Exploring Appropriate Song Rhythms for Effective Language Learning in the *Madrasah* Context: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study investigates identifying the most appropriate song rhythms to support ideal English language learning in the madrasah context, as viewed from students' perspectives. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving four students from MTs NU Pakis as participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews, with data validity ensured through triangulation. The findings indicate that songs with slow to moderate tempo are preferred and perceived as more effective in facilitating listening comprehension, speaking skill, and boosting motivation in language learning. Students reported that such rhythm made it easier to grasp meaning, imitate pronunciation, and reduce anxiety during English lessons. Songs like "I have a dream" and "You raise me up" were found to create a motivating and supportive learning environment. Therefore, rhythm selection plays a significant role in enhancing language acquisition in madrasah-based EFL instruction. This study offers practical insights for EFL practitioners in selecting effective musical aids, emphasizing the critical link between musical rhythm and pedagogical outcomes in religious educational settings.

Keywords: Song Rhythm, Pronunciation Development, Madrasah, Student Perspectives

INTRODUCTION | مقدمة

Teaching English in private madrasahs presents its own unique set of challenges for educators. The diverse background and varying level of proficiency among students demand not only pedagogical competence but also creativity, energy, and adaptability (Jeet et al., 2023). English is often perceived as a particularly difficult subject, especially among students in private madrasahs. This perception reflects a broader challenge in language education, where English is not merely a subject to be learned but a complex linguistic system that students often struggle to internalize, especially in contexts with limited exposure to authentic language use (Novianti, 2024).

Madrasahs, as formal Islamic educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag), play a strategic role in building morally grounded and intellectually capable Muslim generations (Apriyani et al., 2024;(Sudirman et al., 2024). Alongside the national curriculum, madrasahs provide additional religious education through subjects such as Aqidah Akhlak (Islamic Creed and Morals), Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), Islamic Cultural History, Qur'an and hadits Studies, and Arabic Language (Fitri et al., 2023). However, teaching English in these institution involves more than delivering linguistic content. It occurs within an EFL context characterized by minimal exposure

to English outside the classroom, which intensifies learning difficulties (Luthfiatunnisa et al., 2022). Studies from pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) have reported persistent challenges, including low student motivation, overcrowded classes, limited instructional time, and inadequate learning facilities (Marzulina et al., 2021). Traditional reliance on rote learning further impedes the development of communicative competence, as students have limited opportunities to use English meaningfully (Usama, 2023). Furthermore, many available teaching materials do not align with the cultural and pedagogical needs of madrasahs (Suban & Ilham, 2022). These challenges require teachers to adopt adaptive, culturally informed, and resourceful approaches to language instruction (Umar, 2022).

One promising pedagogical approach in EFL classroom, particularly in madrasah settings, is the use of songs as a learning medium. Songs have been shown to create enjoyable learning atmospheres, reduce anxiety, and enhance vocabulary and grammar acquisition in natural contexts (Kim et al., 2024). In environments with limited authentic exposure, songs function as a "culture window," familiarizing students with the rhythms, sounds, and expressions of English in engaging ways. Empirical evidence also indicates a positive relationship between listening to English songs and students' vocabulary mastery (Kamil, 2024). Activities such as lyric gap-filling, group singing, and content discussion encourage active, communicative participation that is often absent in traditional classroom settings. According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, negative emotional factors such as anxiety act as mental barriers that block language input, whereas positive, low-anxiety environments, like those created through songs, facilitate language acquisition (in Lemana II et al., 2023).

Despite a growing body of literature supporting the use of songs on EFL learning, most previous studies have focused on general benefits such as improving vocabulary, grammar, or motivation without examining specific musical elements that contribute to these outcomes. For instance, research has rarely distinguished between the roles of melody, rhythm, tempo, or genre, often treating "songs" as a single undifferentiated variable. As a result, pedagogical recommendations remain broad and lack guidance for selecting songs that are most effective for particular skills. Among these elements, rhythm and tempo play crucial role in building students' linguistic processing and emotional responses. Tempo affects speech rate, comprehension speed, and learners' comfort in following lyrics, while rhythm influences pronunciation modeling and memory retention. However, few studies have explored how these specific aspects impact listening and speaking skills. Particularly, in madrasah EFL context, where students may require slower, more structured input to support comprehension. This research seeks to address this gap by examining, how the tempo and rhythm of songs influence students' listening and speaking skills in English learning and how songs motivate students to learn English in madrasah settings.

