

EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE ROLE OF LYRICS IN SONG-BASED LISTENING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how EFL students perceive the role of lyrics in song-based listening activities. Students' perceptions of the use of lyrics during listening practice were investigated using a qualitative descriptive research approach. Five university students who had experience listening to English songs with lyrics were intentionally selected as participants. This study concentrated on their authentic listening practices rather than using an intervention-based design. Semi-structured interviews, documentation, and observation were used to gather data. Miles and Huberman's interactive qualitative analysis model, which incorporates data reduction, data display, and conclusion drafting, was used to examine the data. The results show that during listening exercises, participants described lyrics as visual aids that helped them follow spoken input, identify words, and comprehend song meaning. Additionally, participants reported that listening was more comfortable and engaging when lyrics were present. However, some participants reported difficulty comprehending both audio and lyrics simultaneously, particularly in songs with fast-paced sections or unfamiliar terminology. Overall, students view lyrics as a supportive component of their listening experiences. This study is limited by the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Despite this limitation, the results indicate that incorporating lyrics into song-based listening activities can support students' comprehension and motivation, particularly in informal learning contexts. Future research is therefore recommended to include larger samples and examine additional variables, such as proficiency levels and song genres, to gain a deeper understanding of the role of lyrics in EFL listening development.

INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalization, English plays an essential role as one of the international languages used for communication across countries (Ferdianto & Kholili, 2022). This global importance has heightened the need for English proficiency, not only for academic purposes but also for socio-economic opportunities, including employment and career development. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) from primary school through university. To put it another way, having a strong command of the English language may be the first step towards finding employment (Islam, 2023b). Therefore, to ensure successful language acquisition, it is crucial to cultivate students' interest and motivation to learn English (Islam, 2023a).

In learning English, one of the skills students need to focus on is listening. Listening refers to the ability to understand and interpret information delivered orally. Mendelsohn (as cited in Rungsinanont, 2024) states that approximately 40–50% of daily communication involves listening. It indicates that listening plays a crucial role in supporting the development of other language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. As the initial step in language learning is listening, the listening comprehension process should be taught at all levels of language learning (Trisnawati et al., 2024).

However, listening is often considered one of the most challenging language skills for EFL learners. According to Lang and Ross (as cited in El-Sayed, 2022), listening involves complex cognitive processing that involves linguistic, contextual, communicative, and cognitive factors. In this process, learners must not only hear sounds but also decode, interpret, and connect them with prior knowledge to construct meaning (Syukur, 2024). Therefore, effective listening requires learners to maintain concentration, distinguish sounds and intonation patterns, and interpret spoken messages accurately.

In practice, many EFL students experience difficulties in listening comprehension. Underwood (as cited in Kulsum & Hidayatullah, 2023) explains that students often face several obstacles, including a fast speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, different accents, a lack of repetition, and difficulty maintaining concentration. These challenges can make listening activities frustrating and reduce students' confidence in their ability to understand spoken English.

One of the most important developments in education in the modern period is the use of technology in English language instruction (Zainuddin & Hamdani, 2025). Through internet platforms and mobile applications, students can easily access authentic English materials

anytime and anywhere (Peter, 2023). One of the commonly used media for practicing listening is English songs.

Songs are widely used in language learning because they provide authentic language input through rhythm, melody, and natural pronunciation patterns (Wusqo et al., 2024). In addition, songs can increase students' motivation and create a more enjoyable learning environment (Nurhasanah & Suryaman, 2022). Songs also allow students to repeatedly listen to the same material, which may help them recognize vocabulary, pronunciation patterns, and expressions used in natural communication (Misa, 2024). However, despite these benefits, students may also face some difficulties when listening to a song. Fast tempo, connected speech, decreased pronunciation, and foreign vocabulary are common features of songs that might make it challenging for students to comprehend spoken words. Consequently, many students rely on song lyrics to help them with their listening.

Lyrics can function as visual support that helps learners match the sounds they hear with written forms of the words. By reading the lyrics while listening to the song, students may find it easier to identify vocabulary, confirm meaning, and follow the flow of the message. This process may also help students reduce confusion when encountering unclear pronunciation or unfamiliar expressions in the song.

