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Enhancing EFL Students' Vocabulary Mastery Through Taylor Swift's Song "Opalite": Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRAK

Penguasaan kosakata merupakan komponen penting dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris; namun, banyak mahasiswa EFL masih mengalami kesulitan ketika kosakata diajarkan melalui metode tradisional yang kurang kontekstual. Pembelajaran berbasis lagu menawarkan paparan kosakata yang lebih bermakna dan menarik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa EFL terhadap penggunaan lagu *"Opalite"* karya Taylor Swift dalam pembelajaran untuk meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata, khususnya kosakata nomina. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan 15 mahasiswa EFL semester pertama Program Studi Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar (PGSD) di Institut Prima Bangsa Cirebon, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur setelah mahasiswa mengikuti kegiatan pengisian lirik lagu (*lyrics gap-fill*). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memersepsikan pembelajaran kosakata melalui lagu lebih menarik dan membantu dibandingkan pembelajaran konvensional, karena kosakata disajikan dalam konteks yang bermakna, mendukung pembelajaran kosakata secara tidak langsung, serta menciptakan suasana belajar yang lebih santai dan meningkatkan motivasi mahasiswa dalam pembelajaran kosakata.

Kata Kunci: Penguasaan kosakata, Mahasiswa EFL, Pembelajaran berbasis lagu, Persepsi mahasiswa

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is a crucial component of English language learning; however, many EFL students still experience difficulties when vocabulary is taught through traditional, decontextualized methods. Song-based learning offers more meaningful and engaging vocabulary exposure. This study aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of the use of Taylor Swift's song *"Opalite"* in learning to enhance vocabulary mastery, particularly noun vocabulary. This study employed a descriptive qualitative method involving 15 first-semester EFL students from the Elementary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at Institut Prima Bangsa Cirebon, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews after students participated in a lyrics gap-fill activity. The findings indicate that students perceived vocabulary learning through songs as more engaging and helpful than conventional instruction, as vocabulary was presented in meaningful contexts, supported incidental vocabulary learning, and created a more relaxed learning environment that increased students' motivation in vocabulary learning.

Keywords: Vocabulary mastery, EFL students, Song-based learning, Students' perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery plays a crucial role in English language learning, as it directly affects EFL students' ability to understand texts and express ideas effectively (Kasmiati, 2021; Rahmah et al., 2023). Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, EFL students often experience difficulties in reading comprehension, listening, speaking fluently, and writing accurately (Brooks et al., 2023; Khairunnisa & Daulay, 2025). In many EFL classrooms, vocabulary instruction is still dominated by traditional methods such as textbook-based learning and rote memorization. (Yassin et al., 2024) reported that these approaches often present vocabulary in isolation, without meaningful connections to real language use, making word meanings difficult to understand and easy to forget. The study further found that the repetitive nature of such instructional practices tends to create a monotonous learning environment, which reduces students' interest and active involvement in vocabulary learning. As a result, lecturers are advised to use different and more interesting teaching methods to help students better learn vocabulary.

One alternative approach that has recently attracted greater attention in vocabulary instruction within EFL contexts is the use of songs as a learning medium. Previous studies have shown that songs are effective

in supporting vocabulary learning in EFL contexts. For example, (Sadiqzade, 2025) found that musical rhythm and lyrical repetition in songs expose learners to vocabulary in an engaging way, which supports vocabulary retention and long-term memory. The melodic patterns of songs also facilitate easier recall of lexical items, thereby making vocabulary acquisition more effective.

Additionally, vocabulary is often learned incidentally when learners absorb new words and phrases naturally while enjoying the music, rather than studying them directly, which helps develop vocabulary in a natural and meaningful way (Sadiqzade, 2025). Through such incidental exposure, songs help learners recognize new lexical items, understand their meanings in context, and retain them for future use. Moreover, the lyrics in songs often include common vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and everyday language, providing learners with practical and rich language input (Linia et al., 2025).

In addition to providing contextualized vocabulary input, songs also support vocabulary learning through affective mechanisms. Previous studies have shown that learning vocabulary through songs can reduce anxiety and create a more enjoyable learning environment (Sadig, 2024). Similarly, (Karim et al., 2022) reported that EFL students perceived English songs as interesting learning media that increased their motivation to learn vocabulary and helped them become more involved in vocabulary-related activities, such as searching for word meanings and understanding lyrics. These affective benefits play a supportive role in vocabulary acquisition by increasing learners' exposure to and engagement with lexical input.

To support vocabulary learning through songs, previous studies have integrated activities such as lyrics gap-fill, which have been found to focus learners' attention on specific words, strengthen sound–visual connections, and enhance learners' understanding of word form and meaning (Amroini et al., 2023; Dinda et al., 2025). In this study, lyrics gap-fill is used only as a classroom activity and not as a research variable. The study focuses specifically on noun vocabulary, as nouns are essential for effective communication, helping learners understand texts and express their ideas clearly (Bozdağ et al., 2025).

