

Exploring New Students Perceptions in English Education Program at Universitas Kuningan on Pop Songs as a Motivation Tool in Learning English

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, pop songs have become increasingly popular as a tool to motivate students in learning English, particularly among younger learners. This study explores how new students in the English Education Program at Universitas Kuningan perceive the use of pop songs in supporting their motivation and language development. Specifically, the research investigates how pop songs influence students' enthusiasm, what language skills they believe are improved through music, and which types of songs are most effective in boosting motivation. Using a qualitative method, data were gathered through open-ended questionnaires completed by ten first-year students. Their responses were then analyzed thematically to identify common patterns and insights. The results show that most students responded positively, saying that pop songs made learning English more enjoyable, less boring, and emotionally engaging. Many reported noticeable progress in vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening skills, along with greater confidence in speaking English. Songs with slower tempos, clear pronunciation, and relatable themes particularly those by popular artists such as Taylor Swift, Coldplay, and BTS, were seen as especially motivating. Although some students mentioned challenges like slang or fast-paced lyrics, they generally viewed these as opportunities to improve rather than barriers. Overall, the study concludes that pop songs meet students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, aligning with the principles of Self-Determination Theory. As such, pop songs can be considered an effective and informal strategy to enhance both motivation and language skills in English learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of pop songs into English language learning has gained prominence as an innovative and engaging pedagogical strategy. Songs are no longer regarded solely as entertainment but have evolved into effective educational tools that provide real-life context, improve listening skills, reinforce vocabulary, and support pronunciation development. Particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, pop songs offer a natural and enjoyable learning environment that bridges classroom instruction with everyday language use. Their catchy rhythms, repetitive lyrics, and cultural relevance make them appealing to young

learners and serve as a potential source of intrinsic motivation.

Motivation plays a crucial role in second language acquisition. Research by Dörnyei (2021), Ushioda (2021), and Ryan & Deci (2020) emphasizes that learners' engagement and performance are deeply influenced by their motivation. Unfortunately, many students, especially at the university level, often find traditional English learning methods monotonous, leading to reduced participation and low academic outcomes. Activities such as memorizing vocabulary, drilling grammar rules, and translating texts may fail to align with students' interests and learning styles. In contrast, integrating pop music into English instruction may stimulate learners emotionally and cognitively, fostering more positive attitudes toward language learning.

Recent studies (e.g., Krashen, 2020; Lems, 2021; Goh, 2020) have shown that music can be an effective tool to enhance vocabulary acquisition, improve pronunciation, and reduce anxiety, especially when students relate personally to the music. Pop songs provide informal exposure to authentic language, including idiomatic expressions and everyday phrases, making the learning process more meaningful and enjoyable. However, challenges remain, such as students' varying preferences for music genres, difficulty in understanding lyrics due to fast-paced delivery or slang, and the need to align songs with instructional goals and learners' proficiency levels.

Although several international and national studies have explored the use of songs in English language learning, there is still a lack of research that specifically investigates students' perceptions of using pop songs as a motivational tool—particularly within the Indonesian context and among new university students. At Universitas Kuningan, where English Education students often experience transitional difficulties in adapting to higher education academic demands, understanding their perceptions is critical to designing engaging and responsive learning strategies.

Therefore, this research focuses on exploring how new students in the English Education Program at Universitas Kuningan perceive the use of pop songs in their English learning process, particularly as a source of motivation. The study also aims to uncover what types of pop songs are most effective in increasing motivation and what potential challenges students may encounter when learning English through music.

To achieve these aims, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of using pop songs in the English learning process?
2. What types or characteristics of pop songs do students believe can increase their motivation to learn English?

Based on these questions, the objectives of this study are:

To explore students' perceptions regarding the influence of pop songs on their motivation in learning English.

To analyze the impact of pop songs on students' engagement with language skills such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening comprehension.

To identify challenges and considerations in using pop songs as a strategy for English language instruction.

By gaining insights from students' own experiences and viewpoints, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on creative language learning approaches and offers practical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers in English language education. The findings are expected to support more effective, enjoyable, and culturally responsive teaching strategies that resonate with learners' preferences and needs.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative descriptive research design to explore new students' perceptions in the English Education Program at Universitas Kuningan regarding the use of pop songs as a motivational tool in learning English. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows the researcher to investigate participants' subjective experiences, thoughts, and feelings in depth. The descriptive nature of the study aims to present a rich, detailed account of how students perceive the pedagogical use of pop music in their English learning process.

This design was considered most appropriate since the study focused on understanding natural attitudes and individual interpretations rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses. The research sought to uncover not only the benefits but also the challenges perceived by students when engaging with music-based learning strategies in a higher education context.

Participants

The participants in this research were ten newly enrolled students in the English Education Program at Universitas Kuningan, selected using purposive sampling. All participants were in the second semester of their first academic year (2024/2025) and were part of the same cohort: PPBIC-01-2024. This population was chosen intentionally to ensure the inclusion of individuals who were still in the early stages of their academic journey and likely to have fresh impressions of their learning experiences.

The sample included nine female students and one male student, with ages ranging from 18 to 21 years.

