STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING ENGLISH SONGS TO ENHANCE VOCABULARY MASTERY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Risma Novalina Sagala[1], Selviana Napitupulu[2]
University of HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Indonesia[1-2]
Corresponding email: pudanzrisma@gmai.com, selviananapitupulu@uhnp.ac.id
Number Whatsapp:081382081643

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is essential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning; however, many EFL learners face difficulties and low motivation when vocabulary instruction relies on conventional teaching methods. This study aims to explore students' perceptions of the use of English songs as learning media to enhance vocabulary mastery. The research employed a descriptive qualitative design involving 15 students from an English Education program. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that students perceive English songs positively in vocabulary learning. The dominant findings show that English songs increase learning motivation, *support* vocabulary retention through repeated exposure and contextual meaning, and improve pronunciation accuracy. Nevertheless, several challenges were identified, particularly related to unfamiliar vocabulary and song tempo, which require appropriate instructional guidance. In conclusion, the use of English songs contributes meaningfully to vocabulary development in EFL contexts by fostering motivation, retention, and pronunciation improvement when implemented with guided learning strategies.

Introduction

Vocabulary mastery is widely recognized as a fundamental component in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as it underpins learners' ability to comprehend texts, express ideas, and participate effectively in classroom interactions. However, many EFL learners face persistent challenges in vocabulary acquisition, including limited exposure to authentic language use, difficulty retaining new words, and low motivation during vocabulary instruction. These challenges often hinder the development of other language skills and negatively affect learners' overall communicative competence.

In many EFL classrooms, vocabulary learning is still dominated by conventional approaches such as memorization, word lists, and repetitive written exercises. While these methods may support short-term word recognition, they often fail to engage learners cognitively and emotionally. As a result, students frequently perceive vocabulary learning

as monotonous and disconnected from real language use, which leads to reduced motivation and limited long-term retention. This situation highlights the need for alternative learning media that can address both linguistic and affective dimensions of vocabulary learning.

One learning medium that has received increasing attention in recent years is the use of English songs. Songs are closely connected to students' daily lives and are easily accessible through digital platforms, making them a familiar and appealing resource for language learning. Previous studies suggest that songs provide authentic language input and present vocabulary in meaningful and contextualized situations (Rahman & Murtiningsih, 2021; Nguyen, 2022). Through song lyrics, learners are exposed to repeated vocabulary, natural pronunciation patterns, and real-life expressions, which may support vocabulary acquisition in a more engaging way.

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature on the use of English songs tends to emphasize learning outcomes or experimental effectiveness, often measured through test scores or vocabulary gains. While these studies demonstrate positive results, they provide limited insight into how learners actually experience the use of songs during the learning process. In addition, several studies rely on quantitative or quasi-experimental designs, which may overlook learners' personal perspectives, emotional responses, and perceived challenges when engaging with song-based learning activities.

Some researchers have highlighted the motivational benefits of songs in language learning. Lee and Lin (2020) argue that music creates a relaxed learning atmosphere that reduces anxiety and encourages active participation. Similarly, Putri and Sari (2023) report that students show more positive attitudes toward vocabulary learning when songs are integrated into classroom instruction. Furthermore, Ahmad (2022) found that melody and rhythm help learners retain vocabulary by associating words with emotional and auditory experiences. However, these studies largely report general perceptions or outcomes without offering an in-depth qualitative exploration of students' lived experiences, particularly within specific EFL learning contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on song-based vocabulary learning, there remains a lack of qualitative studies that deeply examine students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in using English songs as learning media. In particular, previous research has not sufficiently addressed how students interpret the role of songs in supporting motivation, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation development from their own perspectives. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how and why English songs function as an effective learning medium in real classroom settings.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore students' perceptions toward the use of English songs as learning media to enhance vocabulary mastery through a qualitative approach. By focusing on students' lived experiences, views, and perceived challenges, this study seeks to contribute empirically to the existing literature and provide pedagogical insights for English teachers in implementing song-based vocabulary instruction more effectively in EFL contexts.

Method

Type and Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate students' perceptions of the use of English songs as learning media in enhancing vocabulary mastery. The qualitative approach was intentionally selected because the research sought to explore learners' subjective experiences, attitudes, and interpretations rather than to measure learning outcomes statistically. By focusing on meaning construction and participants' voices, this approach allows a deeper understanding of how students perceive and experience song-based vocabulary learning in an authentic educational context. Such an approach is particularly relevant for capturing nuanced insights into learners' emotional engagement, motivation, and perceived learning benefits, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

Research Variable

The central focus of this research was students' perceptions toward the use of English songs in vocabulary learning. This includes students' views on the effectiveness of songs in supporting vocabulary retention, pronunciation development, learning motivation, and overall learning experience, as well as the challenges they encounter during the learning process. As a qualitative inquiry, the study did not define independent or dependent variables in a statistical sense. Instead, it emphasized interpretive exploration of participants' responses to understand how English songs function as a learning medium from the learners' perspectives.

