

The Role of English Songs in Developing EFL Students' Vocabulary Mastery

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Abstract

Vocabulary mastery is important in English learning because it supports learners' ability to comprehend and communicate in English. However, EFL students often experience difficulties in learning and retaining vocabulary through traditional approaches. English songs provide an alternative learning medium through lyrics, melody, rhythm, and repeated exposure. This study aims to examine the role of English songs in developing EFL students' vocabulary and explore how rhythm, lyrical style, and repetition support vocabulary development. A qualitative approach using a descriptive literature review method was employed. Fourteen relevant studies published between 2020 and 2025 were selected and descriptively analyzed by identifying, grouping, and comparing findings related to the research questions. The findings indicate that English songs support vocabulary development through repeated exposure, contextualized input, recognition of word forms and meanings, learner engagement, and autonomous learning. Rhythm, lyrical characteristics, and repetition also support vocabulary learning. The study concludes that English songs can serve as a supplementary medium for vocabulary learning when appropriately selected and combined with purposeful learning activities.

Keywords: English songs, EFL students, vocabulary mastery, vocabulary learning, literature review

INTRODUCTION

Learning English requires a good command of vocabulary because it is the foundation of a language (Alqahtani, 2015). In this case, EFL students with extensive vocabulary knowledge can improve their reading comprehension, writing quality, and overall language proficiency (Basori & Setyowati, 2024). A lack of vocabulary knowledge among students can hinder learning by impeding the development of their English language skills. Therefore, mastering vocabulary is essential for EFL students

because it can improve their English skills both academically and in everyday communication.

However, EFL students often have difficulty expanding their vocabulary, which can affect their overall language learning process (Hadi, 2017). This is because the teaching methods used to develop vocabulary are generally tiring and boring, which reduces EFL students' motivation to study (Hadi, 2017). The large number of vocabulary words that must be learned can also be a factor in the difficulty EFL students have in understanding their meanings, because each English word can have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used (Lazarurizqi & Suryaman, 2022). Responding to the challenges faced by EFL students in learning vocabulary requires effective strategies in the learning process. One effective strategy is the use of media to support and enhance the teaching and learning process (Putri et al., 2025). Among several learning media that can be used to teach vocabulary, one of them is through the use of English songs.

Songs have become a part of human life. Therefore, songs can be used as an interesting and effective learning medium to improve the vocabulary of EFL students. Learning vocabulary through songs is a fun way because the combination of melody, rhythm, and lyrics makes it easier for the brain to remember new words. The use of songs in English language learning has also been shown to support vocabulary mastery (Omolara, 2023). This suggests that English songs can play a role in the language learning process, including expanding vocabulary. The effectiveness of teaching vocabulary using songs has been supported by some evidence that increasingly confirms that songs can play a role in the process of learning foreign languages. Several studies have reported positive outcomes in vocabulary learning after incorporating songs as a medium for improving vocabulary compared to more conventional teaching approaches. As shown by (Tilwani et al., 2022) songs can enhance vocabulary, spoken form recognition, form-meaning connections, and collocation recognition among EFL students. (Rahman et al., 2024) Also show that English songs are effective as a medium for vocabulary learning, where students can expand their vocabulary and improve their fluency in everyday conversation through the use of phrases and idioms found in song lyrics. However, these studies have not systematically synthesized the specific characteristics of songs, such as rhythm, lyrical style, and repetition, in relation to

vocabulary development, leaving a gap in understanding how these characteristics are discussed across the existing literature.

This study aims to examine the role of English songs in developing EFL students' vocabulary through a literature review. English songs are considered effective learning tools because their combination of melody, rhythm, and meaningful lyrics can facilitate memory and retention. This study seeks to synthesize existing literature on how the characteristics of English songs, namely rhythm, lyrical style, and repetition, contribute to vocabulary development among EFL students. Research questions for the study include (1) What are the roles of English songs in developing EFL students' vocabulary? and (2) How can the characteristics of English songs such as rhythm, lyrical style, and repetition be utilized to develop the vocabulary of EFL students? Insights from this study are expected to guide educators in implementing innovative strategies to enhance English vocabulary acquisition.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design using a literature review method to examine the role of English songs in developing the vocabulary of EFL students, focusing on two research questions: (1) What are the roles of English songs in developing EFL students' vocabulary? and (2) How can the characteristics of English songs such as rhythm, lyrical style, and repetition be utilized to develop the vocabulary of EFL students? The data for this study were collected from 14 peer-reviewed journal articles on the use of English-language songs for vocabulary development in EFL students, identified through a comprehensive literature search.

