

Improving Students' Listening Skills by Using Song

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of using English songs to improve the listening comprehension skills of Grade VIII-B students at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. Listening is a fundamental skill in language learning, yet many students face difficulties due to fast native speaker speech, unfamiliar accents, idiomatic expressions, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. These challenges are often intensified by traditional, teacher-centered approaches that fail to engage students actively. To address this issue, the researchers explored the integration of English songs into listening activities as a more engaging and student-centered teaching method. The study employed a mixed-method approach through Classroom Action Research (CAR), conducted in two cycles with 27 students as participants. Quantitative data were gathered through listening tests and analyzed descriptively to observe changes in student performance. Qualitative data from classroom observations and student interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to gain insights into students' engagement, motivation, and perceptions. The findings revealed a notable improvement in students' listening skills. The average score increased from 50 in the first cycle to 67 in the second cycle, indicating that the incorporation of English songs positively influenced students' performance. Although not all students met the school's passing score of 70, their increased motivation, focus, and enthusiasm for learning were evident during classroom observations and interviews. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that using English songs in listening lessons can be an effective strategy to enhance comprehension and foster a more enjoyable learning environment. Songs provide authentic input, repetitive exposure, and emotional engagement, which help learners absorb the language more naturally. Therefore, educators are encouraged to integrate music into English

instruction to support students' listening development and overall language proficiency.

Key words: Listening; Songs; Improvement; English

INTRODUCTION

Listening skills, in the context of this study, refer to students' ability to receive, process, and comprehend spoken English input, including recognizing vocabulary, understanding sentence structures, identifying key information, and responding appropriately. As one of the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing listening serves as the foundation for language acquisition. It is an active process that requires focused attention, cognitive processing, and linguistic awareness. Without strong listening skills, learners may struggle to understand meaning, retain vocabulary, and develop other language competencies such as speaking and writing.

Despite its importance, listening is often overlooked in classroom instruction. Students frequently encounter difficulties such as the speed of native speech, diverse accents, idiomatic language, and reduced forms of spoken English. These challenges are compounded by a lack of exposure to English outside the classroom, as well as traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods that limit student engagement. Agustini (2021) highlighted that listening is often perceived as a difficult skill, with teachers tending to focus more on reading or writing. This imbalance can hinder students' overall language development.

To address this, recent studies have explored more engaging and student-centered approaches, such as the use of English songs in language instruction. Songs are authentic and enjoyable learning materials that combine rhythm, melody, and meaningful language. Listyaningsih (2017) noted that English songs enhance students' familiarity with pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and cultural expressions. Songs also promote repetition, reduce anxiety, and make learning more interactive.

Mubarak et al. (2020) found that Disney songs improved Indonesian high school students' listening comprehension through memorable melodies and repeated structures. Similarly, Jannah et al. (2018) reported that over 75% of students showed increased engagement and improved listening performance after using multimedia-based songs. Yuliyanto et al. (2018) also observed greater interest and participation when songs were used in listening classes. These findings support the idea that songs can improve listening skills while making learning more enjoyable.

Further studies reinforce the practical classroom benefits of using songs. At SMP Negeri 2 Mardinding, students' vocabulary mastery rose from 30% to 80% following the use of English songs in listening sessions (Sinulingga, 2016). In another case at SMP Negeri 2 Banguntapan, students described song-based learning

as motivating and entertaining, even if not all improved in speaking immediately (Jannah & Ayu, 2022). At an international level, Maulana et al. (n.d.) found that students in Thailand improved pronunciation, contextual understanding, and speaking confidence through regular exposure to songs.

