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Music as a Linguistic Bridge: A Qualitative Study on Song-Mediated Grammar Acquisition in Maluku, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of early and sustained exposure to English-language music in the natural acquisition of English grammar among Indonesian learners with mixed-age backgrounds. It explores music as a primary source of comprehensible input in a context with limited formal instructional resources. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving eleven participants from Ambon and Dobo, Indonesia, including the author, with ages ranging from 12 to adulthood. Data collection included analysis of participants' original social media captions , focusing on specific grammatical structures such as verb tense and article usage, and semi-structured interviews exploring their histories of music exposure. This approach provided a source of authentic, unprompted language data to complement self-reported experiences. All participants demonstrated a strong, intuitive command of English grammar in unprompted writing. This competence was unanimously attributed to long-term, intergenerational engagement with English music, which provided extensive, repetitive input that allowed for the internalization of grammatical patterns. The findings suggest that music can serve as a powerful, motivating, and accessible bridge for English grammar acquisition for learners of various ages, offering a model for informal language learning. Supporting the principles of Krashen's Input Hypothesis, this study highlights the potential of leveraging music as a key pedagogical tool to supplement formal language instruction.

Keywords: English Grammar Acquisition, Music Exposure, Indonesian Learners, Informal Language Learning, Krashen's Input Hypothesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of mastering English grammar is a significant hurdle for many learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, a challenge magnified in regions with limited access to qualified English teachers. This study investigates an alternative pathway to grammatical competence: the incidental acquisition of grammar through sustained exposure to English-language music, a resource that often transcends geographical and socioeconomic barriers.

In Maluku, Indonesia, disparities in educational resources mean that many students enter higher education with minimal English foundations. Conversely, some learners in the same region demonstrate a surprising intuitive grasp of the language. Preliminary observations suggested a correlation between this competence and a history of listening to English music, often shared across generations within families. This paper presents a qualitative case study exploring this connection, arguing that music provides the kind of comprehensible input essential for language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). It positions songs not as a replacement for formal instruction, but as a

foundational and motivating scaffold that builds an intuitive "feel" for grammatical structures in learners of all ages, from young adolescents to adults. The central research question is: How does long-term, intergenerational exposure to English songs contribute to the development of implicit grammatical knowledge in Indonesian EFL learners?

Theoretical Underpinnings: Krashen's Input Hypothesis

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in Stephen Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis. Krashen posits that language is acquired most effectively through exposure to comprehensible input, which is language that is slightly beyond the learner's current competence but understandable through context. Music aligns perfectly with this hypothesis by offering language in a context that is often highly comprehensible due to its repetitive nature, emotional resonance, and frequent pairing with melody.

Crucially, Krashen's concept of the "affective filter" is central to understanding why music is effective. The affective filter is a psychological barrier that can impede language acquisition; when learners are anxious or unmotivated, their filters are "high," and input does not easily reach the parts of the brain responsible for acquisition. Music has been shown to lower this anxiety and increase motivation, creating optimal psychological conditions for learning (Engh, 2013). This is supported by research which found that students learning through singing showed not only larger grammar learning gains but also higher positive affect compared to control groups (Li & Brand, 2009).

Empirical Evidence on Music and Language Learning

Empirical research provides growing support for the use of music in language learning. A quantitative meta-analysis of 27 studies and 1,864 participants by Murphy Odo (2021) found that learners who received instruction through English songs outperformed others in learning L2 English vocabulary. The study revealed that pop music genre was particularly effective, likely due to its relatability and musical quality. Furthermore, the meta-analysis indicated that benefits are not confined to a single age group, though the optimal conditions for learning may vary.

From a linguistic perspective, songs are effective learning tools (Li & Brand, 2009; Medina, 1990) because they are typically repetitive and roughly half the speed of normal spoken English, allowing learners to process linguistic features more accurately. This repetitive exposure is key for internalizing grammatical chunks and complex sentence structures. However, scholars also caution that song lyrics can sometimes use poetic or non-standard grammar (Abrate, 1983), meaning they should be one component of a broader learning strategy rather than the sole source of input. This study builds upon this existing research by exploring these phenomena in a specific, under-resourced Indonesian context, using authentic learner production as evidence and focusing on a mixed-age group.

METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative case study design to conduct an in-depth investigation of the relationship between music exposure and grammatical acquisition. The study involved five participants from urban centers in Maluku (Ambon and Dobo), including the researcher. A purposive sampling technique was used, selecting individuals who self-identified as having a strong interest in English music from a young age and who demonstrated good written English competence. The group included individuals from different age groups (12, 15, and older). The familiarity of the younger participants with 1970s and 1980s English music indicated an intergenerational transmission of music within families.

