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A Teacher's Perception on the Use of Song-Based Games to Promote Student Engagement in Teaching English to Young Learners

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A B S T R A C T

Song-based games have emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach in English to Young Learners (EYL) instruction, particularly for promoting active and meaningful classroom participation. This study investigates a teacher's perception of the use of song-based games in fostering student engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions at the elementary school level. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with one experienced English teacher who had approximately 14 years of experience teaching EYL. The questionnaire results showed that emotional engagement obtained the highest mean score (M = 4.00), followed by cognitive engagement (M = 3.75) and behavioral engagement (M = 3.25). The interview findings further revealed that students' prior exposure to English songs through mobile devices created an affective entry point that encouraged participation, particularly among students who were initially shy or reluctant to speak. The teacher also identified several challenges in implementing song-based games, including classroom noise, limited student confidence, and the selection of age-appropriate and relevant materials. These challenges were addressed through careful lesson preparation, the establishment of clear game rules, and the implementation of group-based activities. Overall, the findings indicate that song-based games can support multidimensional student engagement in EYL contexts. Emotional engagement appeared to provide an important foundation for encouraging students' behavioral participation and cognitive involvement. The study highlights the potential of integrating familiar and enjoyable musical activities into English instruction to create a more engaging learning environment for young learners.

Keywords: *Song-Based Games, Student Engagement, English to Young Learners, Teacher Perception, Descriptive Qualitative.*

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to Young Learners (EYL) comes with its own set of pedagogical challenges because children have cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics that are quite different from those of adult language learners. Young learners tend to learn best through play, movement, music, and interaction with others (Cameron, 2001; Harmer, 2007). In this setting, the use of song-based games, which are learning activities that use songs as the main medium, such as singing while moving, completing missing lyrics, arranging lyrics in a competition, or role playing based on song themes, can be a highly effective instructional approach (Octaberlina, 2023).

Student engagement, broadly defined as the quality and extent of students' active participation in learning, encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to active participation and effort; emotional engagement encompasses enthusiasm, interest, and sense of belonging; and cognitive engagement involves focused thinking, comprehension, and the use of effective learning strategies. Research consistently demonstrates that higher levels of student

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engagement are associated with improved academic outcomes, reduced dropout rates, and greater motivation to learn (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Songs and music have long been recognized as motivating pedagogical tools in language education, capable of creating positive affective conditions that facilitate vocabulary retention, pronunciation development, and authentic language exposure (Kumar et al., 2022; Murphey, 1992). When combined with competitive game elements such as team tasks, time pressure, and goal orientation, song-based activities become particularly effective at sustaining young learners' attention and enthusiasm throughout a lesson (Fauzi, 2022).

Despite the growing body of literature on music and games in language learning, empirical studies specifically examining teacher perceptions of song-based games in EYL settings remain limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. Teachers' perceptions are critical because they shape instructional decision-making and the effective implementation of innovative strategies (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021). This study therefore addresses the following research question: How does an elementary English teacher perceive song-based games in promoting students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

By exploring one teacher's in-depth perception through questionnaire and interview data, this study aims to contribute to the growing discourse on game-based and music-integrated language instruction at the primary school level, and to provide practical insights relevant to EYL practitioners and curriculum developers in Indonesia.

Song-Based Games in Language Learning

Songs have long been considered valuable resources in foreign language education. Their rhythm and melody help learners remember words more easily, improve pronunciation, and build vocabulary (Murphey, 1992). Because song lyrics are naturally repetitive, they provide comprehensible input in a low-stress environment, which makes them especially suitable for young learners who may feel nervous or intimidated by more traditional language tasks (Krashen, 1982). When songs are combined with game elements such as competition, teamwork, and clear goals, they become even more motivating, turning passive listening into active and meaningful learning (Brewster et al., 2002).

Song-based games include a variety of activities, such as cloze exercises in which students complete missing lyrics, lyric reconstruction tasks, singing competitions, and movement-based activities that match the content of the song. These activities support several aspects of language development at the same time, including listening comprehension, vocabulary growth, and speaking ability, all within a fun and socially interactive setting (Vale & Feunteun, 1995). Recent studies show that song-based approaches continue to be highly relevant in modern EFL classrooms. Fauzi (2022) found that using songs and games together significantly improved vocabulary learning among young EFL learners, explaining that this success came from the combined motivational impact of familiar music and competitive game elements.

