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The Dual Impact of Commercial Songs on Second-Language Acquisition in Malaysia

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Digital media, including streaming platforms, radio broadcasts, and social networks, are the primary channels through which Malaysian youth engage with English and Bahasa Melayu music daily. While formal schooling provides a foundation in grammar and composition, informal media exposure plays an important role in developing practical, real-world fluency. In Malaysia's multicultural society, where bilingual skills can create exciting career opportunities and foster meaningful global connections, listening to popular music offers an enjoyable and accessible way to connect textbook knowledge with natural speech. Nevertheless, relying on popular music for language learning can have both benefits and drawbacks.

On the positive side, commercial music can significantly support natural vocabulary acquisition and the development of oral fluency in target languages. When learners sing along to English or Malay songs, they gain valuable practice with natural speech patterns, connected speech, and prosodic rhythm. This repeated practice helps learners produce speech at a more native-like pace while reducing delays caused by mental translation. In addition, lyrics often contain idiomatic and colloquial expressions that remain memorable long after listening. As Babayev (2025) highlights, engaging with authentic audio media can markedly improve vocabulary retention and help learners understand how words function in real-world contexts. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) and Urbaite (2025) emphasize that incorporating diverse musical genres into structured second-language pedagogical frameworks can enhance both pronunciation accuracy and lexical mastery.



Music also plays an important role in cognitive and emotional development, as engagement with songs can enhance intellectual processing while supporting emotional regulation (Bao, 2023). Some Malaysian students may experience speech-related anxiety in bilingual contexts, often because of concerns about performance evaluations and the perceived stigma associated with grammatical errors. Songs provide a comfortable, low-anxiety environment where learners can practise language independently and develop greater confidence. In Malaysia, contemporary popular music often incorporates code-switching, commonly known as Bahasa Rojak, reflecting authentic linguistic dynamics. This fluid blending of languages mirrors real-world communication, helping learners build confidence and affirm their multilingual identities beyond formal educational settings.

Conversely, modern commercial music can present pedagogical challenges that may complicate the development of formal language skills. Popular songs in the target language often prioritize rhythmic

symmetry, rhyme, and artistic expression over strict grammatical accuracy. Lyricists may use nonstandard verb conjugations, fragmented syntax, regional slang, and colloquial dialects rather than standard language registers. When learners transfer these informal structures directly into academic writing or formal presentations, they may unintentionally reinforce grammatical errors or carry inappropriate levels of formality across languages. With thoughtful guidance, however, learners can recognize these features as artistic expression while continuing to develop accurate, context-appropriate language skills.

Furthermore, contemporary audio production often features rapid tempos, intricate rap structures, and digital vocal processing, such as pitch correction, which can alter natural vocal formants. As Vandergrift and Goh (2012) note, fast speech rates and acoustic distortion can make bottom-up auditory processing particularly challenging for second-language listeners. When auditory input is unusually fast or acoustically modified, second-language learners may find it more difficult to segment speech streams into distinct lexical units. Consequently, listeners may misperceive phonemic input and develop inaccurate pronunciations, which may contribute to persistent lexical and semantic errors.

In conclusion, contemporary English and Malay songs can meaningfully influence language acquisition among Malaysian learners. Commercial tracks can help improve auditory processing speed, develop a natural sense of rhythm, and foster emotional engagement, although learners should remain mindful of informal language use. At the same time, nonstandard syntax, colloquial dialects, and the acoustic distortion sometimes found in modern audio production may make formal language acquisition more difficult, particularly when these features are not addressed. Therefore, commercial music is best viewed not as a substitute for rigorous language instruction but as a complementary and highly engaging learning resource. By thoughtfully combining songs that promote communicative fluency with structured materials that support formal grammatical mastery, Malaysian students can develop a deeper understanding of how language works. This balanced approach can help learners build the advanced bilingual proficiency they need to thrive academically and professionally in an interconnected world.

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