

## EXPLORING VOCABULARY GROWTH THROUGH SONGS: AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW OF MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of Malaysian undergraduate students regarding the use of English songs as a tool for vocabulary acquisition. Through in-depth interviews with five undergraduate students in Malaysia, the study examines their experiences, insights, and reflections on utilising English songs to expand their vocabulary. Four prominent themes emerged from the analysis: subconscious word learning, learning of pronunciation and accent, vocabulary retention, and exposure to authentic English words. The results reveal that while listening to English songs undergraduate students in Malaysia improve their English language by learning new words, accent and improving pronunciation. Learners benefit from the autonomy to choose strategies they deem suitable for their learning, while also benefiting from teachers' guidance on various strategies to employ. The study concludes that there is a growing preference for engaging approaches such as using English songs, and providing students with an enjoyable and immersive way to learn vocabulary.

**Keywords:** English songs; Second language acquisition; vocabulary learning; undergraduate students

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## INTRODUCTION

In language acquisition, vocabulary learning is indispensable for proficiency development. It is central for language learning whether the language is first, second (L2) or foreign (L3). Additionally, vocabulary knowledge is also essential for mastering the four main language skills; listening, reading, speaking and writing. In fact, Wilkins (1972) stated that without grammar at least something can be conveyed, but without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. This is because when learners lack a wide range of vocabulary knowledge, they soon discover that their ability to comprehend or express themselves in English is limited (Meganathan et al., 2020; Zuo et al., 2021; Nation, 2001). As such, vocabulary is often seen as the key to learning a language.

In the context of Malaysia, students are often required to know a wide range of vocabulary, however, since teaching in Malaysia is often exam-oriented, teachers constantly have to emphasise the teaching of grammar and writing skills with limited importance on learning vocabulary items or listening and speaking. Luan and Sappathy (2011) mentioned that Malaysian students have very limited or almost no opportunities to encounter a wide range of words outside the language classroom. Several scholars (e.g., Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Kumaran & Krish, 2021; Luan & Sappathy, 2011) claim that a contributing factor to their limited exposure to vocabulary is the students' tendency to use their mother tongue rather than the English language even in the English classroom. Despite learning the language for 11 consecutive years in formal settings, Malaysian learners are still facing challenges in speaking and writing at the tertiary level (e.g., Meganathan et al., 2019; Faisal & Putri, 2023). Failure to address the issue of inadequate vocabulary mastery among Malaysian learners could have negative consequences for their English language acquisition.

One of the major contributing factors for L2 or L3 learners' poor English performance is their limited vocabulary size (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). In relation to the difficulties in learning vocabulary, insufficient vocabulary has been a perpetual hindrance for students and remains to be a worldwide concern specifically in Malaysia (Al-Saggaf et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2018). This brings us to the question; how can vocabulary be successfully learned? Many studies have been carried out on successful vocabulary learning in the past (Schmitt et al., 2020; Nation, 2001; Read, 2004; Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2011; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Traditionally, vocabulary learning has been approached through direct instruction and deliberate memorisation techniques. However, researchers in the past (e.g., Nation, 2001: 2015; Rahman et al., 2018; Meganathan et al., 2020; Read, 2004) have increasingly recognised the importance of incidental vocabulary learning, wherein learners acquire new words implicitly through exposure to language and contexts such as reading or listening to authentic materials. Words are usually presented to the learners incidentally (for instance, through storybooks, listening to songs, watching Netflix, playing games and many more) and they tend to learn the words without the intention to do so (Laufer & Hulstijn; 2001). Learners tend to pick up new words incidentally as they encounter them repeatedly in various contexts, gradually expanding their vocabulary without explicit instruction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into incidental vocabulary learning has a rich history spanning at least four decades, with linguists worldwide extensively studying this phenomenon (e.g., Krashen, 1989; Nation, 1990; Gass, 1999; Webb, 2008; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Webb et al., 2023). The increasing

number of studies investigating L2 vocabulary development thorough incidental learning has revealed that most vocabulary gains are through reading up to 40%, listening 29% and viewing television 30% (Webb et al., 2023). Although research on vocabulary acquisition through reading has been extensive in the past, the exploration of using English songs to improve vocabulary knowledge is emerging as the next focal point of study.