In a similar way, Octaberlina (2023), through a qualitative study conducted at an elementary school in Tulungagung, Indonesia, found that songs and games worked well together to create engaging and memorable learning experiences. Teachers reported that students were more willing to speak and interact in English when lessons were organized around songs. Kumar et al. (2022) conducted a descriptive review of music and songs as pedagogical tools in EFL contexts, concluding that musical input reduces the anxiety and peer pressure commonly associated with second language learning, and that song-based methods support both the cognitive and social-affective needs of learners more effectively than traditional instructional approaches. These findings collectively establish a strong evidence base for the pedagogical value of song-based games, particularly for younger learners whose motivation and emotional states are closely intertwined with learning outcomes.

Student Engagement in EYL Contexts

The tripartite model of student engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) provides a robust theoretical framework for examining how learners interact with

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instructional activities. Behavioral engagement encompasses on-task behavior, participation, and effort; emotional engagement includes affective responses such as interest, boredom, happiness, or anxiety; and cognitive engagement refers to the investment of mental effort and the use of deep learning strategies. This multidimensional conceptualization has been widely adopted in second language acquisition research to evaluate the quality of learner involvement in instructional activities.

In EYL settings, emotional engagement is often seen as an important condition for maintaining students' behavioral and cognitive involvement. Young learners whose emotional needs are fulfilled, who feel safe, happy, and interested, are generally more willing to take linguistic risks and to engage in the mental effort needed for language acquisition (Arnold, 1999). For this reason, song-based games, by creating positive feelings and strengthening social connection, can function as an affective scaffold that supports deeper engagement across all three dimensions.

Teacher Perception in Instructional Practice

Teacher perception refers to teachers' beliefs, evaluations, and interpretations regarding specific instructional approaches, which significantly influence their pedagogical choices and implementation fidelity (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Studies in EFL contexts have demonstrated that teachers who perceive innovative methods positively are more likely to implement them consistently and creatively (Borg, 2006). Understanding teacher perception is therefore essential for evaluating the potential of any instructional innovation to be effectively sustained in real classroom practice.

In relation to music and songs specifically, Avdiu (2021) examined non-native English teachers' views on the use of music and songs in teaching English to primary school learners in Kosovo, finding that teachers held consistently positive perceptions of songs as motivational, linguistically rich tools. However, they also reported concerns about time constraints and the challenge of selecting age-appropriate, curriculum-aligned material. Bokiev & Ismail (2021) similarly found that Malaysian ESL teachers believed strongly in the affective and linguistic benefits of music and songs, yet implementation was shaped by contextual factors including institutional support, class size, and the teacher's own musical confidence. These studies underscore that teacher perception encompasses not only beliefs about effectiveness but also awareness of practical challenges, both of which are essential to understand for successful integration of song-based games into EYL instruction.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, which is appropriate when the goal is to describe and interpret phenomena in depth rather than to establish causal relationships or generalize across populations (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative description allows the researcher to present a comprehensive account of the participant's perceptions, experiences, and interpretations in their own contextual frame of reference.

Participant

The participant is one English teacher at an elementary school who has been teaching English, including to young learners, for more than six years. The teacher is 40 years old and reported using song-based games occasionally ("sometimes") in EYL instruction. Purposive sampling was employed, selecting this participant on the basis of relevant experience and willingness to provide detailed reflective responses. While a single-participant design limits statistical generalizability, it enables rich, contextualized insight into one experienced practitioner's professional perspective (Miles et al., 2014).

Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data. The questionnaire and interview protocol were both developed by the research team based on established theoretical frameworks and

