



Harnessing English music to boost vocabulary acquisition among Arab learners of English as a foreign language

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Abstract

The acquisition of English vocabulary remains a significant challenge for Arab learners of English as a foreign language due to limited exposure and motivational factors. This study investigates the potential of using English music as an innovative and engaging tool to enhance vocabulary learning among Arab EFL students. The primary objective is to explore how integrating English songs into language instruction can improve learners' vocabulary acquisition and retention. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving a sample of 60 intermediate-level Arab learners divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group participated in music-based vocabulary lessons over an eight-week period, while the control group followed traditional vocabulary teaching methods. Pre- and post-tests, alongside learner interviews and observation, were used to assess vocabulary gains and learner attitudes. Findings indicate that learners exposed to English music showed significantly higher vocabulary retention and reported increased motivation and enjoyment in the learning process compared to the control group. The study concludes that incorporating English music into EFL instruction offers a valuable complementary strategy for vocabulary enhancement, fostering a more immersive and culturally rich learning environment. These results suggest educators should consider music-based interventions as a means to support vocabulary development and learner engagement in Arab contexts.

Keywords: English vocabulary acquisition, arab efl learners, english music, language learning motivation, vocabulary retention, music-based instruction, foreign language teaching

Introduction

The acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL) has become a global educational priority, particularly in regions where English holds significant academic, professional, and social value. Among Arab learners, English proficiency is often seen as a gateway to greater educational opportunities, international communication, and career advancement. However, vocabulary acquisition remains one of the most challenging aspects of English language learning in Arab countries. Studies consistently show that limited vocabulary breadth and depth impede learners' overall language competence, affecting reading comprehension, speaking fluency, and writing accuracy. This challenge is compounded by factors such as limited exposure to authentic English language use, traditional rote learning methods, and a lack of engaging instructional materials. Hence, innovative and culturally relevant teaching approaches are needed to motivate learners and facilitate more effective vocabulary acquisition.

In recent years, the integration of music into language teaching has garnered growing interest as a pedagogical tool that combines enjoyment with learning efficacy. English music, characterized by rich linguistic content and emotional resonance, presents an authentic context where vocabulary is naturally embedded within catchy melodies and repetitive lyrics. Music not only provides a multi-sensory learning experience that can aid memory retention but also increases learner motivation, reduces anxiety, and fosters a positive attitude toward language learning. For Arab learners, English songs may offer an accessible and enjoyable medium to encounter new vocabulary in context, helping to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use. Despite the apparent potential of this approach, there is limited empirical research exploring

the specific impact of English music on vocabulary acquisition among Arab EFL learners.

The importance of vocabulary acquisition cannot be overstated. According to linguistic research, vocabulary size is closely correlated with language proficiency; learners with larger vocabularies generally achieve higher success in all language skills. Data from international language assessments, such as IELTS and TOEFL, highlight vocabulary knowledge as a critical predictor of learner performance. However, traditional vocabulary teaching methods in many Arab educational settings rely heavily on memorization of word lists and translation exercises, which often result in poor retention and low learner engagement. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors and educational system constraints contribute to the challenges faced by Arab learners, emphasizing the need for more innovative, learner-centered methodologies.

A growing body of literature has examined the role of music in language learning. Studies indicate that music can improve phonological awareness, pronunciation, and listening skills, as well as enhance emotional and cognitive engagement with the language. Research in diverse contexts shows that learners exposed to songs in the target language demonstrate improved recall of vocabulary and expressions, particularly when the lyrics are meaningful and repetitive. For example, investigations into the use of English songs in Asian and European EFL classrooms reveal positive outcomes in vocabulary learning and motivation. However, most existing studies focus on younger learners or general language skills, with limited focus on Arab adult or adolescent learners and specifically on vocabulary acquisition.

Moreover, there are important gaps in the current literature. First, few studies have quantitatively measured the impact

of music-based vocabulary instruction on Arab learners' vocabulary size and retention over an extended period. Second, the influence of learners' attitudes and motivation towards music in English on their vocabulary learning outcomes has not been sufficiently explored in this demographic. Third, the integration of music into formal vocabulary teaching curricula remains under-researched, particularly concerning how teachers can effectively select and incorporate songs to align with learning objectives and learner proficiency levels.