Music also strengthens emotional and psychological engagement. It creates a positive atmosphere that enhances focus and retention, allowing students to process language more intuitively. When emotionally connected to the material, learners are more likely to remember and apply what they have learned. This makes songs an effective medium for both linguistic and affective learning goals. However, while many studies highlight the benefits of using songs in general language instruction, fewer focus specifically on their impact on listening comprehension among students with diverse ability levels. Therefore, further investigation is necessary to explore how songs can be systematically integrated into lesson plans to support listening development.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of English songs in improving listening skills among Grade VIII students at SMP Nasrani 5. It specifically investigates how songs contribute to vocabulary acquisition, grammatical awareness, and overall comprehension. The findings are expected to offer both theoretical insights and practical strategies for enhancing listening instruction in English classrooms, particularly through student-centered and enjoyable learning experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening Skills in English Learning

Listening is one of the fundamental language skills and is the main gateway to understanding the target language. Frimaulia and M. Pd (2022) in "The effectiveness of Kids Song on Students' motivation in Listening Comprehension" stated that students must learn to listen as one of the components of language because it helps them hone their sensitivity to hearing English vocabulary. However, Agustini (2021) in "The Use of English Songs to Improve Students' Listening Skills" stated that listening is often considered a difficult skill and teachers tend to focus more on reading, writing, or speaking skills. This is in line with Maulana, Putra, Padilah, & Harahap (2024) who emphasized the importance of listening as one of the essential skills that must be mastered in English. Students' difficulties in listening can be caused by various factors, including lack of motivation and uninteresting teaching methods. Therefore, it is important to find an effective and enjoyable approach to practicing listening skills.

Using Songs as a Medium for Listening Learning

Songs have long been recognized as an effective and engaging medium in language learning. According to Agustini (2021), songs can successfully capture students'

attention, allowing them to better engage with listening activities. This method not only makes the learning process more enjoyable but also significantly enhances students' motivation to learn. Supporting this, Jannah and Ayu (2022) found that the use of English songs in classroom activities created a fun, entertaining, and encouraging atmosphere, making learning feel less monotonous. Numerous studies have also highlighted the specific benefits of songs across different areas of language acquisition. In terms of vocabulary development, Sinulingga (2020), in a study conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Mardinding, demonstrated that using English songs as a learning resource led to a measurable improvement in students' vocabulary mastery. This was evident in the increase in students' test scores from the first to the second cycle of instruction. Similarly, Jannah and Ayu (2022) reported enhanced vocabulary acquisition among most students after the integration of songs into learning sessions. Beyond vocabulary, English songs have also been shown to improve speaking skills.

Maulana, Putra, Padilah, and Harahap (2024) found that students at Doctor Nueng Intercare Krabi School in Thailand became more confident in speaking English after regularly listening to songs. These students showed better pronunciation, improved intonation, and a greater understanding of context. Furthermore, songs have proven useful in boosting both motivation and listening comprehension. Jazilah and Mandarani (2022), in their study at SMP Muhammadiyah 5 Tulangan, found that students were highly motivated when listening to English songs, and although motivation was the primary focus, their findings also indicated that songs helped enhance comprehension skills. Overall, the existing literature consistently supports the integration of songs into English learning as a powerful tool to improve vocabulary, speaking skills, motivation, and listening comprehension.

Songs and Other Aspects of Language

In addition to enhancing listening skills and vocabulary acquisition, songs can also support the development of other important aspects of language learning, such as grammar, pronunciation, and intonation. While grammar is not always directly addressed through song-based learning, research indicates its potential benefits. For instance, Mijo (2022), in a study titled *The Use of English Song Media to Improve English Grammar Mastery in High School Students*, found that song lyrics can be a useful tool for improving grammar understanding. Repeated exposure to English song lyrics allows students to internalize common sentence structures and grammatical patterns in a natural and engaging way. Furthermore, songs also offer significant advantages in improving pronunciation and intonation. Maulana, Putra, Padilah, and Harahap (2024) observed that students demonstrated noticeable progress in their ability to pronounce words correctly and use appropriate intonation after being exposed to English songs regularly. This improvement highlights the value of songs as authentic linguistic models that provide learners with real examples of how English sounds are naturally produced and delivered. Thus, the use of songs in the classroom not only fosters listening comprehension and

vocabulary development but also contributes to more accurate and confident use of grammar and pronunciation.

