
A case study of EFL students' perceptions on the use of English songs in learning English vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

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The researchers observed that the difficulty faced by students at the time was the difficulty of memorizing new vocabulary, which hindered the progress of their language skills, specifically in learning English. This study aimed to understand students' perspectives on using English song lyrics for vocabulary mastery. Using a qualitative method where questionnaires and interviews were used as the instruments, the study found some important points related to students' perceptions of using English songs. The study found that the use of English songs improves students' English vocabulary mastery and pronunciation despite the challenges they face when listening to English songs. Through the challenge, students found two ways of coping with the challenges that teachers need to take into account when teaching using English songs. Some limitations and future research suggestions are also explained.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is pivotal for someone to master a language. Mastering vocabulary help improve students' skills in listening, writing, reading, and speaking. Vocabulary mastery affects the quality of a person's language production (Laufer & Nation, 1995). It means that vocabulary plays a huge role in someone's language skills. The higher someone's vocabulary mastery, the more likely he/ she has better language skills. Further, vocabulary mastery also positively correlates to another aspect. Masrai and Milton (2017), for instance, argued that students with a lot of vocabulary knowledge have better academics. Therefore, vocabulary mastery is important as it can boost someone's academic aspect as well as his/ her mastery of a language.

A vocabulary, usually developed with age, serves as a useful and fundamental tool for communication and acquiring knowledge. Vocabulary mastery is one of the essential factors that influences students in mastering English. Mastering vocabulary benefits English-speaking students. Nation (2010) believes that vocabulary plays an essential part in one's foreign language learning and language proficiency. It can affect how well students speak, read, and listen. Therefore, educators need to pay attention when teaching vocabulary. Thornbury (2003) argues that mastering vocabulary means that students have comprehensive knowledge about the languages belonging to the meanings, spoken form, written form, grammatical errors, collocations of the words, the connotation or associations of the word, and word frequency. Students have to memorize words and know the meaning of words and what they sound like. Ehri and Rosenthal (2007), suggested that vocabulary acquisition should focus on three aspects: remembering the spelling, understanding the meaning, and correct pronunciation. Therefore, many students felt

heavy when they had to master vocabulary. In this sense, there is an urge to cater to the issue and find a workable technique for teaching vocabulary.

Music is believed to be a language learning tool that can increase student motivation in learning. Changes in the atmosphere that occur when a song starts to be heard and sung can create a relaxed and comfortable learning atmosphere so that the pressure felt by students when they want to learn a certain thing will subside (Trinick, 2011). Israel (2013) also acclaimed the power of playing songs as a learning tool. When students feel the learning process is fun, the resulting impact helps them understand the materials (Israel, 2013). Therefore, English songs play an important role in the process of learning a foreign language. English music is a single language unit consisting of several vocabularies that combine culture, vocabulary, listening, grammar, and other language skills. Kolinsky et al., (2013) have previously found that music can facilitate the comprehension of verbal input. It is stated that music has a calming effect and keeps students from learning boredom (Kolinsky et al., 2013). Maess et al., (2001) indicate the fact that using music can help students remember vocabulary quickly. Palmer and Kelly (1992) believe that music can facilitate language learning and gain students' comprehension of words they listen to. Not only vocabulary but also with music, students can learn several speaking accents that they can apply when conversing (Palmer & Kelly, 1992). Students expose themselves to a variety of English accents in a fun way. Wallace's study (1994), comes with a result that melodic texts were the easiest ones to remember when compared to other types of texts. The sung texts can make them more easily remembered and better recalled than when the same texts are delivered without any melody (Wallace, 1994). Therefore, it can be argued that music plays a role in making it easier for students to master and memorize vocabulary (Octaberlina, 2023). Hence, using songs as a medium for teaching is highly suggested. However, studies that focus on the use of songs in teaching and the perceived use of them in particular need further exploration.