In fact, quite a few researchers have acknowledged the usage of English songs for vocabulary learning. For instance, Saldiraner and Cinkara (2021) studied the efficiency of listening to English songs for vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation among young EFL children. Their research findings demonstrated that songs possess the capacity to heighten learners' motivation to recall newly acquired vocabulary. In a parallel study, Anggaira et al. (2022) reviewed the usage of English songs for word learning among the pre-schoolers. Their investigation yielded significant insights into the challenges encountered by preschool educators in sourcing authentic English learning materials tailored to the developmental needs of young learners. They concluded that songs offer a pragmatic and effective pedagogical tool for addressing these challenges, facilitating the acquisition of English vocabulary in early childhood education settings. Similar results were obtained by Magnussen and Sukying (2021), who also studied the role of songs in pre-schoolers' vocabulary acquisition in the Thai context.

In Italy, Mannarelli and Serrano (2024) undertook an experimental inquiry targeting young children, aiming to investigate the efficacy of employing songs within L2 classrooms. Their study encompassed two primary focuses: explicit and implicit instructional approaches, both utilising songs as a pedagogical tool. The objective was to discern optimal strategies for maximising vocabulary acquisition among young learners in L2 educational settings. The results of their study affirmed that either way, songs promote the students' vocabulary learning, with the explicit vocabulary learning approach leading to greater gains compared to the implicit approach. Besides that, in his study, Kuśnierek (2016) uncovered a significant advantage associated with the integration of songs within the English language classroom. Specifically, he observed that songs offer a multifaceted resource, encompassing various linguistic components such as vocabulary items, pronunciation nuances, and grammatical structures.

Additionally, the findings of Zurriatun et al.'s (2024) study demonstrated a substantial increase in learners' vocabulary acquisition alongside a positive reception of this instructional approach (vocabulary learning process facilitated by English songs). In a study involving adolescents in Indonesia, Felicia et al. (2024) discovered that songs have a significant effect on enriching the vocabulary mastery of 8th-grade students. Zhang et al. (2023) conducted another experiment among Chinese ESL adolescents, implementing a three-session classroom-based training program centered around singing songs to enhance vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation. Their findings indicated that repeated singing of song lyrics can significantly aid in pronunciation improvement and vocabulary learning within the L2 classroom environment.

In a more comprehensive study conducted in Sweden, Johansson (2021) discovered that integrating songs into ESL classrooms not only enhances vocabulary acquisition and retention but also fosters positive attitudes among learners, leading to a reduction in anxiety and stress levels. This suggests that incorporating music into language learning environments can have multifaceted benefits beyond just linguistic development. Since songs offer an entertaining avenue for students to relax and enjoy themselves, they facilitate an engaging learning experience. Consequently, this approach provides a simple yet effective method for students to effortlessly grasp and retain vocabulary through enjoyment and memorisation. While a wide range of studies focused on investigating the effectiveness of employing songs for vocabulary

acquisition among pre-schoolers, children and adolescents, there has been a limited amount of research conducted specifically among undergraduate students.

Tertiary-level students also tend to face many difficulties in speaking and writing in English, especially in ESL and EFL contexts. Particularly at the undergraduate level, students frequently struggle with completing assignments and other written tasks due to deficiencies in their English language skills (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). One contributing factor to these difficulties is their constrained English vocabulary repertoire. It is indispensable to highlight that incidental vocabulary learning presents a viable strategy for them to learn words explicitly to enrich their vocabulary growth. While extensive reading has been identified as an effective method for vocabulary enhancement (Webb et al., 2023; Meganathan et al., 2020; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), it may not be a feasible option for many students struggling with demanding academic schedules (classes, assignments, and projects). As such, alternative approaches that offer relaxation and enjoyment, such as listening to songs, can uplift students' spirits and encourage their engagement with English vocabulary in a more accessible and enjoyable manner (Nie et al., 2022; Pavia et al., 2019).

