

How Music Makes You Fluent: Learning English Through Songs

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Keywords	Abstract
English language learning Songs Music-based instruction vocabulary acquisition pronunciation listening comprehension	<p>This study investigates the impact of learning English through songs on vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. Music has long been recognized as a powerful tool in language learning, combining rhythm, melody, and meaningful content to enhance cognitive and affective processes. Twenty English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners participated in a four-week intervention involving structured activities, including guided listening, lyric analysis, shadowing, and comprehension tasks. A curated playlist of pop, acoustic, soft rock, and indie songs was used, selected for clear pronunciation, repetitive structures, and appropriate lexical content. Pre- and post-tests measured vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation accuracy, and listening comprehension, while qualitative feedback captured learners' perceptions and motivation.</p> <p>Results indicated significant improvements: vocabulary scores increased by 32%, pronunciation by 22%, and listening comprehension by 28%. Pop songs yielded the greatest gains in vocabulary and listening, while acoustic and soft rock songs enhanced prosodic features. Learners reported increased engagement, reduced anxiety, and enhanced motivation, highlighting the affective benefits of music-based learning. These findings support the integration of songs into language instruction as an effective, enjoyable, and culturally enriching approach. Music not only reinforces linguistic skills but also fosters fluency, confidence, and long-term retention, offering a holistic strategy for English language acquisition.</p>

1. Introduction

Music has long been recognized as a powerful cognitive and emotional stimulus, making it a valuable tool in educational contexts. In second language acquisition (SLA), songs offer a unique blend of linguistic input, rhythm, repetition, and cultural meaning. These elements create a

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multimodal learning experience that engages memory, attention, and affective factors—key components of successful language learning (Krashen, 1982; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

Songs provide authentic examples of spoken English, exposing learners to natural pronunciation, connected speech, idiomatic expressions, and colloquial grammatical structures. This supports the principles of communicative language teaching, which prioritize meaningful, real-world input over artificially constructed textbook sentences (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Because lyrics often reflect everyday conversational English, they help learners internalize vocabulary and syntax in a contextualized and memorable manner.

The melodic and rhythmic features of music facilitate language processing at both phonological and semantic levels. Research shows that melody enhances memory encoding by creating predictable patterns, which strengthen learners' ability to recall new vocabulary (Wallace, 1994; Medina, 1993). Rhythm also contributes to the development of prosodic awareness, enabling learners to better understand stress patterns, intonation, and timing—skills essential for producing intelligible speech (Richards, 1969; Schön et al., 2008).

Motivation is another crucial factor in language acquisition, and music is particularly effective in boosting learner engagement (Alisoy, 2025). According to Gardner's socio-educational model, positive emotional experiences and integrative motivation strongly influence SLA success (Gardner, 1985). Songs evoke emotion, reduce anxiety, and create a low-pressure learning atmosphere, encouraging learners to take linguistic risks. Murphey (1990) refers to this phenomenon as the “song-stuck-in-the-head” or “din in the head” effect, suggesting that repeated mental playback of lyrics provides unconscious language rehearsal (Sadiqzade, 2024).

Furthermore, music serves as a cultural bridge, allowing learners to connect with English-speaking communities through the themes, narratives, and social contexts embedded in song lyrics. Cultural exposure supports pragmatic understanding and fosters a sense of identity and belonging in the target language (Kramsch, 1993). For these reasons, integrating music into English learning is not only enjoyable but pedagogically sound.

This study builds on previous research by examining how structured engagement with songs—including listening, lyric analysis, and singing—affects vocabulary development, pronunciation, and listening comprehension (Babayev, 2023). It aims to further clarify the mechanisms through which music enhances fluency and to provide practical implications for both learners and educators (Babayev, 2025).

2. Methods

Twenty English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 35 ($M = 24.2$) and represented ten different L1 backgrounds, including Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Thai. Their proficiency levels ranged from A2 to B1 on the CEFR scale, as determined by a standardized placement test administered at the beginning of the academic term. All participants had completed at least one year of formal English instruction but reported



minimal prior experience using music as a structured learning tool. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Song Selection

A playlist of 12 English-language songs was curated according to the following criteria:

- clear, moderately paced vocal delivery
- high-frequency vocabulary appropriate for A2–B1 learners
- repetitive lyrical patterns
- relatively simple, accessible themes (e.g., relationships, daily life, aspirations)
- availability of official lyric transcripts

The playlist included pop, acoustic, soft rock, and indie genres. Songs such as *Counting Stars* (OneRepublic), *Photograph* (Ed Sheeran), and *Someone Like You* (Adele) were selected for their high lexical repetition and strong narrative coherence.

