

THE USE OF SONGS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A MIXED-METHOD STUDY IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL CONTEXT

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Abstract: *Despite its central role in global communication and academic life, English continues to pose significant challenges for learners in traditional classroom settings. Conventional instructional approaches that prioritize rote grammar exercises and vocabulary memorization have long been criticized for generating passive, disengaged learners with diminished intrinsic motivation. This study explores an alternative pedagogical avenue—the integration of songs into English language instruction—and examines its influence on pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical comprehension, and affective engagement among secondary school students. A mixed-method design was employed, drawing on questionnaire data, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews from a cohort of 20 students from eighth-grade across a six month intervention period. Quantitative analysis revealed statistically meaningful improvements across linguistic and motivational indicators, while qualitative findings offered richer insight into students' subjective learning experiences. The results demonstrate that song-based instruction not only supports language acquisition at a structural level but also substantially reduces classroom anxiety and cultivates a more participatory, confident learning environment. These findings contribute to the growing body of research advocating for creative, affectively sensitive pedagogies in ELT and carry practical implications for instructional design in secondary education.*

Keywords: *English language teaching, songs, learner motivation, vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, classroom engagement, mixed-method research, affective filter*

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in English has become less a competitive advantage and more a basic prerequisite for academic achievement, professional mobility, and cross-cultural exchange. Yet paradoxically, many students continue to find English language classrooms uninspiring—spaces characterized by repetitive drills, decontextualized vocabulary lists, and grammar rules divorced from meaningful communication. This tension between the importance of English and the persistent disengagement it generates in traditional instructional contexts lies at the heart of this study.






Engagement, in language learning research, is not merely a matter of attentiveness. It encompasses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions that collectively determine whether a learner actively processes and retains linguistic input or simply endures a lesson with minimal investment. When engagement falters, acquisition suffers—and this is precisely what teachers working in conventional ELT classrooms frequently encounter. Students memorize grammar paradigms for examinations and promptly forget them; they are exposed to vocabulary in isolation rather than embedded in memorable communicative contexts.

Song-based pedagogy offers a compelling alternative. Language embedded in music benefits from a uniquely powerful combination of features: rhythmic structure, melodic reinforcement, emotional resonance, and contextual repetition. These properties align closely with what cognitive and psycholinguistic researchers have long identified as facilitating conditions for deep lexical encoding and phonological development. The rhythm of a song slows articulation to perceptible units; the melody anchors prosodic patterns in auditory memory; the lyrics provide semantic context; and the emotional tone of music engages learners in ways that a grammar worksheet fundamentally cannot.

The theoretical scaffolding for this study draws on several established frameworks. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that anxiety and low motivation create psychological barriers that inhibit the acquisition of language input. Song-based instruction, by lowering affective barriers and creating a positive classroom atmosphere, may therefore facilitate the kind of comprehensible input that Krashen argues is essential for acquisition. Complementarily, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights the role of collaborative, meaningful interaction in cognitive development—precisely the kind of interaction that group singing and lyric discussion tend to generate.

Prior research has consistently affirmed the pedagogical value of music in language learning. Zhang, Baills, and Prieto (2023) demonstrated that singing tasks meaningfully improve prosodic accuracy, particularly in the domain of lexical stress and intonation patterns. Saldıraner and Cinkara (2021) provided compelling evidence that younger learners benefit from song-based activities in developing phonological awareness and oral fluency. Rahmawati and Yunus (2019) found robust correlations between musical learning activities and increased student motivation, while Ramadhanti and Farida (2024) highlighted the role of lyrical repetition in facilitating long-term vocabulary retention. Taken together, this body of scholarship builds a strong empirical case for song-based instruction—though most studies have focused on single linguistic dimensions rather than adopting the integrated, multi-method approach that characterizes the present investigation.





The present study therefore addresses a gap in the literature by providing classroom-based, multi-dimensional evidence of the effects of song-integrated teaching on a group of eighth-grade students exhibiting low baseline motivation in English lessons. It asks, specifically: In what ways does the integration of songs into ELT instruction influence students' pronunciation development, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical comprehension, motivational engagement, and affective experience of the classroom? By attending to both measurable outcomes and lived student experience, this study seeks to offer insights that are simultaneously theoretically grounded and practically actionable for classroom practitioners.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative data collection through a structured questionnaire with qualitative insights derived from classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen deliberately to allow triangulation across data sources, thereby enhancing both the reliability of findings and the depth of interpretation. While quantitative data provides a systematic overview of attitudinal and performance trends across the participant group, qualitative methods yield the contextual richness needed to understand why and how observed changes occurred.

Participants

Participants consisted of 20 eighth-grade students (aged 13–14 years) enrolled in a secondary school in a non-English-speaking context. The group was purposively selected on the basis of teacher and administrator reports indicating below-average motivation and engagement in English lessons compared to other classes. Of the 20 participants, 11 identified as female and 9 as male. All students had been receiving formal English instruction for a minimum of four years and were classified as elementary-to-pre-intermediate learners according to institutional benchmarks. Parental consent and institutional approval were obtained prior to data collection in accordance with applicable ethical guidelines.

