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The Vocabulary Learning Experience of Junior High School Students in Listening to English Language Songs

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of junior high school students in learning English vocabulary through the independent activity of listening to English-language songs, and it identifies the aspects of vocabulary they perceive as most beneficial. The research addresses a gap in the limited phenomenological literature regarding how junior high school students in Mataram informally encounter, interpret, and respond to vocabulary within songs—focusing on the experience itself rather than measuring vocabulary acquisition outcomes. The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on the students' lived experiences, self-directed learning strategies, challenges, and perceived benefits within a specific local context. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed. The participants consisted of ten junior high school students in Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara, selected via purposive sampling following a screening process using a Google Forms questionnaire. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation, then analyzed using phenomenological procedures adapted from Creswell and Poth. The findings reveal that learning vocabulary through songs is experienced as an enjoyable, gradual, and largely self-directed process, though it also involves social support when students seek assistance. Students engage by reading lyrics, looking up word meanings, replaying songs, noting down vocabulary, and mimicking the singers' pronunciation. Challenges encountered include unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid or unclear pronunciation, slang, idiomatic expressions, and discrepancies between literal translations and contextual meanings. Students respond to these challenges by replaying segments of the songs, checking lyrics, consulting additional resources, or asking others for help. Three aspects of vocabulary were perceived as beneficial: word meaning, basic pronunciation, and contextual usage. Word meaning was identified as the most beneficial aspect by nine out of the ten participants, while pronunciation was noted by two participants (one of whom also identified word meaning). Contextual usage emerged in the data but was not selected as the single most beneficial aspect. These findings represent a report of students' experiences and perceptions, rather than an objective measurement of vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: vocabulary learning experience, English language songs, junior high school students, phenomenology, independent learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a crucial component of language learning, as it enables learners to comprehend messages and convey ideas effectively (Matruty & Que, 2021). In the context of learning English as a foreign language, a limited vocabulary can hinder students from understanding spoken and written input, as well as from expressing

meaning accurately. Nation (2022a) identifies vocabulary knowledge as an essential element in understanding and using a language, while Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) highlight its contribution to language competence. Consequently, meaningful vocabulary learning experiences are vital, particularly for junior high school students who are still in the process of developing their foundational English language skills (Yang, 2026).

In this study, the experience of vocabulary learning is operationally defined as the processes, activities, feelings, challenges, and responses reported by students when encountering and attempting to understand English words while listening to songs independently (Rahman et al., 2024). English-language songs refer to recorded songs with English lyrics that students access via digital platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, or social media. Independent learning refers to student-initiated decisions to select songs, listen to them, look up meanings, replay specific segments, take notes, or seek assistance when necessary (Ramadan & Bhuvaneswari, 2026).

The theoretical foundation for this research is drawn from the concept of vocabulary learning as a process of encountering, processing, and using words within a context (Nation, 2022a; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Webb, 2020); listening as the processing of oral input (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021); and vocabulary instruction that emphasizes meaning and usage, rather than merely the recognition of word forms (Lessard-Clouston, 2021). These perspectives are relevant because songs provide repeated oral and written input through lyrics, melodies, and context, while autonomous learning can incorporate self-selected strategies and external support (Betancourt et al., 2026).

Vocabulary learning does not take place only through formal classroom activities (Nation, 2022). The development of digital platforms allows students to access English-language songs through services such as YouTube, Spotify, and social media. Songs present vocabulary through lyrics, sound, rhythm, and context, which may attract listeners' attention. Putri and Rustipa (2023) discuss the use of songs as a medium for teaching vocabulary to young learners, while Ramadhanti and Farida (2025) review the relationship between listening to English songs and vocabulary acquisition. Repetition in lyrics and interest in music may encourage students to notice words they did not previously understand (Bouguebs, 2023).

Previous studies have also examined the benefits of songs or audiovisual media for vocabulary learning. Ananda et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of English songs for vocabulary mastery, while Safitri et al. (2022) examined vocabulary retention through audiovisual media. Rahayu et al. (2024) also discussed the use of songs in teaching vocabulary to seventh-grade students. Although these studies provide a useful context regarding learning outcomes or benefits, a focus on achievement, mastery, or retention does not fully explain how students experience the process of learning independently in their everyday lives.