The song "Opalite" by Taylor Swift was chosen as the teaching material in this study because it contains a wide range of noun vocabulary that reflects themes such as emotions, personal experiences, and everyday situations, which are relevant to university students. The song introduces words in a meaningful and practical way, helping learners understand and remember new vocabulary by showing how language is used in real-life situations. Regular exposure to the lyrics helps students increase their vocabulary knowledge, understand the meanings of words in context, and become familiar with commonly used English expressions. The popularity of the song also contributes to increased learner motivation and engagement, which are important factors in effective vocabulary acquisition.

Although many studies have highlighted the benefits of using songs in vocabulary learning, most of them discuss song-based learning in general contexts or focus on vocabulary improvement without examining learners' perceptions of specific songs. Research that explores university students' views on the use of popular English songs as vocabulary learning media is still limited. In particular, there is a lack of studies investigating the use of Taylor Swift's song *"Opalite"* in supporting vocabulary learning among EFL students.

Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap by exploring EFL students' perceptions of using Taylor Swift's song *"Opalite"* as a medium for enhancing vocabulary learning in a higher education context.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Participant

This study involved 15 first-semester EFL students from the Elementary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at Institut Prima Bangsa Cirebon, Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) they were active first-semester PGSD students enrolled in an English-related course, (2) they possessed basic to intermediate English proficiency, and (3) they had not previously learned vocabulary using the song "Opalite." These criteria were applied to ensure that the participants were relevant to the objectives of the study and capable of providing meaningful reflections on their vocabulary learning experience.

Research Location

The research was conducted at Institut Prima Bangsa Cirebon, a private higher education institution that emphasizes foreign language development in its academic programs. This setting provided an appropriate context for investigating vocabulary learning through song-based instruction.

Statistical Analysis

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method conducted in a natural classroom setting to describe systematically the characteristics and phenomena related to students' perceptions (Furidha, 2024; Zulfirman, 2022). This method was selected because it allows an in-depth exploration of students' views on the use of Taylor Swift's song Opalite for vocabulary learning.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Prior to the interviews, students participated in a song lyrics gap-fill activity during class to familiarize them with the song and its vocabulary, although it was not included in the data analysis.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to obtain in-depth insights into their perceptions of using songs for vocabulary learning. The interviews followed guiding questions while allowing flexibility to explore participants' responses more deeply (Purnamasari & Afriansyah, 2021; Ultavia et al., 2023). The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, until consistent findings were achieved (Wau et al., 2022).

RESULTS

The findings demonstrate a clear contrast between students' perceptions of traditional vocabulary instruction and song-based learning. In line with previous studies on textbook-based learning and rote memorization (Yassin et al., 2024), students perceived traditional vocabulary instruction as ineffective due to its lack of contextualization and repetitive nature. Vocabulary learned in isolation was described as difficult to understand and easy to forget, as reflected in statements such as "learning vocabulary through textbooks is not very effective because the meaning of words is hard to understand without extra help" [NH] and "focusing too much on memorization makes vocabulary easy to forget" [SSJ]. Reduced motivation was also evident, with one student stating that "repetitive learning activities make me lose interest quickly and less motivated to learn vocabulary" [SRA].

In contrast, students' experiences with vocabulary learning through Taylor Swift's song *"Opalite"* align with previous studies emphasizing the effectiveness of contextualized and repeated exposure to vocabulary through songs (Sadiqzade, 2025). Participants perceived noun vocabulary embedded in song lyrics as easier to identify and remember, as illustrated by the statements "the song Opalite is helpful because it includes many noun words in the lyrics, which makes it simpler for me to identify them" [DA] and "repetition of words in songs makes vocabulary easier to remember and less likely to be forgotten" [AS]. This perception was further supported by another student, who stated that "learning vocabulary through songs helps me remember words more easily" [NN]. These findings support earlier claims that musical repetition enhances vocabulary retention.

The results further support previous research on incidental vocabulary learning through songs. Consistent with (Sadiqzade, 2025), students reported acquiring new vocabulary without conscious memorization through repeated listening. This is evident in comments such as "I often don't realize I'm learning vocabulary, but after listening to the song several times, I start to understand the meanings of new words" [FA] and "songs help me learn vocabulary unconsciously" [SMA]. These findings confirm that songs facilitate natural vocabulary acquisition processes.

In terms of authenticity, students' perceptions align with earlier studies suggesting that song lyrics provide practical and everyday lexical input (Linia et al., 2025). Participants viewed vocabulary from songs as useful for real-life communication, as expressed in statements such as "the words in songs are often used in daily life, so they feel more useful" [C] and "vocabulary from songs feels more practical because it can be used in real-life communication" [SI]. This reinforces previous arguments that songs bridge classroom learning and real-world language use.