Sources were identified through manual searches on academic search engines, primarily Google Scholar, supplemented by cross-referencing citations from relevant articles. Sources were considered if (1) they examined the use of English-language songs in vocabulary development among English language learners, regardless of whether the context was labeled as EFL or ESL, (2) they were published in peer-reviewed journals, (3) they were published between 2020 and 2025, and (4) they were available in accessible full text. Sources were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed,

were not available in full text, were published outside the specified time frame, or were evaluated for purposes unrelated to vocabulary acquisition.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods. The analysis included identifying key findings from the selected publications, grouping similar findings, comparing findings across the studies, and summarizing recurring themes. The first stage involved identifying statements and findings related to the role of English-language songs in vocabulary learning. These findings were then grouped into topics such as repeated exposure to vocabulary, context-based vocabulary learning, familiarization with word forms and meanings, student engagement, and independent learning.

The second stage focuses on the characteristics of the songs. Findings related to rhythm and tempo, lyrical content and stylistic features, as well as repetitions or recurring vocabulary, were organized and interpreted in relation to vocabulary development. The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods. The analysis involved identifying key findings from the selected publications, grouping similar findings, comparing findings across studies, and summarizing recurring themes. Findings related to vocabulary improvement were drawn primarily from studies that directly examined vocabulary outcomes, while perception- and linguistics-based studies were interpreted based on the type of evidence presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Roles of English Songs in Developing EFL Students' Vocabulary

Findings from the fourteen selected studies indicate that English-language songs can support vocabulary learning in several ways. The primary roles identified in the literature include providing repeated exposure to vocabulary, presenting vocabulary in context, supporting the recognition of word forms and their meanings, increasing learner engagement, and providing opportunities for independent learning.

Repeated Exposure to Vocabulary

One of the key roles of English-language songs is to provide repeated exposure to vocabulary. Words and phrases in songs are often repeated throughout the verses and choruses, allowing students to encounter the same vocabulary more than once. This

repeated exposure can increase familiarity with the vocabulary and its pronunciation. (Zhang et al., 2023) present direct evidence regarding the role of singing in vocabulary development. The study involved 95 Chinese adolescents learning English as a second language (ESL) and compared learning through singing with learning through memorizing lyrics. The results showed that the singing condition yielded better outcomes in vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation. These findings suggest that singing can provide additional support for vocabulary learning compared to simply memorizing lyrics.

(Busse et al., 2021) reached a similar conclusion from an intervention involving 57 elementary-school-level EFL students. The students were taught new vocabulary and grammar through singing or reciting lyrics. The singing group showed better results than the group that recited lyrics in vocabulary learning, but the results varied when compared to the control group and in terms of grammar outcomes. Therefore, this study supports the potential contribution of singing to vocabulary learning but does not substantiate the claim that singing is universally superior to other teaching conditions. Repeated exposure is also crucial for song-lyric-based learning. (Huang et al., 2024) studied a song-lyric-based training app and found that it improved listening skills and vocabulary mastery among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Their findings indicate that actively engaging with song lyrics can enhance language learning, particularly when the songs are integrated into structured and interactive learning activities. Thus, the literature suggests that repetition in songs can provide valuable opportunities for vocabulary exposure. However, repeated exposure alone is not sufficient for vocabulary mastery. Students still need opportunities to pay attention to, understand, and apply the words they encounter.