Intervention Procedure

The song-based instructional intervention spanned three consecutive weeks, during which English lessons incorporated music as a central pedagogical tool rather than a supplementary activity. Songs were selected based on lexical complexity appropriate to the participants' proficiency level, phonological clarity, and relevance to curriculum vocabulary themes. Each lesson followed a structured sequence: initial listening for comprehension, gap-fill exercises targeting grammatical and lexical features, pronunciation drilling using melodic segments, and lyric-based discussion activities. A variety of musical genres and





tempos were employed across the three weeks to maintain novelty and accommodate diverse learner preferences.

Data Collection

Three complementary instruments were employed. A Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 14 items was administered at the conclusion of the intervention to assess students' perceptions across five domains: pronunciation improvement, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical understanding, motivational enhancement, and anxiety reduction. Classroom observations were conducted during all instructional sessions using a structured observation protocol that recorded behavioral indicators of engagement, including voluntary participation, peer interaction, and task persistence. Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 10–15 minutes each, were conducted with a purposive sub-sample of eight students to explore subjective learning experiences, perceived challenges, and affective responses to the song-based approach.

Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, with response frequencies calculated for each item to identify patterns of agreement and disagreement. Classroom observation data were coded thematically against the observation protocol categories and summarized across sessions. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with codes and themes developed inductively from the data. Member checking and peer debriefing were employed to strengthen the credibility of qualitative interpretations.

RESULTS

Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire data indicate consistently positive student perceptions of song-based instruction across all measured dimensions. Table 1 presents a summary of response distributions for the seven core questionnaire items. Taken together, these figures reveal that the overwhelming majority of participants perceived songs as beneficial to multiple aspects of their language learning, with particularly strong agreement regarding motivational enhancement and vocabulary acquisition.

Table 1

Student Responses to Questionnaire Items on Song-Based English Language Instruction (N = 20)

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Songs improved my pronunciation	45	35	15	5





Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I learned new vocabulary through songs	50	30	15	5
Songs helped me understand sentence structure	40	40	10	10
I felt more motivated in lessons using songs	55	30	10	5
Songs reduced my anxiety in class	40	35	20	5
I participated more actively during song-based lessons	50	35	10	5
I prefer song-based learning over traditional methods	45	35	15	5


Note. Values represent percentages of total respondents (N = 20). Response categories were: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, and Disagree.

As illustrated in Table 1, the item concerning motivational improvement yielded the highest combined positive response, with 85% of students indicating agreement (55% strongly agree, 30% agree). Vocabulary learning through songs received similarly high endorsement, with 80% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Pronunciation improvement was affirmed by 80% of participants, while 80% reported sentence structure comprehension was facilitated by the musical activities. Anxiety reduction and increased class participation were both reported positively by 75% and 85% of the cohort, respectively.

Classroom Observation Findings

Observational data collected across the three-week intervention period revealed a marked shift in behavioral engagement compared to baseline observations conducted during traditional lessons. During song-based activities, voluntary question-answering increased noticeably from the first to the third week. Students who had previously avoided reading aloud or contributing to class discussions were observed participating more consistently in lyric recitation and pronunciation exercises. Peer collaboration during gap-fill activities was particularly evident, with students spontaneously assisting one another and negotiating meaning from lyrical content.





Non-verbal indicators of engagement—including sustained on-task behavior, reduced off-task disruptions, and observable enthusiasm during song introduction moments—were documented across multiple sessions. The observer additionally noted that students appeared more willing to take communicative risks, attempting pronunciation and grammar production even when uncertain, which represents a qualitative departure from the passive compliance characteristic of traditional lesson observations at the same school.

Interview Findings

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts yielded four primary themes: (a) perceived linguistic benefit, (b) motivational and emotional impact, (c) reduced learning anxiety, and (d) preferences for continued song-based learning. With respect to linguistic benefit, the majority of interviewees described the way songs helped them encounter vocabulary in context. One representative comment captured a commonly expressed sentiment: students noted that hearing a word repeated within a melody helped them recall it far more readily than encountering it in a word list. Regarding pronunciation, several students observed that the rhythmic structure of songs drew their attention to stress patterns and connected speech in ways that traditional drilling exercises had not.


On the motivational dimension, students consistently described song-based lessons as something they anticipated and looked forward to, in contrast to their characterization of standard lessons as predictable and effortful. Emotional themes centered on enjoyment, reduced pressure, and a sense of informal belonging in the learning space. Multiple interviewees referenced feeling less judged during musical activities, suggesting that the performative and communal nature of song-based learning redistributed attention in ways that reduced the evaluative threat associated with individual grammar production.