From a theoretical standpoint, Dual Coding Theory explains how lyrics function while listening. According to this hypothesis, information can be processed via both verbal and visual cognitive processes (Clark & Paivio, 1991). Songs provide auditory input, and lyrics provide visual input in song-based listening activities, which together may support understanding.

However, according to Sweller (1994), learners have limited cognitive capacity. When learners attempt to understand spoken input without support, they may experience high cognitive load as they decode sounds while simultaneously constructing meaning. Presenting lyrics may help reduce unnecessary cognitive load by providing visual cues that assist learners in identifying words and understanding the message more efficiently.

Several previous studies have investigated the use of songs in improving students' listening skills. For example, Putri et al. (2022) found that students felt more relaxed, motivated, and focused when using English songs for listening practice. Similarly, Nadiyya and Suryadi (2024) reported that songs significantly improved students' listening comprehension and pronunciation when appropriate song characteristics were selected. Other studies also show that songs can enhance students' motivation and engagement in language learning (HS et al., 2024; Humaera et al., 2025; Rohana & Saharani, 2023).

However, most previous studies, including those by Putri et al. (2022) and Nadiyya and Suryadi (2024), primarily examined the effectiveness of songs in improving listening skills. Meanwhile, other studies, such as HS et al. (2024), Humaera et al. (2025), and Rohana and Saharani (2023), focused on students' general perceptions of song-based learning. Limited attention has been given to how EFL students experience the use of lyrics as visual support during listening activities. In particular, it is still necessary to explore how lyrics support students' learning experiences in song-based listening, facilitate the absorption of auditory information, and help them address cognitive difficulties.

Therefore, this study aims to explore EFL students' experiences in using presented lyrics during song-based listening activities. Specifically, this research focuses on how lyrics function as visual support in helping students understand spoken input and how students perceive the cognitive and affective aspects of this learning experience. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the understanding of listening comprehension and multimodal learning by exploring how auditory and visual inputs interact in song-based listening activities. In addition, the findings may offer pedagogical implications for EFL teachers by providing insights into the integration of lyrics in listening instruction to support students' comprehension, motivation, and engagement in the learning process.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Listening Skills

Listening skills are the ability to actively interpret and comprehend spoken language, using mental processes beyond just hearing sounds (Worthington et al., 2024). Listening is understood as a dynamic and interpretive process in language learning, in which students identify lexical forms, focus on phonological aspects, and combine semantic and contextual signals to create meaning (Rost, 2024). Because it helps students link auditory data to meaningful language use, this talent is fundamental to communication and a crucial part of overall language competency in both academic and real-world contexts. Rost states that, because spoken data is continuous and fleeting, listening comprehension is considered complex, as it requires learners to receive and interpret information in real time while managing multiple linguistic clues (Rost, 2024).

Comprehension is defined by the combination of interconnected elements that make up listening. The essential elements, as suggested by Latupono and Nikijuluw (2022), are hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. These elements demonstrate that

listening is not merely a passive activity but an active cognitive process that requires attention, interpretation, and a response from the listener.

English Songs in Listening Activities

Songs are often considered authentic resources because they are created for real-life communication rather than for educational purposes (Lubis et al., 2026). Songs provide students with real-world examples of spoken English, introducing them to connected speech, idioms, natural pronunciation, and informal grammar (Babayev, 2025). The songs are insightful, enjoyable, authentic, and full of terms that students will frequently encounter (Paskalisa & Sadikin, 2022). Song can boost students' enthusiasm and foster a laid-back learning environment, both of which improve listening comprehension (Apriyanty, 2025; Murphey, 2013).

Songs' melodic and repetitive qualities help with pronunciation practice and memory retention. Learners instinctively absorb vocabulary, grammatical rules, and pronunciation characteristics through frequent exposure. According to Medina (1990), music enhances vocabulary acquisition in second languages by stimulating both cognitive and emotional memory, making it easier for learners to remember words. Previous studies also show that English songs can enhance students' motivation and engagement in listening activities (Nadiyya & Suryadi, 2024; Putri et al., 2022).