Challenges and Solutions in Listening Learning

Despite the enormous potential of songs in language learning, teachers still face several challenges in effectively teaching listening skills. Agustini (2021) noted that many teachers tend to focus more on other language skills, such as reading or writing, often overlooking listening as a critical component of language development. This imbalance may stem from limited resources, time constraints, or uncertainty about effective listening strategies. However, Agustini also proposed a practical solution—integrating songs into listening lessons as an engaging and accessible method to support students' listening comprehension. In today's digital era, teachers have access to a wide range of platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and Joox, which provide an abundance of English song materials that can be easily incorporated into the classroom. These tools not only make the listening process more dynamic and enjoyable but also allow students to engage with authentic language input outside of traditional textbook content. By utilizing these digital resources, teachers can enhance their listening instruction and create a more interactive, student-centered learning environment.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of how English songs can enhance students' listening skills. The qualitative data explored students' experiences and engagement, while the quantitative data measured students' listening performance through pre- and post-tests. This combination allowed for a more holistic analysis of the learning outcomes. The research was conducted using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, which consists of four cyclical stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This method is particularly effective for improving teaching strategies within an authentic classroom context. The study was carried out at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan and involved a total of 54 eighth-grade students from two parallel classes: VIII-A and VIII-B (27 students each). Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the researcher choosing two intact classes that were available and relevant for the intervention. This sampling method was appropriate given the school-based setting and the need to compare instructional strategies between similar student groups. Class VIII-A served as the control group using standard audio materials, while Class VIII-B received the treatment using English songs.

Instrument and Procedures

To gather data, the researchers used listening tests, classroom observations, and student interviews. Listening tests were administered at the end of each cycle to evaluate students' comprehension of spoken English. A minimum score of 70 was set as the school's standard for success. Observational checklists were used to monitor students' participation, focus, and responses during the listening activities. After the second cycle, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to explore their perceptions and learning experiences.

In Cycle I, both classes used standard recorded audio conversations, consisting of scripted dialogues covering everyday topics such as shopping, greetings, and asking for directions. Students listened to the audio and completed worksheets with comprehension questions. In Cycle II, only Class VIII-B listened to selected English pop songs, including "Count on Me" by Bruno Mars and "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran. These songs were chosen based on their clear pronunciation, moderate tempo, and thematic relevance to students' lives. Worksheets for this cycle included lyric gap-fill exercises, vocabulary matching, and comprehension questions derived from the song lyrics. This cycle aimed to assess how song-based listening materials impacted students' engagement and comprehension compared to conventional audio. Both cycles followed the structured CAR stages. Each cycle included lesson planning, material delivery, observation of classroom interactions, test administration, and reflective evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the teaching strategy and inform improvements.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding student responses and identifying patterns related to motivation, engagement, and comprehension. This method helped uncover insights into students' affective and cognitive responses to the listening materials. Quantitative data from the listening test scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, to measure the degree of improvement across the two cycles. This analysis provided a clear overview of the impact of song integration on students' listening performance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Cycle I Results

In Cycle I, both Class VIII-A and VIII-B were taught using conventional audio recordings without musical elements. Class VIII-A demonstrated a basic understanding of instructions, but overall student engagement was low, and this was reflected in their average test score of 45, significantly below the school's minimum passing standard of 70. Similarly, Class VIII-B showed limited participation and scored comparably low, with an average score of 50.37.

Table 1. Distribution of Cycle I Test Scores VIII-A

Score	N	Percentage (%)
80	4	14.8
70	3	11.1
60	5	18.5
45	2	7.4
40	7	25.9
20	6	22.2
Total	27	100

Similarly, Class VIII-B, which also used regular audio materials during Cycle I, showed limited engagement and performance, with a majority scoring below the minimum standard.

Table 2. Distribution of Cycle I Test Scores for Class VIII-B

Score	N	Percentage (%)
80	3	11.1
60	8	29.6
40	9	33.3
20	7	25.9
Total	27	100

The low scores in both groups revealed a need for more engaging and accessible listening strategies. Observations confirmed that students found it difficult to follow the fast pace and unfamiliar vocabulary of the standard audio recordings. Interview responses reinforced this, with students reporting that they often felt confused and demotivated due to the abstract and repetitive nature of the tasks.