From an affective perspective, the findings also corroborate earlier studies indicating that learning vocabulary through songs can reduce anxiety and create a more enjoyable learning environment (Sadig, 2024). Students described song-based vocabulary learning as less stressful and more enjoyable, as shown in the statement "learning vocabulary while listening to songs feels more relaxed and less stressful" [K] and "song-based learning is very helpful and enjoyable" [ANH].

In line with the findings of (Karim et al., 2022), which reported that English songs increased EFL students' motivation and involvement in vocabulary learning, participants in the present study also expressed greater interest and comfort when learning vocabulary through songs. This is reflected in the statement

"learning vocabulary through songs makes me feel more motivated, comfortable, and interested in learning new words" [LA]. These affective responses indicate that emotional comfort and interest supported students' engagement with vocabulary learning.

Finally, as part of the classroom activity, the lyrics gap-fill task was perceived by students as helpful in supporting vocabulary learning. One participant stated that "filling in the missing lyrics helps me focus more and remember noun vocabulary more easily" [SF]. Another student similarly mentioned that "the activity makes me more aware of the words in the song and helps me understand them better" [SN]. These responses indicate that the gap-fill task encouraged greater attention to vocabulary and supported students' understanding of words during listening activities, which is consistent with findings from earlier studies on song-based vocabulary learning (Amroini et al., 2023; Dinda et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

The study's findings suggest that traditional methods of teaching vocabulary, such as depending on textbooks and rote memorization, do not work well in enhancing learners' vocabulary abilities. Learning vocabulary on its own, without applying it in real language contexts, makes it difficult to remember and use in actual conversations. These findings support (Yassin et al., 2024), who found that traditional vocabulary instruction often presents vocabulary in isolation and employs repetitive practices that limit learners' understanding and engagement.

On the other hand, learning vocabulary through Taylor Swift's song Opalite seems to have a positive effect on students' mastery of noun vocabulary. Songs offer multiple opportunities to encounter vocabulary in meaningful settings, supporting learners in identifying, retaining, and comprehending words more effectively. This aligns with (Sadiqzade, 2025), who believes that the rhythm and repetition in songs support long-term vocabulary retention and promote a more natural way of learning vocabulary.

In addition to repeated exposure, learning vocabulary through songs also encourages incidental vocabulary acquisition. Students learn new words not by being explicitly taught them, but by listening to songs repeatedly in a fun and engaging way. This finding is supported by (Sadiqzade, 2025), who explains that songs facilitate incidental vocabulary learning, as learners naturally absorb new words and phrases while enjoying the music rather than studying vocabulary directly, which supports a more natural and meaningful vocabulary learning process. This kind of incidental learning helps students recognize, understand, and remember vocabulary better, as the words are learned in meaningful, real-life contexts.

Furthermore, vocabulary learning through songs is closely connected to the quality of language input students receive. Song lyrics usually contain common words and expressions that are widely used in everyday language, which helps students develop a better understanding of how vocabulary functions in real communication. In everyday communication, songs provide rich and meaningful language input that helps learners understand and use vocabulary in a natural and authentic way. These results are in line with the study carried out by (Linia et al., 2025), who emphasize how songs offer valuable, context-rich language exposure, allowing learners to acquire vocabulary in ways that reflect real-life language use.

From an affective perspective, the findings support previous studies indicating that learning vocabulary through songs can reduce anxiety and create a supportive emotional learning environment (Sadig, 2024). In line with (Karim et al., 2022), who emphasized the motivational role of English songs in vocabulary learning, participants in the present study reported increased motivation and interest when learning vocabulary through songs. These affective factors functioned as supporting elements that facilitated students' engagement with vocabulary learning.

Furthermore, lyrics gap-fill activities contributed to the learning process by directing students' attention to noun vocabulary and supporting their understanding of words through the combination of listening to the song and reading the lyrics (Amroini et al., 2023; Dinda et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings indicate that song-based instruction provides an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing EFL students' vocabulary learning, particularly noun vocabulary, by offering meaningful contextual exposure and fostering positive engagement in the learning process.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that traditional vocabulary instruction relying on textbooks and memorization is

perceived by EFL students as less effective due to its lack of context and limited support for vocabulary retention. In contrast, the use of Taylor Swift's song Opalite provided meaningful and contextualized exposure to noun vocabulary, which helped students identify, understand, and remember words more easily. Song-based learning also supported incidental vocabulary acquisition and offered authentic language input relevant to real-life communication. In addition, positive affective factors such as reduced anxiety and increased motivation played a supportive role in enhancing students' engagement with vocabulary learning. Overall, the findings suggest that songs can serve as an effective alternative medium for enhancing students' vocabulary mastery in EFL higher education contexts.

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