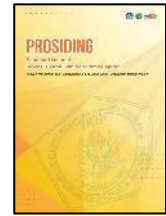




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## Motivation, Engagement and Listening Challenges in Song-Based Efl Listening: A Qualitative Case Study of Indonesian Vocational Students

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**Abstrak** – Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) tingkat menengah sering mengalami kesulitan dalam pemahaman mendengarkan, terutama ketika terpapar input lisan yang autentik. Lagu-lagu berbahasa Inggris sering digunakan sebagai bahan mendengarkan alternatif karena daya tarik afektif dan autentiknnya. Namun, mendengarkan berbasis lagu dapat secara bersamaan meningkatkan motivasi dan menimbulkan tantangan kognitif. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengaruh mendengarkan berbasis lagu berbahasa Inggris terhadap motivasi dan keterlibatan pembelajar, mengidentifikasi kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh pembelajar EFL tingkat menengah, dan meneliti strategi yang mereka gunakan untuk mengatasi kesulitan tersebut. Studi ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif deskriptif yang melibatkan siswa kelas sebelas di sebuah sekolah menengah kejuruan di Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan siswa dan guru bahasa Inggris, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa lagu-lagu berbahasa Inggris secara signifikan meningkatkan motivasi dan keterlibatan emosional pembelajar, menciptakan suasana belajar yang santai dan menyenangkan. Meskipun demikian, pembelajar mengalami kesulitan yang berkaitan dengan tempo cepat, pengucapan yang tidak jelas, ujaran yang berkesinambungan, kosakata yang tidak familiar, bahasa gaul, dan referensi budaya Untuk mengatasi tantangan ini, para pembelajar menerapkan strategi seperti mendengarkan berulang kali, menggunakan lembar lirik, menebak makna dari konteks, dan diskusi dengan teman sebaya. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa lagu-lagu berbahasa Inggris berfungsi sebagai media mendengarkan yang memotivasi dan menuntut secara kognitif. Dukungan pedagogis sangat penting untuk memaksimalkan manfaatnya dalam pengajaran mendengarkan EFL.

**Kata kunci:** Mendengarkan EFL, Lagu-lagu berbahasa Inggris, Motivasi, Keterlibatan pembelajar, Kesulitan mendengarkan

**Abstract** – English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at the intermediate level often experience difficulties in listening comprehension, particularly when exposed to authentic spoken input. English songs are frequently used as alternative listening materials due to their affective appeal and authenticity. However, song-based listening may simultaneously enhance motivation and introduce cognitive challenges. This study

aims to explore the influence of English song-based listening on learners' motivation and engagement, identify the difficulties encountered by intermediate EFL learners, and examine the strategies they employ to overcome these difficulties. This study employed a descriptive qualitative case study design involving eleventh-grade students of a vocational high school in Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and the English teacher, and document analysis. The findings reveal that English songs significantly increase learners' motivation and emotional engagement, creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere. Nevertheless, learners encountered difficulties related to fast tempo, unclear pronunciation, connected speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, and cultural references. To cope with these challenges, learners applied strategies such as repeated listening, using lyric sheets, guessing meaning from context, and peer discussion. The study concludes that English songs function as both a motivating and cognitively demanding listening medium. Pedagogical scaffolding is essential to maximize their benefits in EFL listening instruction.

**Keywords:** EFL listening, English songs, Motivation, Learner engagement, Listening difficulties.

## INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. For intermediate learners, listening difficulty increases as they are required to process authentic spoken input that includes fast speech rate, reduced forms, varied accents, and idiomatic expressions (Graham, 2017; Vandergrift & Goh, 2016). In many EFL classrooms, listening instruction still relies heavily on scripted and decontextualized audio materials, which often fail to engage learners emotionally and may lead to anxiety and disengagement (Bakar et al., 2023).

To address this issue, the use of authentic materials has been increasingly emphasized in listening pedagogy. Authentic materials expose learners to real language use and meaningful contexts, thereby increasing motivation and relevance (Cakir, 2015). Among various authentic resources, English songs have gained particular attention due to their affective and pedagogical potential. Songs integrate linguistic input with melody and rhythm, creating a relaxed learning atmosphere that encourages learner participation and enjoyment (Millington, 2018; Setyaningsih & Calyono, 2022).

Previous studies indicate that English songs can significantly enhance learners' motivation and engagement in listening activities. Enjoyment derived from music

contributes to learners' willingness to participate, persistence in tasks, and positive emotional experiences during learning (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In the context of EFL listening, motivated learners tend to show higher behavioral engagement, such as active listening and participation, as well as cognitive engagement through strategy use (Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020).

However, despite their motivational benefits, English songs also present substantial challenges for learners. The authenticity of songs often involves fast tempo, unclear articulation, connected speech, slang expressions, and cultural references, which can hinder comprehension, particularly for intermediate EFL learners (Muhamad et al., 2020; Lestari, 2025). These linguistic features increase cognitive load and may cause learners to miss important information or experience frustration during listening (Sweller et al., 2019).