Cycle II Results

In Cycle II, a major pedagogical shift was introduced: Class VIII-B was taught using English songs (e.g., “Count on Me” by Bruno Mars and “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran), while Class VIII-A continued with standard audio materials. The results demonstrated a clear contrast in performance and engagement between the two groups.

Class VIII-B showed a significant improvement, with their average score increasing to 69.07, a gain of 18.7 points from Cycle I. In contrast, Class VIII-A experienced only a marginal improvement, from 52.78 to 53.57, a gain of just 0.79 points.

Table 3. Distribution of Cycle II Test Scores VIII-A

Score	N	Percentage (%)
80	4	19
70	3	14.3
60	2	9.5
45	5	23.8
40	3	14.3
20	4	19
Total	21	100

Table 4. Distribution of Cycle II Test Scores for Class VIII-B

Score	N	Percentage (%)
86	9	33.3
71	9	33.3
57	4	14.8
43	2	7.4
29	2	7.4
14	1	3.7
Total	27	100

Qualitative observations supported these findings. Students in Class VIII-B were visibly more enthusiastic and focused during listening activities that included songs. Many reported that the rhythm and repetition of lyrics made it easier to remember vocabulary and understand meaning. One student remarked, “I can understand better because the song helps me imagine the situation.” Another said, “Listening to music in English is fun—it doesn't feel like a test.” In contrast, students in Class VIII-A remained less engaged, and their improvement was minimal. Several students in the control group noted that the audio materials were “boring” or “too fast to follow,” and they felt less confident about their ability to understand spoken English.

These contrasting results highlight the effectiveness of using English songs as a listening medium. The quantitative gains in Class VIII-B were not only larger but also accompanied by qualitative shifts in learner motivation, confidence, and classroom atmosphere. The average standard deviation in Class VIII-B also increased (from 19.16 to 22.61), indicating that while most students improved significantly, a few continued to struggle—suggesting a need for differentiated instruction to support students with lower proficiency. Meanwhile, the relatively static scores in Class VIII-A (with only a minor change in standard deviation from 19.00 to 19.09) confirmed that traditional audio materials alone may be insufficient for promoting substantial progress in listening comprehension.

The contrast between the two classes demonstrates that integrating English songs can create a more engaging and effective learning environment. The combination of music and language input appears to enhance memory retention, lower anxiety, and make learning more meaningful—especially for students with limited prior exposure to authentic English. These findings are consistent with previous studies, such as those by Mubarak et al. (2020) and Jannah et al. (2018), which emphasized the motivational and cognitive benefits of using music in language instruction. However, the variability in gains among students in Class VIII-B also indicates the importance of adapting song choice and activities to suit diverse learners' needs and ensuring equitable learning outcomes. The use of English songs as an instructional tool significantly improved students' listening comprehension compared to conventional methods. Students responded positively, both in terms of performance and engagement, validating songs as an effective and enjoyable medium for auditory learning. Future applications of this method should include targeted support for lower-achieving students and consider expanding the use of songs to other language skills, such as speaking or grammar, for more integrated learning.

This study investigated the use of English songs as a tool to improve students' listening skills and found that song-based instruction led to significantly better outcomes in terms of comprehension, engagement, and motivation compared to conventional audio materials. The findings showed that students in Class VIII-B, who engaged with song-based listening materials, not only scored higher but also demonstrated increased enthusiasm and participation during lessons. These results support a growing body of research emphasizing the benefits of music in language learning. For instance, Mubarak et al. (2020) found that Disney-themed songs enhanced Indonesian students' listening comprehension due to their repetitive and memorable nature. Similarly, Jannah and Ayu (2022) observed that integrating English songs improved both speaking and listening abilities in junior high school students, with most learners reporting higher levels of enjoyment and participation.