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validated instruments in the EYL and teacher perception literature. First, a Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 13 perception statements was constructed. The questionnaire items were developed based on the tripartite engagement framework of (Fredricks et al., 2004), which defines engagement along behavioral (Items 4–7), emotional (Items 8–11), and cognitive (Items 12–15) dimensions, with an overall effectiveness item (Item 16) added to capture the teacher's holistic evaluation. Each item was formulated as a declarative statement about observable classroom behavior and teacher perception, and responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items 1–3 constituted the respondent background information section covering teaching experience, frequency of song-based game use, and grade-level focus. Content validity of the questionnaire items was established through review against the theoretical indicators for each engagement dimension. Second, a semi-structured interview protocol comprising five open-ended questions was developed to complement and extend the quantitative questionnaire data. The interview questions were structured around the three engagement dimensions and designed to elicit in-depth narrative accounts of the teacher's classroom experiences with song-based games. Specifically, the protocol addressed: (1) the teacher's background and history with song-based games; (2) observed effects on behavioral engagement and student participation; (3) the role of emotional responses in facilitating or inhibiting engagement; (4) perceived effects on vocabulary acquisition and cognitive processing; and (5) practical challenges encountered during implementation and strategies used to address them. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up probing questions to clarify responses and explore emergent themes, ensuring both breadth and depth of data collection (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively, with mean scores calculated for each engagement dimension. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically, with recurring themes identified in relation to the three engagement dimensions and implementation challenges. Triangulation between questionnaire and interview data was used to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Miles et al., 2014). Member-checking and prolonged engagement with the data further supported analytical trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the research purpose and procedures were explained clearly to the participant. Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from the teacher, who was assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. No identifying personal information beyond professional background is disclosed in this article. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles applicable to educational research involving human participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Results

Table 1 presents the teacher's responses to the Likert-scale questionnaire items organized by engagement dimension.

Table 1. Teacher's Questionnaire Responses on Song-Based Games and Student Engagement

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Section A: Behavioral Engagement (Active Participation and Student Effort)						
4	Song-based games increase students' active participation in English learning activities.			✓		
5	Song-based games encourage students to demonstrate greater effort and persistence.			✓		
6	Song-based games engage students physically and socially during learning.				✓	
7	Song-based games reduce passive or disengaged student behavior.			✓		
Section B: Emotional Engagement (Student Enthusiasm and Enjoyment)						

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8	Song-based games make students more enthusiastic and happier during English lessons.		✓
9	Song-based games increase students' interest and enjoyment of the subject matter.		✓
10	Song-based games help students feel more connected to the lesson and classmates.		✓
11	Song-based games create a positive emotional atmosphere in the classroom.		✓
Section C: Cognitive Engagement (Student Focus and Comprehension)			
12	Song-based games help students focus better and retain lesson material longer.		✓
13	Song-based games encourage students to think deeply and use effective language strategies.	✓	
14	Song-based games increase students' mental engagement in understanding English skills.		✓
15	Song-based games promote better understanding through cognitively challenging activities.		✓
Section D: Overall Question			
16	Overall, song-based games are highly effective in enhancing student engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) in EYL learning.		✓

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 2 summarizes the mean scores for each engagement dimension.

Table 2. Mean Scores by Engagement Dimension

Engagement Dimension	Items	Scores	Mean	Interpretation
Behavioral Engagement	4, 5, 6, 7	3, 3, 4, 3	3.25	Neutral
Emotional Engagement	8, 9, 10, 11	4, 4, 4, 4	4.00	Positive
Cognitive Engagement	12, 13, 14, 15	4, 3, 4, 4	3.75	Positive
Overall	16	4	4.00	Positive

The questionnaire results show three clear patterns across the dimensions of engagement. Emotional engagement had the highest mean score (M = 4.00), as the teacher agreed with all four items related to students' enthusiasm, interest, sense of connection in the classroom, and the positive emotional atmosphere. Cognitive engagement had the second highest mean (M = 3.75), with three items rated 4 (Agree), while Item 13, which focused on deep thinking and strategic learning, was rated 3 (Neutral). Behavioral engagement had the lowest mean score (M = 3.25), with three items rated Neutral and only Item 6, which referred to students' physical and social participation during learning, rated as Agree. The overall effectiveness item (Item 16) received a score of 4, indicating the teacher's general agreement that song-based games are effective in supporting all three dimensions of engagement.

Interview Results

Background and Attraction to Song-Based Games

The teacher reported approximately 14 years of teaching experience, during which song-based games have been a recurring methodological choice, particularly for lower elementary grades. The appeal lies primarily in songs' intrinsic motivational properties:

> *"Song itu mempunyai daya tarik tersendiri, menarik, dan anak cepat mengingat kosakata, khususnya vocabulary." [Songs have their own appeal; they are engaging, and children quickly remember vocabulary, especially vocabulary.]*

The teacher's sustained use of song-based games across 14 years suggests high perceived self-efficacy and confidence in this approach, consistent with findings by Avdiu (2021) that experienced EFL teachers tend to view songs as inherently motivating and linguistically valuable tools.