While prior studies have examined either the motivational benefits of songs or the linguistic challenges of authentic listening materials separately, limited research has investigated how motivation, engagement, and listening difficulties interact simultaneously within song-based listening activities. This gap is particularly evident among intermediate EFL learners in vocational school contexts, where listening competence is crucial for future workplace communication yet remains under-researched.

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) explore how English song-based listening influences learners' motivation and engagement, (2) identify the listening difficulties experienced by intermediate EFL learners, and (3) examine the strategies learners employ to cope with these difficulties. By integrating affective and cognitive perspectives, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of song-based listening pedagogy in EFL classrooms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Songs and Motivation in EFL Listening

Music has long been recognized as a powerful affective stimulus in language learning. Songs can reduce anxiety, enhance enjoyment, and foster intrinsic motivation (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Enjoyable learning experiences contribute to

sustained effort and willingness to engage in challenging tasks (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In listening instruction, songs create emotionally meaningful experiences that strengthen learners' positive attitudes toward the target language.

### **Learner Engagement in Authentic Listening**

Learner engagement is commonly viewed as a multidimensional construct involving behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Authentic listening materials can stimulate higher engagement when learners perceive tasks as meaningful and enjoyable (Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020). However, engagement is influenced not only by affective factors but also by learners' ability to manage cognitive demands during listening tasks.

### **Linguistics Challenges of Song-Based Listening**

Although songs provide authentic input, they often contain features that complicate comprehension, such as reduced forms, fast tempo, connected speech, and colloquial expressions (Muhamad et al., 2020). These features increase cognitive load and may hinder information processing (Sweller et al., 2019), particularly among intermediate learners whose listening skills are still developing.

### **Research Gap**

Despite extensive research on song-based learning and listening comprehension, few studies have examined the intersection of motivation, learner engagement, and listening difficulties within a single instructional context. Moreover, research focusing on intermediate EFL learners in vocational education settings remains limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating affective and cognitive dimensions of song-based listening simultaneously.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore learners' experiences with English song-based listening activities.

## **Research Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cepu, Central Java, Indonesia. The participants were 23 eleventh-grade vocational students categorized as intermediate EFL learners. Their ages ranged from 16 to 17 years. Students had learned English for approximately six years in formal education.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observation focusing on indicators of behavioral engagement (participation, attention), emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment), and cognitive engagement (strategy use, effort). Semi-structured interviews with selected students and the English teacher to explore motivation, perceived listening difficulties, and coping strategies. Document analysis of worksheets and learning materials used during song-based listening sessions.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Observations were conducted during song-based listening lessons over four classroom meetings. Interviews were carried out with selected students and the English teacher after the instructional sessions.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019), involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview data were transcribed and coded thematically.

## **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Credibility was ensured through data triangulation across observation, interview, and document sources. Member checking was conducted by confirming interview summaries with participants. Prolonged classroom observation enhanced contextual validity.

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were obtained through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and the English teacher, and document analysis conducted at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cepu during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The findings are organized into three major themes corresponding to the research objectives: (1) the influence of English songs on students' motivation and engagement, (2) the listening difficulties encountered by intermediate EFL learners during song-based listening activities, and (3) the strategies employed by learners to overcome comprehension difficulties and construct meaning from song lyrics.

### Motivation and Engagement in Song-Based Listening Activities

The classroom observations and interviews indicated that English songs significantly increased students' motivation and engagement during listening comprehension activities. Students demonstrated behavioural engagement through active participation during classroom tasks. During the observations, students paid attention to the listening materials, completed lyric worksheets actively, requested repetition of certain song parts, and discussed difficult words with classmates. These findings suggest that song-based listening activities encouraged students to become more involved in the learning process.

Emotionally, English songs created a more relaxed and enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Several students appeared enthusiastic while listening to the songs, as shown through smiling expressions, body movements following the rhythm, and active responses during classroom interaction. One student explained that listening through songs felt more relaxing and less stressful than ordinary listening materials. Another student stated that songs increased enthusiasm because some songs were already familiar to them, even though they did not fully understand the lyrics. These findings indicate that songs reduced anxiety and promoted positive emotional experiences during listening activities.

From the cognitive perspective, students also demonstrated efforts to understand the song lyrics despite various listening difficulties. Students focused on identifying missing words in the lyric worksheets, attempted to infer meanings from context, and listened repeatedly to improve comprehension. One student explained that paying attention to lyrics helped in learning new vocabulary and understanding pronunciation patterns. This finding suggests that songs encouraged students not only emotionally but also cognitively during listening activities.

These findings are consistent with Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018), who argue that enjoyable learning experiences reduce anxiety and improve positive emotional responses toward language learning. Similarly, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) state that positive emotions contribute significantly to learners' motivation and classroom participation. The findings also support Oga-Baldwin and Fryer's (2020) concept of learner engagement, which includes behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. In this study, all three dimensions were clearly reflected during song-based listening activities.

The findings indicate that English songs can function as effective motivational tools in EFL listening classrooms. The enjoyable and familiar nature of songs encouraged students to participate actively while simultaneously increasing their emotional comfort and cognitive involvement during listening comprehension tasks.

