it, which in turn will help him/her memorize the lyrics. On the other hand, the student who finds the song boring will be distracted from learning it, which can negatively affect memorizing the lyrics.

## METHODS

The study involved 47 (N=47) second-grade students (aged 7-9) of the comprehensive school. The study took place within the curriculum content of the music lesson in one Latvian comprehensive school in March 2019. In the music lesson, the students learned to sing the Latvian folk song *Little, little girl* by ear, while at home the students were asked to learn to sing the same song by heart. In the next music lesson, each student had to sing the song individually by heart. After having sung, each student wrote a free-form essay up to 300 words, in which they outlined their thoughts on how they had been able to learn this song by heart at home. The students' thoughts in the essays were coded using codes, such as B1, B2, B3, etc., or G1, G2, G3, etc., where the first letter represents the students' gender (B - Boy and G - Girl) and the number next to the letter represents the students' serial number. 25 girls and 22 boys participated in the study.

The aim of the study was to identify what techniques the students used to memorise song lyrics, how much time was needed to do that, and whether and in what way their parents helped them learn the song.

To achieve the aim of the study, the following study questions were raised:

- What techniques do students use to learn how to memorise song lyrics?
- How much time does a student need to learn to sing a song by heart?
- Do parents help students memorise the song lyrics and in what way?

The content analysis was used to answer the above-mentioned study questions. The use of content analysis aimed at obtaining a concise and detailed description of the song memorising techniques. Systematic classification of concept extraction was used to interpret the content of textual data. The concept extraction was based on three study dimensions. The first of them was to determine how a student learned to sing a song by heart. The second dimension provided information about how much time a student needed to learn a song by heart. In its turn, the third dimension was to identify whether the students got assistance from their parents to learn the song, and in what way. The concept analysis of each dimension has resulted in a system of concepts that describes each of the study questions. The content analysis provided an opportunity to study and evaluate the students' thoughts on learning a song by heart within the context of the aim of the study.

Quantitative research methods were used to determine which memorising techniques dominate and how parents helped their children learn to sing a song by heart. The study identified the numerical frequency (f) and percentage frequency (f%) of each learning technique and the ways in which the parents supported their children.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The first dimension of the study was to identify the techniques by which a student learned to sing a song by heart. The ways that students use to fulfil this task are very different, but the most commonly used techniques to memorise the song lyrics are: reading it, singing the lyrics, and repeating the song several times (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

The memorizing techniques of learning a song by heart

<i>Memorising techniques</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>f%</i>
Reading the song lyrics	16	33.3
Writing down the song lyrics	1	2.1
Singing the song with lyrics	10	20.8
Singing the song repeatedly	15	31.2
Reproducing the song lyrics	2	4.2
Using the recording of the song	3	6.3
Visualising the story of the song	1	2.1
Total	48	100

Source: author

The highest percentage of students (33.3%) believe that learning a song by heart does not begin with singing the lyrics but with learning the lyrics without singing at first. The most typical statements in this context are: "At first, I read them several times" (B1; G4; G5; B8; G15; B15), "I was sitting and reading" (G2), "I read the song lyrics" (B6; B20), "I read them twice" (G8), "I read them a lot" (G9), "I read every couplet 15 times" (G12), "I read the song lyrics 10 times" (G20). It is recommended not only to read the song lyrics countless times, as we see in the students' responses, but also to read it with understanding. Furthermore, the information conveyed in the first couplet should be connected with the content of the next couplet.

20.8% of students learned to sing songs by heart. That is essential because during music lesson the song should not simply be recited as a poem, but it should be sung expressively. The students formulated the following statements "I was singing the song without a book" (G4; B2; G15), "I was singing in two lines" (G10), "At first, I was looking at the book while I was singing, but after that, I was singing by heart without looking at the book" (G11). The students have learned to sing the song lyrics by heart either through looking at

their textbook or without looking at it. Unfortunately, only one in five students has learned the song lyrics by heart through singing.

31.2% of students considered that repeating the lyrics is important in memorising them. To emphasise that repeating is an essential part of memorising, the students used the following statements in their essay: "I closed the book and repeated the lyrics" (B3), "I repeated the lyrics several times" (B7; B14; G17), "I repeated the lyrics all the time in order not to forget it" (B8), "I repeated the words" (G13), "I repeated every day" (G15; B19), "I repeated ten times" (B16), "I repeated the song before bedtime" (B20). By taking a closer look at these statements, we can see that repeating is related to the quantity and frequency of the lyrics. The number of repetitions cannot be too high. Repeating enhances the ability to memorise and strengthens memory.

A very low percentage of the students use techniques such as visualisation (2.1%), writing down the song lyrics (2.1%), reproducing the song lyrics (4.2%), and recording the song (6.3%).

