

Song Selection Criteria for EFL Senior High School Vocabulary Development

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Songs are valuable resources for English teachers as they provide enjoyment and repeated exposure to high-frequency vocabulary. However, selecting appropriate songs can be challenging because their linguistic and musical elements vary considerably. In the absence of clearly defined song selection criteria, teachers may rely partly on subjective preferences or personal experiences, which may increase the likelihood of selecting songs with a heavy vocabulary burden or reduced singability. This paper outlines a set of concrete and objectively measurable criteria for song selection. Informed by the research literature, these criteria consist of vocabulary frequency, vocabulary repetition, tempo, and lyrical density. An analysis of two groups of songs is presented to illustrate how the proposed criteria can help teachers select songs more systematically in terms of their pedagogical suitability and singability by considering their linguistic and musical features.

英語の歌は、学習者に楽しさをもたらしながら高頻度語に繰り返し触れる機会を提供する点で、英語教育において教育的価値を有する教材である。しかし、楽曲ごとに言語的・音楽的要素が大きく異なるため、適切な歌を選定することは容易ではない。明確な選曲基準が存在しない場合、教師は主観的な好みや経験に基づいて楽曲を選ぶ傾向があり、その結果、生徒にとって適切でない語彙負担や歌唱のしづらい楽曲の使用につながる可能性がある。本研究は、先行研究に基づき、語彙頻度、語彙の繰り返し、テンポ、歌詞密度の四つの観点から構成される、客観的に測定可能な選曲基準を提示する。さらに、二つの楽曲群の分析を通して、提案された基準が、楽曲の言語的・音楽的特徴を考慮した、より体系的な選曲にどのように寄与し得るかを示す。

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to second language proficiency, and teacher guidance should support its development. For vocabulary learning in Japanese senior high schools, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

(MEXT, 2018) sets the target vocabulary size across the three *English Communication* courses—*English Communication I*, *II*, and *III*—at approximately 1,800 to 2,500 words. However, learner proficiency varies considerably in this context, and reaching this goal may be especially demanding for students with relatively limited proficiency. To support these learners' vocabulary development, it is important to reinforce previously learned high-frequency vocabulary (MEXT, 2018). English songs have been identified as useful resources for this purpose because their lyrics primarily consist of high-frequency words (Tegge, 2017). Moreover, songs can promote vocabulary learning through positive emotional engagement.

Beyond their lexical advantages, enjoyable learning experiences are essential for song use, which depends on *singability*—operationalized here mainly in terms of tempo and lyrical density. If a song is too fast or lyrically dense, students' engagement and learning may be hindered (Etani et al., 2018; Tegge, 2017). Yet, songs vary considerably in their linguistic and musical features, and while some song selection criteria exist, they often include subjective judgments such as personal preferences or popularity (Griffie, 1992; Hamilton et al., 2024; Lems, 1996), and few studies provide objectively measurable criteria.

This paper outlines four objectively measurable elements for song selection: vocabulary frequency, vocabulary repetition, tempo, and lyrical density. The paper examines the four elements and proposes reference values for teachers to consider when selecting classroom songs. Finally, two sets of songs are examined to illustrate the proposed criteria in practice.

Literature Review

Vocabulary development plays a pivotal role in helping learners become proficient in a target language. However, mastering the full lexicon of English may not be a realistic learning goal for learners (Nation, 2013, 2022). Estimates suggest that a 20-year-

old native speaker of American English knows approximately 11,100 word families, suggesting that the English lexicon is too large for classroom learners to master fully (Brysbaert et al., 2016). This highlights the need for a principled way to prioritize vocabulary for learning. Vilkaitė-Lozdienė and Schmitt (2019) grouped vocabulary into three broad practical frequency bands: high-frequency vocabulary (the most frequent 3,000 word families), mid-frequency vocabulary (word families ranked from 3,001 to 9,000), and low-frequency vocabulary (word families beyond the 9,000 level). This prioritization is particularly relevant in Japanese senior high schools, where MEXT (2018) sets the target number of words to be learned through the three English Communication courses at approximately 1,800 to 2,500. Given the limited classroom time available for achieving this goal, vocabulary learning therefore needs to be strategic (Nation, 2021), so focusing on high-frequency vocabulary is a rational approach for this context.