Lyrics in Song-Based Listening

Lyrics are the written form of sung text, using words, rhythm, and emotion to convey meaning. They blend linguistic structure with melodic, rhythmic, and intonatory musical elements (Karolina, 2024). The song's lyrics are "optimal input chunks provided are manageable for beginning learners, blending rhythm, stress, rhymes, intonation, vocabulary, and sentence patterns" (Chuang, 2016; Tasnim, 2022).

Lyrics are frequently used as supplementary materials for listening exercises in educational settings, as they facilitate comprehension of the spoken text. Listening while following the lyrics helps students stay focused throughout the task, identify vocabulary more readily, and explain meaning. This link between the visual and aural components facilitates comprehension and retention of linguistic input.

According to Dual Coding Theory, information processed via both non-verbal and verbal channels supports retention and reinforces cognitive encoding (Clark & Paivio, 1991). In song-based listening, two cognitive processes are concurrently activated by visual-verbal input (lyrics) and aural input (song). This dual processing may strengthen both word recognition and

memory traces. However, according to John Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1994), working memory has limited capacity. Therefore, depending on the language's complexity and the learners' processing capacity, lyrics may either support cognitive load or facilitate comprehension.

EFL Students' Experiences

The process by which people understand and give meaning to what they encounter is called experience. Dewey describes experience as an ongoing interaction between an individual and their surroundings, in which knowledge and comprehension arise from the contemplation of deeds and their results (Dewey, 2012). In the context of listening activities, this experiential learning process can be explained through the principles of continuity and interaction. The principle of continuity is at work when students repeatedly engage with listening materials, such as English songs, enabling them to gradually enhance their comprehension, recognize vocabulary, and become more familiar with pronunciation patterns. Meanwhile, the principle of interaction is evident when students actively relate their prior knowledge to new auditory input, interpret meaning, and utilize contextual cues, such as lyrics, to facilitate their understanding.

Experiences play an important role in shaping motivated, positive, and successful language learners. Positive experiences can boost confidence and engagement, while negative ones can demotivate or worry. When students participate in learning activities like listening to English songs and applying the lyrics during listening exercises, their experiences in EFL contexts include their perceptions, feelings, and methods.

METHOD

To explore EFL students' experiences with lyrics during song-based listening activities, this study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. This approach is appropriate because the purpose of this study is not to measure learning outcomes quantitatively but to describe students' experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges when using lyrics to support listening comprehension.

The participants in this study were five students from Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic University who had experience conducting listening activities outside the classroom, particularly through informal exposure to English songs and through regularly scheduled, self-directed song-based listening activities, either daily or several times a week. Participants were

selected through purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling entails intentionally selecting participants who align with the study's goals and is commonly employed by researchers familiar with the study context and potential participants (Tajik et al., 2025). Initially, several students were identified and approached to assess whether they met the inclusion criteria. The selection criteria included: (1) students who frequently listen to English songs accompanied by lyrics, (2) students who intentionally use lyrics to support their listening comprehension, and (3) students who are willing to share detailed explanations about their learning experiences.

The data collection techniques used in this study were observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to understand how students interact with songs and lyrics during listening activities. According to Widoyoko (as cited in Subakti et al., 2023), observation is a systematic process of observing and recording phenomena related to the research subject. In this study, the researcher conducted non-participant observation in informal learning settings. The observation focused on several thematic aspects, including students' involvement in song-based listening activities, the use of provided lyrics, the listening strategies they applied, and the challenges they faced during the listening process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' experiences, perceptions of the benefits and challenges of using lyrics during song-based listening activities. According to Yakin (2023), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore participants' thoughts and opinions in greater depth while still maintaining a flexible interview structure. In this study, the interviews were conducted individually with each participant following the song-based listening activities. The interviews focused on students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in using the provided lyrics during listening exercises. The collected data included participants' responses on their listening strategies, comprehension difficulties, and perceived benefits of incorporating lyrics. The interview transcripts were subsequently analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to the research questions, particularly regarding the cognitive and affective aspects of students' listening experiences.