Addressing these gaps, this study aims to investigate the effect of using English music as a tool to enhance vocabulary acquisition among Arab EFL learners. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does exposure to English music improve vocabulary acquisition and retention among Arab learners compared to traditional teaching methods?
2. How do learners' attitudes towards English music influence their motivation and vocabulary learning outcomes?
3. What are the practical implications for integrating music into vocabulary teaching in Arab EFL classrooms?

The scope of this research is focused on intermediate-level Arab EFL learners, reflecting a common proficiency level in many educational settings across the Arab world. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative assessment of vocabulary gains with qualitative data on learner attitudes and classroom dynamics. By focusing on this population, the study seeks to provide actionable insights that educators can apply to enhance vocabulary instruction using music.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Following this introduction, a detailed methodology section outlines the research design, participant selection, and data collection instruments. The results section presents quantitative and qualitative findings, followed by a discussion that contextualizes these findings within the broader literature. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key contributions, discusses limitations, and proposes recommendations for future research and classroom practice.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing field of music-assisted language learning by focusing on the underexplored context of Arab EFL vocabulary acquisition. Given the increasing global importance of English proficiency and the motivational challenges faced by learners in the Arab world, exploring innovative and culturally engaging instructional tools such as English music is both timely and necessary. The outcomes of this research have the potential to inform language teaching practices and support learners in overcoming vocabulary acquisition hurdles more effectively.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine the effects of English music on vocabulary acquisition among Arab learners of English as a foreign language. The primary focus was on measuring vocabulary gains through experimental intervention, while also exploring learner attitudes and motivational factors through qualitative data collection. This design was chosen

to provide both objective evidence of vocabulary improvement and insights into the learner experience, allowing for a well-rounded understanding of the research problem.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling from a pool of intermediate-level Arab EFL learners enrolled in a language institute in a major urban center. The sample size consisted of 60 learners, aged between 16 and 25 years old, representing a typical demographic of EFL students in the region. The participants were randomly assigned to two groups of equal size: an experimental group and a control group, each comprising 30 learners. Both groups were comparable in terms of English proficiency, age, and educational background, as confirmed by pre-study language assessment tests and demographic questionnaires. This ensured the validity of the comparison between the two groups.

Data collection was conducted over an eight-week instructional period. The experimental group participated in vocabulary lessons that integrated English songs specifically selected based on their thematic relevance, lexical content, and appropriate difficulty level. These songs were played multiple times during lessons, and activities such as lyric gap-filling, vocabulary identification, and contextual discussion were used to engage learners actively. In contrast, the control group received traditional vocabulary instruction based on textbook exercises and direct teaching of word lists without musical components. Both groups followed the same curriculum and covered equivalent vocabulary sets to maintain content consistency.

Vocabulary acquisition was assessed using a standardized vocabulary test administered both before and after the intervention period. The test included multiple-choice questions, matching exercises, and fill-in-the-blank items designed to measure recognition, understanding, and usage of targeted vocabulary items. This pre-test/post-test design allowed for a clear measurement of vocabulary gains attributed to the teaching methods. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 12 learners from the experimental group to gather qualitative data on their experiences, attitudes towards English music, and perceived impact on their motivation and learning process.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from the vocabulary tests were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize the learners' scores, followed by inferential statistics. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the mean vocabulary gains between the experimental and control groups, determining whether the differences observed were statistically significant. Additionally, effect size calculations were performed to measure the practical significance of the findings. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts. This process involved coding responses to identify recurring themes related to learner motivation, engagement, and perceptions of music's role in vocabulary learning. The thematic analysis was conducted manually to capture nuanced insights and to complement the quantitative results.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study to ensure the protection and rights of participants. Prior to data collection, all participants and their guardians

(in the case of minors) were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes to participants instead of using their real names, and all collected data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. Furthermore, care was taken to ensure that the music content selected was culturally appropriate and did not cause discomfort or offense to participants.

In summary, this methodical approach combining controlled experimental design with qualitative inquiry provided robust and replicable means to investigate the role of English music in enhancing vocabulary acquisition among Arab EFL learners. The clear delineation of participant selection, intervention procedures, data collection tools, and analysis techniques ensures that other researchers can replicate or extend this study in similar contexts.