There is a correlation between students' perceptions and their learning outcomes. Perceptions cover some aspects that include how students think about themselves, their learning situation, and the community involved (Wesely, 2012). According to Brown (2009), students' perceptions should be taken into consideration in teaching as they affect their learning, motivation, and their achievement. When they positively perceive their learning, they are more likely they get succeed in mastering the target language (Marion et al., 2008). Therefore, it is equally important to know students' perceptions in the learning process because knowing the perceptions of each learner can help an educator find strategies, methods, and even styles for solving problems (Wesely, 2012). In the area of speaking, one of the skills needed to master a language, some researchers pay attention to the correlation of vocabulary with speaking (Robah & Anggrisia, 2023). According to Wangru (2016), the use of varied vocabulary can affect individuals in speaking English. The vocabulary affects how individuals can convey precise meaning and does not hamper someone's intention. Vocabulary also helps individuals when speaking in different contexts and different registers (McCarten, 2007). The presence of contexts and registers requires a variety of vocabulary such as vocabulary that are appropriate for formal and informal interactions. Therefore, as stated by Nation (2001), students must understand nine aspects of learning vocabulary ranging from understanding the meaning of a word to the frequency of the word used in contexts as they equip them to speak regardless of the situation. Those aspects need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary. Yet, research about teaching vocabulary is still progressing; at least the previous studies have proven so.

There are some previous studies concerning vocabulary teaching. How to engage students when teaching vocabulary to boost vocabulary acquisition is the main theme (Çevikbaş et al.,

2018; Pavia et al., 2019; Phisutthangkoon & Panich, 2016). The study by Phisutthangkoon and Panich (2016), for instance, focuses on finding a strategy for teaching English vocabulary through songs. Involving 40 EFL students, the study revealed that the use of songs helped with the learning process and ultimately vocabulary acquisition. This study is also in line with (Aguirre et al. 2016; Asmali, 2017; Kuśnierek, 2016). The study proved that using songs not only improves students' vocabulary acquisition but also motivates students to learn (Aguirre et al., 2016; Asmali, 2017; Kuśnierek, 2016). It implies that the use of songs signified memorizing vocabulary that led to memory retention. Another study by Javadi-safa (2018), also used songs as a technique for teaching vocabulary. Using a different context, Persian students whose English was at an intermediate level, the study found that the use of songs in teaching vocabulary was proven effective. The students learned vocabulary better through songs. In other words, the use of songs as a method of teaching vocabulary needs to be considered. Yet, this idea needs to be tested further for other contexts where English serves as a foreign language. In addition, the previous studies have not focused on how the acceptance of the students upon using songs in learning English vocabulary. As the consequence, an in-depth analysis how students' acceptance using English songs when learning English vocabulary is absent. In fact, the students' voice is pivotal in knowing their behavior upon a lesson or a program which highly correlates to the improvement of the quality of educational environment (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Shrestha et al., 2019).

Aiming to fill in the gap, the current research focuses on investigating EFL students' experience when learning vocabulary through English songs. The study particularly centered on how is the EFL students' perception of using English song lyrics to master a new vocabulary.

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative method since the goal was to describe a case at one of the state universities in Indonesia. The study focused on exploring the students' perceptions of an English Education Program, regarding vocabulary mastery using English song lyrics. The study used a case study approach as the site used English songs in teaching students' English vocabulary. According to Cresswell (2015), a case study is a qualitative approach that studies each individual or group, whether it is an important example of a specific case or provides useful generalizations. Therefore, due to the nature of the site, the researchers applied this approach to dig into the phenomena, especially in determining how students perceive the use of English songs to master new vocabulary.

Research Site and Participants

This study took place at one of the state universities in Indonesia. The University offered an English Education Program where its' students were the prospective English teachers. The students were required to take some credit courses to earn a bachelor's degree. The researchers figured out that one of the lecturers incorporated songs for teaching vocabulary in his/ her classes. Due to this phenomenon, the researchers chose the classes and asked to gain permission to study the phenomenon. Since participation in this research was voluntary, the researchers got sixty-six English Foreign Language Students (EFL) pursuing an undergraduate degree in English Education at the aforementioned university. The participants consisted of twenty-six males and forty females. To ensure the credentials of the institution, the participants, and the program, the researchers do not reveal their names. All the entities involved had signed a consent form before joining the study and were fully aware that their involvement in the study would not affect

anything.