Documentation was also used to support the data obtained from observation and interviews. The documentation included research notes, interview photographs, and other relevant materials related to the listening activities. The documentation for this study consisted of research notes, interview photographs, and other materials relevant to the listening activities. Research notes were taken during and immediately after the song-based listening sessions, documenting students' engagement, interactions with the lyrics, and notable behaviors or challenges. Photographs, taken with participants' consent, provided a visual record of the

activities and the learning environment. Additional materials included copies of the song lyrics used in the sessions. All these materials were systematically organized and analyzed together with the interview and observation data using thematic analysis, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and relationships related to students' cognitive and affective experiences, strategies, and perceptions during the song-based listening activities. Supporting documentation helps increase the credibility of qualitative research findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994). This model consists of three interconnected processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Through these steps, the researcher systematically organized and interpreted the data to identify patterns and themes in students' experiences with lyrics during song-based listening activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The results, based on interviews with five students, demonstrate that participants' use of lyrics shown alongside the music aided their listening. Across all data sources, lyrics were consistently regarded as a valuable tool that supports comprehension, engagement, vocabulary recognition, and overall affective experience.

Lyrics as Visual Support for Listening

Every participant emphasized that the lyrics made it easier for them to follow and comprehend the audio. They saw lyrics as a visual depiction of the noises they heard.

S5 said: "In my opinion, by looking at the lyrics, we can match the sound with the writing."

S3 explains: "Looking at the lyrics helps me match what I hear with what is written."

S1 added: "It makes it easier for me to understand the meaning if there is a translation."

Observations revealed that students often read the lyrics while listening, paused and replayed certain segments, or sang along to match the sounds with the written words. Supporting documentation, such as listening logs and screenshots from music applications, indicated consistent use of the lyrics and repetition strategies. These claims suggest that the lyrics act as a visual aid for participants to confirm what they hear. The presence of written text aids in their understanding of the auditory input when the song's speed is relatively fast or the pronunciation is ambiguous.

Lyrics to Help with Word Recognition and Pronunciation Awareness

Lyrics are thought to help participants recognize vocabulary and comprehend the sounds of previously unknown words, in addition to providing visual support.

S2 stated: "I often come across words that I rarely hear, through music and displaying lyrics, which helps me recognize the words."

S4 stated: "The lyrics displayed help me learn new vocabulary or new terms."

S5 adds: "Sometimes the pronunciation is fast or different from what we imagine. By looking at the lyrics, we can understand what words are actually being said."

Observations indicated students' active engagement, including pausing to check words and repeating segments aloud. Documentation showed frequent use of lyrics for vocabulary reinforcement and pronunciation practice, demonstrating that lyrics support linguistic decoding and comprehension. These results suggest that lyrics contribute to word recognition and raise participants' awareness of the connection between written form and sound. As a result, lyrics aid in both deciphering a song's linguistic structure and its content.

Lyrics for Context and Meaning Construction Comprehension

Additionally, participants noted that the lyrics gave them a deeper understanding of the meaning. They were able to better understand the song's message by reading the lyrics and listening to the music.

S3 stated: "I understand the meaning of the song better and find it easier to understand the message of the song."

S4 clarified: "Using the lyrics makes me enjoy the song more because I know what it means."

S5 stated: "Sometimes I also learn how to use the word in the right context."

Observations revealed students rereading lyrics to clarify meaning, while documentation captured repeated listening to support comprehension. Together, these data show that lyrics facilitate the connection between auditory input and broader contextual understanding. This statement demonstrates how lyrics help participants connect the words they hear to a broader context of meaning. To put it another way, the written word serves as a conduit between sound and meaning comprehension.

Cognitive Challenges in Processing Audio and Lyrics at the Same Time

Even with the lyrics, some participants reported difficulty processing text and audio simultaneously, particularly in songs with a fast tempo or slang.

S2 said: "In rap songs, I find it difficult to read the lyrics because they are pronounced very quickly."

S4 stated: "For some songs with a fast tempo, such as rap, it's usually quite difficult to find the right balance."

S5 added: “Sometimes it’s difficult if the song is too fast or there are a lot of slang words that I don’t know yet.”

Observations confirmed that participants employed multiple strategies to address these challenges, including slowing the song’s tempo, replaying playback, pausing to read the lyrics, and checking word meanings. Documentation, such as listening records and screenshots of repeated sessions, indicated that students deliberately managed their interaction with both audio and lyrics to support comprehension. These findings suggest that engaging with lyrics alongside audio requires conscious cognitive effort and the purposeful use of strategies.