METHOD | منهج

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to address the research questions effectively and provide an in depth analysis of students' experiences. Qualitative research is considered suitable for exploring complex educational issues that require detailed understanding and prioritize textual and contextual data over numerical information (Craswell in Azizah et al., 2025). This design aligns with the purpose of this study, which aimed to explore students' perceptions of the most appropriate songs and rhythms for ideal English language learning in madrasah context.

The research was conducted at MTs NU Pakis, a private Islamic junior high school located in

Malang Regency, East Java. The institution was selected purposively based on "A" accreditation status by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which indicates institutional quality and stability in teaching practices. Malang was also considered a suitable setting due to its relatively open minded educational culture and diverse student background, which provide a dynamic context for English learning through songs.

The participant consisted of four students (two male and two female) who had prior experience learning English through songs. The small sample size was determined based on the principle of information saturation, where sufficient depth and richness of data were achieved, and no new insights emerged after repeated data collection. The selection process used purposive sampling, guided by inclusion criteria: (1) active students in grade eight, (2) exposure to English leaning with songs, and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily.

Data were gathered through observation, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. Observations were conducted during two English learning sessions that integrated songs as instructional media to capture students' engagement and classroom interaction. Interviews served as the primary data source, exploring students' personal experiences and perceptions regarding song rhythm, tempo, and motivation in learning English. The questionnaire served as a supporting instrument to validate and cross check participants' responses. It contained open-ended questions, allowing students to express their opinions freely rather than being limited by fixed choices.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, this study applied methodological triangulation, comparing results obtained from the three data sources (observation, questionnaire, and interview). Member checking was also carried out to confirm the accuracy of the interpreted data. Ethical research procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the research objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity.

RESULT | نتائج

The findings of this study were organized into two major themes: (1) students' perspective on song tempo and rhythm in relation to listening and speaking, (2) the motivational influence of song-based learning, and (3) integration and theoretical reflection on how song tempo and rhythm align with language learning principle, particularly within Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and theories of affective engagement. A thematic analysis was conducted following (Braun & Clarke, 2006)six-step framework, involving repeated reading, initial coding, category development, theme generation, and interpretation.

Students' Perspective on Tempo and Rhythm

Across participants, song tempo and rhythm emerged as crucial factors affecting comprehension, pronunciation, and speaking fluency. Three subthemes were identified: (a) clarity and comprehension, (b) rhythm as memory and pronunciation aid, and (c) tempo-based leaning preference. Most students preferred slow or moderate tempo songs (e.g., You Raise Me Up. I Have a Dream), as these facilitated clearer perception of English words and pronunciation accuracy. They reported that slower rhythm allowed them to imitate and internalize correct stress and intonation patters, finding consistent with Krashen's input Hypothesis, which posits the comprehensible input promotes acquisition. For these learners, the slow tempo acts as a cognitive scaffold, reducing the burden on auditory processing. However, one student expressed a contrasting preference for upbeat

songs, stating that fast tempo provided a sense of challenge and enjoyment. This contras indicates the individual difference factor in musical preference and processing speed. Rather than contradiction, such variation reflects differentiated learning styles. Some students benefit from calm rhythmic pacing, while others are stimulated by rhythmic energy.

Students' Motivation through Song-based Learning

Three motivational subthemes emerged: (a) emotional engagement, (b) enjoyment and reduced anxiety, and (c) personal relevance. Students consistently described songs as emotionally stimulating and enjoyable, helping them to overcome anxiety when learning English. The affective connection between song and learning motivation aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, where lowered anxiety and increased enjoyment facilitate language acquisition. Songs described as "touching" or "fun" transformed English learning from a formal task into a pleasurable experience. Furthermore, the role of personal preference appeared significant, students reported feeling more motivated when the selected songs matched their tastes. This supports learner-centered pedagogical approaches (Lamb, 2017) emphasizing autonomy and emotional investment in language learning.