Some students found it difficult to memorise the song lyrics. "I had been learning the song for a long time, but I could not remember it. I tried to remember it without the book, but it did not work out" (B17). Conscious attention is required to memorise the song lyrics. The difficulties to memorise the song lyrics are often caused by the lack of attention. If students find it difficult to memorise the song lyrics, then there is a lack of attention. In order to focus one's attention, it is important to choose an appropriate place to avoid distraction. For example, the students learned the song while "sitting in silence" (G16), "travelling by car or bus" (G6; G7), "sitting comfortably on the couch" (G13), "putting the book on one side of the couch and sitting on the other side" (B20), and "sitting in their room keeping the door closed" (G21). The students considered that these learning techniques are effective. It is easier to learn a song by heart if the lyrics are divided into parts. As a result of the content analysis, it was found out that the students learned song lyrics mostly in two lines, which consisted of four beats.

The second dimension of the study intended to figure out how much time the students needed to learn a song by heart. Some students note that they had already learned to sing the first couplet of the song by heart during the music lesson, and then they learned the rest of the song at home. In such a case, less time is needed to learn the song by heart. They admitted that "the song was sung twice" (B4; G8; G19). There are students who spent two days to learn to sing the song by heart since they experienced certain difficulties, which was described by the following statements: "it was hard for me" (G21), "I was very worried" (B22). It usually took the students more than two days to learn the song by heart.

The third dimension of the study was to clarify whether the parents were engaged in helping the second-grade students to memorise the song. The study found out that slightly more than half of students (53.2%) learned to sing the song by heart without their parents' help (table 2).

**Table 2.**  
Parents' engagement in memorising the song

<i>The type of parents' engagement</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f%</i>
Singing the song to the mother	14	29.8
Singing the song to both parents	5	10.6
The mother showed a video to the student	1	2.1
The student learned together with the mother	2	4.3
The parents did not engage in memorising the song	25	53.2
Total	47	100

Source: author

29.8% of students sang the song only to their mother, when they thought that they had already learned it by heart. The students described that by the following statements: "my mom examined me" (G1; G4; B6; G17; B23), "I went to my mom and sang the song" (B7; B8), "I sang it to my mom" (G15). Only 4.3% of students learned the song together with their mother, and they mentioned that in their essay with the aid of the following statements: "I learned the song together with my mom" (G5; G7), "my mom helped" (B12). None of the students indicated that their father alone was engaged in the song testing or learning process. 10.6% of students sang the song to both their parents after learning it by heart. This is a song performance, during which the students act in a similar way as they would do in the music lesson.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study has determined that the most popular techniques for memorising a song for the second-grade students are reading the song lyrics, singing the song lyrics, and repeating the song several times. Musliu and colleagues found out that trying to memorise the poems with rhyme could have a negative effect on memory; therefore, the students should memorise the song without music (Musliu, Berisha, Latifi, & Peci, 2017). However, Konantz has determined that music does not affect memorising the song lyrics (Konantz, 2012). What about the song lyrics which need to be learned along with the melody, though? The researchers' views regarding this matter are very controversial. Some studies have found that song lyrics and melody are perceived independently from one another (Besson, 1998; Ginsborg, 2002), and the best strategy for memorising song lyrics is to ignore the melody because the melody interferes with remembering the song lyrics rather than promotes it (Racetta, & Peretz, 2007). However, Martinovic-Trejgut believes that the lyrics and the melody are mutually integrated, so they should be learned at the same time (Martinovic-Trejgut, 2010). This study determined that the students mostly learned the song lyrics by reading (33.3%) rather than by singing (20.8%). This means that the song lyrics are memorised separately from the melody and are not integrated with it. It could be due to the fact

that learning and memorising of a song are influenced by the prior music knowledge, the readiness to learn, and the ability level. The three previously mentioned factors which negatively affect the second-grade students' ability to memorise the song lyrics integrated with the melody should be developed during the music lesson.

The study determined that the amount of time needed to learn a song by heart is very different: depending on students' abilities, this time usually ranged from a few minutes to several days. According to Baddeley, the amount of material you learned depends on the time you spent on learning. The more time we spend on learning, the more information we memorise (Baddeley, 2014). Baddeley also believes that learning for shorter but more frequent time periods can often be more effective than spending twice as much time on rare learning. He calls this widespread phenomenon "distribution of practice effect" (Baddeley, 2014, p. 68). One could easily agree with A. Baddeley's view that long-term learning is more effective, but such a strategy is difficult to develop, particularly when it comes to a regulated educational process. Nevertheless, singing the song lyrics by heart should not be learned intensively on the last day before the deadline, but gradually and regularly.

The study has also determined that slightly more than half of the parents do not check how their children have learned to sing a song by heart and that they even do not engage in the song learning process. It is interesting that the mother only was the one who examined and helped the child in learning. If both parents are engaged in the child's learning process, the song often comes to a performance that the child presents to the whole family. It is considered that parents' engagement is an important strategy for improving the quality of education. Therefore, further studies would be needed to explore the benefits of parents' engagements for developing their child's memorising techniques in the context of musical activities.

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