The gender imbalance reflects the real demographic distribution within the program at the time of research. The participants were considered suitable due to their exposure to English instruction and potential encounters with the use of pop songs in classroom or informal learning contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured open-ended questionnaire, designed to elicit comprehensive responses about students' perceptions, experiences, and opinions regarding the use of pop songs in learning English. The questionnaire consisted of ten main questions, divided into two major sections:

Section A: Explored general perceptions of using pop songs in English learning, including emotional engagement, comparisons to traditional methods, and perceived skill improvement (vocabulary, listening, pronunciation).

Section B: Focused on identifying specific song types or characteristics that increase motivation, including tempo, lyrics, emotional relevance, and alignment with students' musical preferences.

The open-ended format encouraged participants to express themselves freely in their own words, allowing the collection of rich qualitative data. The questionnaire was distributed online to ensure accessibility and convenience for participants, and responses were submitted digitally for ease of analysis.

Ethical considerations were addressed by providing informed consent forms, ensuring participant anonymity, and emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation. Respondents were assured that their identities and responses would be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data gathered through open-ended questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative analytic method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within data. This method was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in summarizing large volumes of textual information while retaining participants' original meaning.

The analysis followed the six-step procedure as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with Data: The researcher thoroughly read all responses multiple times to immerse in the content and gain a deep understanding of the data.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Key phrases, recurring ideas, and expressions were systematically coded across the entire dataset. Codes such as "fun and engaging," "improves pronunciation," and "hard to understand lyrics" were used.
3. Searching for Themes: Codes were grouped into potential themes based on similarities and relevance to the research questions, such as emotional motivation, language skill enhancement, and technical challenges.
4. Reviewing Themes: The identified themes were refined by checking their coherence in relation to the entire dataset. Some themes were combined or broken down into subthemes.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined, and meaningful labels were assigned to describe the scope and content of each.
6. Producing the Report: A detailed narrative was developed, integrating illustrative quotes from participants to support each theme, ensuring that their voices remained central in the interpretation.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher applied techniques such as triangulation of codes, peer review of themes, and reflexive journaling throughout the analysis process. All interpretations were grounded directly in the participants' responses, ensuring credibility and authenticity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data obtained from the ten respondents, several main themes can be identified regarding their perceptions of the use of pop songs in English language learning:

1. Increased Fun and Enthusiasm in Learning: All respondents stated that learning with pop songs was more enjoyable than traditional methods or the usual learning methods. They said they are more motivated to learn when the song used as learning media is a pop song or the latest song according to the trend, it makes learning less boring.
2. Effect on Language Skills: The majority of participants mentioned improvements in pronunciation, vocabulary and listening comprehension. Song lyrics are considered to help pronunciation as they mimic the way the singer pronounces the words in the song used as learning media. In addition, they also learn new vocabulary that appears in real contexts.
3. Emotional and Cultural Linkages: Songs with themes of love, friendship, and daily life are considered to help students feel closer to the English language. Familiar songs make it easier for them to understand meaning and context, while connecting learning to real life. Therefore, learning is much easier for them to follow and understand.
4. Challenges Faced: Some respondents complained about the difficulty of understanding fast-paced songs, the use of idioms or slang, and grammar that is not in accordance with formal rules that may still be unfamiliar to them. However, these challenges motivated them to find out and learn more about the meaning of some of the things they did not understand.

Discussion

The findings from this study reinforce the idea that music, especially pop songs, can be an effective tool to increase motivation to learn English. Pop songs fulfill three basic needs in Self-Determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020):

Autonomy: Students are given the freedom to choose their favorite songs, which strengthens their sense of ownership over their learning process. This makes them much more interested in learning English.

Competence: Through activities such as mimicking the lyrics and understanding the meaning of the song, students feel progress in language skills, both in terms of vocabulary and even pronunciation.

Relatedness: Pop songs touch on emotional and cultural aspects that are close to students, making them feel personally connected to the learning material. Since pop songs are usually more familiar to them and are often heard according to their emotional state.

In addition, pop songs as learning media provide an authentic context that supports the communicative approach. Songs become a bridge between theory and practice as they present language in its natural form, as used by native speakers. This is in line with previous findings from Sukardi (2020), Saun (2021), and Kurniawan & Hidayati (2018), which state that music helps improve listening skills, pronunciation, and learning motivation.

However, it is important to consider students' language level when choosing songs. Songs with lyrics that are too complex can cause confusion or frustration. Therefore, educators need to select appropriate songs and include supporting activities such as cloze, meaning discussion and pronunciation practice.

4. CONCLUSION

This research shows that pop songs have great potential as motivational tools in English language learning among freshmen. Students feel more enthusiastic, confident and emotionally engaged when learning using songs. Pop songs help develop vocabulary, pronunciation, as well as listening comprehension skills in a fun and non-stressful atmosphere.

Although there are challenges such as difficulty understanding fast lyrics and idioms, pop songs are generally perceived to provide more benefits than obstacles. With the right approach and appropriate song selection, pop songs can be made an integral part of English learning strategies at the tertiary level.

Future research is recommended to use a mixed methods approach and involve a larger number of participants so that the results can be generalized more widely. In addition, classroom experiments with a variety of music genres can provide a deeper understanding of the effect of music on cognitive and affective aspects in foreign language learning.

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