Population and Research Sample

The population of this study consisted of students enrolled in an English Education program at a higher education institution in Indonesia, where English songs had been integrated into vocabulary learning activities. The research sample comprised 15 undergraduate students, who were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling technique was employed to ensure that all participants had prior experience learning vocabulary through English songs and were therefore able to provide rich and relevant data. The number of participants was considered adequate for qualitative research, as it allowed in-depth exploration while ensuring data saturation. Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks, providing sufficient time to gather comprehensive responses from participants.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires to enhance data richness and methodological triangulation. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to explore participants' perceptions in depth

while allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues during the interview process. Sample interview questions included inquiries about students' learning experiences, perceived benefits of using English songs, and challenges encountered during song-based vocabulary learning. The open-ended questionnaires complemented the interview data by allowing participants to reflect on their experiences in written form, particularly for those who felt more comfortable expressing their views in writing.

Data Analysis Methods

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which was conducted through a systematic and iterative process. First, all interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful units related to students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes representing recurring patterns across participants' responses. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research objectives. Finally, the themes were interpreted to provide a comprehensive explanation of students' perceptions of using English songs as learning media. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was applied by comparing data obtained from interviews and questionnaires.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study, which summarizes the main themes derived from students' perceptions toward the use of English songs as learning media in enhancing vocabulary mastery. The thematic analysis revealed four dominant themes: learning motivation, vocabulary retention, pronunciation improvement, and learning challenges. Each theme is supported by direct empirical evidence from participants' responses and discussed in relation to relevant theories and previous studies.

Learning Motivation through English Songs

One prominent theme emerging from the data is the role of English songs in enhancing students' learning motivation. Most participants reported that learning vocabulary through songs created a more relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere compared to traditional methods. One participant stated:

"Learning vocabulary through songs makes the class more fun. I feel more relaxed and not afraid of making mistakes." (Participant 4)

Another participant explained that songs helped reduce boredom during vocabulary lessons:

"Usually vocabulary learning is boring, but songs make me interested and more active in class." (Participant 9)

These findings support Lee and Lin's (2020) argument that music reduces learning anxiety and promotes emotional engagement. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Affective Filter Theory, which suggests that lower anxiety and higher motivation facilitate language acquisition. In the EFL context, where students often experience limited exposure and confidence, English songs appear to function as an affective bridge that encourages participation and sustained engagement.

Vocabulary Retention and Contextual Learning

Another dominant theme relates to students' perceptions of improved vocabulary retention. Participants emphasized that repeated exposure to words in song lyrics helped them remember vocabulary more easily. As expressed by one participant:

"I remember new words better because I hear them many times in the song, not just once." (Participant 7)

Similarly, another participant noted the importance of contextual meaning:

"The words are easier to remember because they are connected to the story of the song." (Participant 12)

This finding corroborates Ahmad's (2022) qualitative study, which highlights the role of melody and emotional association in long-term memory. Unlike rote memorization, songs provide contextualized input, allowing learners to associate vocabulary with meaning, rhythm, and emotion. However, this study adds a qualitative contribution by showing how students consciously recognize repetition and context as key factors in their vocabulary retention, rather than merely demonstrating learning outcomes through test scores.

Pronunciation Improvement

Pronunciation improvement also emerged as a significant theme. Several participants reported that listening to native-like pronunciation in songs helped them improve their pronunciation accuracy. One participant stated:

"When I listen to songs, I can imitate how the singer pronounces the words." (Participant 2)

Another participant highlighted increased awareness of stress and intonation:

"Songs help me notice pronunciation and intonation that I usually ignore in textbooks." (Participant 10)

These findings align with Nguyen (2022), who suggests that authentic audio input supports phonological awareness. However, this study extends previous research by emphasizing learners' self-awareness of pronunciation development, indicating that songs function not only as exposure tools but also as informal pronunciation models within EFL learning environments.