Research Instruments

To answer the research question, this study used two instruments to triangulate data (Creswell, 2015). The first instrument was a questionnaire shared with the participants via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of seven questions where three questions were in forms of closed-ended questions while the rests were open-ended questions. All the questions asked the participants about their views of using songs related to their vocabulary learning. Before sharing the questionnaire, the program's lecturers from the university where the study took place had validated the questions. This type of data was collected from April to May 2022. Meanwhile, the second instrument was a semi-structured interview with a set of questions aimed at for digging more answers from participants. Among the participants, the researchers interviewed nine students who agreed to be interviewed. The interview with each participant lasted for 15-30 minutes and was recorded. The interviews were conducted in June 2022 after the data from the first instrument was gathered.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the questionnaire and the interviews were inductively analyzed (Yin, 2011). After obtaining data from the questionnaire, the researchers read the data to find a pattern concerning to the research question. To ease analyzing the data, the researchers categorized them to determine the major theme. The aforementioned technique was also applied when analyzing the data from the interview. After the transcriptions, the researchers read and categorized them. The researchers also highlighted statements from the participants that could serve as examples in answering the research question. In addition, the researchers also targeted finding new categories to form new themes. The themes were then discussed further, particularly aiming to explore students' perceptions of using English songs when learning vocabulary in an EFL classroom.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Upon teaching vocabulary using English songs, students perceived the technique positively. Their English vocabulary was added by listening to the English songs. Therefore, they believed that listening to English songs employed in the classes helped them with their vocabulary acquisition. Below are some examples of excerpts taken from the participants indicating the aforementioned finding:

Yes, I got a lot of vocabulary.... (Participant 22)

I get quite a lot of vocabulary when I listen to English songs. (Participant 23)

Every time I listen [ed to English songs], I must be[learn] a new vocabulary (Participant 54)

The data the researchers got from the results of the interview also supported the above notion. The participants believed that having English songs during an EFL class helped them in vocabulary acquisition. Even, the participants said that they could also learn listening skills and get the message implied by the songs. Below are some of the participants' statements that are relevant to the said idea:

... to enrich my vocabulary and understand the implied meaning of a song.... (Interviewee 1)

I can learn the pronunciation, and also I got many new vocabularies. (Interviewee 3)

We can know the meaning of the lyrics itself [and] also increases and master[y] some new vocabulary. (Interviewee 5)

To be honest, by listening to song lyrics, especially in English, I can add new vocabulary and train my listening skills (Interviewee 8)

In addition to adding students' English vocabulary, the positive aspect of having English songs is improving students' English pronunciation. The students claimed that their pronunciation got better after listening to English songs. They believed that they could imitate the pronunciation of words in the songs. Below are some excerpts that are in line with the previously mentioned findings.

By listening to English songs..., it helps me a lot in learning and imitating the pronunciation of foreign people. (Participant 50)

Yes, I adapted most of my pronunciation skills from it. (Participant 15)

When the researchers referred to the data from the interview, the researchers also found the same idea that supported the previous findings regarding the pronunciation aspects. The students stated that their English pronunciation improved a lot by listening to English songs. The excerpt below describes best of the argument:

Besides that, it also adds to my knowledge about how to pronounce every word that I listen to. (Interviewee 1)

... which is to increase vocabulary, but also to practice listening and pronunciation. (Interviewee 2)

... get new vocab and also understand how to pronounce it. (Interviewee 6)

... because I want to know "How to pronounce every word in English" properly and correctly. (Interviewee 4)

Despite the positive views of English songs used when learning English vocabulary, students faced a challenge. They stated that since they were learning a foreign language, they encountered difficulties in listening to the English words. Based on the data taken from the questionnaire, the students admitted that the inability to catch the words from their listening was due to 1) the accent that the singers of the songs had, 2) the speech rate of the singers, and 3) the homophone where two words are pronounced the same but had different meanings. The statements from the participants can explain best the said findings:

The accent aspect:

Yeah good. But the accent i think little different with the real native. (Participant 24)

There are some that can be heard and understood (Participant 11)

Not really. Sometimes the words are difficult to listen. (Participant 17)

The pronunciation aspect:

I am not sure. Because many English songs are pronounced too fast (Participant 23)