In summary, past research has extensively examined the impact of songs in vocabulary learning among young learners through experimental and survey research (e.g., Zurriatun et al., 2024; Saldiraner & Cinkara, 2021; Pavia et al., 2019). Indeed, these studies imply that engaging with songs can facilitate incidental vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, it is not one of the widely practised vocabulary learning activities among young adults at university or college levels. This phenomenon could be ascribed to the general assumption that young adults may no longer be interested in learning English through songs. However, the results of many quantitative studies (e.g., see Al-Saggaf et al., 2021; Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020; Isnaini & Aminatun, 2021) showed that undergraduate students at universities /colleges in fact, love English songs and believe that it can help them to learn vocabulary. In fact, there has been a wide range of surveys conducted to examine undergraduate student's perception of using songs to learn the English language. However, no in-depth qualitative research has been carried out investigating the undergraduate students' perceived role of songs in vocabulary acquisition especially in the Malaysian context.

Additionally, there has been no exploration into the English song genre preferences of Malaysian undergraduate students. Therefore, this paper highlights this gap in the past literature by addressing the following research question: what are undergraduate students' perceptions of using English songs towards their vocabulary learning? The aim involved the fulfilment of the following research objective: To investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the impact of using English songs as a tool for vocabulary acquisition, focusing on their attitudes towards the learning process, perceived benefits, and overall impact on their vocabulary development.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The research seeks to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of using English songs to learn vocabulary. A qualitative approach was applied in this study to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions, and experiences. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on quantifying data and establishing statistical relationships, qualitative research seeks to uncover deeper meanings, patterns, and insights (Creswell, 2015). In other words, this kind of research often involves observing and documenting behaviours, attitudes, or experiences without manipulating variables. Therefore, using a descriptive qualitative approach allows for

a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of songs to aid vocabulary learning.

### **Participants**

This study consists of five undergraduate students in a private university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The five participants were chosen for the study based on their practical experience using songs to enhance their English language skills outside of traditional classroom settings. The authors determined that these learners regularly engaged in listening to songs as a method of language learning and had been practising this approach for some time. Two male and three female undergraduate students participated. They agreed to be interviewed, and to uphold confidentiality, the participants are addressed using pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection Method**

An in-depth interview was conducted to collect data for the present study. Since the aim of the study was to explore the real-life experiences and views of the participants, the interview was considered to be suitable (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interview protocol incorporated a series of questions related to the participants' past experiences and perceptions of using English songs to learn words. The participants were told that they could freely express any feelings, opinions, and thoughts regarding their experiences in learning words using songs. After finding suitable participants, consent was obtained from each participant involved in this study. Once the participants gave their consent, one of the researchers carried out the one-to-one interviews. The interviews were conducted in English which lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step in the data analysis process was a transcription of the interview. Subsequently, interview transcripts were coded by the author in which the information was broken down by rearranging and grouping it into potential patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyse the participant's spoken response, which attempts to understand or interpret what they mean by identifying patterns embedded in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 6). It is particularly useful for research projects that seek to identify themes and concepts within the qualitative data. The steps included coding, organising, categorising, identifying themes, and reporting conclusions to answer the research questions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The in-depth interviews conducted with the respondents revealed four main themes regarding how Malaysian undergraduate students perceive the impact of English songs on vocabulary acquisition. The data analysis identified four distinct themes: subconscious learning of words, improvement in pronunciation and accent, retention of vocabulary, and exposure to authentic English language usage. The results of each of these themes are detailed in the following section.

## Subconscious Word Learning

Nation (2001) defines incidental vocabulary learning as a type of learning that happens without any specific intention to focus on vocabulary itself but rather ends up acquiring the word(s) subconsciously through engaging in language activities. Learning words with no intention of doing so or learning words subconsciously is the first and foremost theme that emerged in this qualitative research. Subconscious learning of words that occur through songs directly relates to the form of incidental vocabulary learning through songs. The respondents in this study have expressed that over the years they have learnt English words subconsciously while listening to English songs. The following are interview excerpts:

“There’re many words that I learnt from listening to songs... thanks to English songs, it helps me a lot in learning English...for example, words like atrocious, I never learnt that from books, but from songs.” (Jean)

“Ever since I was in kindergarten, I’ve been learning English through songs, and that’s how I learn many English words, mostly from songs ... when I encounter an English word that I don’t understand, I pick up a dictionary and look for the meaning. It’s a practice that I do, till today.” (Mia)