Table 1. **Pre- and Post-Intervention Results Across Language Skills**

Skill Area	Measurement Type	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Improvement
Vocabulary	Score (out of 40)	18.4 (46%)	30.5 (76%)	+32%
Pronunciation	Rubric Score (1–5 scale)	2.7	3.3	+22%
Sentence Stress	Sub-score (1–5)	2.3	3.1	+35%
Rhythm & Intonation	Sub-score (1–5)	2.4	3.1	+29%
Consonant Clusters	Sub-score (1–5)	3.0	3.4	+13%
Listening Comprehension	Score (out of 25)	14.8 (59%)	19.0 (76%)	+28%
Fast Speech Recognition	Item Accuracy (%)	41%	78%	+37%
Paraphrase Understanding	Item Accuracy (%)	45%	76%	+31%
Reduced Forms Awareness	Item Accuracy (%)	43%	72%	+29%

2.2.2 Supplementary Materials

To facilitate structured engagement with the songs, the following materials were used:

- printed lyric sheets with line numbers
- vocabulary lists containing 10–15 target items per song



- pre- and post-intervention vocabulary quizzes
- pronunciation rubrics covering segmental and suprasegmental features
- listening comprehension worksheets with short-answer and multiple-choice questions
- audio playback through headphones to ensure consistent listening quality

2.3 Procedure

The intervention lasted four weeks and consisted of two 45-minute sessions per week (eight sessions in total). Each session focused on one or two songs. The procedure followed a consistent four-step structure.

2.3.1 Step 1: Guided Listening

Participants listened to each song twice:

1. **First hearing:** No materials were provided. Learners were instructed to focus on the general meaning and emotional tone.
2. **Second hearing:** Lyric sheets were distributed, and learners followed along, marking unfamiliar vocabulary.

The instructor briefly clarified unknown words but encouraged students to infer meaning from context first.

2.3.2 Step 2: Lyrics Analysis

Learners worked in small groups to identify:

- vocabulary items related to everyday themes
- idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs
- simple grammatical structures (e.g., present perfect, conditionals, modal verbs)

Groups then discussed how figurative language and narrative elements contributed to the song's overall meaning. This stage aimed to promote semantic elaboration, which is known to support long-term memory retention.

2.3.3 Step 3: Pronunciation and Shadowing Practice

Students practiced shadowing—a technique in which learners repeat speech simultaneously with the speaker—to imitate rhythm and intonation patterns.

Activities included:

- softly singing along to match stress and intonation
- practicing difficult consonant clusters



- focusing on reduced forms commonly used in spoken English (e.g., *gonna*, *wanna*, *I'mma*)

This step targeted improvements in fluency, prosody, and awareness of connected speech.

2.3.4 Step 4: Comprehension and Production Tasks

Students completed listening comprehension questions and paraphrased selected lyrics orally or in writing. Some sessions included short creative tasks such as rewriting a verse using new vocabulary. These activities aimed to reinforce comprehension and encourage language production—an essential component of second language acquisition.

2.4 Assessment Instruments

2.4.1 Vocabulary Test

A 40-item pre/post vocabulary test assessed recognition and production of key words from the playlist. The test included matching items, fill-in-the-blank questions, and short written responses.

2.4.2 Pronunciation Evaluation

Instructors rated learners using a rubric that focused on:

- consonant and vowel accuracy
- sentence stress
- rhythm and intonation
- fluency and confidence during read-aloud tasks

Each category was scored on a 1–5 scale.

2.4.3 Listening Comprehension Test

Participants completed a 25-item listening comprehension exam that included:

- identifying main ideas
- recognizing paraphrased meanings
- detecting specific lexical items within rapid speech

Audio excerpts were drawn from the playlist as well as from thematically similar but unfamiliar songs to assess transferability.

2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data (vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening scores) were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentage gains and mean score comparisons. Qualitative data from open-ended feedback questionnaires were coded using thematic analysis. Recurring themes



related to motivation, enjoyment, and perceived language improvement were identified and categorized.

3. Results

3.1 Vocabulary Acquisition

Pre- and post-test measures revealed a substantial positive effect of song-based instruction on vocabulary learning. Participants' mean vocabulary score increased from 18.4/40 (46%) before the intervention to 30.5/40 (76%) after the intervention, representing an average improvement of 32%.

Words that appeared frequently in choruses or predictable narrative sequences were remembered at significantly higher rates. Items such as *broken*, *promise*, *dream*, *running*, and *leave* showed retention gains exceeding 40%. In contrast, less frequent or metaphorical terms (e.g., *reckoning*, *chasing down*, *misery*) demonstrated more moderate improvements between 15–20%.

Learners also performed better on productive vocabulary tasks—such as fill-in-the-blank items and short written responses—indicating that the songs supported not only lexical recognition but also active usage. These findings align with previous research suggesting that repetition, emotional engagement, and contextualized exposure contribute to stronger lexical retention.