Contextualized Vocabulary Input

English songs can also present vocabulary within meaningful linguistic contexts. Unlike vocabulary lists that present words individually, song lyrics generally contain phrases, sentences, and expressions. This contextualized input can help learners encounter vocabulary as part of language use. (Karim et al., 2022) explored EFL students' perceptions of using English songs to enhance vocabulary mastery. The study used a qualitative descriptive design involving 56 EFL students and additional interviews with six participants. The findings provide evidence of students' positive

perceptions of songs as a vocabulary-learning medium. Similarly, (Basori & Setyowati, 2024) in a qualitative case study of 66 Indonesian EFL undergraduate students, found that the students consistently reported that listening to English language songs helped them acquire new vocabulary and improve their pronunciation, but they also noted difficulties in understanding the lyrics due to the singers' accents, fast speech, and homophones, which they overcame by searching for lyrics online and replaying the songs repeatedly.

(Wardiman et al., 2022) also investigated the use of English songs for vocabulary mastery among 30 English students at Tadulako University. The researchers used a questionnaire to obtain students' responses. Participants reported that songs could help their development in listening and language elements, including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. These studies suggest that contextualized lyrics can make vocabulary more meaningful to learners. Nevertheless, contextualization does not guarantee that learners will understand every word. Vocabulary may still require teacher explanation, dictionary use, or additional learning activities.

Supporting Recognition of Word Forms and Meanings

Another role of English songs is supporting learners' recognition of vocabulary through auditory and written input. When lyrics are provided while students listen to or sing a song, learners can encounter vocabulary in both spoken and written forms.

(Zhang et al., 2023) provide evidence that singing can support vocabulary learning together with pronunciation. This finding is important because vocabulary knowledge is not limited to knowing the meaning of a written word; learners also need to recognize how words sound. (Huang et al., 2024) similarly demonstrate the value of combining song listening with lyrics-based activities. Their use of a lyrics-training application indicates that technology can help learners interact with the auditory and written forms of language simultaneously.

This role is also relevant to students' experiences reported by (Basori & Setyowati, 2024). Although the study focused on perceptions rather than experimental vocabulary gains, its findings indicate that English songs can be used as a resource for encountering vocabulary and pronunciation. Therefore, songs may support the relationship between how a word is written, how it is pronounced, and how it is used in

context. However, this potential depends on the clarity and accessibility of the song lyrics.

Learner Engagement and Positive Learning Experiences

The literature also shows that English songs can increase learner engagement. Songs are familiar forms of entertainment for many learners, and their use in language learning may make vocabulary activities less monotonous. (Sarnou & Sarnou, 2023), for example, examined the use of songs for teaching English vocabulary to Algerian elementary-school pupils. Their study provides direct evidence that song-based instruction can be effective in vocabulary learning. The findings indicate that songs can enliven English classes while supporting vocabulary instruction.

(Ammelia et al., 2024) similarly examined vocabulary learning through songs using a constructivist approach with elementary school students. The study emphasizes learner engagement as part of the learning process. This suggests that songs can provide a learning environment in which students participate more actively in vocabulary-related activities. However, engagement should not be equated directly with vocabulary mastery. A song may be enjoyable without necessarily providing useful vocabulary. Therefore, teachers need to connect students' interest in songs with explicit vocabulary-learning objectives.

Supporting Autonomous and Extramural Learning

English songs can also provide opportunities for learners to study vocabulary independently outside formal classroom settings. (Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020) specifically examined vocabulary learning autonomy through the incorporation of English songs among Indonesian EFL students. Their findings indicate that learners could use English songs as a resource for autonomous vocabulary learning. This role is particularly relevant because songs are easily accessible through digital platforms. Learners can choose songs according to their interests, listen to them repeatedly, read the lyrics, identify unfamiliar vocabulary, and search for meanings without direct teacher supervision.

(Imsa-ard, 2025) provides broader supporting evidence from the context of extramural English. The study examined the relationship between out-of-class English activities and Thai EFL undergraduates' L2 vocabulary knowledge and affective variables. Although the study was not limited to English songs, its findings support the

broader argument that engagement with English outside the classroom can contribute to vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, English songs can extend vocabulary learning beyond classroom instruction. Their accessibility makes them particularly suitable for learners who want to engage with English according to their own interests and learning habits.

