

LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ON SONG-ASSISTED LEARNING (SAL) APPROACH FOR EXPOSITORY ESSAY WRITING IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This study explores the perceptions of tertiary ESL learners on the Song-Assisted Learning (SAL) approach in assisting expository essay writing to improve its performance after a nine-week treatment. In this study, the SAL approach carefully integrated selected songs to stimulate idea generation, cognitive engagement – aimed to reduce over-reliance on AI-based writing tools, improve idea generation skills, and increase writing motivation. Through purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews to six participants being undergraduates in a public university in Perak, Malaysia revealed that songs enabled students to connect lyrical contents with personal experiences, prior knowledge, and broader societal issues, fostering original and meaningful writing. Participants reported that upbeat and thematically relevant songs enhanced focus, emotional engagement, and idea development, whereas melancholic songs sometimes hindered productivity. SAL also encouraged students to explore perspectives beyond habitual thinking. The approach provided a low-anxiety, emotionally supportive environment, promoting intrinsic motivation, cognitive flexibility, and expressive writing. In term of AI assistance, some participants highlighted unfairness of essay composition when some students self-developed their essays, while some others used AI writing tools that furnished unfair advantage. However, compared to AI-driven tools, SAL was perceived as more conducive to creativity, authenticity, and critical engagement. The findings suggest that incorporating songs into writing instruction offers a holistic pedagogical strategy that nurtures cognitive, affective, and linguistic skills, supporting the development of sustainable writing competence and originality in tertiary classrooms, being a suitable approach that helps reduce AI over-reliance in the classroom that could impact tertiary learners' cognitive abilities and individual-writing development capacities in the long run.*

Keywords: *Song-Assisted Learning (SAL), AI Writing Tools, Expository Essay*

Introduction

The Song-Assisted Learning (SAL) approach plays multiple roles in supporting the development of essays by tertiary ESL writers, especially when used to replace the traditional approach of chalk and talk method, with a more modern approach that integrates media in classrooms. A more contemporary approach is the integration of AI writing tools in classrooms to assist and improve essay writing, either used to supplement the current teaching and learning styles, or for several other purposes like grammar and writing styles (Aljuaid, 2024). In the context of using songs in classroom, performance wise, Rubio et al. (2026) discovered that such approach doubles the number of students with excellent writing skills, and Wibowo et al. (2025) found improved engagement and interests in writing activities. However, in many writing classes, Zunaidah et al. (2023) indicated that a substantial dependence on AI tools among their participants were observed, with most using them for the given writing tasks, but expressing limited confidence in their ability to write without AI support. It suggests that the SAL approach is beneficial to writers in terms of cognitive development and motivation, while an extensive support of AI volume can impact the students' individual development of essays.

In the SAL environment, as noted by Coss (2019), incorporating music exploration into classroom practices helps learners develop mental flexibility, positive dispositions, and skills related to improvisation and composition. A song-enriched classroom environment offers students a learning atmosphere that differs from traditional lecture-based instruction that typically involve very few to no music-related media; with many instructors noting that the students use AI writing tools to assist their writing (Zunaidah et al., 2023). In general, the integration of songs before writing stages begin is viewed as beneficial for idea generation and writing motivation, leading to writing sessions becoming more interesting, aside from encouraging the students to express their ideas in writing authentically and creatively.

The abilities of students in forming their own ideas from songs and expressing them into essays were highlighted in a study by Van Horn and Van Horn (2013), as they used music to help students grasp the ideas of great thinkers in economics, and see their relevance in today's world, apart from also using music to teach essential skills to completing assignments related to thesis-driven essays. Such pedagogical device assisted the students in making interpretive discussions and thought papers, benefiting them in various aspects in developing their write ups.

When SAL was used in this study, the students were found to have managed to develop expository essays that reflect personal lives and feelings, mirroring several theories used in this study, involving the alignment between the stimuli of music, lyrics, and rhythm to trigger the students' engagement in attempts to guide the desired learning behaviour – the enjoyable nature of listening to songs and being challenged to make meanings from the songs. This is in line with a research by Miyares (2016) who admitted the difficulties of reading words from songs – being literary texts, and the meanings placed on those words were dependent of the readers' refractions, and multiple other texts and audiences also contribute to making meanings from them, which eventually reflect the significant challenges in interpreting the song lyrics, showing that readers who performed such interpretation had made deep connection between the lyrics and the author's or students' personal stories.

However, even though the findings from past studies supported the benefits of SAL approach in writing, where the tertiary students benefited from associating their life experiences with the lyrical contents of the songs – allowing song integration into their essays' main ideas, and expanding them, their perceptions about this approach that involves expository essay writing is scarcely found. In a book written by Butuc and Pagini (2018), it was stated that narrative-based songs are particularly effective for use in comic strip activities, as they allow students to visualise and represent story elements creatively, yet, careful song selection is essential, and sufficient time should be allocated to analysing the lyrics with students to ensure comprehension of the main ideas. Learners at lower proficiency levels may require additional scaffolding, especially in guiding them to segment the song into manageable sections that can be translated into visual representation (Butuc & Pagini, 2018). Even though this approach fosters the students' abilities to express their own thoughts and feelings into their writing, by allowing surface ideas from the songs (after careful analysis and extraction of ideas) to be obtained, and draw out complex and hidden ideas from them involving abstract and unclear ideas that are extracted and clarified themselves – this matter is not yet confirmed from the students' own perspectives (qualitatively), as many past studies only supported this finding quantitatively, by looking at performance based on final scores or final products of the essays. Therefore, although this approach carries significant benefits to assist expository essay writing development processes, a scarce number of literature had been conducted to support this matter qualitatively by interviewing tertiary learners who are more fond of using AI writing tools rather than SAL to assist their expository essay writing – since AI usage has become extensively used in many tertiary classrooms today as Fitria (2021) indicated that AI has been extensively integrated into a range of educational technology platforms, including virtual aided instruction systems (ICAI) – highlighting that AI based writing assistance prevails over any other teaching and learning approach like SAL in today's world,.