### **Difficulties in Comprehending English Songs**

Although English songs positively influenced students' engagement and motivation, the findings also revealed several difficulties experienced by learners during listening activities. The most common challenges included fast tempo, connected speech, unclear pronunciation, unfamiliar vocabulary, slang expressions, and background music interference.

One major difficulty involved the fast tempo of the songs. Students explained that when singers pronounced lyrics rapidly, words sounded connected and difficult to separate. During observations, some students stopped

writing or looked confused when songs were played at high speed. Students also reported that unclear pronunciation and connected speech made it difficult to recognize familiar vocabulary during listening activities.

In addition, unfamiliar vocabulary and slang expressions created further comprehension problems. Some students stated that they struggled to understand certain parts of the songs because many words were unfamiliar. Classroom observations also showed that students frequently paused while completing lyric worksheets when they encountered difficult vocabulary items.

Another challenge involved background music interference. In several cases, instrumental sounds made it difficult for students to hear the singer's voice clearly. Consequently, students often requested repetition of particular song sections in order to confirm missing lyrics or identify unclear words.

These findings are in line with Muhamad et al. (2020), who explain that authentic listening materials frequently contain reduced forms, natural pronunciation patterns, and informal expressions that complicate listening comprehension. Songs, as authentic language materials, naturally contain such linguistic characteristics, which may increase listening complexity for EFL learners.

The findings can also be explained through Cognitive Load Theory proposed by Sweller et al. (2019). According to this theory, learners possess limited cognitive processing capacity during learning tasks. When listening materials simultaneously contain fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, unclear pronunciation, and musical distractions, learners may experience cognitive overload. As a result, they may fail to recognize important information during listening comprehension activities.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that students particularly struggled with bottom-up listening processes. Vandergrift and Goh (2016) explain that bottom-up listening involves recognizing sounds, identifying word boundaries, and decoding linguistic forms. In song-based listening, connected speech and unclear pronunciation complicated this process, making it difficult for students to identify individual words accurately.

Therefore, although English songs can create enjoyable listening experiences, their authentic linguistic characteristics may simultaneously increase the cognitive demands placed on intermediate EFL learners.

### **Strategies Used to Overcome Listening Difficulties**

Despite the listening challenges encountered during song-based activities, students demonstrated several strategies to overcome comprehension difficulties and construct meaning from the song lyrics. The most common strategies included repeated listening, using lyric worksheets, contextual guessing, and peer discussion.

Repeated listening became the strategy most frequently used by students. During classroom observations, students often requested that songs be replayed several times in order to identify missing words and confirm their understanding. One student explained that the first playback was mainly used to focus on general listening, while the second playback helped in completing missing lyrics more accurately. Repetition allowed students to process listening input gradually and improve comprehension over time.

Another important strategy involved the use of lyric worksheets. Students compared written lyrics with the audio while listening repeatedly to the songs. This process helped them identify unfamiliar vocabulary and confirm their interpretation of the lyrics. The lyric worksheets also reduced students' uncertainty during listening activities because they provided visual support alongside the audio input.

Students additionally employed contextual guessing strategies when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or unclear pronunciation. By paying attention to repeated phrases and the general meaning of the songs, students attempted to infer meanings from context rather than relying solely on word-by-word understanding. One student stated that understanding the overall message of the song was more important than understanding every individual word.

Peer discussion also played an important role in supporting listening comprehension. During classroom activities, students frequently discussed

difficult vocabulary and compared answers with classmates. Collaborative interaction helped students clarify misunderstandings and increased their confidence during listening tasks.

These findings support Nation and Newton (2020), who state that repeated exposure to spoken language improves learners' listening comprehension and recognition of linguistic patterns. The findings also align with Graham (2017), who explains that effective listeners frequently use contextual clues to compensate for limited linguistic knowledge during listening activities.

The findings further highlight the importance of instructional scaffolding in song-based listening activities. The English teacher emphasized that pre-teaching key vocabulary, replaying songs several times, and encouraging peer discussion significantly supported students' comprehension. This indicates that English songs should not merely function as entertaining classroom media, but also as pedagogical tools supported by appropriate instructional strategies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of song-based listening activities depends not only on the use of songs themselves but also on the learning strategies and instructional support provided during the listening process. When supported appropriately, English songs can become meaningful listening materials that simultaneously promote motivation, engagement, and listening comprehension development among intermediate EFL learners.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of English songs on students' motivation and engagement, the listening difficulties experienced by intermediate EFL learners, and the strategies employed to overcome these difficulties during song-based listening activities. The findings demonstrated that English songs positively influenced students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement by creating a more enjoyable, relaxed, and motivating classroom atmosphere.

However, the study also revealed several comprehension difficulties experienced by learners, including fast tempo, connected speech, unclear pronunciation, unfamiliar vocabulary, slang expressions, and background music interference.

To overcome these difficulties, learners employed various strategies such as repeated listening, using lyric worksheets, contextual guessing, and peer discussion. These findings indicate that English songs can function both as motivating learning materials and cognitively demanding listening media. Therefore, effective instructional scaffolding is essential to maximize the pedagogical benefits of song-based listening instruction in EFL classrooms.

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