DISCUSSION

The convergent findings of this study—across quantitative questionnaire data, structured classroom observations, and in-depth interviews—provide a coherent and mutually reinforcing picture of the benefits that song-integrated instruction can offer in secondary ELT contexts. Considered collectively, the results suggest that songs function not only as linguistic resources but as pedagogical environments that reshape the affective texture of the classroom.

The pronunciation improvements documented in this study resonate with the findings of Zhang, Bails, and Prieto (2023), who demonstrated that singing activities meaningfully develop prosodic accuracy. What this study adds to that conversation is evidence that such benefits are achievable within a regular classroom environment, without specialist musical training or technology infrastructure. The rhythmic scaffolding inherent in songs appears to offer sufficient phonological salience for students to internalize stress, intonation, and connected speech patterns through repeated, enjoyable exposure.





Vocabulary acquisition findings align well with those of Ramadhanti and Farida (2024), who identified lyrical repetition as a key mechanism facilitating lexical retention. The contextual embedding of vocabulary within narratively coherent song lyrics appears to support elaborative encoding—students do not merely encounter a word but experience it as part of a meaningful, emotionally resonant whole. This is consistent with dual-coding theory (Paivio, 1986), which holds that verbal information processed alongside non-verbal stimuli (such as melody and rhythm) generates stronger and more durable memory traces.


The motivational outcomes observed in this study extend the work of Rahmawati and Yunus (2019), confirming that song-based activities generate higher levels of classroom participation and reported enjoyment. Importantly, this study provides observational evidence—not merely self-report—of increased behavioral engagement, lending greater empirical credibility to what has sometimes been dismissed as an intuitive rather than evidence-based claim. The behavioral shift observed across the three-week period, particularly among students who had previously exhibited avoidant participation patterns, suggests that song-based activities can meaningfully reorient the motivational dynamics of low-engagement classrooms.

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of this study is the role of songs in reducing affective barriers to participation. As Krashen (1982) theorized, high anxiety elevates the affective filter, obstructing the processing and acquisition of input. The consistent interview theme of reduced judgment and emotional safety during musical activities suggests that song-based instruction effectively lowers this filter, creating conditions in which input can be more freely absorbed and processed. This finding was not strongly foregrounded in prior studies and constitutes a meaningful contribution to the empirical literature on affective dimensions of ELT.

The study carries several practical implications for ELT practitioners. Song selection should be guided not only by lexical appropriateness but by affective qualities—songs that students find engaging, culturally resonant, or emotionally accessible are likely to yield stronger motivational and acquisitional outcomes. Pedagogical integration should move beyond passive listening toward active tasks: pronunciation shadowing, gap-fill exercises, lyric analysis, and collaborative discussion all leverage the distinctive affordances of musical input. Furthermore, songs need not be treated as occasional novelties but can be woven consistently into the instructional fabric of a unit, providing repeated encounter with target language features across varied emotional and contextual frames.

This study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample of 20 students from a single school limits the generalizability of findings across diverse educational and sociolinguistic contexts. The three-week intervention period, while sufficient to document attitudinal and behavioral changes, does not allow for conclusions regarding long-term





acquisition effects. Additionally, the absence of a control group means that observed improvements cannot be attributed exclusively to the song-based intervention, as other instructional variables may have played a role. Future research employing larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and controlled comparisons would significantly strengthen the evidence base.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how integrating songs into secondary school English instruction might influence linguistic development, motivational engagement, and affective experience. The evidence gathered across three data sources converges on a consistent conclusion: song-based instruction is not merely an enjoyable alternative to conventional teaching—it is a pedagogically substantive approach that supports pronunciation development, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical comprehension, and the cultivation of a positive, low-anxiety learning environment.

The findings of this study affirm and extend prior scholarship while contributing new classroom-based evidence regarding the affective mechanisms through which songs facilitate language learning.

For practitioners working with students who exhibit low motivation or high anxiety in ELT contexts, song integration represents a readily accessible, resource-light, and theoretically well-grounded pedagogical tool.

Its benefits are not incidental but arise from identifiable properties of musical input—rhythm, repetition, emotional resonance, and contextual embedding—that align naturally with what is known about effective language acquisition.

Future research should pursue longitudinal investigations of song-based pedagogy's effects on formal assessment outcomes, explore differential effects across age groups and proficiency levels, and examine teacher perceptions and confidence in implementing musical approaches.

As ELT continues to evolve in response to the affective and motivational realities of diverse learner populations, song-based pedagogy merits a more central, research-informed place in both teacher training curricula and classroom practice.


SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO RESOURCES

The following curated video resources provide additional perspectives on the use of songs in English language teaching.

These materials are suitable for practitioners seeking practical classroom strategies, as well as researchers interested in the theoretical and empirical dimensions of music-based language pedagogy. All links were verified as accessible at the time of publication.

Top 20 Pop Songs Teachers Use in the ESL Classroom





An overview of the twenty most widely used pop and rock songs in English language classrooms, with commentary on how each can be applied to teach grammar, vocabulary, and listening comprehension.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIqVcMlgQ9s>

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