

Investigating The Psycholinguistic Impact of Rap Music on Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic and psychological effects of using rap music as a learning tool by first-year EFL Iraqi college students. Grounded in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Gardner's Motivation Theory, the study employed a quasi-experimental design comparing an experimental group exposed to English rap music with a control group receiving traditional instruction.

Findings revealed that the rap group scored significantly lower in vocabulary, phonological awareness, grammar, and syntactic control. Students exposed to rap demonstrated difficulty in processing rapid, idiomatic language, and replicated non-standard grammatical structures, likely influenced by lyrical content. Additionally, increased anxiety and reduced motivation were reported among rap group participants, suggesting that the genre's cultural and linguistic complexity raised affective filters and hindered language acquisition.

The results emphasize the need for culturally appropriate and linguistically accessible materials in EFL instruction. While music remains a potentially valuable tool for language learning, its integration—especially rap—must be carefully curated to align with learner proficiency, values, and context.

Keywords: Rap music; EFL; language acquisition; affective filter; motivation; cultural con

دراسة التأثير-النفسي اللغوي لموسيقى الراب على متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة التأثيرات اللغوية والنفسية لاستخدام موسيقى الراب كأداة تعليمية لدى طلاب المرحلة الأولى في كليات العراق ممن يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وترتكز الدراسة على كلٍ من فرضية الحاجز العاطفي لكراشن ونظرية الدافعية لغاردنر، حيث اعتمدت تصميمًا شبه تجريبي يقارن بين مجموعة تجريبية تعرّضت لموسيقى الراب باللغة الإنجليزية ومجموعة ضابطة تلقت تعليمًا تقليديًا.

أظهرت النتائج أن المجموعة التي استمعت إلى الراب حصلت على درجات أقل بشكل ملحوظ في المفردات، والوعي الفونولوجي، والقواعد، والتحكم التركيبي. كما أظهرت صعوبة في معالجة اللغة السريعة والمليئة بالتعابير الاصطلاحية، وكرّرت تراكيب لغوية غير قياسية، يُحتمل أن تكون متأثرة بمحتوى الأغاني. إضافة إلى ذلك، بين المشاركون في مجموعة الراب عن زيادة في القلق وانخفاض في الدافعية، مما يشير إلى أن تعقيد الراب الثقافي واللغوي قد فاقم الحواجز النفسية وعرقل عملية اكتساب اللغة.

تؤكد النتائج على ضرورة استخدام مواد تعليمية مناسبة ثقافياً وميسرة لغوياً في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وعلى الرغم من أن الموسيقى لاتزال أداة تعليمية واعدة، إلا أن دمجها— وخاصة موسيقى الراب—يجب أن يتم بعناية بما يتماشى مع كفاءة المتعلمين وقيمهم وسياقهم التعليمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: موسيقى الراب؛ الإنجليزية text

1. Introduction

The intersection of music and language learning has increasingly attracted the attention of educators and researchers due to music's emotional, mnemonic, and cultural appeal. Studies suggest that incorporating music into EFL classrooms can aid in vocabulary acquisition, reduce learner anxiety, and create a more relaxed classroom atmosphere (Kim et al., 2024). However, these benefits are not guaranteed across all music genres. While classical or folk music has generally been associated with calming and educational value, rap

music—despite its global popularity—presents a unique set of linguistic and cultural challenges.

Rap music is characterized by rapid-paced lyrics, dense colloquial language, idiomatic expressions, and often, controversial content. These features may be stimulating for native or advanced learners but potentially overwhelming or culturally alienating for early-stage EFL learners, especially in conservative societies. For first-year Iraqi students studying English at the university level, learning through listening to rap may either serve as an engaging resource or an anxiety-inducing and demotivating influence, depending on how well it aligns with their sociolinguistic background and language proficiency.

The present study aims to explore this issue through a focused investigation of how learning through listening to English rap music affects both the linguistic and psychological dimensions of first-year Iraqi EFL learners. It seeks to contribute to the growing but refined conversation about how popular culture—particularly Western musical forms—can either enhance or obstruct second language acquisition in culturally distinct and pedagogically sensitive contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Music and Language Learning

A substantial body of research affirms the value of music in SLA. Music provides a natural and emotionally engaging medium for language exposure, often facilitating the acquisition of pronunciation, vocabulary, and rhythm (Murphey, 1990). The melodic and repetitive structures of songs can reinforce phonological awareness and memory retention. According to Medina (1993), students exposed to lyrical repetition were more successful in recalling new vocabulary than those who were not, supporting the notion that rhythm aids language retention. Music also plays a powerful affective role in classroom settings. As Krashen (1982) suggested in his Affective Filter

Hypothesis, learners who are less anxious are more likely to acquire language input effectively. Music contributes to lowering anxiety and promoting enjoyment, which leads to a more conducive learning environment.