The specific research gap addressed by this study is the limited phenomenological understanding of how junior high school students in Mataram experience independent vocabulary learning through English-language songs in their daily lives. Previous studies have largely focused on effectiveness, mastery, or retention; they have not sufficiently explained students' first-hand experiences of encountering new vocabulary, using strategies, facing difficulties, managing feelings and motivation, and judging which vocabulary aspects are most beneficial. This study

therefore offers a phenomenological perspective that has rarely been applied to the context of junior high school students in Mataram. Its contribution is a detailed account of informal vocabulary-learning experiences from the students' perspectives, within the boundaries of the research context and data.

This study addresses two research questions: (1) How do junior high school students experience learning English vocabulary through independently listening to English-language songs? and (2) Which aspects of English vocabulary do they perceive as most beneficial when learning through songs?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand students' lived experiences of learning English vocabulary through independently listening to English-language songs (Kusumoriny & Aziz, 2025). A qualitative approach focuses on participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in natural settings rather than on numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study focused on learning activities, challenges, feelings, and the vocabulary aspects students perceived as most beneficial.

Research Participants

The study was conducted at a junior high school in Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara, during the 2026–2027 school year. Ten students were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Before participant selection, a screening questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms. The criteria were: (1) being enrolled in junior high school during the 2026–2027 school year; (2) regularly listening to English-language songs; (3) having encountered or learned vocabulary through English song lyrics; and (4) being willing to participate voluntarily in an interview. The questionnaire was used only to select participants, not as the primary source of research data.

Research Instruments

The supporting instruments were a screening questionnaire, an interview guide, and an audio recorder (Aung et al., 2021). The questionnaire contained brief questions related to the participant-selection criteria. The interview guide included open-ended questions based on the two research questions: students' experiences of independently learning vocabulary through songs and the vocabulary aspects they perceived as most beneficial. The questions covered overall experiences, learning activities, challenges, feelings, independent learning, and perceptions of word meaning, basic pronunciation, and contextual use in lyrics. The audio recorder was used to record interviews after permission had been obtained from participants.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved three stages. First, the screening questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms to identify students who met the study criteria.

Second, the ten selected students took part in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and sought participants' voluntary agreement to participate and to have the interview audio-recorded. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, and their duration was flexible. Follow-up questions were asked in response to participants' answers to encourage fuller descriptions of their experiences. Third, supporting documentation, including song lyrics listened to by participants and any available vocabulary notes or lists, was collected. Interviews served as the primary data source, the questionnaire was used for screening, and the documentation provided additional context for participants' accounts.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using phenomenological procedures adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018). First, horizontalization was used to identify significant statements in the interview transcripts and relevant documentation (Cariaga & Gerodias, 2025). These statements were then grouped into meaning units or categories reflecting patterns in students' experiences, such as learning activities, challenges, feelings, and perceived beneficial vocabulary aspects. Next, the researcher developed textural descriptions of what the students experienced and structural descriptions of the conditions or contexts that shaped those experiences. Finally, the two descriptions were synthesised to formulate the essence of students' experiences. NVivo was used to support data organisation and coding; interpretation of meaning remained the researcher's responsibility.

Operationally, horizontalization was conducted by reading each transcript line by line, highlighting statements that directly described participants' experiences, and removing repetitive or irrelevant statements. Meaning units were formed by grouping related statements into codes, such as reading lyrics, looking up meanings, replaying songs, pronunciation imitation, unfamiliar words, fast pronunciation, slang, idiomatic expressions, translation mismatch, asking for help, word meaning, pronunciation, and contextual use. Textural descriptions focused on what students experienced, whereas structural descriptions focused on the conditions that shaped those experiences, such as access to mobile phones, digital platforms, family support, and school context. NVivo was used to create nodes, store coded excerpts, and compare patterns across participants; the researcher then interpreted the nodes and wrote the synthesis manually.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through triangulation, prolonged engagement, thick description, an audit trail, peer debriefing with academic supervisors, and reflexivity. Triangulation involved comparing interview data with available documentation. Thick description provided contextual information about the research setting, participants, and learning experiences. The audit trail documented the research process and analytical decisions, while peer debriefing and reflexive notes

supported the review of interpretations. Participants were identified by the codes P1–P10 to protect their anonymity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students' Experiences of Learning Vocabulary through Songs