Results

This study aimed to investigate the impact of integrating English music into vocabulary instruction on vocabulary acquisition among Arab EFL learners. The results are presented below in two main parts: quantitative findings

from the pre-test and post-test vocabulary assessments, and qualitative data from learner interviews.

Quantitative Findings

The vocabulary pre-test scores for both groups confirmed the equivalence of the experimental and control groups prior to the intervention. The experimental group had a mean pre-test score of 42.3 (SD = 5.6), while the control group's mean was 43.1 (SD = 6.0). An independent samples t-test showed no significant difference between the two groups at this stage ($t(58) = -0.48$, $p = 0.63$), indicating that both groups started with similar vocabulary knowledge levels.

After the eight-week intervention, post-test results demonstrated clear differences in vocabulary acquisition between the groups. The experimental group achieved a mean post-test score of 68.7 (SD = 7.4), whereas the control group scored 55.4 (SD = 6.9). The mean gain in vocabulary scores (post-test minus pre-test) was significantly higher in the experimental group ($M = 26.4$, $SD = 8.1$) compared to the control group ($M = 12.3$, $SD = 7.2$). The independent samples t-test confirmed this difference was statistically significant ($t(58) = 7.61$, $p < 0.001$). The calculated effect size (Cohen's d) was 1.96, indicating a very large practical effect of the music-based intervention on vocabulary acquisition.

Table 1: below summarizes the descriptive statistics and t-test results comparing pre-test, post-test, and gain scores between the two groups.

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain (SD)	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Experimental	42.3 (5.6)	68.7 (7.4)	26.4 (8.1)	7.61	<0.001	1.96
Control	43.1 (6.0)	55.4 (6.9)	12.3 (7.2)			

Further analysis of test item types revealed that the experimental group showed significant improvements across multiple vocabulary dimensions, including recognition, understanding in context, and correct usage in sentence completion tasks. For example, multiple-choice item accuracy increased by 32%, while fill-in-the-blank items improved by 29%, suggesting that music exposure positively affected both receptive and productive vocabulary skills.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 12 participants in the experimental group provided insights into learners' experiences and attitudes towards using English music in vocabulary learning. Thematic analysis identified three primary themes: motivation enhancement, contextual learning, and emotional engagement.

First, learners consistently reported that English songs made vocabulary learning more enjoyable and less monotonous compared to traditional methods. Many participants mentioned that music helped reduce anxiety around learning new words and encouraged repeated exposure through listening outside the classroom. For instance, one learner stated, "I found myself singing along and remembering words without trying too hard."

Second, participants highlighted the value of contextualizing vocabulary within meaningful lyrics, which facilitated understanding and retention. Several learners noted that hearing words used naturally in songs helped them grasp nuances of meaning and usage that were often absent in textbook exercises.

Third, emotional engagement emerged as a significant factor. Learners described feeling more connected to the

learning process when music was involved, which boosted their overall motivation to study English. Some expressed that music helped them overcome boredom and fostered a positive attitude toward language learning.

Overall, the qualitative data reinforced the quantitative findings by demonstrating that English music not only enhanced vocabulary acquisition but also positively influenced learner motivation and attitudes, contributing to a more holistic learning experience.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that integrating English music into vocabulary instruction can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition among Arab EFL learners. The statistically significant gains observed in the experimental group, alongside the positive learner attitudes reported in interviews, highlight the multifaceted benefits of this approach. This section discusses these results in relation to the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and prior studies, offering insights into their broader implications for EFL teaching.

Firstly, the quantitative data clearly demonstrate that learners exposed to English music experienced greater vocabulary gains compared to those receiving traditional instruction. This finding directly answers the first research question regarding the extent to which music enhances vocabulary learning. The experimental group's mean vocabulary gain was more than double that of the control group, with a very large effect size indicating both statistical and practical significance. This supports the growing body of research suggesting that music is an effective tool for language learning, particularly vocabulary acquisition. Music provides repetitive, meaningful, and context-rich

input, which facilitates deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention of lexical items. These results align with the theories of second language acquisition that emphasize the importance of comprehensible input and repeated exposure in naturalistic contexts.