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Behavioral Engagement

When asked whether quiet or shy students become more willing to participate through song-based games, the teacher confirmed this observation, attributing the change to students' prior exposure to English songs via mobile devices:

> *"Mereka pernah mendengar dari handphone… secara tidak langsung ketika kita menampilkan yang song-based seperti ini, mereka langsung mengingat apa saja yang sudah mereka dengar sebelumnya. Jadi itu membuat mereka itu ingin tampil dan ingin menjawab apa yang kita sampaikan." [They have heard [English songs] on their phones… indirectly, when we present song-based activities, they immediately recall what they had previously heard. This makes them want to perform and respond to what we present.]*

The questionnaire's open-ended section reinforced this observation: students who were typically quiet became very active in a missing-lyrics team competition because they loved the song and were motivated by team competition. This aligns with the questionnaire finding that physical and social engagement (Item 6) was rated more highly than intrinsic effort indicators.

Emotional Engagement

The teacher described students' initial emotional reactions as hesitant rather than immediately enthusiastic, particularly given that English instruction had been limited in the school context:

> *"Pertama-tama mereka ini masih bingung, ragu-ragu… tetapi beriring dengan waktu, kita perkenalkan dengan step by step… akhirnya mereka memahami dan berminat untuk menjawab apa yang kita sampaikan." [At first, they were still confused and hesitant… but over time, we introduce it step by step… eventually they understand and become interested in responding to what we present.]*

Emotional engagement, while ultimately high (M = 4.00 on the questionnaire), is thus achieved through a gradual process of scaffolded introduction rather than being instantaneously generated by the song-based game itself.

Cognitive Engagement

The teacher identified song-based games as among the most effective methods for vocabulary acquisition, explaining the mechanism in terms of students' learning style preferences:

> *"Anak-anak dengan lagu sudah terlebih dahulu merasa happy, sudah merasa senang. Karena anak-anak ini suka dengan gerakan kebanyakan, daripada dia dengan diam kognitif saja. Jadi dengan kinestetik mereka lebih terpacu lagi." [Children already feel happy with songs. Because most children prefer movement to sitting still cognitively. So kinesthetic involvement stimulates them even more.]*

This perception connects physical movement to cognitive stimulation, suggesting that for this teacher, kinesthetic engagement is not merely motivational but functionally accelerates vocabulary acquisition and comprehension.

Challenges

The teacher identified three primary challenges: classroom noise management, student confidence, and material selection. Regarding noise, the teacher noted:

> *"Kondisi kelas itu dengan song ini biasanya kan agak berisik… kalau tidak kita manajemen dengan baik nanti akan ke mana-mana dan tidak terarah*

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lagi." [The classroom during songs tends to get noisy… if not well-managed, it will go in all directions and become unfocused.]

To address these challenges, the teacher employs three strategies: (1) thorough preparation, including careful selection of songs familiar and appealing to students; (2) proactive classroom management through pre-established game rules; and (3) group-based activities so that individual students do not feel exposed or intimidated.

Emotional Engagement as the Primary Dimension

The finding that emotional engagement received the highest mean score (M = 4.00) is consistent with the broader EYL literature, which positions affective involvement as both the most accessible and most immediately observable outcome of music-based instruction. Kumar et al. (2022) argued that songs create a fundamentally different emotional environment from conventional language tasks by activating pleasure and familiarity responses that lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). The teacher's interview corroborates this, noting that students' prior exposure to English songs via mobile devices creates an immediate emotional connection to the activity, effectively bridging out-of-school and in-school language experiences. Importantly, however, the interview data reveal that this emotional engagement is not automatic: it develops gradually through scaffolded, step-by-step introduction, a nuance not captured in the questionnaire scores alone.

Cognitive Engagement: Kinesthetic Mediation

The cognitive engagement dimension had a mean score of 3.75, while Item 13, which focused on deep thinking and strategic language learning, was rated only as Neutral. This pattern suggests that while song-based games effectively support attentional focus and vocabulary retention, they may not independently promote higher-order cognitive engagement such as metacognitive strategy use or deep semantic processing. The teacher's emphasis on kinesthetic learning as a mechanism for cognitive stimulation is theoretically significant: it implies an embodied model of cognition in which physical movement during songs accelerates memory formation and comprehension, consistent with Wilson (2002) framework of embodied cognition. This finding also resonates with Fauzi (2022) observation that song-based learning strategies improve vocabulary acquisition partly because the multimodal, kinesthetic nature of the activities creates richer encoding conditions than auditory-only input.

