

Integrating Music Into Efl Classrooms: Effects On Vocabulary Acquisition, Listening Comprehension, And Affective Factors Among Indonesian Secondary School Students

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Article information:

Received: june 2025

Revised : Nov 2025

Accepted: march

2026

Abstract

This study examines the role of music, particularly English-language songs, in supporting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition among Indonesian secondary school students. Although interest in music-based pedagogy has increased, empirical evidence from Southeast Asian EFL contexts, especially at the secondary level, remains limited. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 25 high school students through Likert-scale questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in perceived language development, while qualitative data were thematically analysed to explore learners' experiences and motivation. The findings show that music-based activities enhanced vocabulary retention, listening comprehension, and oral fluency, while reducing foreign language anxiety. In addition, affective dimensions of music, including emotional engagement and cultural relevance, supported sustained learner involvement. However, challenges were identified, including inappropriate song selection, linguistic complexity, and potential distraction. The study concludes that music is most effective when used as a supplementary pedagogical tool within a structured and blended instructional framework rather than as a standalone strategy for practice.

Keywords: EFL pedagogy; music-based learning; vocabulary acquisition; foreign language anxiety; blended learning; Indonesian secondary school

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) presents multifaceted challenges for secondary school learners, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts such as Indonesia. Mastery of accurate pronunciation, complex grammatical structures, extensive vocabulary, and fluent listening comprehension is frequently hindered by limited authentic language exposure and heightened foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Alshumaimeri & Alhumud, 2021). In formal classroom settings, opportunities for meaningful, naturalistic language contact remain scarce, rendering alternative pedagogical modalities increasingly important for comprehensive language development.

Music, as a culturally embedded and emotionally resonant medium, has attracted sustained scholarly attention as a vehicle for language learning (Saleh et al., 2023). From a neurocognitive perspective, musical processing engages overlapping neural networks associated with phonological awareness, prosodic sensitivity, and working memory competencies that are foundational to second language acquisition (SLA) (Sagre Baboza et al., 2023). The rhythmic and melodic properties of songs facilitate chunking and rehearsal of linguistic input, thereby enhancing retention and recall (Pido, 2019). Furthermore, the affective properties of music its capacity to lower anxiety and increase intrinsic motivation align closely with (Caratiquit et al., 2022). Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional barriers significantly impede language intake.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the efficacy of music-based instruction across various dimensions of language learning. Wang (2017) found that regular engagement with English songs significantly accelerated vocabulary acquisition in EFL learners, attributing this effect to contextualised repetition and melodic reinforcement. Hwang and Chang (2019) similarly reported improvements in incidental vocabulary learning, listening comprehension, and learner motivation among students exposed to song-integrated instruction. At the phonological level, Chobert and Besson (2013) demonstrated that musical training sharpens auditory discrimination skills, which directly benefit sound recognition and production in a second language. In the Indonesian EFL context specifically, where learners are exposed to limited authentic English input outside the classroom, the motivational and contextual affordances of music-based pedagogy may hold particular pedagogical value.

Nevertheless, the systematic implementation of music in language classrooms is not without obstacles. Concerns regarding the appropriateness of lyrical content, the mismatch

between song complexity and learner proficiency, and the potential for musical elements to distract from linguistic goals have been documented in the literature (Kettle, 2005). Moreover, empirical studies examining music-based EFL instruction in Indonesian secondary school settings remain sparse, creating a significant gap between theoretical advocacy and evidence-based classroom practice.

This study therefore addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does music-based learning influence vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension among Indonesian secondary school EFL learners?

RQ2: How does music engagement affect affective factors specifically motivation and foreign language anxiety in this learner population?

By triangulating quantitative and qualitative evidence, this study aims to provide empirically grounded insights into the role of music in Indonesian secondary EFL classrooms and to offer actionable pedagogical recommendations for practitioners and curriculum designers.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods research design (Creswell, 2018), integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview and focus group data. The concurrent triangulation approach was selected to enable cross-validation of findings and to capture both the breadth and depth of participants' experiences with music-based EFL learning. This design is particularly appropriate for exploratory studies with relatively small samples, where statistical generalisability is secondary to richness of contextual understanding (Song & Song, 2023).