The improvement across different test item types—including recognition and usage—suggests that music influences both receptive and productive vocabulary skills. This aligns with findings from previous studies where songs have been shown to improve not only passive understanding but also active use of vocabulary. The lyrical context appears to provide semantic clues and memorable associations, aiding learners in internalizing new words more effectively than isolated word lists. Additionally, the melodic and rhythmic features of music may support memory encoding processes, making vocabulary recall easier and more reliable.

The second research question explored the role of learners' attitudes toward English music in their motivation and vocabulary learning outcomes. The qualitative findings offer valuable insights here, revealing that music enhanced learners' motivation by making learning enjoyable and emotionally engaging. Motivation is a critical factor in language learning success, and many language educators seek strategies to increase learner interest and reduce anxiety. The participants' reports of increased enjoyment, reduced stress, and greater willingness to engage with vocabulary tasks suggest that music creates a positive affective environment conducive to learning. These results resonate with affective filter hypotheses, which propose that lower anxiety and positive emotions facilitate language acquisition. In contexts where traditional teaching methods may be viewed as monotonous or challenging, music offers a refreshing alternative that can renew learners' enthusiasm and commitment.

Furthermore, the interviews highlighted that music contextualizes vocabulary in a way that textbooks often fail to do. This contextualization aids learners in understanding word meanings and usage in authentic situations, thus promoting deeper lexical knowledge. Contextual learning has been shown to enhance vocabulary retention because it links new words to real-life scenarios and communicative functions. The learners' descriptions of understanding nuances and idiomatic expressions within songs underscore music's potential as a rich linguistic resource that extends beyond mere word memorization.

Comparing these findings with previous literature reveals both consistencies and new contributions. While many studies have focused on children or beginner learners, this study addresses intermediate Arab learners, a group less frequently studied in music-assisted vocabulary acquisition research. This specificity adds valuable evidence that music is effective across different ages and proficiency levels. Additionally, this study's use of a controlled experimental design strengthens the argument for causality between music exposure and vocabulary gains, addressing some limitations of prior correlational or anecdotal research. Nevertheless, this study also identifies challenges and considerations for implementing music-based vocabulary instruction. Some learners mentioned initial difficulty in understanding lyrics due to accents or slang, suggesting that careful song selection is crucial. Teachers must balance linguistic complexity with learner proficiency and cultural relevance to maximize benefits. Moreover, the study

recognizes that music should complement rather than replace traditional teaching methods, integrating with other instructional strategies to provide a comprehensive vocabulary learning experience.

The findings have important pedagogical implications. Language educators working in Arab EFL contexts should consider incorporating English songs as part of vocabulary lessons to increase engagement and effectiveness. Activities such as lyric gap-fills, discussion of song themes, and vocabulary exercises tied to songs can transform passive listening into active learning. Furthermore, promoting learners' autonomy by encouraging outside-classroom listening may enhance incidental vocabulary acquisition, reinforcing classroom instruction.

In conclusion, this study confirms that harnessing English music in vocabulary instruction is a promising approach to overcome persistent vocabulary acquisition challenges among Arab EFL learners. By improving vocabulary retention and fostering learner motivation, music enriches the language learning experience and supports learners in reaching higher proficiency levels. Future research should explore long-term impacts of music-assisted learning, variations across different age groups and proficiency levels, and the integration of diverse musical genres to tailor instruction to learner preferences and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that incorporating English music into vocabulary instruction significantly enhances vocabulary acquisition among Arab learners of English as a foreign language. The experimental group exposed to music-based lessons showed notably higher vocabulary gains and greater retention compared to learners taught through traditional methods. In addition to improving vocabulary knowledge, the use of English songs fostered increased learner motivation, enjoyment, and positive attitudes toward language learning. These findings highlight the dual cognitive and affective benefits of music as a pedagogical tool, suggesting that it creates a more engaging and effective learning environment. Given the persistent challenges faced by Arab EFL learners in expanding their vocabulary, music-based instruction offers a valuable and culturally accessible strategy to support language development. Educators are encouraged to integrate carefully selected songs into their teaching practices to enrich vocabulary learning and boost learner enthusiasm. Overall, this research contributes to the growing evidence that music can play a vital role in foreign language education and offers practical implications for enhancing EFL instruction in Arab contexts.

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