

TODDLERS' LEARNING ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH LEARNING: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SONG BASED AND NON SONG BASED ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis keterlibatan belajar (learning engagement) anak toddler dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris melalui perbandingan antara kegiatan berbasis lagu (song based activities) dan kegiatan non berbasis lagu (non song based activities). Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan satu partisipan anak toddler berusia empat tahun. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi langsung, pengukuran durasi fokus menggunakan stopwatch, catatan lapangan, serta wawancara semi terstruktur dengan orang tua sebagai bentuk triangulasi data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kegiatan berbasis lagu menghasilkan tingkat keterlibatan belajar yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan kegiatan non berbasis lagu. Anak menunjukkan durasi perhatian yang lebih lama, respons emosional yang lebih positif, keterlibatan fisik yang lebih aktif, serta kemampuan mengingat kosakata bahasa Inggris yang lebih cepat dan spontan. Sebaliknya, kegiatan non berbasis lagu cenderung menghasilkan durasi fokus yang lebih singkat dan tingkat kebosanan yang lebih tinggi. Temuan ini mendukung teori Second Language Acquisition (SLA), khususnya Hipotesis Input dan Hipotesis Filter Afektif dari Krashen, serta prinsip Total Physical Response (TPR). Oleh karena itu, pembelajaran berbasis lagu direkomendasikan sebagai strategi yang efektif dan sesuai dengan perkembangan anak dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris pada usia dini.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran berbasis lagu, Keterlibatan belajar, Anak toddler, Pemerolehan bahasa kedua, Bahasa Inggris usia dini

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze toddlers' learning engagement in English language learning by comparing song based activities and non song based activities. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach involving one four year old toddler as the participant. Data were collected through classroom observation, focus duration measurement using a stopwatch, field notes, and a semi structured interview with the parent as a form of data triangulation. The findings indicate that song based activities lead to higher levels of learning engagement than non song based activities. The toddler demonstrated a longer attention span, more positive emotional responses, greater physical involvement, and faster and more spontaneous vocabulary recall during song based learning. In contrast, non song based activities resulted in shorter focus duration and higher levels of boredom. These findings support major theories in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), particularly Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis, as well as the principles of Total Physical Response (TPR). Therefore, song based learning is recommended as an effective and developmentally appropriate strategy for early childhood English language learning.

Keyword: Song based learning, Learning engagement, Toddlers, Second language acquisition, Early childhood English learning

INTRODUCTION

English learning in early childhood is an important part of children's cognitive, social, and language development. At this stage, children's engagement in learning activities plays a crucial role in determining learning outcomes and the effectiveness of language

internalization. Children aged 3–5 years tend to learn language through multisensory experiences that combine listening, movement, and social interaction rather than through static verbal instruction alone.

Research indicates that singing and music activities in language learning can create a more enjoyable and supportive learning environment, making children more interested and actively involved in the learning process learning engagement compared to traditional, passive methods. For example, a systematic review on the role of songs in preschool children's language development shows that song based interventions using rhythm and repetition significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and communication engagement due to multisensory stimulation. Music and songs have long been used as strategies in teaching English because they contain pedagogical and linguistic features that are highly effective in attracting children's interest. Songs make learning more interactive and help children retain information more effectively through rhythm and repetition, thereby naturally increasing learning engagement. A quasi experimental study conducted in early childhood education settings found that the use of movement and song methods in English learning improved students' motivation, vocabulary skills, and activeness compared to conventional learning without songs (Prihatin et al., 2024).

This approach is often chosen by early childhood educators because it is considered capable of creating meaningful, enjoyable learning experiences that align with the developmental characteristics of young children (Ningsih et al., 2024).

This research focuses on observable learning behaviors such as level of focus, attention span, expressions of enthusiasm, and active participation during learning activities.

The findings of this study are expected to provide insights for teachers and parents regarding the most effective learning methods to enhance toddlers' engagement and interest in learning English. English language learning for early childhood does not only emphasize the achievement of language skills, but also focuses on children's learning engagement during the learning process. This engagement includes attention, emotional responses, and physical

involvement in learning activities. Songs as a learning medium are believed to enhance engagement because they combine music, language, and movement, which align with toddlers' developmental characteristics.

Recent studies indicate that song based learning can increase children's interest, focus, and active participation in learning English by creating an enjoyable and non-threatening learning environment (Nasution et al., 2025).

To further specify the focus of this study, this research investigates the differences in toddlers' learning engagement in English learning when using song based activities and non-song based activities. Based on this focus, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does children's learning engagement differ when learning through song based activities compared to non song based activities?
2. Do children demonstrate a longer attention span when learning English with songs compared to learning without songs?
3. Which types of engagement, including attention, emotional response, and physical involvement, occur more frequently in song based activities than in non song based activities?

