

LINGUISTIC PROBLEM ANALYSIS OF THE SONG “COUNT ON ME” IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study analyzes the motivational impact and linguistic problems arising from the use of the song “Count on Me” by Bruno Mars as instructional material in an Indonesian junior high school EFL classroom. The objectives of this study are to examine students’ learning motivation when songs are integrated into English instruction and to identify linguistic difficulties encountered during the listening activity. The study employed a descriptive qualitative design complemented by quantitative observational data. The qualitative data were obtained from researchers’ classroom observation notes and analysis of students’ responses during guided lyric discussion, which were used to identify linguistic problems at semantic, morphological, syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic levels. The quantitative data were derived from a motivation observation checklist. Students’ motivation was operationalized through four observable indicators: attention, participation, confidence, and anxiety, each scored dichotomously (observed/not observed) and converted into percentages. The learning activity was conducted in a single 80-minute classroom meeting involving 30 eighth-grade students. The findings reveal that the use of the song positively affected students’ motivation, as reflected in high levels of attention and participation, increased confidence, and reduced anxiety. However, students experienced linguistic difficulties, particularly in understanding idiomatic expressions, contractions, phonological reductions, and implicit pragmatic meanings in the song lyrics. This study concludes that while songs function as effective affective tools in EFL instruction, explicit linguistic scaffolding is necessary to ensure meaningful comprehension. Due to the limited duration and single-class implementation, the findings should be interpreted cautiously.

Keywords: Authentic Materials, EFL Motivation, Linguistic Problems, Listening Comprehension, Songs In EFL

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivation plays a crucial role in second language acquisition, as it influences learners’ engagement, persistence, and achievement (Dörnyei, 2005). In many Indonesian EFL classrooms, particularly at the junior high school level, students often demonstrate low motivation due to limited exposure to authentic English input, teacher-centered instructional practices, and anxiety related to language performance. These conditions frequently result in passive learning behavior and low communicative confidence.

To address this issue, EFL teachers are encouraged to integrate instructional media that are both engaging and meaningful. One instructional medium that has gained considerable attention is the use of English songs. Previous studies have shown that songs can enhance learners’ listening comprehension by providing repeated exposure to authentic language, natural pronunciation, and contextualized vocabulary (Millington, 2011; Schön et al., 2008). In addition, songs contribute to a relaxed classroom atmosphere, which helps reduce affective barriers and increases learners’ willingness to participate (Murphey, 1992).

From a motivational perspective, the use of songs aligns with classroom engagement and expectancy-value principles, as enjoyable learning activities increase learners' perceived value of tasks and sustained attention (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Empirical studies in EFL contexts report that songs positively affect learners' attention, participation, and confidence while reducing anxiety during listening activities (Almutairi & Shukri, 2022; Engh, 2013). These findings suggest that songs function not only as linguistic input but also as affective tools that support learner motivation.

However, authentic song lyrics often contain linguistic features that pose comprehension challenges for EFL learners. Idiomatic expressions, informal grammatical structures, contractions, phonological reductions, and implicit pragmatic meanings are commonly embedded in songs and may not be immediately accessible to learners with limited proficiency (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Studies on authentic input indicate that without explicit linguistic scaffolding, learners may struggle to interpret meaning beyond the surface level (Nation, 2001).

Although previous research has extensively examined the motivational benefits of songs in EFL classrooms, fewer studies have systematically analyzed the specific linguistic problems encountered by learners when processing authentic song lyrics. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by examining both the motivational impact of song-based instruction and the linguistic difficulties experienced by Indonesian junior high school EFL learners through the use of the song "Count on Me" by Bruno Mars. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions: How does the use of the song "Count on Me" influence students' learning motivation in an Indonesian junior high school EFL classroom?

What linguistic difficulties do students encounter when listening to the song "Count on Me" in terms of semantic, morphological, syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic aspects?

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design complemented by quantitative observational data. The qualitative component focused on identifying linguistic problems encountered by students while listening to an English song, whereas the quantitative component measured students' learning motivation through structured classroom observation. The participants were 30 eighth-grade students from a private junior high school in Indonesia. The class was selected purposively based on the teacher's recommendation and students' relatively homogeneous English proficiency level. The instructional activity was conducted in one 80-minute classroom meeting as part of regular English instruction.