With high-frequency vocabulary as a priority, repeated learning is important for vocabulary development (Nation, 2013, 2022). Vocabulary repetition, or repeated occurrence of the same lexical items within a text, is therefore a relevant feature to consider when evaluating vocabulary-learning materials. English songs have been identified as potentially useful materials for vocabulary learning because they can provide students with repeated opportunities to encounter high-frequency vocabulary (Husain et al., 2021; Karim et al., 2022; Mannarelli & Serrano, 2024; Romanko, 2017; Tegge, 2017). Tegge (2017) also notes that approximately 95% of pop-song lyrics are composed of high-frequency vocabulary, suggesting that songs can provide learners with accessible lexical input. In addition, Pavia et al. (2019) report a positive effect on vocabulary gains through repeated exposure to songs. Furthermore, Hamilton et al. (2024) reviewed 60 studies on the pedagogical use of songs and found that more than half focused on vocabulary learning, highlighting the importance of vocabulary learning in song-based pedagogy. As such, English songs may support students' vocabulary learning by providing repeated encounters with high-frequency vocabulary.

English songs may support vocabulary learning not only lexically but also affectively by enhancing enjoyment and engagement in classroom contexts (Bao, 2023; Kumar et al., 2022). Based on their data analysis of lesson feedback from over 1,700 students, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) note that Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) can be promoted in various ways, including the use of authentic foreign language materials. In the Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, Kitaoka (2021) found that classroom activities with music and singing could enhance university students' FLE. Dewaele et al. (2023) further argue that FLE enhances students' learning motivation. While songs can be enjoyable classroom materials, they may also reduce students' anxiety, in turn

promoting participation in lessons (Ejeng et al., 2020). Isnaini and Aminatun (2021) found that students reported both vocabulary improvement and greater enjoyment after lessons using English songs. From the teachers' perspective, Tegge (2018) conducted a survey of approximately 400 English teachers worldwide, including 51 from Japanese contexts, and found that the most common reason for using songs as teaching materials was "[t]o motivate students with an enjoyable activity" (p. 279). As these studies show, the value of songs in the classroom depends not only on the vocabulary they contain but also on the kind of learning experience they provide.

In a survey of the use of songs for language teaching, Tegge (2018) found that while many teachers acknowledge the effectiveness of using songs as teaching materials, some teachers refrain from using songs for various reasons, such as difficulty in finding suitable songs and integrating them effectively into the curriculum. In the Japanese EFL context, Tada (2022) notes that English teachers may not have enough experience or training in implementing songs in lessons. While the elementary school guidelines refer to the value of songs and offer practical suggestions for classroom use (MEXT, 2017b), the junior high school and senior high school guidelines do not provide specific pedagogical guidance on using songs in English classes (MEXT, 2017a, 2018). In the absence of such guidance, song selection may depend heavily on teachers' own past experiences. For example, Tada (2022) found that university students in a teacher education course had experienced lessons with English songs in their own junior and senior high schools and suggested that these previous experiences with English songs may influence how they choose to incorporate songs into their future lessons. However, song features such as language use and tempo can vary greatly among songs (Meindertsma, 2019; Parada-Cabaleiro et al., 2024). Teachers therefore need clear criteria for song selection (Tasnim, 2022).

Several studies discuss criteria or considerations for song selection. Existing studies often combine subjective considerations, such as teachers' personal preferences and the popularity of songs, with practical pedagogical concerns, such as whether the vocabulary is suitable for learners' proficiency levels (Lems, 1996; Tasnim, 2022), while also referring to more objective considerations like vocabulary burden or ease of singing (Nakata et al., 2022). Although subjective considerations remain important in song selection (Griffie, 1992; Tasnim, 2022), clearly defined criteria that incorporate objectively measurable features of songs can provide a more systematic and transparent basis for evaluating songs and selecting materials appropriate for learners. Nakata et al. (2022) reviewed 15 English song textbooks available in Japan and proposed that the correspondence between English rhythm and lyrics of songs, as well as song tempo could be considered in song selection, but they did not propose a comprehensive set of criteria for English songs.