This study aims to achieve the following research purposes:

1. To investigate the effect of song-based activities on toddlers' learning engagement in English learning.
2. To compare toddlers' learning engagement in English learning through song based activities and non song based activities.
3. To explore toddlers' learning engagement in terms of attention, emotional responses, and physical involvement during English learning activities.

This study is expected to provide several contributions both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the field of second language

acquisition in early childhood by positioning learning engagement as a central component of the language internalization process, rather than focusing solely on linguistic outcomes such as vocabulary mastery or speaking fluency (Jaelani, A., Rafli, Z., & Murtadho, F., 2025). This comparative study between song based and non-song based approaches also enriches multisensory learning theory, which suggests that stimulation through music and movement can strengthen learning experiences, enhance motivation, and facilitate better information retention (Fitria, 2023).

Practically, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a valuable reference for early childhood educators, parents, and curriculum developers in designing more engaging, effective, and enjoyable English learning strategies for young children.

Furthermore, these findings may support the development of teaching materials and teacher training programs that emphasize the importance of active child engagement in the learning process (*Creating a Song and Movement Video as a Media to Tech*, 2025)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant SLA Theories Informing This Study

This study draws on well-established Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories to explain why song based activities might affect toddlers' engagement differently than non-song based activities. Krashen's Input Hypothesis posits that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners receive comprehensible input that is slightly above their current level ($i + 1$), which promotes natural internalization without forcing production (Krashen, 1982).

In the context of toddlers, song based activities naturally provide repetitive, patterned, and meaningful linguistic input that children can process and internalize as they listen and sing along. Researchers have suggested that the rhythm, melody, and

repetition in songs can make input more comprehensible and memorable, thus aligning with Krashen's claim that meaningful exposure is crucial for SLA. Songs can create language input that is contextualized and structured in ways that young learners can grasp innately, supporting vocabulary acquisition and language development (Gong, n.d.).

In addition to Krashen's Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, this study also draws on Swain's Output Hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of language production in second language acquisition. While input is crucial for exposing learners to new language forms, Swain argued that producing language (output) can further enhance language learning by enabling learners to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge and reflect on linguistic forms. This process complements input based learning and contributes to deeper linguistic processing, fluency development, and more accurate language use (Liu, 2022).

Another important theory is Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, which argues that learners must consciously notice specific linguistic features in the input in order for acquisition to occur. Songs that contain rhythm, repetition, and melody help toddlers notice language features such as sounds, vocabulary, and sentence patterns indirectly through listening and singing activities.

The Role of Songs in Early Childhood English Learning

Various empirical studies indicate that songs contribute positively to children's learning engagement in English learning. Research by Kamila et al. found that movement and song methods increase children's activeness, physical involvement, and vocabulary comprehension because the learning process becomes more enjoyable and developmentally appropriate. Songs help children remember vocabulary through rhythm and accompanying movements (Prihatin et al., 2024).

Learning strategies that combine movement and songs have also been shown to enhance motivation and engagement in English learning. Observations reveal that children become more interested, focused, and actively participate in singing and movement activities during lessons (Ningsih et al., 2024). Furthermore, other studies show that the use of songs significantly improves children's vocabulary acquisition, both in formal classroom settings and in daily learning activities outside the classroom. Songs also enhance positive emotional responses such as enthusiasm and curiosity, which are essential components of learning (Zamzami et al., 2023).

An experimental study on the use of the song "The Days of the Week" demonstrated that songs significantly improved children's English vocabulary skills, including pronunciation and word recognition (Firdaus et al., 2025). Another relevant study on song and movement found that this combination is effective in introducing English vocabulary to kindergarten children and increases engagement and active responses during learning activities (Fitri & Pransiska, 2024).

In addition, a literature review examining the role of songs in supporting preschool children's language development concluded that songs, through a multisensory approach involving rhythm, repetition, and melody, enhance vocabulary learning, speaking fluency, and children's engagement in communication. Research on interactive teaching through singing also reveals that singing helps children better understand English because they can associate sounds, words, and movements, which increases focus and sustained learning engagement during activities (Bandung, n.d.).

2.3 Deeper Learning Through Song Based vs Non Song Based Activities

Songs are associated with higher learning engagement because they provide multisensory stimulation auditory input through music and vocals, visual input through movement, and kinesthetic input through physical activities. This differs from non song based methods such as flashcards or verbal instruction alone, which

tend to be less engaging for toddlers as they lack emotional and physical involvement.

Studies examining the use of songs in developing other language skills, such as listening skills, also support the role of music in creating interactive learning environments, reducing anxiety, and fostering sustained engagement (Jani et al., 2025). Additionally, studies on English songs for early learners indicate that songs help enrich vocabulary and engage learners through repetitive and meaningful contexts, encouraging active participation and imitation (Journal & English, 2025).