Song Characteristics Supporting Vocabulary Learning

The second research question concerns how characteristics of English songs support vocabulary development. The reviewed literature suggests that rhythm or tempo, lyrical characteristics, and repetition can contribute to vocabulary learning. However, these characteristics were not consistently isolated and experimentally tested as independent variables across the fourteen studies. They should therefore be understood as interconnected characteristics identified through the literature rather than as separate causal variables.

Rhythm and Tempo

Rhythm and tempo can influence how easily learners follow and process song lyrics. Songs with a slower and clearer rhythm may provide learners with more time to identify individual words and understand their pronunciation. (Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020) provide particularly relevant evidence in this respect. Their participants reported preferences for slow-beat songs because slower songs made the words easier to understand. This finding suggests that song tempo can influence the accessibility of vocabulary input for EFL learners. The finding is also consistent with the intervention evidence from (Zhang et al., 2023), where singing was associated with vocabulary and pronunciation learning. However, this research did not isolate rhythm as an independent variable. Therefore, the improvement cannot be attributed to rhythm alone. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers should consider the tempo of songs when selecting materials. Songs with extremely fast rhythms may make vocabulary recognition difficult, especially for lower-proficiency learners. Songs with manageable rhythms may provide learners with greater opportunities to notice pronunciation and individual lexical items. Thus, rhythm should be considered as a facilitating condition rather than a proven independent cause of vocabulary development.

Lyrical Content and Linguistic Style

Lyrics are the primary linguistic component of English songs. They expose learners to vocabulary, phrases, expressions, and different forms of language use. The usefulness of lyrics for vocabulary learning depends on their clarity, relevance, linguistic complexity, and appropriateness for learners. (Basori & Setyowati, 2024; Karim et al., 2022) demonstrate the relevance of song lyrics from learners' perspectives. Students viewed English songs as useful for vocabulary learning, indicating that lyrics can function as a source of vocabulary input. However, lyrics can also contain linguistic features that make comprehension difficult. (Aras et al., 2024), for example, it examined figurative language in contemporary music. This study is useful for understanding the linguistic complexity of song lyrics, but it should not be interpreted as evidence that figurative language itself improves vocabulary mastery. Instead, it indicates that contemporary songs may contain figurative expressions that require interpretation. (Alharthi & Alharbi, 2024) provide another relevant perspective by comparing English songs from school curricula with songs available on YouTube. Their analysis focused on vocabulary and word-frequency characteristics. The findings indicate differences between curriculum songs and YouTube songs in terms of vocabulary distribution and variety. This suggests that the source and selection of songs influence the type of vocabulary students encounter. Therefore, lyrical style should be considered carefully in vocabulary instruction. Songs with useful, comprehensible, and level-appropriate vocabulary may provide more accessible learning input, whereas highly figurative or linguistically complex lyrics may require additional explanation.

Repetition and Vocabulary Frequency

Repetition is another characteristic associated with vocabulary learning through songs. Words and phrases may occur several times within a song, particularly in repeated choruses. Such repetition provides learners with multiple encounters with vocabulary. (Alharthi & Alharbi, 2024) are particularly relevant to this issue because their study analyzed vocabulary in school curriculum songs and YouTube songs using word-frequency information. Their findings indicate that curriculum songs contained vocabulary that was more closely aligned with high-frequency word lists, while YouTube songs provided greater thematic and lexical variety. The findings suggest that repetition should not be considered only in terms of how many times a word occurs. The

frequency and usefulness of the vocabulary are also important. A word that is repeated several times but is not relevant to learners' needs may have limited instructional value. Conversely, repeated exposure to useful and level-appropriate vocabulary can provide students with additional opportunities to notice and remember the word. The findings from (Busse et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023) also support the broader value of repeated engagement with song lyrics, although neither study isolates repetition as an independent variable. Consequently, repetition appears to be most useful when combined with active vocabulary processing. Teachers can ask students to identify repeated words, determine their meanings, complete missing lyrics, and use the words in new sentences. Such activities turn repetition into purposeful vocabulary practice.