Furthermore, studies such as those by Salcedo (2010) and Fonseca–Mora et al. (2015) confirm that music can enhance student engagement and build a positive association with language learning. Songs with simple structures and clear articulation are generally preferred for instructional use. These studies, however, mostly focused on genres like classical, folk, or children’s songs—genres that align well with language learners’ needs due to their slower tempo and simplified vocabulary. The case for music in language learning is strong, but this support tends to vary depending on the genre, delivery, and cultural alignment of the musical content.

2.2 Rap as a Self–Educational Tool

Rap music, originating in urban American contexts, features complex rhyme schemes, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references. Unlike the measured rhythm of folk or pop, rap’s rapid pace and dense linguistic packaging challenge conventional approaches to language learning. Yet some researchers have explored its pedagogical potential. Alim (2006) and Pennycook (2007) introduced the concept of “hip–hop pedagogy,” which seeks to harness the cultural relevance of rap to promote critical literacy and learner identity development, especially among marginalized students. In American classrooms, for instance, rap has been used to teach rhyme, metaphor, and syntax (Kelly, 2013), and its cultural familiarity has been shown to boost student motivation in specific demographics.

Beyond its classroom applications, Fonseca–Mora et al. (2015) see that rap also functions as a self–educational tool. Its accessibility via digital platforms allows learners to engage with authentic English content

independently, outside the classroom. Students often turn to rap lyrics to explore pronunciation, vocabulary, and colloquial expressions in a format that feels personally meaningful and engaging. This form of autonomous learning can support language acquisition, particularly when learners are intrinsically motivated and possess a high level of cultural openness.

However, these studies are based primarily in ESL contexts (i.e., learning English in English-speaking countries) where learners may already be immersed in the surrounding culture and familiar with the genre. In such contexts, rap may resonate with students' lived experiences and serve as a bridge between formal learning and informal communication. In contrast, in EFL settings—particularly in conservative, non-Western societies like Iraq—the same content may provoke discomfort, misunderstanding, or disengagement.

2.3 Cultural and Psychological Considerations

The potential adverse effects of rap music are closely tied to its thematic content. Ballard and Coates (1995, p. 151) found that violent and misogynistic themes common in some rap songs can heighten negative emotional states. Kubrin (2005) and Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) further documented recurring motifs of aggression, materialism, and gender objectification in mainstream rap, raising concerns about the psychological and sociocultural messages imparted to listeners. In contexts like Iraq—where educational environments emphasize modesty and decorum—such themes may contradict community norms and provoke moral resistance.

Palmer (2015) explored cultural conflict in EFL classrooms in the UAE, revealing that exposure to Western materials that clashed with local values often led to learner discomfort and disengagement. Similarly, Iraqi EFL students encountering American rap might experience value-based dissonance, raising their affective filter and inhibiting language intake. According to Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model,

attitudes toward the target language and its associated culture significantly impact motivation. If learners associate English with offensive or alien cultural content, their desire to engage with the language may diminish.

2.4 Empirical Studies on Rap in EFL Contexts

There is limited empirical work on rap music specifically within EFL classrooms, but available studies offer important insights. Güzel (2024), in a study on Turkish learners, noted that while rap music can expose students to authentic and contemporary language, it is often unsuitable for pedagogical use due to vulgarity and the difficulty of the lyrics. Similarly, Rafiee et al. (2010) found that while some Iranian learners found rap engaging, comprehension was significantly lower compared to pop songs. Im (2022), analyzing hip-hop-based English content on YouTube for Korean EFL learners, observed that learners gravitated toward slower, educational rap with minimal slang—further suggesting that genre adaptation is necessary.

Other studies suggest that while the rhythm of rap can improve pronunciation and fluency, its fast delivery and cultural references make it better suited for advanced learners or those already familiar with the genre. In many cases, attempts to integrate rap without proper scaffolding have led to confusion or frustration among learners.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing interest in music-based learning, the potential downsides of using rap in conservative EFL contexts remain underexplored. Most existing studies either highlight the benefits of music broadly or focus on the motivational effects of culturally aligned genres. There is a lack of research examining the *negative* linguistic and psychological consequences of rap music on beginner or intermediate EFL learners in non-Western countries.

