

EXPLORING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES USING ENGLISH SONGS TO ENHANCE VOCABULARY MASTERY IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran kosakata berbahasa Inggris di sekolah menengah kejuruan (SMK) telah menjadi masalah yang telah tersebar dan terus-menerus muncul di kalangan guru Bahasa Inggris selama bertahun-tahun. Mempertimbangkan keadaan di kelas XI pada jurusan Akuntansi dan Keuangan Lembaga (AKL) yang ada di SMK Perdana Semarang, sebagai contoh, model pembelajaran kosakata terdahulu yang hanya mengandalkan hafalan kata-kata dan tugas tertulis yang berulang, membawa pada dua permasalahan utama: kurangnya partisipasi siswa saat pembelajaran di kelas dan rendahnya kemampuan mengingat kosakata. Penelitian ini menggunakan lagu berbahasa Inggris sebagai alternatif media pembelajaran. Dengan mengadopsi metode deskriptif kualitatif, memanfaatkan pengalaman kegiatan belajar mengajar di sekolah, serta melakukan analisis dalam tiga dimensi: motivasi siswa, tingkat partisipasi, dan tingkat kemampuan mengingat kosakata. Didukung oleh *Affective Filter Hypothesis* dari Krashen, *Vocabulary Knowledge Framework* dari Nation, dan *Experiential Learning Theory* dari Kolb, serta dikombinasikan dengan kesimpulan dari penelitian sebelumnya, yang menyatakan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis lagu dapat menciptakan ruang kelas yang santai, meningkatkan kesadaran pelafalan, dan menguatkan kemampuan mengingat kosakata dalam jangka panjang. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan musik merupakan strategi yang tepat untuk digunakan dalam proses pembelajaran. Guru bahasa Inggris di sekolah kejuruan dapat menggunakan pendekatan ini untuk mencapai pembelajaran yang efektif, kontekstual, dan berpusat pada siswa.

Kata Kunci: lagu berbahasa Inggris; penguasaan kosa kata; SMK; deskriptif kualitatif; pembelajaran EFL

ABSTRACT

For many years, English vocabulary teaching in vocational high schools has been a widespread and persistent problem plaguing English teachers in the field. Taking the classroom conditions of XI-grade students majoring in Institutional Accounting and Finance at SMK Perdana Semarang as an example, the traditional vocabulary-teaching model, which relies on memorizing word lists and repetitive written assignments, has led to two core problems: low student participation in class and poor vocabulary retention. This study uses English songs as an alternative teaching medium. Adopting a qualitative descriptive method, drawing on classroom experiences in the school, and conducting an analysis along three dimensions: student motivation, participation level, and vocabulary retention level. Supported by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, the Nation's Vocabulary Knowledge Framework, and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, and combined with verified conclusions from previous research, which states that song-based teaching that combines appropriately selected songs with integrated structured activities can create a relaxed classroom, increase pronunciation awareness, and strengthen long-term vocabulary retention. This study proposes that music-integrated teaching is a formal strategy that aligns with the logic of teaching. These strategies are available for English teachers in vocational schools to adopt to achieve effective, contextually relevant, and student-centered vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: *english songs; vocabulary mastery; vocational high school; qualitative descriptive; efl learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Any teacher who has taught English at a vocational high school is familiar with a common classroom scenario: students' eyes go blank as soon as they see a list of new vocabulary words on the board. This exact scene unfolded in an XI-grade AKL accounting class at SMK Perdana, a vocational school in Semarang. These students were lively and talkative when speaking Indonesian, but as soon as the lesson shifted to English vocabulary, they became hesitant, passive, and clearly disconnected from the class. After years of teaching experience in the field, I concluded that the problem lies not in students' intelligence or willingness to learn, but in the outdated teaching methods still in use. The core role of vocabulary is irreplaceable. Nation (2001) long ago proposed that an adequate vocabulary foundation is a key prerequisite for students to master the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The unique context of vocational education underscores this importance: English is not just an academic subject but also a practical tool students will need in their future careers.