Table 1. Summary of main themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-themes	Reported experience
Learning activities	Reading lyrics, looking up meanings, replaying songs, taking notes, imitating pronunciation	Students engaged actively with words in songs they liked.
Challenges	Unfamiliar words, fast or unclear pronunciation, slang, idiomatic expressions, translation mismatch	Students encountered difficulties in understanding lyrics.
Responses	Replaying sections, checking lyrics, searching additional sources, asking for help	Students took actions to resolve comprehension problems.
Perceived beneficial vocabulary aspects	Word meaning, basic pronunciation, contextual use	Students reported different aspects as helpful.

The findings indicate that students' vocabulary-learning experiences often began with an interest in a song, such as its melody, instruments, genre, singer, or lyrical message. When students encountered unfamiliar words, some began paying closer attention to the lyrics and looking up meanings. Listening to songs therefore involved more than receiving sound; it could develop into active engagement with vocabulary that attracted students' attention.

Students reported several activities for understanding words in songs. These included reading lyrics while listening, looking up meanings through Google, translation applications, digital dictionaries, or other online sources, and replaying a song or a difficult section. Some students recorded new vocabulary in notebooks, personal notes, or applications, whereas others relied on searching for meanings and repeating the song without making written notes. Some also imitated the singer or sang along to follow pronunciation. These variations indicate that participants did not all learn in the same way.

These experiences can be considered alongside Nation's (2022) and Webb's (2020) discussions of vocabulary development through encounters with, processing of, and exposure to words. In this study, students encountered vocabulary in songs they liked and then listened again or checked the lyrics to understand unclear parts. Written lyrics also supported listening, which is consistent with Goh and Vandergrift's (2021) discussion of oral input in listening development. However, the data describe activities and perceptions reported by students; they do not demonstrate that all these activities produced measurable vocabulary gains.

Students' feelings during the process varied. Songs could make learning feel enjoyable, relaxing, interesting, or satisfying when the lyrics began to make sense. In contrast, unfamiliar words, fast singing, and translations that did not fit the context could cause confusion or frustration. Interest in music appeared to encourage some students to pay attention to words, but it did not remove the difficulties involved in understanding lyrics.

Learning took place mostly independently. Students chose songs and when to listen, often using mobile phones and digital platforms. However, independent learning did not always mean learning without assistance. When translations did not fit the meaning of a song or a word remained difficult to understand, some students asked family members, teachers, or other people for help. The experience is therefore best described as mostly self-directed, with external support when needed.

Challenges and Students' Responses

Reported challenges included unfamiliar words, singers who sang too quickly or unclearly, slang and idiomatic expressions, and differences between direct translations and intended meanings in lyrics. P4, for example, explained that a Google Translate result sometimes did not match the meaning of a song, so the participant considered the lyric context and asked their mother to confirm the meaning. This experience suggests that direct translation alone may not be sufficient for understanding word use in a particular context.

Students responded to difficulties by replaying song sections, checking written lyrics, searching additional sources, comparing meanings, or asking other people for help. These responses show how challenges shaped students' actions as they tried to understand vocabulary. However, the findings do not show that every difficulty was always resolved or that students' understanding of every word was always accurate. This distinction matters because the study focused on reported experiences rather than testing comprehension accuracy.

Vocabulary Aspects Perceived as Beneficial

Three aspects appeared in the data: word meaning, basic pronunciation, and contextual use. Word meaning was most frequently described as beneficial because it helped students understand lyrics and song messages. P7 explained: "After I learned the meanings of some words, such as maybe, believe, and save, I could understand the story in the song better." This account illustrates how understanding individual words was connected, in P7's experience, to understanding the song's message. This pattern is consistent with Nation (2022) and Lessard-Clouston (2021), who emphasise that vocabulary knowledge includes understanding meanings and use, rather than merely recognising word forms.

Basic pronunciation was also considered beneficial by some students. They listened to how singers pronounced words, replayed song sections, or imitated the pronunciation. P3 selected pronunciation as the most helpful aspect and explained: "The most helpful one is pronunciation because it helps me communicate with other people more easily." P3 connected pronunciation with communicating with family members and friends who understood English better than Indonesian. This experience can be considered alongside Goh and Vandergrift's (2021) discussion of the role of oral input in listening. Nevertheless, fast or unclear singing also created difficulties; songs therefore did not always provide pronunciation models that were easy to follow.