“I think I learn new vocabulary better through songs. I find it easier to understand words through songs because it somehow helps me to memorise words easily compared to words that we usually learn in class.” (Rina)

“I would say subconsciously I learn many words through songs. I don’t usually listen to songs to learn words, but it just happens for the reason that songs tend to have a variety of new words, and if they seem to be interesting, I look up the meaning of those words online.” (Tejesh)

The findings are consistent with the results of past studies (Feng & Webb, 2020; Pavia et al, 2019; Nie et al., 2022). Listening to songs was found to be not only effective in learning vocabulary unintentionally but also a popular way to acquire words outside the classroom. Learners often do not realise that they are actively engaged in the learning process when listening to songs, thereby reducing any perceived burden in vocabulary acquisition (Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020). Additionally, Vishnevskaja and Zhou (2019) emphasised that songs can facilitate language acquisition by offering exposure to various linguistic elements such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar.

Interestingly, these linguistic elements are typically acquired with no intention to do so since learners enjoy listening to songs for entertainment rather than for intentional learning purposes. Learning words through songs also benefits learners by the learners indirectly rehearsing the newly acquired vocabulary while listening and singing the songs. This allows repeated encounters with the newly learned vocabulary since songs often use repetitive words and expressions (Tomczak & Lew, 2019). Nation affirms that repeated exposure to at least six to eight times of newly learned words is highly necessary for successful vocabulary learning and retention. However, Feng and Webb (2020) contend that successful vocabulary learning through listening requires a greater number of exposures to words compared to reading. In that case, songs can be an ideal tool for learners to engage in multiple exposure to the same word.

Each time learners encounter a new word, they grasp at least partial meanings, and repeated exposure to these words can lead to significant vocabulary development (Meganathan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Wardiansyah et al. (2019) assert that students with a higher level of vocabulary proficiency tend to exhibit more frequent engagement with English songs. The entertaining nature of songs may encourage students to relax and enjoy themselves, providing a simple yet effective means for them to grasp and memorise vocabulary effortlessly. Consequently, students become motivated to engage with English songs as their comprehension of song lyrics increases alongside their vocabulary proficiency. This iterative process forms a reinforcing cycle wherein heightened exposure to songs leads to encounters with both new and familiar words, thus perpetuating the habit of repeated listening. This process often happens without the learner's conscious awareness that they have engaged in subconscious vocabulary learning.

### **Learning of Pronunciation and Accent**

Another perception of the participants towards learning English through songs is that learning of accent and pronunciation of new and/or partially known words. The following excerpts show that undergraduate students in Malaysia believe that they can learn accents and proper pronunciation of English words by listening to English songs. Participant Chen said, "When I listen to English songs, I tend to imitate the way the words are pronounced by the singers (usually native speakers), and the accent as well". Whereas Mia stated, "...I learnt pronunciation also by listening to songs. My English speaking sounds more professional, as a result of listening to songs, especially to American songs, which helped me to build my accent." In addition to that, in the next excerpt, Tejesh highlighted an example on how English songs has taught him to learn the pronunciation of a new word and boosted his confidence to speak better English.

"Previously, I wasn't able to pronounce the word 'island' correctly, I would say 'Is-land' but after listening to the word a few times in a song, I learnt the correct pronunciation, and started to say the word correctly thereafter." (Tejesh)

Enhanced English pronunciation and achieving a good accent are often a dream for L2 and L3 speakers. Many studies (e.g., Saldiraner & Cinkara, 2021; Ridhayatullah et al., 2020; Makaso et al., 2022; Dewi et al., 2020) affirm that listening to songs improves learner's pronunciation skills and makes it easier for them to memorise how to pronounce the words by singing it (Makaso et al., 2022). Besides, the incorporation of songs allows learners to not only hear how words are pronounced by native speakers or singers but also provides a platform for them to imitate and enhance their pronunciation. It not only exposes learners to authentic pronunciation but also provides a fun and engaging way to practise and improve their accents. This finding resonates with Makaso et al., (2022) and Saldiraner and Cinkara's, (2021) arguments. Hence, it is apparent that integrating songs into learning not only helps learners improve their vocabulary but also creates an enjoyable and immersive method for accent refinement.