In short, research on selecting songs for English language teaching still lacks a clearly operationalized and comprehensive set of measurable criteria. Therefore, this paper aims to address this gap by proposing a set of objectively measurable criteria for song selection.

Objectively Measurable Song Selection Criteria

When using songs to develop students' vocabulary, certain considerations should be made. Teachers should examine vocabulary frequency to help determine whether the vocabulary burden, or the amount of unfamiliar vocabulary in a song, is appropriate for students' proficiency levels (Lems, 1996). Additionally, vocabulary repetition should be considered because repeated exposure to the same lexical item in song lyrics is one of the pedagogical strengths of songs (Ramani, 2024). Teachers should also consider *singability*, defined as the degree of “musico-verbal unity between the text and composition” (Franzon, 2008, p. 375), that is, how naturally the lyrics fit the melody and rhythm of a song. Factors such as tempo (the speed of a song) and lyrical density (the amount of lyrical content delivered within a given period of time) affect how easily lyrics can be sung with the melody. Higher tempo and lyrical density require learners to process lyrics more rapidly or to process more words within a given period, which may make a song more difficult to sing. Both factors influence the singability of a song for learners. The song selection criteria should incorporate the following elements of English songs:

1. Vocabulary frequency
2. Vocabulary repetition
3. Tempo
4. Lyrical density

The frequency profile of vocabulary in a song is relevant to its suitability for Japanese senior high school EFL learners because learners vary considerably in proficiency and may benefit from continued exposure to high-frequency vocabulary (MEXT, 2018; Nation, 2013). In the present analysis, vocabulary frequency refers to the distribution of vocabulary across frequency bands. The analysis focuses on K-1 and K-2, the first and second 1,000-word frequency bands, in the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (BNC/COCA). Dang et al. (2022) found that, among major high-frequency word lists, BNC/COCA2000 provided high lexical coverage; English teachers worldwide judged it to contain more useful words, and its words were better known by learners. For the vocabulary frequency analysis, the *Compleat Lexical*

Tutor Vocabulary Profilers (Cobb, n.d.) was selected because it allows texts to be analyzed directly according to BNC/COCA frequency bands, which align with the present study's stated vocabulary range. Although high-frequency vocabulary is broadly defined as the 3,000 most frequent word families (Vilkaitė-Lozdienė & Schmitt, 2019), the present study uses the K-1 and K-2 bands to provide a conservative benchmark for evaluating the high-frequency lexical content of songs in the Japanese senior high school context. This narrower focus does not redefine high-frequency vocabulary; rather it reflects the first 2,000 word families, which Nation (2013) classifies as high-frequency vocabulary. Nation (2013) suggested that approximately 98% of lexical coverage supports fluent reading comprehension. Because song use commonly involves reading lyrics, this benchmark is applied here to the proportion of lyrics covered by K-1 and K-2 vocabulary; it does not imply that vocabulary beyond K-2 is unsuitable for learners. MEXT (2018) also highlights the importance of revisiting previously learned vocabulary. Thus, approximately 98% of K-1 and K-2 coverage is proposed as a practical reference value for song selection.

Vocabulary repetition is another important aspect of song selection. In the present study, it is operationalized using the Measure of Textual Lexical Diversity (MTLD), which is a robust index of lexical diversity for a text (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010). MTLD is less affected by text length than Type-token ratio (TTR), a widely known measure of lexical diversity that calculates the ratio of different words (types) to total words (tokens) in a text (Johnson, 1944; McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010; Meindertsma, 2019). MTLD can be measured using an online application, *Lexical Diversity Measurements* (Reuneker, n.d.), which also calculates other lexical diversity indices, allowing MTLD to be examined alongside related measures. Higher MTLD values indicate greater lexical diversity, whereas lower values indicate greater repetition (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010). Because repeated exposure can support vocabulary learning (Nation, 2022; Ramani, 2024), lower MTLD values may be pedagogically advantageous for Japanese high school students, as they are more likely to provide repeated encounters with familiar vocabulary. Yang (2020) investigated the changes in song characteristics from 1970 through 2016, reporting fluctuations in MTLD value across this period. The study identified a median MTLD value of 45 across this period. Although the present author was unable to identify recommendations for an appropriate MTLD threshold for English learners, Yang's median MTLD value of 45 may serve as a useful tentative reference point for song selection in Japanese high school contexts. In particular, because lower MTLD values indicate greater lexical repetition, this benchmark may help teachers select songs that recycle vocabulary more frequently, which plays an important role in learners' language skill development (MEXT, 2018; Nation, 2013, 2022).