Students in this accounting class will frequently encounter English in accounting software interfaces, financial reports, and international business correspondence. A weak vocabulary is not just an academic issue. It is a critical deficiency that will hinder their professional development. Traditional vocabulary-teaching methods, still widely used in Indonesian vocational high school classes, simply require students to copy textbook vocabulary, memorize Indonesian translations, and complete short-answer exercises. This method only yields short-term results on written exams and fails to develop the lasting, flexible vocabulary competency students need for real-world communication.

A study by Syafiyah, Indriyani, and Setiyana (2022) confirmed these findings: monotonous teaching methods are the main reason why vocational high school students struggle to master practical vocabulary, and isolated words taught without context or emotional connection are quickly forgotten. Therefore, this study proposes exploring the use of English songs as an alternative medium for vocabulary learning. This approach not only aims to increase engagement in learning but also leverages the multidimensional cognitive, emotional, and sensory processes that are typically neglected in traditional vocabulary instruction.

Words embedded in favourite melodies, repeated in song lyrics, and capable of triggering emotional resonance are much more likely to be transferred from short-term to long-term memory. The following sections will sequentially outline the theoretical foundations of song-based vocabulary instruction, recent research in similar EFL contexts, practical challenges in implementing this approach in vocational school classrooms, and practical tips for teachers in similar settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Mastery in the Vocational High School Context

Full vocabulary mastery extends far beyond the ability to complete simple word-for-word translations. The field of second language acquisition has long established a systematic cognitive framework for this domain. Nation (2013) proposed an interrelated, three-dimensional system of vocabulary knowledge encompassing form, meaning, and usage, requiring learners to recognize and produce vocabulary forms across listening, speaking, reading, and writing, understand word-meaning constraints, and use vocabulary appropriately in all types of communicative contexts. Schmitt (2020) added the dimensions of word families, collocation patterns, and word frequency to this framework, suggesting that this type of knowledge should develop gradually through repeated and meaningful exposure to vocabulary across a variety of contexts.

This paper argues that this multidimensional vocabulary knowledge is crucial for vocational school students, who need to master both general communicative vocabulary and industry-specific terminology. For example, students in the AKL program are exposed to English related to finance, auditing, and banking operations before they enter the workforce. A study of vocational high school students by Rahmawati & Hidayati (2020) found that many students believe English is unrelated to their career goals, which exacerbates their existing motivational challenges. For this reason, teaching vocabulary that aligns with professional contexts and personal interests is not an unnecessary luxury, but a necessary core teaching principle.

English Songs as a Medium for Vocabulary Learning

Songs have a long history of use in language education. In recent years, the academic community has clarified the fundamental logic underlying their suitability for language teaching from a neurological and cognitive perspective. Research by Murphey (1992) demonstrated that songs can provide authentic, native-language input that more closely resembles real-world English usage than the artificially simplified language used in most teaching materials.

Research by Fonseca-Mora and Gant (2016) is particularly compelling. This study found that combining language with music can simultaneously activate both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning. Melodies act as memory frameworks to help the brain organize and retrieve new words, while the emotional connections triggered by music form personal memories for vocabulary. Consequently, the effectiveness of songs for vocabulary learning differs significantly from other media.

In a 2019 controlled variable experiment, five researchers, Schon, Boyer, Moreno, Besson, and Kolinsky, confirmed that the memory retention effects of using songs to aid new vocabulary learning are far superior to those of purely verbal repetition. The underlying mechanism is that the memory traces left by the two learning methods differ in strength.

The role of repetition in vocabulary acquisition deserves significant emphasis. Nation (2013) lists repetition as a core factor in vocabulary acquisition

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and suggests that vocabulary typically needs to be encountered at least 10 times to be consolidated into long-term memory. Songs naturally provide this type of effective repetition. Students who enjoy a particular song will actively listen to it repeatedly without getting bored. This form of repetition is far superior to traditional vocabulary drills, which can be monotonous and lack emotional reinforcement, making songs an efficient medium for vocabulary acquisition.