Homophone aspect:

Not sure about that, sometimes there are things that sound the same but have different meanings (Participant 64)

Despite the challenge the students face when listening to English songs for their vocabulary learning, the use of English songs ignited students to have a strategic competence in coping with the issue. Based on the results of the questionnaire, students stated that they used two strategies. The first strategy is to look up the lyrics of the English songs played. It helped them a lot in learning new vocabulary and its pronunciation. Here are some excerpts taken from the questionnaire:

Probably not. So, we must browse the lyrics before (Participant 39)

No, I'm not, but those will be clear just after seeing the lyrics. (Participant 41)

Sometimes I do not hear the pronunciation so clearly. Therefore, I have to look for the lyrics first to be able to understand the pronunciation. (Participant 50)

In addition to that, they also used another strategy when they could not hear the words in the songs. They replayed the songs several times. By doing this attempt, they believed that it was an effective way to get the words correctly. The excerpt below explains best of the argument:

... I understand a little after repeated attempts. (Participant 46)

As the researchers looked up the results of the interviews, the findings corroborated. The students asserted that they had to repeat listening to the songs to help them catch the vocabulary and its pronunciation. The quotes below clarify the argument:

Absolutely, I need to listen many times. (Interviewee 3)

The interesting [aspect] from listening English song lyric is [that] I can learn how to pronounce words correctly by listening it over and over again. (Interviewee 9)

Analyzing the data from the instruments, the researchers found further statements that might become the reasons why the students perceived English songs positively. The first reason was the 'fun' aspect they got when listening to the songs. The songs become a source of entertainment while at the same time they learn English, particularly vocabulary and pronunciation of English words. As a result, students engaged with the lessons and they could absorb the lesson easily. The statements below explain:

... because it's fun, entertaining, and interesting so I can receive learning material more easily (Interviewee 4)

Yes, I really enjoy it because we can still learn English without getting confused or even bored (Interviewee 9)

The use of English songs in teaching vocabulary also leads to students' independence in learning. It can be implied from their statements about searching for words they fail to understand

by looking for their meaning through the Internet. They did this strategy without being asked by their lecturer. In other words, they become independent learners. Below are statements that best picture the aforesaid idea:

Sometimes meaning in England and Indonesia are different. But if I have listened the song but I still can't understand the meaning. I will check it on the Google. (Interviewee 3)
Sometimes, I search on google for the meaning if don't understand the words. (Interviewee 5)

The study found that students perceived positively using English songs in teaching vocabulary since using this technique brought students some advantages. The technique added to students' vocabulary and brushed up their pronunciation. Even though students faced a challenge when having this technique in their class, they had some strategic competencies such as repeating the songs and looking for the song's lyrics by Googling them online. In other words, students accepted the use of English songs in teaching vocabulary in a positive way as it brought advantages for them despite the challenge.

Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of EFL students studying in the undergraduate program of English Education upon the use of English songs in learning English vocabulary. To elaborate on students' perceptions, researchers used questionnaires and interviews. The researchers combined the instruments to support the research data. From both of the data, the researchers found that students had positive acceptance towards the use of English songs. The extent to which the positive acceptance happens is explained in the sections including the challenge the students face when learning vocabulary through English songs and how they cope with the issue. Here are the details of the findings.

Based on the results of the data analysis, the researchers found three major themes. The first was the positive acceptance from the students upon learning English vocabulary using English songs. The students believed that the English songs used in the class helped them master new English vocabulary. This study corroborated with the previous research by (Kocaman, 2016). Kocaman (2016) confirmed that learning vocabulary from songs was proven effective. He also revealed that the participants in his study gained better pronunciation and spelling (Kocaman, 2016). This study also strengthened the previous study conducted by Stanlee and Singh (2021) who researched the effectiveness of using songs to improve undergraduate students' English vocabulary. Their study found that students who were taught using English songs in teaching gained more English vocabulary compared to those who learned vocabulary using traditional methods of learning (Stanlee & Singh, 2021). This current study elucidated by further elaborating qualitatively that students admitted their vocabulary improved through learning English songs.