Participants

Participants comprised $n = 25$ high school students (Grades 10–12) enrolled at a state secondary school in Pekanbaru, Riau Province, Indonesia. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had prior experience with English-language music in their personal language learning practices. The sample included 14 female and 11 male students, aged 15–18 years ($M = 16.4$, $SD = 0.9$). The sample size, while modest, is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study and is sufficient for the qualitative depth sought (Creswell,

2018). All participants provided informed consent, and parental consent was obtained for students under 18 years of age.

Instruments

Three data collection instruments were employed:

(a) Likert-Scale Questionnaire: A 30-item, five-point Likert-scale instrument was developed to assess students' self-reported frequency of music engagement, perceived vocabulary gains, listening comprehension improvement, oral fluency development, and levels of language anxiety. Items were adapted from validated scales, including the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Marzuki et al., 2023) and the Music and Language Learning Inventory (MLLI). Internal consistency was established via Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .84$), indicating acceptable reliability.

(b) Semi-Structured Interviews: Individual interviews (approximately 20–30 minutes each) were conducted with a purposively selected subsample of eight participants to explore in-depth their experiences, preferences, and perceived challenges associated with music-based language learning.

(c) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Two focus groups (5 participants each) were facilitated to elicit collective perspectives on music integration in EFL classrooms, with particular attention to motivational dynamics and peer interaction.

Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions) computed in SPSS v.26. Due to the small sample size and non-normal distribution of some variables (confirmed via Shapiro-Wilk test, $p < .05$), non-parametric descriptive reporting was prioritised over inferential generalisation. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Two researchers independently coded the transcripts to ensure analytical rigour, with intercoder reliability assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = .79$), indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Board at Universitas Islam Riau. All participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Pseudonyms are used in all qualitative extracts presented in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Results are presented in alignment with the two research questions, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings throughout.

Effects on Vocabulary Acquisition and Listening Comprehension (RQ1)

Quantitative findings indicated strong positive perceptions of music's contribution to vocabulary development. The majority of participants (88%, $n = 22$) reported that they regularly encountered and internalised new vocabulary through song lyrics. The mean score for perceived vocabulary gain was $M = 4.21$ ($SD = 0.63$) on the five-point Likert scale, suggesting a consistently high level of perceived benefit. These findings are consistent with Wang (2017), who demonstrated that the combination of melodic repetition and contextualised lexical input in songs significantly accelerates vocabulary acquisition in EFL settings.

Qualitative data provided important nuance to these quantitative patterns. Participants frequently described the contextual embedding of vocabulary within song narratives as a key mechanism of retention:

"When I hear a word in a song and understand the feeling behind it, I never forget it. It's different from memorising from a word list." (Participant 7, Grade 11)

This aligns with Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which holds that conscious attention to linguistic form within meaningful input is a prerequisite for acquisition. The emotional salience of music appears to facilitate this noticing process, rendering lexical items more cognitively accessible and memorable.

Regarding listening comprehension, 80% of participants ($n = 20$) reported measurable improvement in their ability to parse connected speech as a result of sustained engagement with English-language songs. The mean score for perceived listening improvement was $M =$

4.08 ($SD = 0.71$). Participants attributed this improvement to heightened attentiveness to prosodic features particularly intonation, rhythm, and stress patterns which songs render more salient than conventional listening exercises.

Focus group discussions further revealed that students developed metacognitive listening strategies such as inferring meaning from melodic contour and identifying syllable stress through repeated engagement with songs. As one participant noted:

"I started to hear the rhythm of how English sentences go up and down. Now it's easier for me to understand when my teacher speaks fast." (Participant 12, Grade 10, FGD 2)

These findings corroborate Chobert and Besson's (2013) neurocognitive model, which posits that musical training sharpens auditory temporal processing and phonological discrimination skills that directly transfer to second language listening.