Integration and Theoretical Reflection on the Dual Role of Rhythm

Overall, both themes point to the multidimensional role of song rhythm in English learning. Rhythm operates as a dual mechanism: a cognitive scaffold and an affective regulator. Slow to moderate tempos enhance linguistic clarity, aligning with Krashen's input hypothesis by ensuring the music is comprehensible input that does not overwhelm the processor. Simultaneously, rhythmic engagement, particularly when paired with personal preference, significantly increases affective motivation and participation.

This interplay between auditory processing and emotional resonance underscores the potential of rhythmically structured songs to create low-stress, high engagement environments in EFL classroom, a particularly crucial outcome within the madrasah context where cultural and linguistic exposure is limited and anxiety toward English can be high. These findings reinforce Krashen's (1982) affective principles and extend them to musical pedagogy, highlighting that rhythmically balanced songs act as both comprehensible input and affective support, thereby fostering holistic language development and addressing the need for culturally sensitive and resource-efficient teaching methods in religious educational settings.

DISCUSSION | مناقشة

The result shows that the using songs through the learning English in Madrasah give positive impact for the crucial aspect in the acquisition language process, especially for the listening skill, speaking skill and increasing the learning motivation, and the vocabulary mastery and the grammar. While the overall benefit of songs is confirmed, a critical finding discussed below revolves around the necessity of matching song characteristics, particularly tempo and rhythm, to individual learning needs.

1. Song Enhance Listening Skills Through Repetition and Rhythmic Input

One of the most notable findings of this study is the significant improvement in students' listening skill after consistently participating in song-based learning activities. Songs offer authentic and repetitive language input, allowing learners to recognize sound patterns, intonation, and develop greater sensitivity to the phonological aspects of English. This aligns with the argument

made by Kim et al. (2024), who emphasize that songs can naturally enhance listening comprehension through repetition and meaningful context. In madrasah environments, where exposure to authentic English input is generally limited, songs serve as an alternative way into the natural sounds and rhythm of native speakers. This finding underscores the role of rhythmic consistency, particularly the preference for slow to moderate tempo identified in this study, which acts as a cognitive scaffold, making the comprehensible input more accessible in low exposure contexts. This exposure has proven effective in helping students identify sentence structure, common phrases, and correct pronunciation of vocabulary that they had previously encountered only in written form.

2. Song Support Speaking and Pronunciation Practice in a Low-Anxiety Setting

The use of songs also has a significant impact on the development of speaking skills, particularly in terms of pronunciation, syllable articulation, and students' confidence in oral communication. Activities such as singing along and completing gap-filling lyrics encourage learners to produce spoken language without excessive pressure. As noted by Krashen (in Lemana II et al., 2023), the affective filter constitutes a major barrier in second language acquisition. Songs through their enjoyable and low-stress nature, have been shown to lower this affective filter, thereby allowing students to become more receptive to input and more willing to engage in language production. The moderate pace of the songs, like those preferred by most participants, ensured that students have adequate time for pronunciation imitation without the anxiety induced by fast speech rate. Even students who were initially shy or reluctant to speak began to participate more actively when the learning involved their favorite songs. Several students reported increased confidence in pronouncing English words after singing songs, as they had become accustomed to hearing and mimicking the words repeatedly. Even students who were initially shy or reluctant to speak began to participate more actively when the learning involved their favorite songs.

3. Songs Foster Students' Motivation and Positive Attitude toward English.

Learning motivation is another aspect that receives a substantial boost through the use of songs in the classroom. Songs have the capacity to evoke positive emotions, foster affective connections to the learning material, and create a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere. One student in this study remarked, "A touching song makes me excited to learn English," indicating that emotional engagement with the content can significantly enhance students' interest and involvement in the learning process. This finding is consistent with the study by Kim et al. (2024), who emphasize that songs can establish a stress-free and enjoyable classroom environment. Furthermore, when songs are aligned with students' interest, they can stimulate curiosity, heighten attention, and ultimately improve the effectiveness of language learning.