The current study addresses this gap by empirically examining the linguistic and psychological outcomes of using rap music in Iraqi EFL classrooms. It considers both the cognitive load imposed by rap lyrics and the cultural resistance that may arise from its themes, aiming to provide a comprehensive perspective on the genre's appropriateness in early-stage language instruction.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon two foundational theories in second language acquisition: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Gardner's Socio-Educational Model of Language Learning Motivation. These frameworks help contextualize the observed effects of using rap music in EFL instruction, particularly regarding learner emotion, cultural perception, and motivational engagement. In addition to these socio-psychological models, the study incorporates linguistic considerations, examining how rap music influences learners' phonological awareness, grammatical accuracy, syntactic development, and lexical acquisition.

3.1 Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

Proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982), the Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that affective factors—such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence—play a central role in language acquisition. According to Krashen, learners acquire language most effectively when they are relaxed, confident, and motivated. Conversely, when learners experience stress, fear, or discomfort, they develop an “affective filter” that acts as a mental barrier, preventing input from being fully processed and internalized.

In this framework, the emotional climate of the classroom becomes crucial. Educational tools and materials that provoke anxiety or confusion may inadvertently raise this filter. In the context of this study, rap music—due to its linguistic complexity and sometimes controversial themes—has the potential to raise the affective filter in first-year Iraqi

students. The dissonance between the content and the learners' cultural expectations or linguistic readiness could trigger discomfort, resulting in reduced input processing and lower retention.

Krashen's theory also suggests that affective factors are often more influential than cognitive ones when it comes to language acquisition. Even if the vocabulary or grammar in rap lyrics is educationally valid, it may be rendered ineffective if the learner's affective filter prevents them from engaging with the material. The hypothesis thus provides a valuable lens for interpreting the elevated anxiety scores and diminished performance observed in the experimental group.

3.2 Gardner's Motivation Theory

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985) emphasizes the pivotal role of motivation in second language learning. According to Gardner, motivation comprises three components: effort, desire to learn the language, and positive attitudes toward learning the language. He also distinguished between integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to a learner's desire to integrate into the target language culture, while instrumental motivation involves learning a language for practical purposes, such as career advancement.

In this study, rap music may affect both forms of motivation. Learners who feel culturally alienated or morally uncomfortable with the content of rap lyrics might experience a reduction in integrative motivation. Instead of viewing English as a means to connect with others or understand another culture, they might begin to associate it with values or behaviors that clash with their own. This distancing effect could lead to decreased motivation and, consequently, poorer learning outcomes.

On the other hand, students who enjoy rap and identify with Western youth culture might experience an increase in integrative motivation. However, in the context of this study, feedback and performance data suggest that this group constituted a minority. Gardner's model helps

explain why even educational materials that are linguistically valid can become demotivating if they evoke negative cultural associations.

3.3 Linguistic Considerations

Beyond psychological and cultural influences, this study incorporates key linguistic components impacted by rap exposure. Phonologically, students exposed to rap music demonstrated reduced clarity in segmental and suprasegmental features, likely due to the genre's rapid tempo and elision of sounds. Grammatically and syntactically, learner output reflected informal structures and non-standard usage found in lyrics, suggesting that frequent exposure may reinforce incorrect patterns.

Syntactic irregularities included fragmented sentences, omission of auxiliary verbs, and inconsistent verb tense usage—common traits in rap lyrics. Lexically, the reliance on idioms, slang, and culturally loaded expressions limited learners' ability to extract contextually appropriate meaning, affecting both comprehension and retention.

Together, Krashen's and Gardner's theories, combined with phonological, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical perspectives, offer a comprehensive framework for evaluating the impact of rap music on language learning. This integrated approach highlights the need for linguistic as well as cultural alignment between teaching materials and learner profiles.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study utilized a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effects of rap music on the linguistic and psychological development of first-year Iraqi EFL learners. Two intact classes were selected from a university English department: one class served as the experimental group and was exposed to instructional content incorporating English rap music, while the other functioned as the control group and received

traditional instruction without any music component. The intervention lasted four weeks, with each group receiving equal instructional time totaling twelve hours. The study was structured to assess the specific impacts on phonological processing, grammatical accuracy, syntactic structure, and vocabulary acquisition.

4.2 Participants

A total of 60 first-year undergraduate students participated in the study, divided equally between the experimental and control groups. All participants were Arabic-speaking Iraqi nationals between the ages of 18 and 20, enrolled in an English language program at a public university in Baghdad. To ensure homogeneity in language proficiency, all students completed a placement test at the beginning of the academic year. The selected students exhibited intermediate-level English proficiency and had no prior formal exposure to rap music as an educational tool.