Learning Engagement in Early Childhood English Learning

Several previous studies have shown that the use of audio based activities, such as songs, repetition, and drilling, has a positive impact on students' learning engagement and language ability. A study by (Tono Suwarno, Nanik Retnowati, 2023) found that the implementation of the Audio Lingual Method, which emphasizes imitation, repetition, and both verbal and nonverbal stimuli, can significantly improve students' vocabulary mastery. In that study, the students' average score increased to 94 after the method was optimally applied in the classroom.

Previous studies have widely discussed the benefits of songs, music, and audio based activities in English learning, especially in improving vocabulary, motivation, and language skills of young learners. Many researchers have also reported that song based and audio lingual approaches can create enjoyable learning environments and encourage active participation in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative comparative approach to examine toddlers' learning engagement in English learning activities. The study focuses on one toddler aged 4 years who is learning English as a second language in a home learning context. The learning activities are divided into two conditions. In the first condition, the toddler

learns English through song based activities using English children's songs. In the second condition, the toddler learns English through non song based activities such as flashcards, pictures, or verbal explanations without music.

The main focus of this research was not on academic achievement or formal language mastery, but rather on the learning process, specifically how toddlers demonstrate learning engagement. This engagement was observed through attention span, physical response through Total Physical Response (TPR), and memory recall during and after the learning activities.

Data are collected through video and photo observations to capture the toddler's behavior and level of engagement, time recording to measure how long the toddler remains focused during each activity, and semi structured interviews with parents to support the observational data. The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis by identifying patterns related to attention span, emotional response, physical involvement, and willingness to continue learning.

The participant of this study was one toddler, a four year old child named Naura. The participant was selected based on accessibility and relevance to the research objectives. Naura had prior exposure to English, particularly basic vocabulary related to animals and family, through previous learning experiences as well as digital media such as videos and songs.

Data were collected using observation, field notes, and a stopwatch as the main research instruments. Observation was chosen as the primary method because toddlers may not yet be able to clearly and verbally express their learning experiences. Therefore, direct observation was considered the most appropriate way to capture toddlers' learning engagement during English learning activities.

Data collection was conducted in four stages. In the first stage, the researcher conducted an English learning activity using a song based approach. The researcher played an English YouTube video entitled Animal Actions Song, which included music, movements, and repetition. During this activity,

the toddler's learning engagement was observed and recorded. The observation focused on attention span, physical responses through Total Physical Response (TPR), emotional reactions, and spontaneous verbal responses. A stopwatch was used to measure the duration of the toddler's focus and the response time when recalling vocabulary.

In the second stage, after the song based activity was completed, the researcher conducted a non song based English learning activity using a different topic, namely family. This activity was carried out without musical elements and involved the use of flashcards, pictures, and simple verbal instructions. The same engagement indicators were observed to ensure consistency. The researcher also measured the toddler's response time, attention duration, and noted behavioral signs such as loss of focus or physical restlessness during the activity.

In the third stage, the researcher asked the toddler to complete a writing and coloring activity related to the family topic. This activity aimed to observe the toddler's ability to sustain focus during a non song based task. The duration of focus and behavioral responses during this activity were recorded using observation notes and a stopwatch.

In the final stage, the researcher conducted a semi structured interview with the toddler's mother to obtain supporting data related to the child's prior exposure to English, learning preferences, level of engagement, and memory retention after the learning activities. The interview data were used to support and validate the observational findings through data triangulation.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis with a comparative approach. Observation notes and field notes were read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the toddler's learning engagement during both song based and non song based activities.

Key behaviors related to learning engagement were identified and categorized into several indicators, including attention span, physical response through Total Physical

Response (TPR), emotional reactions, and memory recall. In addition, simple quantitative data obtained from the stopwatch, such as attention duration and response time, were used to support the qualitative observations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to compare the learning engagement of a toddler in English learning through song based activities and non song based activities. The data were obtained through direct observation using a stopwatch, field notes, and a parent interview.

1. Learning Engagement in Song Based Activity

During the song based learning activity, the participant watched the Animal Actions Song on YouTube. While the song was playing, the child showed high enthusiasm, actively followed the movements, and displayed positive emotional expressions. The child was able to maintain focus for 1 minute and 27 seconds without showing signs of boredom. After the song ended, the child was asked a question related to animal vocabulary, specifically the English equivalent of the word “*ayam*”. The child responded quickly by using the song lyric “*chicken*” within 5 seconds, indicating strong and rapid memory recall.

2. Learning Engagement in Non Song Based Activity

In the non-song based learning activity, the child was given a different topic, family, using flashcards. Although the material had been previously learned, the child required more time to recall the vocabulary, approximately 11 seconds, and appeared to make an effort to remember before responding.