Contextual use appeared when students noticed how words were used in lyrics, sentences, or song narratives. P6 discussed the difference between "have" and "had" and explained that he could see how words were used in sentences, not only learn their meanings. P4 also described connecting a word with the meaning of the song when a direct translation did not fit. These accounts indicate that students

sometimes moved from looking up individual meanings to considering how words were used in context.

However, no participant selected contextual use as the most beneficial aspect in the comparison question, although contextual understanding remained part of their reported learning experiences.

The summary of participants' choices shows that nine participants selected word meaning as the most helpful aspect or as one of the aspects that helped them most. P3 selected pronunciation, while P5 explicitly selected both pronunciation and word meaning. The counts therefore overlap because P5 selected two aspects. These figures describe participants' stated preferences, not measured learning outcomes.

Table 2. Participants' selections of the most beneficial vocabulary aspects

Vocabulary aspect	Participants selecting the aspect as beneficial	Number of participants
Word meaning	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10	9
Basic pronunciation	P3, P5	2
Contextual use	Not selected as the single most beneficial aspect	0

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, students' experiences can be understood as a gradual process connecting interest in music, curiosity about lyrics, engagement with unfamiliar words, and self-directed decision-making. Students listened to songs they liked, encountered words they did not understand, searched for meanings or checked lyrics, and then listened again or paid attention to pronunciation and context. The process could involve both enjoyment and difficulty, as well as support from other people when needed.

These findings share similarities with research on songs and audiovisual media that has examined vocabulary learning, mastery, or retention (Ananda et al., 2023; Rahayu et al., 2024; Safitri et al., 2022). The difference in focus is that the present study emphasizes students' lived experiences and perceptions rather than measuring vocabulary outcomes. Its contribution is therefore a description of how students reported their activities, challenges, feelings, and perceptions of useful vocabulary aspects while listening to songs independently.

The findings also extend the discussion by showing that independent learning through songs is not a single uniform strategy. Students combined informal digital searching, repeated listening, note-taking, pronunciation imitation, and help-seeking. This combination resonates with Webb's (2020) emphasis on repeated encounters with words and with Lessard-Clouston's (2021) argument that vocabulary learning involves meaning and use. However, the presence of slang, idiomatic expressions, and fast pronunciation indicates that songs should be treated as contextual and sometimes challenging input rather than as a simple pronunciation model.

CONCLUSION

This study answers the first research question by showing that junior high school students experienced vocabulary learning through English-language songs as an enjoyable, gradual, interactive, and mostly self-directed process. They read lyrics,

looked up word meanings, replayed songs, took vocabulary notes, imitated pronunciation, and sometimes asked others for help. They encountered unfamiliar words, fast or unclear pronunciation, slang, idiomatic expressions, and translations that did not fit the context, and they responded by checking lyrics, replaying sections, consulting additional sources, and seeking help.

The study answers the second research question by showing that the vocabulary aspects perceived as beneficial were word meaning, basic pronunciation, and contextual use. Word meaning was most frequently identified as helpful, while pronunciation was emphasised by one participant and by another participant together with word meaning. Contextual use helped students understand words in lyrics and sentences, although it was not selected as the sole most beneficial aspect. The synthesis of these findings is that songs can serve as meaningful informal input when students actively engage with lyrics, but the learning process remains gradual and mediated by challenges, strategies, and social support. These conclusions are limited to the experiences and perceptions reported by the ten participants; the study did not objectively measure vocabulary gains or retention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students may use English-language songs as an additional learning resource by reading lyrics, identifying unfamiliar words, checking meanings through reliable dictionaries or online sources, and paying attention to sentence context. They may also replay difficult sections and consult additional pronunciation resources when a singer's pronunciation is too fast or unclear. English teachers may use age- and proficiency-appropriate songs as supplementary materials for identifying vocabulary, discussing meanings in context, and noticing pronunciation. Teachers can help students check whether translations fit the meaning of lyrics, especially when slang or idiomatic expressions appear.

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