Checklist Students' motivation was measured using a structured observation checklist consisting of four indicators: attention, participation, confidence, and anxiety. Each indicator was operationalized into observable behaviors (e.g., focusing on the task, responding to questions, volunteering answers, visible nervousness).

The checklist used a binary scoring system:

1 = behavior observed

0 = behavior not observed

Scores were summed for each indicator and converted into percentages. The motivational levels were categorized using the following thresholds:

High: 76–100%

Moderate: 51–75%

Low: $\leq 50\%$

2. Linguistic Problem Analysis Grid

A linguistic problem analysis grid was used to categorize students' listening difficulties based on five linguistic levels:

Semantic: difficulty understanding word meanings or idiomatic expressions (e.g., “count on me”).

Morphological: difficulty recognizing contracted or inflected forms (e.g., I'll, you'll).

Syntactic: difficulty interpreting sentence structure or informal grammar.

Phonological: difficulty caused by reduced sounds, connected speech, or fast pronunciation. Pragmatic: difficulty interpreting implied meanings, speaker intention, or contextual meaning beyond literal interpretation. A difficulty was categorized based on students' incorrect responses, hesitation during discussion, and clarification requests observed during guided lyric analysis.

Classroom observation was conducted by two observers: the researcher and an English education colleague. Prior to data collection, both observers participated in a calibration session to discuss indicator definitions and scoring procedures. To reduce observer bias, both observers independently completed the motivation checklist during the lesson. The results were then compared, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. This process ensured consistency and increased the reliability of observational data. Content validity of the instruments was established through expert judgment by two English education lecturers with experience in EFL pedagogy and educational research. The experts evaluated the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the indicators with the study objectives. Based on their feedback, several revisions were made, including simplifying indicator wording and refining the linguistic category definitions to avoid overlap. The teaching activity consisted of three stages: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. Students listened to the song “Count on Me” twice. During the activity, observers recorded students' motivational behaviors using the checklist. Linguistic difficulties were identified during guided lyric analysis and class discussion. The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic categorization. Students were identified as experiencing linguistic difficulties when they provided incorrect interpretations, showed hesitation, or explicitly requested clarification during guided lyric discussion. Each difficulty was classified into semantic, morphological, syntactic, phonological, or pragmatic categories based on observable evidence.

Quantitative data from the motivation observation checklist were analyzed descriptively. Scores for each indicator were summed and converted into percentages to determine students' motivational levels, which were categorized as high, moderate, or low. Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration prior to data collection. Parental consent and student assent were secured because the participants were minors. Students' participation was voluntary, and they were informed that the data would

be used solely for research purposes. Anonymity was maintained by using codes instead of students' names, and all data were treated confidentially.

3. RESULTS

The results indicate that the integration of the song created a positive and engaging learning atmosphere. Students demonstrated high levels of attention (83%) and participation (80%), moderate confidence (70%), and low anxiety (20%). In addition to motivational outcomes, several linguistic difficulties were identified during the listening activity.

3.1 Motivation Observation Results

Students' motivation was measured through classroom observation using four indicators: attention, participation, confidence, and anxiety. Observation results show that most students were attentive to the listening task, actively participated in class discussion, and appeared more confident when responding to questions related to the song lyrics. Anxiety was observed in a relatively small number of students.

Table 1. Students' Motivation Observation Results

Indicators	Percentage	Category
Attention	83%	High
Participation	80%	High
Confidence	70%	Moderate
Anxiety	20%	Low

3.2 Linguistic Problems Identified

The analysis of linguistic problems was based on students' oral responses during guided lyric discussion, observable hesitation or confusion, and clarification requests, as recorded in observer notes. A student was considered to experience a linguistic problem when they provided an incorrect interpretation, failed to explain meaning, or explicitly asked for clarification related to a specific lyric segment. These instances constituted the unit of analysis.

Overall, phonological problems were the most dominant linguistic difficulty, experienced by 20 students, followed by semantic problems (18 students), morphological problems (14 students), pragmatic problems (12 students), and syntactic problems (10 students).