4.3 Materials and Instructional Procedures

The experimental group engaged with three carefully selected and edited English rap songs, each aligned with weekly vocabulary themes. Songs were chosen based on pedagogical relevance, clarity of lyrics, and thematic appropriateness (e.g., perseverance, identity, and societal issues). Each session included a pre-listening vocabulary activity, focused listening with lyric sheets containing fill-in-the-blank tasks, group discussion on the lyrics' meaning, and post-listening exercises involving sentence formation, grammatical analysis, phoneme identification, and short writing tasks.

Conversely, the control group received standard instruction using reading passages, scripted dialogues, and vocabulary exercises sourced from the university's EFL textbook. The topics and vocabulary were matched with those used in the experimental group to ensure consistency in content. Instructional methods included direct vocabulary

explanation, phonological drills, grammar practice, comprehension questions, and oral discussions.

4.4 Instruments

1. Vocabulary Tests: Two 30-item multiple-choice tests were developed to assess students' understanding of target vocabulary—administered as pre-test and post-test. Items tested word meaning, usage, and contextual understanding.

2. Grammar and Syntax Assessment: A short-answer and sentence correction task assessed learners' command of basic grammatical rules and sentence structure.

3. Phonological Awareness Task: Students completed minimal pair discrimination and phoneme identification exercises to measure changes in phonological processing.

4. Language Anxiety and Motivation Questionnaire: Adapted from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), the survey comprised 20 Likert-scale items. It was administered pre- and post-intervention to gauge changes in students' affective states.

5. Open-Ended Feedback Forms: After the intervention, participants provided written reflections on their classroom experience. These qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to identify perceptions of difficulty, enjoyment, and perceived learning benefits or drawbacks.

4.5 Procedure

In Week 1, both groups completed the vocabulary, grammar, and phonology pre-tests, along with the affective survey. Weeks 2 through 4 involved the instructional intervention. In Week 5, all post-tests and surveys were administered. The teacher-researcher maintained consistency in instruction across both groups, aside from the independent variable (use of rap music). To minimize instructor bias, lesson plans were strictly followed, and the researcher refrained from

commenting on the potential benefits or drawbacks of the musical content during class.

5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from vocabulary tests and surveys were analyzed using SPSS. Paired sample t-tests evaluated within-group changes from pre- to post-test, while independent samples t-tests assessed between-group differences. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d. Qualitative data from the feedback forms were coded and categorized to support interpretation of quantitative findings and to provide insight into students' subjective experiences.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's research committee. Participation was voluntary, and all data were anonymized to protect student identities.

6. Results

6.1 Pre-Test Comparisons

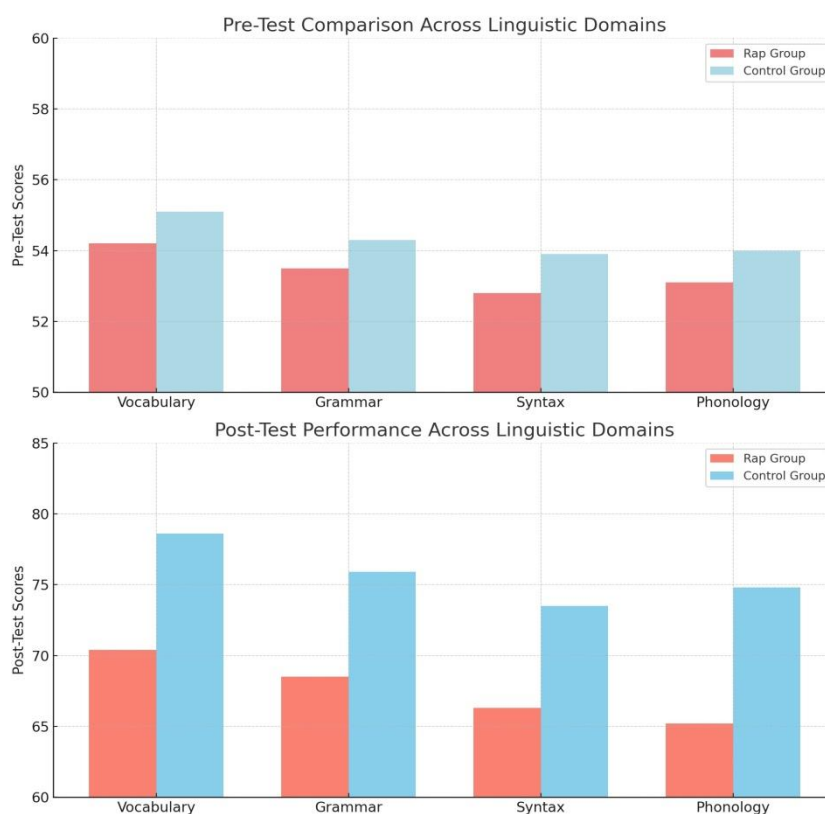
Initial analysis revealed no significant difference in pre-test scores across all measured domains—vocabulary, grammar, phonology, and syntax—between the experimental and control groups, confirming group equivalency at baseline. The experimental group had a mean vocabulary score of 54.2 (SD = 9.6), while the control group averaged 55.1 (SD = 10.1), $t(58) = 0.37$, $p > .05$. Similarly, no statistically significant differences were noted in grammatical accuracy, phonological awareness, or syntactic control.