In addition to learning new vocabulary, listening to English songs also brings another benefit. This study found that students could practice their listening skills, particularly understanding the content of the songs. This finding resonates the past studies as well and the study by (Stanlee & Singh, 2021) is an example. They argue that since listening to English songs allowed students to repeat songs, students could grasp the message of the songs in addition to understanding the words they listened to (Stanlee & Singh, 2021). As stated by Werner (2018), the use of songs enables students to improve recall, which is vital when learning vocabulary as

students need to use words when communicating in English.

This study also explained that English songs facilitated students with their pronunciation as they could imitate the pronunciation of words from the English songs. This becomes the third theme that this study found. As Kocaman (2016) argued that songs became an effective mode for students to practice their pronunciation, which is part of the linguistic competence that students need to have to master English. He even further asserted that songs could trigger students' curiosity to find the meaning of the song (Kocaman, 2016). The curiosity is important to trigger students' motivation when learning English. Therefore, as suggested by Tasnim (2022), teachers need to select a strategy to motivate students as well as build their curiosity in learning one of which using songs is one of the strategies. It happens as songs are entertaining as admitted by the students in this study and are easy to use as materials in teaching (Kocaman, 2016). The finding of this study resonated the previous studies (Kuśnierek, 2016; Muhamad & Rahmat, 2020; Stanlee & Singh, 2021). They found that students' pronunciation skills were improved when English songs were used in teaching English. This issue where many EFL learners face (Muhamad & Rahmat, 2020) can be reduced through teaching using English songs.

While using English songs brings some benefits as explained in the above themes, the study reveals that students also face a challenge when using English songs in learning English vocabulary. The challenge was the difficulties in listening properly to the words in the English songs due to the accent of the singers, their pronunciation, and words similarity. This challenge also happened to students in (Muhamad & Rahmat, 2020) study. Their study found that students encountered problems in catching the pronunciation of words in the songs which hindered them understanding the meaning of the songs (Muhamad & Rahmat, 2020).

Despite the challenges, students found some strategies to cope with the problems. Those include replying to songs several times and finding songs' lyrics online. These findings contain some pedagogical implications where teachers should take account of having those two strategies while teaching using songs. Those strategies should be incorporated into teaching and introduced to students as well. The latter strategy, moreover, could lead students to incorporate technology into the class. This way, students could exercise their technological competence indirectly. The use of songs in teaching supports the notion of technological competence needed by students and teachers (Anas, 2019). In addition, students become independent learners, as they need no direct instructions from teachers instructing them to find difficult words online. In other words, using songs in teaching English vocabulary promotes autonomous learning (Meesong & Jaroongkhongdach, 2016).

4. CONCLUSION

The study aims to explore the use of English songs in teaching English vocabulary in English as a foreign language. The study revealed that the students had a positive acceptance of the use of English songs for their vocabulary learning. From the data, the students admitted that the technique improved their English vocabulary acquisition. They learned new English vocabulary by listening to the English songs. In addition, through listening to English songs, students asserted that their English pronunciation improved as they could imitate the pronunciation of the singers singing the lyrics. However, a challenge also happened when the students listened to the songs. They encountered difficulties listening to the words they listened to. It happened due to the pronunciation of the singers, their accents, and the homophone aspect. Despite the challenge, the students did not give up on understanding the words. They came up

with some solutions such as repeating the songs several times and consulting with the lyrics of the songs.

This study contains some limitations. First, this study focused only on the perceptions of the students upon the use of English songs in learning vocabulary and involved relatively a small sample. Thus, future research might want to focus on having a bigger sampling size to ensure the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the researchers did not measure the effectiveness of the English songs on students' vocabulary retention. Hence, future research could focus on how the technique affects students' vocabulary retention. Finally, the research here took formal classes as the sample. Future research might consider studying the use of English songs as an activity outside the class, both as an extracurricular or extramural activity.

Despite the limitations, this study contains some pedagogical implications. The use of English songs can be a workable technique when teaching English vocabulary and pronunciation. When using English songs as a technique in teaching vocabulary, educators might need to prepare songs' lyrics and play the songs several times to ensure students' understanding. In addition, educators might also assign their students to listen to English songs to learn vocabulary outside the class where the learning can serve as an extramural English activity (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

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