Lyrics and Affective Interaction

Participants’ affective reactions to listening activities are linked to the use of lyrics and to cognitive features. Several participants reported feeling more at ease and inspired when lyrics were present.

S1 states: “Because when learning, there must be interesting things first. With this method, learning becomes more enjoyable and motivating.”

S3 also expressed: “I feel more relaxed and enjoy it. This method makes me more confident and enthusiastic about learning listening.”

S5 conveys: “Yes, very motivated. Because I feel that learning English can be done in a fun way, it doesn’t always have to be serious in class.”

Observational data supported these findings, with participants smiling, nodding, or singing along during listening sessions, reflecting positive engagement. Documentation, including listening logs and notes on voluntary practice outside the classroom, further showed that participants actively selected songs and used lyrics to boost enjoyment and motivation. The experience wasn’t totally cohesive, though. S4 stated that, in comparison to other media, using lyrics was not the best approach for her. It demonstrates how each participant’s learning experience is unique and influenced by their preferences.

Discussion

This study indicates that lyrics serve as visual scaffolding that supports comprehension in song-based listening activities by facilitating word recognition, meaning construction, and the flow of auditory input. The simultaneous process of reading lyrics while listening can be interpreted through Dual Coding Theory, which explains how visual and auditory information work together to support learning (Clark & Paivio, 1991).

In addition to formal learning contexts, students also engaged in informal listening activities outside the classroom, such as replaying songs, independently checking lyrics, and selecting songs based on personal interest. These experiences extend learning beyond classroom boundaries and support engagement and motivation, aligning with previous findings

on authentic language exposure (Nurhasanah & Suryaman, 2022; Wusqo et al., 2024). This suggests that song-based listening with lyrics can function as a meaningful informal learning practice that promotes learner independence.

Some challenges emerged when students encountered fast-paced songs or unfamiliar vocabulary, reflecting cognitive limitations in processing dual input simultaneously. Cognitive Load Theory helps explain these difficulties by emphasizing the limited capacity of working memory during learning (Sweller, 1994). At the same time, students employed strategies such as slowing the tempo, replaying segments, and pausing, which demonstrate active self-regulation and deliberate cognitive effort during listening.

A distinctive contribution of this study is its emphasis on students' out-of-class listening experiences as meaningful informal learning practices. While previous studies on song-based listening have largely focused on classroom implementation, this research highlights how students independently engage with songs and lyrics beyond the classroom. The findings reveal that students actively use lyrics to support comprehension, address cognitive challenges, and support their motivation, indicating that song-based listening functions as a self-directed, experiential learning process.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that EFL students used lyrics in song-based listening activities outside the classroom as visual support to help them follow the audio, recognize vocabulary, and develop a more focused understanding of meaning. The availability of lyrics allowed students to connect spoken sounds with written forms, identify unfamiliar vocabulary, and become more aware of pronunciation patterns. These experiences illustrate how auditory and visual input can be processed simultaneously during song-based listening activities.

Although these benefits were evident, participants also experienced challenges, particularly when listening to fast-paced or unfamiliar-vocabulary songs. To overcome these difficulties, students applied strategies such as slowing down the tempo, replaying specific sections, and reviewing lyrics before listening again. These strategies indicate that learners actively regulated their cognitive processes and exerted conscious effort to maintain comprehension during listening activities.

From an affective perspective, the use of lyrics in informal listening contexts contributed to a more relaxed, enjoyable, and motivating learning experience. However, participants demonstrated different preferences in using lyrics, suggesting that individual learning tendencies influenced how students engaged in song-based listening activities.

Overall, the findings suggest that lyrics serve as supportive tools that help both cognitive and affective dimensions of students' listening experiences. Furthermore, the use of lyrics in out-of-class listening highlights the importance of informal learning in supporting independent language development.

Nevertheless, this study was limited by the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger sample size to provide broader insights into students' experiences using lyrics in song-based listening activities. Further studies may also examine additional variables, such as proficiency levels, song genres, and different listening environments, to deepen understanding of how lyrics contribute to listening comprehension in EFL contexts.

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