6.2 Post-Test Performance across Linguistic Domains

Post-intervention test results demonstrated a statistically significant difference in multiple areas of language acquisition. In vocabulary acquisition, the control group outperformed the experimental group with a mean score of 78.6 (SD = 8.2) compared to 70.4 (SD = 9.5), $t(58) = 3.64$, $p < .01$. Grammar and syntax assessments revealed that the control group maintained higher levels of structural accuracy, with fewer

instances of non-standard constructions and fragmented sentences. The experimental group showed an increase in errors related to tense consistency, article usage, and sentence formation. Phonological awareness scores also reflected a disparity. Students in the experimental group performed significantly lower on tasks involving minimal pair discrimination and phoneme identification, suggesting that exposure to the fast-paced, rhythm-heavy nature of rap music may have interfered with their ability to process and reproduce standard English phonological forms.

Below are two side-by-side charts comparing pre-test and post-test scores across vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and phonology for both the rap (experimental) and control groups.



6.3 Anxiety and Motivation Outcomes

Survey data revealed that students in the experimental group reported a higher level of language anxiety post-intervention. Their mean anxiety score increased from 2.8 to 3.5 on the 5-point scale, while the control

group's score slightly decreased from 2.9 to 2.6. A paired t-test confirmed a significant increase in anxiety for the rap group ($t = 4.02$, $p < .01$).

In terms of motivation, the experimental group's average motivation score decreased from 4.1 to 3.7, whereas the control group's score increased from 4.0 to 4.3. This change was statistically significant ($t = 2.78$, $p < .05$), indicating that rap music exposure had a demotivating effect on some learners, likely due to cultural misalignment and increased cognitive burden.

7. Discussion and Findings

The results of this study provide empirical evidence that the integration of rap music in the EFL classroom may present both linguistic and psychological challenges for first-year Iraqi learners. The statistically significant differences across vocabulary acquisition, grammatical and phonological accuracy, syntactic control, anxiety levels, and learner motivation between the experimental and control groups support the hypothesis that exposure to rap music can impede language learning outcomes under certain conditions.

The lower vocabulary post-test scores in the rap group suggest that the dense, fast-paced, and idiomatic nature of rap lyrics likely hindered comprehension and retention of target vocabulary. Additionally, the exposure to informal, context-specific lexical items and slang may have led to confusion and disengagement, limiting meaningful uptake.

Phonologically, students in the rap group struggled with segmental and suprasegmental features, likely due to the genre's reduced articulation, elided syllables, and unconventional stress patterns. These characteristics appear to have negatively affected learners' ability to identify and reproduce accurate English sounds.

Grammatical and syntactic assessments also revealed a decline in structural precision. Many students reproduced non-standard grammar

drawn from the lyrical style of rap music, including omitted auxiliaries, tense inconsistency, and sentence fragments. The influence of informal syntax common in rap may have interfered with the learners' acquisition of standard academic structures.

The increased anxiety levels observed in the experimental group align with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Learners exposed to unfamiliar, fast-paced music featuring linguistically complex and culturally challenging content may experience heightened anxiety, which in turn inhibits their ability to absorb and internalize language input. Student reflections describing confusion, frustration, and discomfort reinforce this interpretation. Despite content being moderated for appropriateness, the genre's core linguistic features still posed emotional and cognitive barriers.

The decline in motivation among students in the rap group, contrasted with the increase in the control group, underscores the importance of instructional content being both engaging and culturally resonant. Gardner's (1985) motivation theory emphasizes that learners are more likely to succeed when the language and its associated culture feel accessible and meaningful. In this case, rap music may have fostered cultural dissonance, reinforcing negative stereotypes or alienating students from the target language, thereby weakening integrative motivation.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, while rap music may offer rich, authentic language exposure, its application in EFL classrooms must be carefully evaluated. This study demonstrates that for first-year Iraqi learners, rap music can increase anxiety, reduce motivation, and negatively impact vocabulary, phonology, grammar, and syntax. These findings reinforce the importance of aligning pedagogical tools with learners' linguistic

readiness, cultural values, and emotional needs to create a supportive and effective language learning environment

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