Tempo is commonly measured in beats per minute (BPM) (McKinney & Moelants, 2006), and it can influence singability. Moreno and Woodruff (2024) found that listening to background music at 150 BPM, compared with 110 BPM, was associated with lower reading comprehension performance, suggesting that faster tempo may place greater demands on learners' language processing during reading. This is relevant to song use because singing often involves reading lyrics while processing and producing language. A study on Japanese university students majoring in music (Etani et al., 2018) identified the optimal tempo range as 100 to 120 BPM. Based on their analysis of English songs included in 15 textbooks used in Japan, Nakata et al. (2022) identified a tendency toward moderately up-tempo songs and suggested approximately 103 BPM as a practical reference point for songs in English language classrooms—a target that is within the 100 to 120 range found by Etani et al. (2018). For Japanese senior high school learners, a moderate tempo may be a useful reference point, as excessively fast songs may be harder to process while excessively slow songs may be less engaging. Teachers can obtain BPM values using the website *SongBPM* (n.d.), which provides direct tempo information for commercially released songs and allows BPM values to be retrieved efficiently and consistently across multiple tracks without manual beat counting or audio-file analysis. From a practical perspective, *SongBPM* (n.d.) is therefore a suitable tool for song selection.

It is also important to consider how densely song lyrics are packed, because lyrical density may influence singability. Despite its potential importance as an objective feature in song selection, no online tool for calculating lyrical density was identified. However, it can be calculated manually by dividing the total number of words in the lyrics by the duration of a song. In a study investigating changes in the lyrics of English songs that charted on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 from 1956 to 2016, Meindertsma (2019) calculates lyrical density by measuring words per second (WPS), with higher WPS values indicating that more words are delivered within a given amount of time. Meindertsma (2019) also reports a rapid increase in the mean WPS of these songs after 1991, with the mean reaching a peak of 1.87 in the 2000s and remaining high afterward. Although the present author was not able to find a lyrical density figure appropriate for Japanese senior high school students, Meindertsma's (2019) analysis provides a tentative reference value. In the present study, this point is therefore used provisionally for comparison, rather than as a validated threshold for singability. Table 1 summarizes these four features and includes the reference values for each index, which will help teachers confirm whether selected songs provide appropriate lexical and musical conditions for learners.

Table 1
Criteria for Song Selection

Feature	Description	Reference Value
Vocabulary Frequency	The coverage of high-frequency vocabulary (K-1 & K-2)	≥ 98%
Vocabulary Repetition	The measure of textual lexical diversity (MTLD) (lower values indicate more repetition)	<45
Tempo	Beats per minute (BPM)	100-120 BPM
Lyrical Density	Words per second (WPS)	≤ 1.87 WPS

Note. Measurement tools and sources referred to for the criteria: *Compleat Lexical Tutor Vocabulary Profilers* (Cobb, n.d.), *Lexical diversity measurements* (Reuneker, n.d.), and *SongBPM* (n.d.).