Effects on Affective Factors: Motivation and Anxiety (RQ2)

A particularly salient finding of this study pertains to music's affective impact. The mean score for enjoyment and intrinsic motivation was $M = 4.56$ ($SD = 0.52$), the highest of all subscales, indicating that students found music-based learning markedly more engaging than conventional instruction. Concurrently, perceived language anxiety decreased substantially, with 84% of respondents ($n = 21$) indicating that songs created a low-threat environment conducive to risk-taking in language use.

Interview data illuminated the psychological mechanisms underlying these affective shifts. Several participants described the relaxed, playful atmosphere of music-based activities as psychologically safe in a manner that structured classroom tasks were not:

"In normal class, I'm afraid to speak because maybe my grammar is wrong. But when we sing together, nobody is judging. I feel free to try." (Participant 3, Grade 12)

This observation is theoretically grounded in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, wherein reduced anxiety lowers the cognitive barrier to language input, enabling greater acquisition. Lake (2003) similarly found that music reduces inhibition and fosters a more relaxed learning climate, which the present findings strongly corroborate in the Indonesian secondary school context.

The social dimension of music-based activities collaborative singing, group lyric analysis, and peer discussion was also identified as a significant contributor to both motivation and communicative confidence. Participants in both FGDs described increased

willingness to communicate (WTC) as a direct outcome of music-integrated lessons, echoing MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) construct of WTC as a proximal predictor of authentic language use.

Challenges and Pedagogical Considerations

Notwithstanding the predominantly positive findings, several challenges were identified. Approximately 36% of participants ($n = 9$) reported difficulty comprehending songs featuring rapid speech, heavy dialectal variation, or culturally opaque idioms. This is a critical concern from a pedagogical standpoint: songs that exceed learners' current proficiency level may engender frustration rather than engagement, consistent with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which stipulates that comprehensible input slightly above current competence ($i+1$) is optimal for acquisition.

Teachers were identified in both the interviews and FGDs as pivotal mediators of effective music integration. Participants expressed a clear preference for teacher-guided pre-listening activities, including vocabulary pre-teaching, cultural contextualisation, and explicit identification of linguistic learning targets, before engaging with song lyrics. This pedagogical scaffolding was perceived as essential for maximising the linguistic yield of music-based tasks.

Additionally, participants acknowledged that music-based activities, while valuable for vocabulary, listening, and affective development, do not adequately address formal grammar instruction or academic writing skills. This limitation is important for curriculum planners to acknowledge: music should function as a complementary, rather than substitutive, pedagogical strategy within a comprehensive EFL curriculum.

3.4 Towards a Blended Music-Integrated Pedagogical Framework

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative strands of this study, a blended pedagogical framework is proposed in which music-based activities are systematically embedded within, rather than peripheral to, formal EFL instruction. This framework comprises three phases: (1) a structured pre-listening phase involving vocabulary and cultural scaffolding; (2) an active engagement phase involving guided lyric analysis, aural tasks, and communicative activities; and (3) a reflective post-listening phase involving critical discussion, writing tasks, and explicit grammar focus derived from song-sourced examples. This scaffolded approach maximises the motivational and contextual benefits of music while ensuring alignment with formal curricular objectives and learner proficiency levels.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides empirical support for the integration of music into EFL classrooms at the secondary school level in Indonesia. Findings demonstrate that music-based learning activities positively influence vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and oral fluency, while simultaneously reducing foreign language anxiety and enhancing intrinsic motivation. The affective and cognitive affordances of music render it a uniquely powerful pedagogical tool for EFL contexts characterised by limited authentic language exposure and high levels of learner anxiety.

However, the efficacy of music-based instruction is contingent upon thoughtful implementation: song selection must be calibrated to learner proficiency, learning objectives must be explicitly defined, and music-based tasks must be embedded within a structured, scaffolded instructional framework that complements, rather than replaces, formal language instruction. The blended learning approach proposed in this study offers a replicable model for practitioners seeking to harness the motivational and linguistic potential of music in the Indonesian secondary EFL context.

Future research should pursue controlled experimental or quasi-experimental designs with larger, more representative samples to strengthen causal claims regarding music's impact on measurable language outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking sustained vocabulary retention and anxiety reduction across academic semesters would also substantially advance the evidence base. The development and psychometric validation of music-specific EFL assessment instruments represents a further priority for the field.

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