Data were collected in two phases. The first phase consisted of document analysis. The researcher collected and analyzed original English social media captions from Facebook and Instagram written by the participants. This was to assess their grammatical competence in an authentic, unprompted context. Captions were analyzed for accuracy in tense usage, article application, prepositions, and sentence structure. The researcher specifically verified that the language used was indicative of intrinsic knowledge rather than the output of translation software. The second phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted to explore each participant's "music exposure history." Questions focused on the age of first exposure, the role of family members, artists they preferred, frequency of listening, and their perceptions of how music influenced their English abilities and grammatical intuition.

A thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. Interview transcripts were coded for recurring themes, such as "learning through repetition," "development of intuitive grammar," and "the intergenerational 'Family Jukebox' effect." The analysis of social media captions was used to triangulate and provide tangible evidence for the competencies described in the interviews.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data revealed several consistent themes across all five cases.

Intuitive Grammatical Knowledge

Analysis of social media captions confirmed that participants could consistently produce grammatically accurate English in an informal setting. More notably, in interviews, all participants reported being able to answer formal grammar exercises based on "instinct" or what "sounded right," rather than memorized rules. One of the younger participants (age 12) expressed, "I just know which answer is correct, like a melody that fits."

The "Family Jukebox" Effect

A key finding was the role of the family in facilitating exposure. For example, one participant born in 2008 was fluent with the lyrics of Olivia Newton-John's "Hopelessly Devoted to

You" (1978), a song she learned from her father. This highlights that the source of input can be intergenerational, with parents' musical preferences creating a curated linguistic environment for their children, regardless of the children's ages.

Internalization through Repetition and Engagement

Participants unanimously described listening to their favorite songs repeatedly, leading to an unconscious memorization of lyrics and, consequently, grammatical structures. This process of "chunking"—learning phrases as whole units—was evident, allowing for the accurate use of complex collocations and idioms without explicit study.

Music as a Low-Anxiety, High-Motivation Input

Participants described listening to music as a pleasure, not a study task. This aligns with the concept of a lowered "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982), where the anxiety-free, enjoyable nature of the activity facilitated deeper and more lasting acquisition. The motivation to understand the meaning and sing along provided a powerful incentive for engagement with the language.

DISCUSSION

The results strongly support the idea that music functions as a highly effective medium for delivering comprehensible input for grammar acquisition across age groups. The participants' intuitive grasp of grammar, developed without strenuous effort, can be explained by the constant, engaging, and repetitive input provided by the songs they listened to over years. This process allowed them to internalize the rhythm and patterns of English subconsciously.

This study observed that even songs from decades before the learners' births were effective, emphasizing that the quality and clarity of the input are as important as its contemporaneity. The "family jukebox" effect presents a compelling model for how parents, even without English proficiency, can actively contribute to their children's language development by sharing their music, creating a continuous learning environment from childhood through adolescence.

The findings align with existing empirical research, which shows that singing can lead to outperforming peers in grammar tests (Li & Brand, 2009) and that the benefits of musical input are sustained over time. The meta-analysis by Murphy Odo (2021), while focused on vocabulary, confirms the overall efficacy of songs as an instructional tool. Our study extends these findings by illustrating the mechanism—intergenerational exposure leading to implicit knowledge—in a real-world, non-intervention setting.

The following table summarizes the key mechanisms through which song-mediated learning operates, as evidenced by this study and the literature.

Table 1. Key Mechanisms of Song-Mediated Language Learning

Mechanism	Effect on Learning	Supporting Evidence from Study
Comprehensible Input	Provides understandable linguistic data in a meaningful context.	Use of complex grammar in social media captions.
Lowered Affective Filter	Reduces anxiety, making the learner more receptive to input.	Participants described learning as fun and effortless.
Repetition & Chunking	Engrains grammatical structures and phrases as whole units.	Unconscious memorization of lyrics reported by all.
Intergenerational Exposure	Creates a continuous, curated linguistic environment at home.	Younger participants fluent in parents' music (e.g., 70s/80s pop).

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that integrating music into EFL curricula, especially in resource-limited settings like remote Indonesia, could be highly beneficial (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Teachers can use songs to introduce specific tenses, vocabulary, and pronunciation features in a memorable way. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the limitations of music, as lyrics may sometimes use non-standard or poetic grammar (Abrate, 1983). Therefore, music is best positioned as a powerful supplement to a well-rounded language program.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides evidence from the Maluku context that consistent, intergenerational exposure to English-language music can significantly contribute to the development of intuitive and accurate English grammar in learners of various ages. It acts by providing rich, repetitive, and motivating comprehensible input that bypasses the anxiety often associated with formal study. The implications are significant for both learners and educators. For learners, it validates the value of a hobby they may already enjoy. For educators, particularly in under-resourced areas, it points to a low-cost, highly engaging strategy to bridge the gap in English language exposure. Future research could expand on this with larger, longitudinal studies and explore the specific grammatical structures most effectively acquired through music across different age cohorts.

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