Illustrative Application of the Proposed Song Selection Criteria

To illustrate the practical application of the proposed song selection criteria (Table 1), eight English songs previously selected on the basis of the present author's classroom teaching experience were retrospectively analyzed using the criteria. The eight songs were separated into two groups: Group 1 and Group 2. Group 1 consists of songs that were subjectively experienced as relatively manageable and effective in classroom use, based on students' positive reactions and resulting classroom atmosphere. On the other hand, Group 2 consists of songs that were perceived as more challenging to use in the classroom despite their popularity among students as they appeared to present greater lexical burden and lower singability, which the author associated with lower student participation or less effective classroom interaction. Although such classroom experience provides valuable pedagogical insights, it remains based largely on subjective observations of student engagement and classroom interaction. The following analysis therefore examines the extent to which these earlier subjective impressions are supported, qualified, or challenged by the proposed objective criteria. The four songs included in Group 1 are:

- "Count on Me" (Mars, 2010)
- "Closer" (The Chainsmokers, 2016)
- "Give Me a Kiss" (Crash Adams, 2022)
- "If I Can't Have You" (Mendes, 2019)

Table 2 shows the analysis of these songs with respect to the reference values. While three of the songs surpassed the 98% threshold for high frequency vocabulary (K-1 and K-2), “Closer” (The Chainsmokers, 2016) has a slightly lower proportion of high-frequency vocabulary. As for vocabulary repetition, “Closer” (The Chainsmokers, 2016) has a considerably lower MTLD, indicating that it contains a great deal of lexical repetition. Only “Count on Me” (Mars, 2010) has a higher MTLD than 45, the tentative reference point used in this analysis. Regarding tempo, the songs’ BPM values vary widely, ranging from 89 to 141. “Count on Me” (Mars, 2010) and “Closer” (The Chainsmokers, 2016) fall within the proposed tempo reference range of 100–120 BPM, whereas the other two songs fall outside it. Comparing WPSs, the songs other than “If I Can’t Have You” (Mendes, 2019) share similar lyrical density, which is less than 1.87. Overall, the four songs showed variation across the four criteria, with some songs deviating from one or more reference values.

Table 2
Group 1 Songs Analyzed with Measurable Features

Feature	“Count on Me”	“Closer”	“Give Me a Kiss”	“If I Can’t Have You”	Reference Value
Vocabulary Frequency (K-1 & K-2)	98.5%	96.5%	97.9%	99.3%	≥ 98%
Vocabulary Repetition (MTLD)	51.2	25.1	36.2	42.8	< 45
Tempo (BPM)	89	95	141	124	100-120 BPM
Lyrical Density (WPS)	1.3	1.51	1.59	1.88	≤ 1.87 WPS

Note. Measurement tools and sources referred to for the criteria: *Compleat Lexical Tutor Vocabulary Profilers* (Cobb, n.d.), *Lexical diversity measurements* (Reuneker, n.d.), and *Song BPM* (n.d.). Lyrics were analyzed from the recordings listed in the reference list.

Group 2 includes songs that were subjectively perceived as more difficult for classroom use. Some are replete with difficult words for senior high school students, and some are too fast to sing. They are listed below:

- “Billionaire” (McCoy, 2010)
- “Shape of You” (Sheeran, 2017)
- “Wellerman” (Evans, 2022)
- “World’s Smallest Violin” (AJR, 2021)

Table 3 presents the numerical data for the Group 2 songs with the reference values. As shown in Table 3, each song has at least two features deviating from the reference values. For instance, “Billionaire” (McCoy, 2010) and “Wellerman” (Evans, 2022) show similar patterns across all four features: lower coverage of high-frequency vocabulary, relatively high MTLDs, higher or lower tempo values outside the reference range, and high lyrical density. “Shape of You” (Sheeran, 2017) has relatively high vocabulary coverage and a lower MTLD, but its WPS is higher and its tempo is slightly below the reference range. “World’s Smallest Violin” (AJR, 2021) has the lowest K-1 and K-2 coverage among the four songs, while its MTLD and WPS values are within the reference ranges. Overall, the Group 2 songs show more deviations from the proposed reference values than the Group 1 songs.