Motivation and Affective Factors

In the field of second language acquisition, the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen in 1985 has been highly influential. This hypothesis states that negative emotions, such as anxiety and lack of motivation, will increase the affective filter, hindering the processing and retention of language input; while positive emotions, such as relaxation and comfort, will decrease this filter, allowing input to be transmitted smoothly. Music naturally fits this mechanism: most students associate music with enjoyment rather than the pressure of academic assessments, laying the groundwork for the following discussion.

Dornyei and Ryan's 2015 study on second language acquisition showed that, compared to their unmotivated peers, motivated learners are more willing to exert effort, more persistent in the face of setbacks, and achieve better language learning outcomes. Addressing the conflicting attitudes held by vocational college students toward English, this paper proposes that fostering genuine motivation is a core task for English teachers. Teachers can choose songs that align with students' musical tastes and daily experiences, transforming the English class from a mandatory obligation into an activity students look forward to.

Students' Experiential Learning

The experiential learning theory proposed by scholar Kolb in 2015 states that meaningful learning does not come from passively receiving information, but rather is a cyclical process consisting of four core components: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. When this cycle is applied to song-based vocabulary instruction, students first gain concrete experience by listening to songs and encountering new words. Next, they reflect on the song's content and the meaning of new vocabulary, then form an abstract understanding of the material under their teacher's guidance. Finally, they test these new words in their speaking and writing assignments, making this form of learning have substantial educational value, not just entertainment.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

Numerous empirical studies have confirmed that English songs can be used for vocabulary learning across various EFL contexts, and this review focuses on only five recent studies targeting vocational school students in Indonesia. Butar and Katemba (2023) conducted an empirical study focusing on EFL students' vocabulary learning experiences through English songs. The study

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participants included students at secondary and tertiary levels, and the primary observation context was students' learning behaviours on digital streaming platforms. The study first recognized the key strengths of this type of learning, outlined three core findings, then highlighted the shortcomings of implementing this learning method without professional guidance, and finally reached the rigorous conclusion that independent song-based learning still requires professional guidance from teachers.

Saputra (2023) conducted an empirical study in a formal EFL classroom, adopting a pretest-posttest design, with classroom observations, and using a series of song-based vocabulary activities as the intervention. The study found that students' vocabulary test scores improved significantly, while their participation and motivation were higher than those of students in traditional courses. Saputra also suggested that song selection should be appropriate to students' ability levels and learning objectives, because songs that are too difficult or too fast will hinder vocabulary learning.

In recent years, three empirical studies in EFL education have successively explored the effectiveness, limitations, and core implementation conditions of song-assisted vocabulary learning. Their core findings are summarized as follows: In 2023, Zaharani conducted a study using a quantitative pretest-posttest method. The study found that after a song-based teaching intervention, students' vocabulary test scores significantly improved, and their difficulty recalling target vocabulary embedded in emotionally resonant, memorable scenarios decreased.

The study also noted that songs with non-standard accents or unclear pronunciation can create learning barriers, underscoring the importance of careful song selection. In the same year, Putri's study, focusing on young EFL learners, found that song-assisted learning can significantly increase class participation and enthusiasm; students actively repeated vocabulary from song lyrics and transferred this knowledge to subsequent class activities.

The study suggested that songs should be paired with complementary activities such as matching exercises, sentence construction, and guided discussions to function optimally as part of a comprehensive teaching strategy, rather than being used alone. In 2024, Basori's qualitative case study found that most students perceived this model as more relaxed than traditional vocabulary instruction and reported that it helped them build confidence in learning. The low-anxiety learning environment also encouraged shy students to actively participate. However, without teacher explanations, students exposed to fast-paced, complex lyrics often felt confused, underscoring the essential role of teacher guidance.