Moreover, studies like Jazilah and Mandarani (2021) and Maulana et al. (2021) noted that English songs reduce classroom anxiety, build student confidence, and enhance pronunciation and vocabulary. These affective factors are critical for sustained language acquisition, and the current study reinforces the idea that music creates a relaxed and student-centered learning environment. In terms of cognitive and linguistic gains, Sinulingga (2016) demonstrated an 80% increase in vocabulary mastery through repeated exposure to songs. Agustini (2021) added that songs support listening development because they offer natural pronunciation, connected speech, and contextual vocabulary. The present study observed similar outcomes—students in the experimental group reported that they could recognize more words and understand conversations better after the intervention.

In addition, Anjani, Talib, and Korompot (2021) and Ghonivita et al. (2020) highlighted the role of multimedia songs in improving vocabulary and comprehension through contextualized learning. In line with these results, students in this study noted that filling in lyrics and identifying meanings from songs made

vocabulary learning more enjoyable and meaningful. From a motivational standpoint, Listyaningsih (2017) emphasized that students are more likely to engage with familiar and emotionally resonant materials, such as pop music. Yuliyanto et al. (2018) confirmed that songs increase students' willingness to participate in class activities, especially when they relate to their personal interests.

A new finding in this study was the increased variation in student performance after the implementation of song-based instruction. Although the average score increased significantly in Class VIII-B, the rise in standard deviation suggests that the intervention benefited some students more than others. This highlights the need for differentiated scaffolding when applying song-based strategies, particularly for lower-proficiency learners who may require additional support in decoding lyrics or unfamiliar vocabulary.

Despite the promising findings, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a single school with only two classes, which limits the generalizability of the results to broader educational settings. The sample size and context may not represent the diverse conditions found in other schools or regions. Second, the selection of listening materials was restricted to only two English songs, namely "Count on Me" and "Perfect". Both songs featured a slow tempo and clear articulation, which are ideal for beginner to intermediate learners. However, this limited variety means that the study did not explore the potential impact of faster-paced songs, different genres such as rap or rock, or culturally diverse music. Third, although interviews and classroom observations provided valuable qualitative insights, the absence of standardized instruments such as motivation or engagement scales limited the depth and precision of affective measurement. Finally, the research was conducted over a relatively short period, spanning only two learning cycles. A longer implementation timeframe might produce different or more sustained outcomes and allow for better monitoring of long-term skill development.

This study provides several important implications for teaching and curriculum design. From a pedagogical perspective, English teachers are encouraged to integrate songs into listening instruction to enhance students' attention, emotional engagement, and language retention. Activities such as lyric gap-fills, vocabulary matching, and comprehension-based tasks can make listening lessons more interactive and effective. Regarding curriculum development, music-based instruction can be aligned with the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) framework, particularly in units focusing on listening and vocabulary. This approach can also be extended to support pronunciation and speaking skills, creating a more holistic language learning experience. For future research, scholars should investigate the use of different song genres, tempo levels, and lyric complexity across varied student profiles. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore how music-based instruction influences long-term retention, pronunciation accuracy, and the transferability of listening skills to other language domains.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of English songs into classroom instruction is an effective and engaging strategy for improving students' listening comprehension skills. The findings demonstrated a noticeable increase in students' average listening scores from an initial average of 50 to 67 indicating measurable academic progress. Beyond test performance, students showed greater enthusiasm and motivation during lessons that incorporated music, suggesting that songs offer not only linguistic benefits but also emotional and psychological engagement in learning. Given that this method is not commonly applied in the school, students responded positively to the novelty and enjoyment of music-based activities. Therefore, the researchers recommend that English teachers incorporate song-based listening exercises into their teaching practices periodically ideally at least once a month as part of a varied and student-centered instructional approach. Repeated exposure to authentic English through music can help students become more familiar with natural pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure. To maintain and enhance the effectiveness of this strategy, consistent implementation and appropriate song selection are essential. Ultimately, using English songs in the classroom provides a practical, enjoyable, and pedagogically sound approach to support students' language development.

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