Learning Challenges and Contextual Limitations

Despite the positive perceptions, participants also reported several challenges related to the use of English songs. The most frequently mentioned issues were unfamiliar vocabulary and fast song tempo. One participant explained:

"Sometimes the song is too fast, so I cannot understand the lyrics clearly." (Participant 6)

Another participant expressed difficulty with unfamiliar expressions:

"Some words are new and informal, so I still need the teacher's explanation." (Participant 14)

These challenges indicate that while songs are engaging, they require pedagogical scaffolding to maximize learning benefits. This finding highlights a contextual factor often underexplored in previous studies, which tend to focus on positive outcomes without addressing instructional limitations. The present study contributes by demonstrating that teacher guidance plays a crucial role in mediating the effectiveness of song-based vocabulary learning in EFL contexts.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore students' perceptions of the use of English songs as learning media in enhancing vocabulary mastery within an EFL learning context. The findings demonstrate that students generally perceive English songs as a meaningful and supportive medium for vocabulary learning. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, English songs are experienced by learners as resources that promote engagement, facilitate vocabulary retention through repeated exposure and contextualized meaning, and support the development of pronunciation awareness. At the same time, the study reveals that students also encounter learning challenges, particularly related to unfamiliar vocabulary items and variations in song tempo, which influence their comprehension and learning process.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings contribute to the broader discourse of EFL vocabulary learning by emphasizing the interplay between affective, cognitive, and contextual dimensions of language acquisition. Students' experiences indicate that English songs serve as affective tools that lower learning anxiety and increase motivation, supporting theoretical perspectives such as the affective filter hypothesis and meaningful input theory. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on vocabulary achievement or experimental effectiveness, this study foregrounds learners' lived experiences and perceptions, thereby offering a more nuanced qualitative understanding of how English songs function as mediating tools in vocabulary learning.

In addition, the findings suggest that vocabulary acquisition through songs is closely linked to contextual learning and emotional engagement. Students' ability to associate vocabulary with melody, rhythm, and personal emotions allows learning to extend beyond mechanical memorization. This insight positions English songs as multimodal learning

resources that integrate auditory input, emotional resonance, and linguistic meaning, thus enriching existing theories of vocabulary learning in EFL contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights the importance of thoughtful instructional design when integrating English songs into vocabulary teaching. While songs can enhance motivation and retention, their effectiveness depends on teachers' ability to provide appropriate scaffolding. Practical strategies such as selecting songs with suitable linguistic complexity, pre-teaching key vocabulary, guiding students to analyze song lyrics, and facilitating reflective discussions after listening activities can help address learners' difficulties and maximize learning outcomes. These implications position English songs not as supplementary entertainment, but as pedagogically grounded learning media within EFL classrooms.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a specific institutional context and a relatively small group of participants. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all EFL learning environments. Future research may extend this study by exploring diverse educational contexts, involving larger participant groups, or employing mixed-method approaches to examine the relationship between students' perceptions and measurable vocabulary development. Such studies would further strengthen the theoretical and empirical understanding of song-based learning and its role in EFL vocabulary instruction.

References

Butar, E. L. B., & Katemba, C. V. (2023). EFL students' perceptions toward vocabulary learning by listening to English songs on Spotify. Journey: Journal of English Language and Pedagogy, 6(1), 194–205. https://doi.org/10.33503/journey.v6i1.628

Faisal, F., & Nur Putri, N. (2025). English songs in vocabulary learning: Higher-education students' perceived views. Surakarta English and Literature Journal, 6(1), 46–61.

Syafiyyah, V. H., Pujiawati, N., & Bani Ahmad, Y. (2024). Students' perception toward English vocabulary learning through listening to English songs. Innovative: Journal of Social Science Research, 4(3), 10609. https://doi.org/10.31004/innovative.v4i3.10609

Febrianti, M., Rahman Putra, A., & Pradana, A. (2025). EFL students' perceptions of using English songs for vocabulary learning at Dehasen University Bengkulu. J-Shelves of Indragiri (JSI), 7(2), 214–229. https://doi.org/10.61672/jsi.v7i2.3354

Alamsyah, M. F., & Taufiq, W. (2025). Persepsi siswa terhadap lagu bahasa Inggris untuk pembelajaran kosa kata. Pubmedia Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning, 1(1).

Waruwu, M. D. A., Zega, N., Tafona'o, P. D., & Wijaya, D. K. W. (2025). Students' perceptions of the role of songs in enhancing English vocabulary mastery. Journal of English Education, Linguistics and Literature. https://doi.org/10.32682/jeell.v1102/35

Syafmuriya, S. I., Sumartono, & Prihatini, F. A. (2025). The use of English songs to improve EFL students' pronunciation. International Journal of Language Teaching and Education, 9(2), 121–130.

Rahman, F., & Murtiningsih, S. (2021). Vocabulary learning through songs: Students' responses and challenges. Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 11(2), 389–398.

Nguyen, T. M. H. (2022). English songs as authentic materials in EFL vocabulary learning. International Journal of Language and Linguistics Studies, 4(1), 45–56.