By integrating the conclusions of these three studies, this paper argues that English songs can improve vocabulary learning outcomes through the combined effects of repetition, rich context, emotional engagement, and reduced learning anxiety. Key conditions for successful implementation are careful selection of songs appropriate to students' ability levels and interests, and structured teacher guidance that guides students from passive listening to active vocabulary use.

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RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on students' authentic experiences in learning vocabulary through songs and adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. This method aligns with the core objective of capturing the complexity of students' perceptions, feedback, and meaning construction, distinguishing it from quantitative research that measures vocabulary mastery through numerical tests. Drawing on Creswell and Creswell's (2023), the arguments are to support the academic validity of a qualitative descriptive research design and the requirement for reflexivity.

This study was conducted in Grade XI AKL A at SMK Perdana Semarang, with a sample of 19 students aged 16 to 17. As an internal study, this research not only allowed natural access to a real-life learning scenario but also required the researcher to maintain reflexivity regarding their own assumptions and potential biases. The sample was recruited through purposive sampling, with selection criteria that all participating students had participated in song-based vocabulary learning activities and that the researcher was familiar with their learning characteristics, laying the foundation for validity for further research.

This study collected research data using three complementary tools. First, we conducted classroom observations and completed comprehensive field notes immediately after each class session, recording students' participation patterns, levels of engagement, and their immediate responses to the song-based learning activities. Next, we distributed an open-ended questionnaire via Google Forms after the core learning activities concluded to gather students' reflections on their learning experiences, perceived benefits and challenges, and evaluations of songs as a vocabulary-learning tool.

Finally, following the questionnaire phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine purposefully selected students (three each with high, medium, and low levels of engagement) to explore their personal learning experiences in depth. For data analysis, this study adopted the reflective thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022), which was implemented through six sequential stages: data introduction, data reduction, data visualization, coding and classification, theme development and verification, and conclusion derivation. To maintain the reliability and validity of the study, this study also implemented three steps: triangulation across three data sources, member checking with interview participants, and maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Creating a Classroom Atmosphere That Invites Learning

This study incorporated English songs into English vocabulary instruction. The most immediate and obvious effect observed first was a significant shift in the classroom's emotional atmosphere. Direct observation of teaching in an English vocabulary class at SMK Perdana, Semarang, Indonesia, confirmed this: students who were typically quiet and passive in regular vocabulary classes became more alert and demonstrated significantly higher levels of participation

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in lessons that integrated English songs. This observation is not a trivial detail. The quality of the classroom atmosphere directly affects the volume of language input students can absorb.

Only a comfortable classroom that allows students to set aside concerns about making mistakes can support authentic language learning. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen in 1985, when students listen to songs they enjoy, they release their anxiety about making mistakes. This activity eliminates exam pressure, and the familiar, enjoyable experience lowers barriers to participation for shy or less confident students. Student interviews collected for this study indicate that several participants noted that they “didn’t feel nervous” in these classes. This simple statement has a core pedagogical value: only students free of tension are willing to actively engage in learning.

Repetition Without Tedium

When songs are used as a medium for vocabulary learning, their most prominent practical value is that they allow repeated vocabulary input without triggering the boredom common to repetitive vocabulary training. Research by Nation (2013) shows that repetition is a necessary condition for vocabulary acquisition, and that a word can be truly mastered only if a learner encounters it multiple times in various contexts.

Students actively listen to songs repeatedly because they enjoy the music, and they do not consider this behaviour to be intentional vocabulary training. Surveys for this study also found that participating students often unconsciously hummed the lyrics of songs used in class during their free time. This unconscious recall is a sign of deep vocabulary learning, meaning that the vocabulary has become embedded in memory and can be recalled spontaneously. In contrast, traditional training only makes it difficult for students to recall vocabulary during exams, and they quickly forget the words soon afterward.