Next, the child was asked to complete a writing and coloring task related to the family topic. The child’s focus lasted only about 30 seconds, after which signs of boredom emerged, such as moving hands

and legs, playing with the pencil, and losing attention to the task.

Table 1. Comparison of Learning Engagement Between Song Based and Non Song Based Activities

| Learning Indicator | Song Based Activity | Non Song Based Activity |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Duration of focus | 1 minute 27 seconds | ± 30 seconds |
| Response time (memory recall) | ± 5 seconds | ± 11 seconds |
| Physical response (TPR) | Active imitation of movements | Minimal physical involvement |
| Emotional response | Happy, enthusiastic | Easily bored, distracted |

Findings from Toddler’s Mother Interview

To strengthen the observational findings, a semi structured interview was conducted with the toddler’s mother after the learning activities. The interview focused on the child’s prior exposure to English and her responses to song based and non song based learning activities. The mother confirmed that the child had been exposed to English before, mainly through digital media. She stated:

Researcher: Has your child been exposed to English before? Where does the exposure usually come from?

Naura’s Mother: “Yes, she has. Since she is already around four years old, she often spends time using gadgets and accessing social media such as YouTube. From there, English songs frequently appear on her feed, and through those songs she has become familiar with English.”

Regarding learning through songs, the mother emphasized that her child showed higher enthusiasm, physical involvement, and focus. She explained:

Researcher: How does your child react when learning English through songs, in terms of enthusiasm, movement, and focus?

Naura’s Mother: “She is more enthusiastic when learning through songs. With music, she automatically follows the movements shown in the song, especially when there are visuals. She imitates the actions and follows the melody, so she becomes more enthusiastic when learning through songs.”

In contrast, the mother described that non song based learning activities resulted in lower engagement:

Researcher: How does your child react when learning English without songs, for example using pictures, flashcards, or direct instructions? Could you please describe it?

Naura’s Mother: “When using flashcards or pictures, she can still follow along, but her focus is lower. She gets bored more quickly and can only maintain attention for a short time. It’s not like with songs, where she can stay engaged until the song finishes and enjoy the activity more.”

When asked to compare both approaches, the mother clearly preferred song based learning:

Researcher: In your opinion, during which activity does your child appear more focused and involved: learning with songs or without songs? Why?

Naura’s Mother: “Definitely when using songs. As I mentioned before, with songs she automatically imitates the movements and the melody. When using pictures, she might focus at the beginning because the images are interesting, but after that her focus quickly fades.”

Additionally, the mother noted spontaneous language use after song based activities:

Researcher: During the learning process, does your child ever repeat vocabulary, movements, or say English words spontaneously after the activity?

Naura’s Mother: “Yes, she often does it spontaneously. When learning through songs, the melody and intonation make the words easier to remember. For example, in the animal song, ‘lion,’ she sometimes suddenly sings it on

her own even without music, while playing and singing.”

Table 2. Summary of Toddler’s Mother Interview Findings

| Interview Aspect | Mother’s Response Summary |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Prior English exposure | Child has been exposed to English mainly through YouTube and English songs |
| Reaction to song based learning | Highly enthusiastic, follows movements, imitates melody, and stays focused longer |
| Reaction to non song based learning | Can follow briefly but focus decreases quickly and boredom appears |
| Perceived effectiveness | Song based learning is more effective than non song based learning |
| Spontaneous language use | Child often repeats English words and songs spontaneously after learning |

Discussion

This study examined toddlers’ learning engagement in English learning by comparing song based activities and non song based activities. The discussion integrates findings from direct observation, stopwatch measurements, behavioral responses, and parental interview data, and interprets them through relevant Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories.

The findings consistently indicate that song based activities lead to higher levels of learning engagement than non song based activities. Observational data showed that the toddler was able to maintain attention for a longer duration during the song based activity (1 minute 27 seconds) compared to the non song based task, in which focus lasted only approximately 30 seconds. This difference suggests that musical elements help sustain

attention in young learners, whose attention spans are naturally limited.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated toddlers' engagement in English learning by comparing song based activities and non song based activities. Based on the integration of observational data, stopwatch measurements, behavioral responses, and parental interview findings, the results clearly indicate that song based learning is more effective in promoting toddlers' engagement and early language acquisition. The findings show that toddlers were able to maintain longer attention spans, demonstrate higher emotional involvement, and recall vocabulary more quickly and spontaneously during song based activities. The combination of music, repetition, movement, and visual support helped create a positive learning atmosphere that sustained focus and enhanced memory retention. In contrast, non-song-based activities such as flashcards and direct instruction resulted in shorter attention spans and lower levels of engagement.

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