3.2 Pronunciation Improvement

Pronunciation scores increased from an average of 2.7/5 to 3.3/5, reflecting a 22% improvement across all evaluated categories. The greatest gains were observed in:

- **Sentence stress** (+0.8 average increase)
- **Rhythm and intonation** (+0.7 average increase)

Learners reported that singing along and shadowing helped them “feel” the natural rhythm of English, reducing hesitation and improving connected speech. Several participants shifted from syllable-timed speech patterns typical of their L1 to more stress-timed patterns characteristic of English.

Consonant cluster accuracy (e.g., /str/, /pl/, /bl/) showed moderate improvement (+0.4), especially among learners whose L1 includes limited cluster structures. However, certain phonemes—such as /θ/, /ð/, and /ɹ/—remained challenging, showing only minimal progress (≤ 0.2). These results suggest that while music effectively supports prosodic development, improvements in segmental accuracy may require more targeted instruction.

3.3 Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension scores increased from 14.8/25 (59%) to 19/25 (76%), representing a 28% improvement.

The most substantial gains occurred in:



- **Identifying key words in fast speech** (+37%)
- **Understanding paraphrased ideas** (+31%)
- **Recognizing reduced and linked forms** (+29%)

Two comprehension items taken from unfamiliar audio extracts demonstrated a transfer effect: learners were able to decode meaning in songs not included in the training playlist. This suggests that students developed general listening strategies—such as attending to stress, rhythm, and recurrent lexical patterns—rather than merely memorizing the lyrics of the practiced songs.

3.4 Learner Perceptions and Qualitative Outcomes

Qualitative analysis of learner feedback revealed four major themes.

3.4.1 Increased Motivation

Ninety percent of participants described the lessons as “more enjoyable,” “motivating,” or “relaxing” compared to traditional grammar-based instruction. Several learners reported replaying the playlist voluntarily outside of class time.

3.4.2 Reduced Anxiety and Increased Confidence

Many learners noted that singing lessened their fear of mispronunciation. Classroom discussions also became more fluent, supported by the “safe and playful” atmosphere created by music-based activities.

3.4.3 Enhanced Memory and Automaticity

Students frequently reported that lyrics “stuck in their head,” supporting unconscious repetition. This reflects the “din in the head” phenomenon described in earlier literature. Some learners mentioned recalling vocabulary during daily routines, indicating improved long-term retention and automaticity.

3.4.4 Perceived Cultural Connection

Several participants stated that songs helped them better understand cultural values, emotional expression, and storytelling traditions in English-speaking communities. This sense of cultural engagement was perceived as enhancing both motivation and comprehension.

3.5 Summary of Findings

Overall, the integrated use of songs produced measurable gains in vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. The study documented:

- **32% increase in vocabulary retention**
- **22% improvement in pronunciation accuracy and prosody**
- **28% improvement in listening comprehension**



- **Strong qualitative support** for enhanced motivation, cultural engagement, and reduced learning anxiety

These findings suggest that structured musical activities can serve as an effective supplement to traditional English language instruction.

Table 2. Learning Outcomes by Music Genre

Genre	Number of Songs	Vocabulary Improvement (%)	Pronunciation Improvement (%)	Listening Comprehension Improvement (%)
Pop	5	35%	24%	30%
Acoustic	3	28%	20%	26%
Soft Rock	2	32%	22%	27%
Indie	2	29%	21%	25%

Notes

- Pop songs yielded the highest gains across all three skills, likely due to higher repetition, simpler vocabulary, and memorable melodies.
- Acoustic and soft rock songs showed moderate improvements, possibly because their slower tempo and clearer pronunciation supported prosodic development, although their vocabulary was slightly more complex.
- Indie songs produced moderate engagement but weaker vocabulary gains due to more abstract or metaphorical lyrics.

4. Discussion

This study highlights the effectiveness of music as a language-learning tool. Consistent with previous research, songs facilitated vocabulary retention by pairing repetition with emotional engagement (Medina, 1993). Melody helped learners internalize stress patterns and rhythm—key components of English prosody (Richards, 1969).

Furthermore, music created a low-pressure environment that encouraged risk-taking in speaking, an essential factor for developing fluency. These findings suggest that integrating music into language learning may significantly enhance outcomes, particularly for learners who struggle with traditional classroom methods.

Quantitative results showed substantial improvements: vocabulary recall increased by 32%, pronunciation by 22%, and listening comprehension by 28%. These outcomes align with prior studies indicating that music supports language acquisition through repetition, melody, and affective involvement (Medina, 1993; Murphey, 1990; Wallace, 1994).