3.2.1 Semantic Problems

Semantic difficulties were the most frequently observed. Many students failed to understand idiomatic expressions used in the song. Lyric excerpt: "You can count on me like one, two, three". Typical student response: Interpreted count on me as "counting numbers" rather than "rely on someone." A total of 18 students demonstrated semantic difficulties related to idiomatic expressions and figurative meanings.

3.2.2 Morphological Problems

Morphological problems involved students' difficulty recognizing contracted forms. Lyric excerpt: "I'll be there" Typical student response: Some students interpreted I'll as a separate word or failed to identify it as I will.

This type of problem was observed in 14 students, particularly those with lower exposure to spoken English.

3.2.3 Syntactic Problems

Syntactic difficulties occurred when students struggled with informal sentence patterns.

Lyric excerpt: “You’ll always have my shoulder when you cry”

Typical student response: Misinterpretation of sentence structure, leading to confusion about subject–object relationships.

Syntactic problems were identified in 10 students.

3.2.4 Phonological Problems

Phonological problems were caused by reduced sounds, connected speech, and fast pronunciation.

Lyric excerpt: “’Cause that’s what friends are supposed to do”

Typical student response: Students were unable to recognize ’cause as because.

Phonological difficulties were observed in 20 students, making this category one of the most dominant challenges.

3.2.5 Pragmatic Problems

Pragmatic difficulties involved students’ inability to interpret implied meanings related to friendship and emotional support.

Lyric excerpt: “You can count on me”

Typical student response: Literal interpretation without understanding the implied promise of loyalty and support.

Pragmatic problems were identified in 12 students, especially during discussion of the song’s message.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the use of songs in EFL instruction positively influenced students’ motivation by reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation. This result can be explained through Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that learners are more receptive to language input when emotional barriers such as anxiety are minimized. The relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere created by the song “Count on Me” likely lowered students’ affective filter, enabling them to engage more actively in the listening activity.

The increase in attention and participation also aligns with classroom engagement perspectives, which emphasize that meaningful and enjoyable tasks enhance learners’ involvement. Songs function as emotionally engaging materials, making students more willing to participate in classroom interaction, as observed during the guided lyric discussion.

Despite these motivational benefits, the study also revealed significant linguistic difficulties arising from the use of authentic song lyrics. From the perspective of authentic materials theory, songs expose learners to natural language use, but such input often includes idiomatic expressions, reduced forms, and implicit meanings that exceed learners’ current proficiency levels. The semantic and pragmatic problems identified in

this study, particularly in interpreting idiomatic expressions such as “count on me”, illustrate this challenge.

The phonological difficulties observed can be interpreted through input processing theory, which posits that learners have limited capacity to process form and meaning simultaneously. Reduced sounds and connected speech (e.g., 'cause) may overload learners' processing ability, leading to miscomprehension. In addition, difficulties with contractions and implied meanings support noticing theory, which argues that learners must consciously notice linguistic features in input for acquisition to occur. Without explicit instructional guidance, many students failed to notice these forms and meanings.

These findings suggest that while songs are effective for enhancing motivation, they require systematic linguistic scaffolding to support comprehension. Pre-teaching key vocabulary, explicitly explaining contractions and reduced forms, and guiding students to interpret pragmatic meanings are essential to maximize the pedagogical value of songs in EFL classrooms.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The instructional intervention was conducted in a single 80-minute session, and the observed motivational gains may reflect a novelty effect rather than stable or long-term motivational improvement. Future research should employ multiple sessions or longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of motivational and linguistic outcomes.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that songs enhance learner motivation while simultaneously presenting linguistic challenges due to their authentic nature (Almutairi & Shukri, 2022; Engh, 2013). Similar phonological and semantic difficulties were also reported by Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), who emphasized that reduced forms and idiomatic expressions often hinder EFL learners' listening comprehension.

5. CONCLUSION

This study is limited by its implementation in a single class, the use of only one song, and a one-session instructional design. Therefore, the findings may reflect a short-term motivational response rather than sustained learning effects. These findings suggest that EFL teachers should integrate songs with explicit linguistic scaffolding to balance motivational benefits and comprehension support in listening instruction.

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