## Vocabulary Retention

Apart from that, the participants also believed that listening to songs can assist them with longer retention of unknown words. The participants reported as follows;

“I think music has some sort of stimulation to the brain in where I tend to remember the song lyrics even without memorising it. When words are put in songs, it’s easier to remember without the intention to do so.” (Rina)

“Songs (lyrics) tend to stay in my memory more compared to the words that I forcefully try to remember from class.” (Chen)

“I think songs can be a good way for me to learn new words because I can then remember the words quickly and for a longer term.” (Tejesh)

“The repetition of songs definitely helps me to remember the words longer than I thought, it doesn’t happen with words learnt intentionally.” (Jean)

The findings showed that the students perceive that listening to songs can eventually help them to remember the lyrics (words) for a longer term resulting in better vocabulary retention rates compared to learning words with intention. This aligns with the findings of Wang et al. (2020) who asserted that vocabulary acquisition through songs tends to have enduring effects, suggesting that the learned vocabulary has a lasting impact on learners. When individuals connect new words and expressions to the lyrics of a song, the emotional resonance and repetition enhance memory retention. Several other studies (e.g., Al-Saggaf et al., 2021; Shakerian et al., 2016) also have similarly highlighted the positive impact of incorporating songs into English language learning, particularly in terms of vocabulary retention. Shakerian et al. (2016) as well as Demirci and Yavaslar (2018) observed that students, through exposure to songs, not only remembered and memorized the words used in the lyrics but also demonstrated an ability to comprehend the meanings of newly acquired words without the need to consult a dictionary or seek assistance from others. These findings underscore the effectiveness of songs as a tool for enhancing vocabulary acquisition and retention in the language learning process. In short, exposure to songs helps students remember lyrics, understand new words, and improve vocabulary retention independently, demonstrating the effectiveness of songs in language learning.

## Exposure to English Words

The next finding of this study is exposure to authentic English words. The respondents stated that English songs have always helped them to encounter new and/or authentic English words. The participants’ opinions are reported as follows:

“I have been listening to English songs ever since I was a kid, I listen to various types of songs from pop to rock and by British singers and American writers.” “Through songs, I’ve come across various kinds of words throughout the years.” (Jean)

“English songs always expose me to a variety of phrases and idiomatic expressions that I don’t usually learn in class.’ Besides that, Tejesh also added that ‘English songs introduce

me to informal language and words like from American culture or reference that help me to polish my English.” (Rina)

Songs often present diverse linguistic structures and colloquial expressions, providing learners with a rich and authentic experience that goes beyond traditional language materials. Exposure to authentic English words through songs promotes auditory discrimination, allowing learners to attune their ears to different accents, pronunciation nuances, and intonations.

This finding is similar to Lestari and Hardiyanti's (2020) in which they found their respondents tend to use English songs to learn vocabulary in a natural setting. Songs seem to be indispensable in exposing authentic language use by native speakers. This type of exposure could help the learners become familiar with the pronunciation of words as demonstrated by native speakers or singers.

## CONCLUSION

Generally, learners perceive L2 acquisition primarily as the acquisition of vocabulary. This leads them to invest a great deal of time and effort in memorising words and depending heavily on bilingual dictionaries as fundamental communicative aids. Vocabulary acquired through traditional methods, such as rote memorisation, often exhibits poor retention rates and may fade from memory over time. On top of that, research has shown that incidental vocabulary acquisition, facilitated by exposure to authentic language contexts, is particularly effective for L2 learners. This reinforces a pressing need for engaging approaches to facilitate vocabulary learning in English, with the utilisation of English songs emerging as an increasingly favoured method. This approach offers students the opportunity to acquire English vocabulary in an enjoyable and immersive manner.

Results of this present study provide evidence that undergraduate students in Malaysia indeed who have used English songs to improve their English language do so for many reasons; to learn new words, accent and enrich pronunciation. They seemed to enjoy this method of encountering new words. While the study primarily focused on learner autonomy and may not emphasise direct teacher involvement in students' learning processes, it is still important to consider the guidance teachers can provide regarding the selection of music genres or songs. Teachers can play a significant role in advising students on effective strategies that align with their learning needs. Thus, it is evident that learners benefit from the autonomy to choose strategies that suit their learning preferences, while also benefiting from teachers' guidance on the various strategies available for use.

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