4.1 Interpretation of Findings



The largest vocabulary gains were associated with frequently repeated or predictable lyrics, supporting the view that meaningful repetition strengthens memory encoding (Krashen, 1982). The “earworm” effect noted by Murphey (1990) was evident in qualitative feedback: learners frequently recalled lyrics outside of class, demonstrating that songs promote both conscious and unconscious language rehearsal.

Pronunciation improvements—particularly in stress, rhythm, and intonation—indicate that musical input reinforces prosodic awareness. Shadowing and singing along allowed learners to internalize English stress-timing patterns, which are often challenging for non-native speakers. While consonant cluster accuracy improved moderately, certain segmental features (e.g., /θ/, /ð/, /ɪ/) remained difficult, suggesting that musical practice benefits prosody more than precise articulation and may require complementary explicit instruction.

Listening comprehension gains showed that learners were not simply memorizing the practiced songs but were transferring skills to new, unfamiliar material. Improved recognition of key words, paraphrased ideas, and reduced forms supports the idea that music exposure enhances auditory processing and strengthens input-based learning strategies (Schön et al., 2008).

4.2 Genre-Specific Insights

Analysis by musical genre revealed distinct patterns:

- **Pop songs** produced the highest gains in vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening comprehension due to their simple, repetitive structures and strong melodic hooks.
- **Acoustic and soft rock songs** offered clearer articulation and slower tempo, which supported prosodic development and listening comprehension, though vocabulary gains were slightly lower.
- **Indie songs**, with their abstract or metaphorical lyrics, enhanced interpretive skills and cultural understanding but contributed less to lexical retention.

These findings suggest that song selection should be aligned with instructional goals: simpler, repetitive songs may benefit beginners, while more complex or metaphorical songs may better support advanced learners and cultural immersion.

4.3 Motivational and Affective Factors

Qualitative data emphasized the role of music in reducing anxiety, enhancing motivation, and creating a supportive, low-stress environment. According to Gardner’s socio-educational model, affective variables such as integrative motivation significantly influence SLA outcomes (Gardner, 1985). Music encouraged learners to experiment with language, practice pronunciation openly, and participate in communicative activities without fear of making mistakes. These findings highlight the importance of emotional engagement and enjoyment in language learning.

4.4 Pedagogical Implications



This study offers several practical recommendations for teachers and learners:

- Structured musical activities—listening, lyric analysis, shadowing, and paraphrasing—can be incorporated into regular lessons to promote fluency.
- Genre selection should reflect learning aims: pop music for vocabulary building, acoustic or soft rock for prosody, and more complex genres for cultural interpretation.
- Playlists can be assigned as homework to support autonomous learning and reinforce classroom content.

4.5 Limitations

Although the findings are encouraging, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- The small sample size ($n = 20$) limits generalizability.
- The short four-week intervention may not capture long-term retention.
- Pronunciation improvements were assessed primarily through instructor ratings, which may introduce subjectivity.
- Cultural familiarity with the songs was not controlled, and prior exposure may have influenced motivation and learning outcomes.

Future research could increase sample size, include control groups, measure long-term retention, and use objective acoustic analysis for pronunciation assessment. Additionally, exploring digital platforms (e.g., Spotify, YouTube, language-learning apps) could further enhance engagement and accessibility.

4.6 Conclusion from Discussion

Overall, the study supports integrating songs into English language instruction as a multifaceted tool that enhances vocabulary retention, listening comprehension, and prosodic development while simultaneously increasing motivation and reducing anxiety. Music-based learning thus represents an effective, enjoyable, and pedagogically sound approach to developing English fluency.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating music into English language learning can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. Learners who engaged in structured musical activities—including guided listening, lyric analysis, shadowing, and comprehension tasks—showed measurable improvements across all assessed language areas. Pop songs, characterized by repetition and melodic simplicity, produced the highest gains in vocabulary and listening comprehension, while acoustic and soft rock genres contributed notably to the development of prosodic features and pronunciation. Qualitative feedback highlighted increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and higher levels of engagement, indicating that music not



only reinforces cognitive learning processes but also positively influences affective factors essential for language acquisition.

The findings support previous research emphasizing the roles of rhythm, melody, and repetition in memory encoding and phonological awareness (Murphey, 1990; Medina, 1993; Wallace, 1994). Music provides authentic and meaningful input that mirrors natural speech, enabling learners to internalize vocabulary, stress patterns, and connected speech more effectively. Although limitations such as the small sample size and short intervention duration must be acknowledged, the results indicate that music-based learning is a flexible, enjoyable, and pedagogically sound supplement to traditional classroom instruction. Incorporating songs into language curricula can promote fluency, cultural awareness, and learner confidence, offering a holistic approach to developing English proficiency.

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