Conditions and Limitations of Using English Songs

Although the reviewed studies generally indicate positive potential, the literature also shows that the effectiveness of English songs depends on how they are selected and implemented. One important consideration is learners' difficulty in understanding lyrics. Fast tempo, unclear pronunciation, unfamiliar vocabulary, and figurative expressions can make songs challenging for EFL learners. (Basori & Setyowati, 2024) for example, reported positive perceptions but also identified difficulties associated with listening to English songs. Another consideration is the difference between learner perception and measurable learning outcomes. Some studies in the corpus, including (Karim et al., 2022; Wardiman et al., 2022) rely heavily on students' perceptions or questionnaire responses. These studies provide useful evidence about learners' experiences but should not be interpreted in the same way as intervention studies that measure vocabulary outcomes. The evidence also varies according to learners' age and learning context. Studies involving primary school learners, university students, and independent learners cannot necessarily be generalized in the same way. Therefore, teachers should adapt song selection and activities to learners' proficiency, age, learning objectives, and classroom context. Overall, English songs are better understood as a supplementary learning medium. Songs can provide valuable exposure and engagement, but they should be accompanied by activities that help learners notice, understand, practice, and use vocabulary.

Overall Discussion

The findings of the fourteen studies demonstrate that English songs have potential as a supplementary medium for vocabulary development among EFL learners. The strongest direct evidence comes from studies that incorporated singing or songs into instructional interventions and measured vocabulary-related outcomes. (Zhang et al., 2023) for example, found advantages associated with singing for vocabulary and pronunciation learning, while (Busse et al., 2021) found that singing students outperformed speaking students in vocabulary learning. (Ammelia et al., 2024; Sarnou & Sarnou, 2023) further demonstrate the instructional potential of songs in vocabulary learning contexts. At the same time, perception studies provide another important dimension. (Basori & Setyowati, 2024; Karim et al., 2022; Wardiman et al., 2022) indicate that learners perceive songs as useful and engaging for vocabulary learning. These findings help explain why songs may encourage learners to interact with English more frequently, although perception-based evidence should not be treated as equivalent to measured vocabulary gains.

The literature also suggests that songs are most useful when their musical and linguistic characteristics match learners' needs. Slower and clearer rhythms may facilitate word recognition, meaningful lyrics can provide contextualized vocabulary, and repetition can increase opportunities for vocabulary exposure. Nevertheless, these characteristics interact with one another, and the reviewed studies do not provide sufficient evidence to establish rhythm, lyrical style, or repetition as independent causal factors. Therefore, the role of English songs in vocabulary development can best be understood as a combination of linguistic exposure, musical support, repeated encounters, and learner engagement. Their effectiveness depends on appropriate selection and purposeful pedagogical use rather than on the presence of music alone.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of English songs in developing EFL students' vocabulary mastery and explored how song characteristics such as rhythm, lyrical style, and repetition support vocabulary learning. Based on a descriptive qualitative synthesis of fourteen selected studies, English songs can support vocabulary development by providing repeated exposure, presenting vocabulary in meaningful contexts, supporting recognition of word forms and meanings, increasing learner engagement, and creating

opportunities for autonomous learning. The findings indicate that rhythm and tempo may influence how easily learners process song lyrics, with slower songs potentially providing clearer opportunities for vocabulary recognition. Lyrical content can expose learners to vocabulary, phrases, and expressions in contextualized language, although figurative and complex lyrics may create additional comprehension difficulties. Repetition provides students with multiple encounters with vocabulary, particularly when words and phrases recur in song lyrics.

However, the reviewed studies do not consistently examine these characteristics as independent variables. Therefore, their contribution should be understood as interconnected features of song-based learning rather than as separately established causes of vocabulary improvement. The study concludes that English songs can serve as a useful supplementary medium for vocabulary learning in EFL contexts. Their effectiveness depends on appropriate song selection, learners' proficiency levels, and the learning activities accompanying the songs. Teachers can maximize the potential of songs by selecting comprehensible lyrics and manageable rhythms and by combining listening or singing with activities involving vocabulary identification, meaning interpretation, repetition, and language use. Future research should investigate individual song characteristics more systematically and examine their specific effects on different dimensions of vocabulary knowledge.

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