Contextual Vocabulary Encounters

A fundamental flaw has long plagued traditional English vocabulary instruction: vocabulary is largely presented in isolation, disconnected from meaningful communicative contexts. For example, when teaching the word “receivable”, students may only memorize its Chinese definition but fail to master its grammatical terms, common collocations, and applicable usage scenarios. Schmitt (2020) proposes that contextual learning is crucial for cultivating flexible lexical knowledge, as context can not only convey word meaning but also clarify the rules governing vocabulary use.

The authors of this paper propose that songs embed vocabulary within discourse that carries semantic meaning and emotional weight, thereby creating a contextually rich vocabulary exposure scenario for second language (L2) learners. When learners encounter the word “lonely” in songs centered on themes of longing and separation, they can access the term’s emotional register, its applicable usage contexts, and its natural spoken pronunciation, which no

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dictionary can convey, ultimately enabling them to truly memorize and use this vocabulary flexibly.

The Role of Teacher Guidance

It's important to clarify that the previous discussion about English songs supporting second language vocabulary learning does not imply that simply playing English songs in class is sufficient. Existing studies consistently agree that for English songs to be effective, they must be paired with structured teacher guidance that encourages students to shift from passive listening to active vocabulary use.

English listening classes that integrate musical elements can be designed using a three-stage structured teaching method: In the pre-listening stage, teachers activate students' existing knowledge, introduce core vocabulary, and establish cognitive frames of reference; in the listening stage, students are guided to complete activities such as filling in missing words, identifying specific vocabulary, and answering comprehension questions, focusing on the target language; in the post-listening stage, students are organized to flexibly apply newly learned knowledge through sentence construction, role-playing, discussions, and creative writing. A 2022 study by Syafiyah et al. emphasized that this method is highly suitable for the vocational high school environment, enabling students not only to enjoy the musical content used in class but also to truly master the target language.

Challenges and Practical Considerations

Addressing the various challenges associated with using songs to support English vocabulary learning is as important as recognizing the potential of this learning model. Two specific types of learning barriers emerged from the student feedback collected for this study; these barriers represent legitimate pedagogical concerns, and based on them, we have derived three core evaluation criteria for selecting songs for English language instruction.

In English classes at Indonesian vocational schools, a core issue in introducing popular English-language songs is their appropriateness for the classroom context: the vocabulary and cultural references of some songs are inappropriate for the classroom, and the cultural backgrounds inherent in them are unfamiliar to students. Teachers should listen to and screen these songs first, proactively explain content that creates barriers to understanding, and should not assume that students can understand cross-cultural content independently.

This paper first establishes a core principle: songs cannot and should not replace other forms of vocabulary instruction. Studies by Putri (2023) and Basori (2024) both note that songs can serve only as one component of a diverse teaching method, complementing other learning activities. Vocabulary learning requires repeated exposure across multiple contexts and modalities, and songs cannot meet all the relevant needs of this process.

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CONCLUSION

Although the current status of English vocabulary teaching in vocational high schools is relatively complex, the core argument of this paper is clear and straightforward: carefully selected English songs systematically integrated into structured learning activities can provide a more engaging learning experience, evoke stronger emotional resonance, and result in longer-lasting memory retention for vocational high school students, compared to traditional vocabulary instruction. This conclusion is supported by three classic theoretical frameworks and previous empirical research.

The authors of this paper propose to English teachers in vocational high schools that integrating songs into English vocabulary teaching is an endeavour worthy of careful planning and dedicated effort. To successfully implement this model, three core requirements must be met: selecting appropriate songs, designing comprehensive pre-listening, in-listening, and post-listening activities, and providing clear vocabulary guidance. This approach can help students who initially have very low participation in vocabulary learning increase their motivation for learning, retain the vocabulary they learn, and strengthen their confidence in using English.

The authors of this paper, basing their work in the context of vocational education at SMK, suggest three future research directions for song-based vocabulary learning: exploring its long-term impact on students' communicative competence, researching the optimal types of songs suitable for this approach, and investigating integration paths between this method and other pedagogies.

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