Behavioral Engagement: Social Activation over Individual Effort

The lowest mean score for behavioral engagement (M = 3.25) should not be understood as a negative perception of song-based games but rather as a theoretically meaningful pattern that reveals an important distinction between types of behavioral involvement. Physical and social participation, represented by Item 6 and rated 4 (Agree), is shown more consistently than students' intrinsic effort and initiative, as reflected in Items 4, 5, and 7, each rated 3 (Neutral). This pattern suggests that while song-based games successfully activate external behavioral engagement — observable movement, verbal interaction, and collaborative participation during the activity itself — they may not independently sustain the internal motivational components of behavioral engagement, namely persistence, independent effort, and self-directed participation, once the structured game activity concludes. Several factors may explain why behavioral participation remains partially limited even within song-based game contexts. First, classroom dynamics in large elementary school settings can work against individual initiative: students who are unsure of themselves may hide within the group dynamic, participating visibly at the surface level while relying on peers rather than independently engaging with the task. Second, the novelty and sensory stimulation of song-based games may actually compete with focused on-task behavior for some learners, particularly those who become overstimulated by the noise, movement, and competition elements of the activity. Third, as the teacher noted in the interview, classroom noise

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management was identified as a challenge, suggesting that without proactive management strategies, behavioral engagement can drift from productive participation toward social excitement that is disengaged from the learning objectives. These dynamics align with Fredricks et al. (2004), who noted that behavioral engagement, especially in terms of effort and persistence, often requires additional instructional scaffolding beyond motivating activities alone. The implication is that song-based games are most effective for behavioral engagement when embedded within a broader pedagogical structure that includes clear task goals, explicit behavioral expectations, and post-activity consolidation activities that transfer the social energy of the game into sustained independent engagement.

Challenges and Pedagogical Implications

The teacher's identification of classroom noise, student confidence, and material selection as the main challenges is in line with findings from similar studies. Avdiu (2021) reported comparable concerns among EFL teachers in Kosovo, who mentioned noise management and material selection as obstacles to consistent implementation. In the same way, Bokiev & Ismail (2021) found that Malaysian ESL teachers' use of songs was limited by large class sizes and a lack of institutional support. The strategies used by the teacher in this study, such as careful preparation, setting clear rules in advance, and providing group-based scaffolding, are consistent with the best practices highlighted in the literature on song-based learning (Brewster et al., 2002; Octaberlina, 2023). They also reflect the kind of thoughtful pedagogical decision making commonly associated with experienced and effective teachers (Borg, 2006).

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the use of only one participant greatly limits how far the findings can be generalized. Although the teacher's perceptions were described in rich detail, they cannot be assumed to represent the views of EYL teachers in general, especially since previous studies have shown that teachers' beliefs about music-based instruction can vary across contexts (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021). Second, the study depends entirely on self-reported data, including questionnaire responses and interview statements, without direct classroom observation to confirm whether the teacher's perceptions were reflected in actual teaching practices. Third, because the questionnaire was completed by only one respondent, it was not possible to calculate inter-rater reliability or produce descriptive statistics beyond individual scores. Fourth, the study was carried out in only one elementary school, which further limits the range of contexts represented. For future research, it would be useful to involve multiple participants from different school settings, including direct classroom observation, and use validated multi-item instruments with larger samples so that inferential statistical analysis can be conducted.

CONCLUSION

This study explored one experienced elementary English teacher's perception of song-based games in promoting behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The findings indicate that emotional engagement was perceived as the most strongly supported dimension, as songs fostered happiness, enthusiasm, and classroom community. Cognitive engagement was also supported, particularly through improved attention and vocabulary retention, with kinesthetic activities perceived as facilitating learning. Behavioral engagement was viewed more cautiously because, although song-based games encouraged social and physical participation, sustained individual effort required additional instructional support. Successful implementation therefore depends on appropriate song selection, clear classroom management, progressive scaffolding, and motivational strategies for hesitant learners. Pedagogically, teachers may use familiar songs to create emotionally supportive environments while combining games with individual accountability tasks, such as vocabulary writing, oral summaries, and reflection activities. Teacher education programs should also provide training

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in song-based instruction and classroom management. Future research should involve multiple teachers and schools, incorporate classroom observations, and include students' perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of engagement in EYL contexts.

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