4. Improvement in Vocabulary and Grammar Acquisition Through Meaningful Context

Songs provide meaningful context that support students in understanding and retaining vocabulary as well as grammatically structures. In this study, many students reported that they found it easier to memorize irregular verbs due to repeated exposure to them through specific song lyrics. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of incidental learning, the acquisition of knowledge that occurs indirectly while engaging in enjoyable activities. Wong et al. (2024) suggest that through natural repetition, songs assist learners in internalizing grammatical forms such as the past tense of regular and irregular verbs, without relying on rote memorization. Similarly, Kamil (2024) found a positive correlation between students' vocabulary mastery and their habit of listening to English songs. This pattern was also evident in the current study, where students who regularly listened to English songs demonstrated a broader and more diverse vocabulary compared to those who did not.

5. Classroom Participation and Communicative Practice Through Songs

Songs also provide valuable opportunities for students to engage actively in communicative language learning. activities such as discussing song content, answering comprehension questions based on the lyrics, and expressing personal interpretations of a song's meaning allow students to use English in authentic, context-rich situations. This is particularly significant in madrasah settings, where traditional, teacher-centered approaches often limit students' opportunities to speak and interact in the target language. Moreover, songs foster inclusivity in the classroom, students with auditory learning preferences tend to feel more at ease and better able to demonstrate their abilities when compared to conventional methods. Singing together and discussing shared musical interests also help strengthen social bonds among students, contributing to a more collaborative and supportive learning environment.

6. Implications for Differentiated Instruction: Addressing Tempo Preference

While the majority of students favored slow or moderate tempos for enhanced clarity and reduced cognitive load, a critical minority expressed a preference for fast, upbeat songs as a source of challenge and motivation. This nuanced finding suggests that a size fits all approach to song selection is inadequate. The varying preferences reflect individual differences in auditory processing speed and motivation, supporting the principle of differentiated instruction. For teachers in the madrasah context, this implies that early EFL instruction might benefit from utilizing slow, rhythmically consistent songs (e.g., ballads) to ensure linguistic clarity and lower the affective barrier for most learners. However, differentiated activities must be integrated, such as assigning faster, challenging rhythm to students who exhibit higher linguistic competence or musical rhythmic intelligence. By adapting the tempo, educators can maximize both the cognitive benefit (for slower processors) and the affective engagement (for those who thrive on rhythmic challenge). This approach is essential for achieving true learner centered pedagogy in religious schools.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

A reflective discussion requires acknowledging the study's limitations. First, the research employed a small, purposive sample (N=4) from a single madrasah. While this achieved the necessary depth for qualitative insight (information saturation), the finding lack generalizability across all madrasahs, which may have different religious orientations or EFL resources. Second, while the study focused on rhythm and tempo, other musical factors such as genre (e.g., pop vs nasyid), instrumentation and lyrical theme alignment with Islamic values were not fully explored. Future research should utilize quantitative or mixed methods designs with larger and more diverse samples to validate the rhythm preferences identified here. Furthermore, investigating the impact of culturally relevant genres (e.g., Islamic pop or qosidah) on the affective filter in madrasah settings would provide highly valuable pedagogical guidance.

CONCLUSSION | خاتمة

This study successfully demonstrated that the integration of rhythmically appropriate songs into English language instruction in madrasah offers substantial pedagogical benefits. Specifically, the fidings indicated that slow to moderate tempos are generally preferred, acting as a crucial cognitive scaffold that enhanced linguistic clarity (listening/pronunciation) and reduces cognitive load, thus directly supporting Krashen's Input Hypothesis in a low exposure environment. Furthermore, the use of songs significantly boosts motivation and reduces affective barriers, transforming the learning experience from a formal task into an enjoyable, inclusive activity. The result affirm that songs are not merely suppementaary materials but represent powerful

pedagogical tools that can effectively address the structural and cultural challenges faced by eucators in private madrasahs.

Despite these significant findings, the conclusion is drawn within the bounds of certain methodological limitations, namely the use of a small, purposive sample (N=4) from a single madrasah. Therefore, while the findings offer rich contextual insight, they are not generalizable. In light of this, future research should first utilize quantitative or mixed methods designs with larger, diverse sample to validate the rhythm preferences identified here. Second, research should explore the specific impact of culturally relevant genres (e.g., nasyid or Islamic pop) on students' affective filter, ensuring that the selection of musical aids aligns not only pedagogically but also with leaners' religious and cultural identities.

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