Table 3
Group 2 Songs Analyzed with Measurable Features

Feature	“Billionaire”	“Shape of You”	“Wellerman”	“World’s Smallest Violin”	Reference Value
Vocabulary Frequency (K-1 & K-2)	91.2%	98.8%	92%	89.9%	≥98%
Vocabulary Repetition (MTLD)	57.4	27.8	61.3	109	< 45
Tempo (BPM)	87	96	192	116	100-120 BPM
Lyrical Density (WPS)	2.4	2.96	2.35	2.01	≤ 1.87 WPS

Note. Measurement tools and sources referred to for the criteria: *Compleat Lexical Tutor Vocabulary Profilers* (Cobb, n.d.), *Lexical diversity measurements* (Reuneker, n.d.), and *Song BPM* (n.d.).

Lyrics were analyzed from the recordings listed in the reference list.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the two groups of songs suggests that the four criteria—vocabulary frequency, vocabulary repetition, tempo, and lyrical density—can help identify potential differences in the pedagogical demands of songs. Although the Group 1 songs did not uniformly meet all four reference values, they generally showed relatively manageable profiles. In contrast, the Group 2 songs showed more substantial deviations across the criteria, broadly supporting the author's earlier impression that they presented greater challenges in classroom use. These findings also suggest that teachers' initial impressions of song suitability may be supported in some cases but challenged in others. Because suitability depends on linguistic and musical features, the criteria should be considered together: deviation from one reference value does not necessarily determine a song's overall suitability, whereas a song's profile across the four criteria can reveal potential sources of difficulty that may not be apparent from subjective impressions alone. This is the practical value of the proposed framework, which extends previous recommendations for song selection by operationalizing vocabulary burden and selected aspects of singability as objectively measurable song characteristics. Teachers' subjective considerations in song selection may sometimes lead them to choose songs that are popular or personally appealing but place greater linguistic or musical demands on learners (Griffie, 1992; Lems, 1996; Tasnim, 2022). Songs containing high-frequency and repeated vocabulary can facilitate vocabulary learning (Nation, 2013, 2022); however, linguistic suitability alone does not guarantee successful classroom use. Although Franzon (2008) discusses singability in song translation, his concept of the fit between lyrics and music is relevant here because EFL singing also requires learners to coordinate lyrics with melody and rhythm. In the present study, this concept is applied to song selection to consider how tempo and lyrical density may affect this coordination. Therefore, songs with appropriate vocabulary may nevertheless prove difficult for learners if their tempo or lyrical density makes them harder to sing comfortably. Such difficulties may also limit opportunities to foster FLE, which has been associated with greater learner engagement (Dewaele et al., 2023; Ejeng et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022). Accordingly, teachers should complement their professional judgement by profiling songs in advance and evaluating potential learning burdens.

The proposed criteria offer a practical framework for pedagogical song selection. However, the reference values suggested in this paper should be regarded as tentative rather than universally fixed benchmarks because previous research has documented

changes in the musical and lyrical characteristics of songs over time (Meindertsma, 2019; Parada-Cabaleiro et al., 2024; Yang, 2020). Further research tracking song characteristics may help refine these reference values and strengthen their reliability for teachers' song selection.

Conclusion

English songs can support high school students' vocabulary development by providing repeated encounters with high-frequency vocabulary in engaging and memorable ways. To support these benefits, however, careful song selection is essential. Without objective criteria, teachers may rely more heavily on intuition or personal preference, which may reduce the pedagogical effectiveness of song selection. This paper focused on vocabulary burden and selected aspects of singability as key instructional elements and proposed four objectively measurable criteria—vocabulary frequency, vocabulary repetition, tempo, and lyrical density—to guide song selection. The proposed reference values should be regarded as tentative rather than definitive cut-off points, as they have not been statistically validated with Japanese senior high school learners and may require refinement as musical trends change. The comparative analysis illustrated how these criteria can help teachers evaluate songs systematically and make more informed selections for vocabulary instruction. By integrating linguistic and musical dimensions into a single framework, the proposed criteria offer teachers a clearer basis for song selection. Moreover, as musical and lyrical trends continue to change, further research is necessary to refine the reference values of these criteria. Teachers in different instructional contexts will need to adapt the criteria according to their learners' proficiency levels, evolving language needs, and specific instructional purposes.

Bio Data

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