This limitation creates a knowledge gap in understanding the tertiary students' perceptions of the SAL approach, since despite its usage in university classrooms, the question of will the students completely disregard the use of AI writing tools to assist their expository essay writing development processes, and rely of their own cognitive functions to extract ideas from the songs used in the SAL approach remain under discovered. In fact, the question of whether classrooms that only use AI to assist writing manage to motivate the students to individually develop their essays remains under discovered, since past studies reported that writing is viewed as a challenging process that requires intense guidance by the instructor (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). So, with the help of technology alone, will the students' cognitive functions and motivation levels go up? Therefore, this study aims to obtain the tertiary students' perceptions on the use of the SAL approach to assist their expository essay writing, by gaining insights regarding the benefits that this approach carries from their perspectives.

Literature Review

Five key issues are discussed in the literature review section, covering SAL in ESL, cognitive and affective roles of songs in learning, lyrical assistance and idea generation for expository writing, and technology and AI in academic writing.

Song-Assisted Learning in ESL

Song-assisted learning has been widely recognised as an effective approach in ESL education, particularly for enhancing learner motivation, engagement, and language development. Studies have shown that the use of songs significantly increases students' motivation to learn English (Al-Smadi, 2020) and improves engagement and performance when integrated into grammar

instruction (De Roxas et al., 2024). In addition, singing songs with familiar melodies has been found to support vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation, with learners who sing lyrics outperforming those who merely recite them (Zhang et al., 2023), while musical training further contributes to phonological awareness and reading comprehension (Zhang, 2025). Songs also facilitate listening development when combined with explicit phonological instruction and lyric analysis (Tsang, 2020). However, the effectiveness of song-assisted learning depends on careful song selection, considering factors such as lyrical complexity, cultural relevance, and melody familiarity (Tasnim, 2022), as well as thoughtful instructional integration, since isolated activities such as gap-filling may be insufficient on their own (Tasnim, 2022; Tsang, 2020). More recent studies suggest that combining songs with interactive approaches, including digital platforms such as YouTube, mobile applications, and educational robots, can further enhance cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in ESL learning (Feng & Guo, 2024; Shen et al., 2019; Shih et al., 2013). Song-assisted learning in ESL offers numerous benefits, including increased motivation, improved vocabulary and pronunciation, and enhanced listening skills. However, the success of this approach depends on careful selection of songs and thoughtful integration into the curriculum. Combining songs with other interactive and technological methods can further enhance the learning experience for ESL students.

Cognitive and Affective Roles of Songs in Learning

To understand the cognitive and affective roles of songs in learning, it is important to examine how music influences both mental processes and emotional responses in educational contexts. From a cognitive perspective, music has been shown to enhance memory and attention by keeping neural pathways active and supporting effective information processing (Bennett & Royle, 2004). Similarly, music education contributes to improved cognitive flexibility and working memory, skills that are essential for learning tasks involving memorisation and problem-solving (Zhang, 2025). In language learning contexts, songs support prosodic processing, including rhythm, stress, and intonation, which facilitates language comprehension and production (Jingjing et al., 2024), while also providing authentic and contextualised language input that aids vocabulary retention (Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020). Moreover, music learning engages cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains simultaneously, making it a holistic instructional tool that enhances auditory–visual integration and overall learning efficiency (Park et al., 2014). From an affective standpoint, music has been found to regulate emotional responses by reducing negative emotions such as frustration and supporting emotional balance during cognitively demanding tasks (Moreno & Woodruff, 2023). Consequently, the enjoyable and emotionally engaging nature of music fosters motivation, attention, and sustained engagement in learning activities (Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020; Sohrabi, 2015). Furthermore, the use of background music during learning tasks has been shown to enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement, leading to improved learning outcomes (Nair & Patil, 2026). Overall, the literature suggests that songs play a multifaceted role in learning by supporting cognitive processes, regulating emotions, and creating an engaging learning environment that promotes effective and meaningful learning experiences.

Song Lyrics and Idea Generation for Expository Writing

Song lyrics have been recognised as a valuable resource for stimulating idea generation and creativity in writing contexts. Notably, recent technological approaches to lyric generation demonstrate how lyrics can inspire new perspectives and reduce repetitive phrasing, as text-to-lyrics generation systems that employ multimodal pipelines have been shown to support creative idea development by offering alternative wording and viewpoints (Watanabe & Goto, 2023, 2024). Similarly, collaborative lyric-writing practices have been found to produce richer

ideas than individual efforts, as tools such as lyric association maps facilitate both divergent and convergent thinking through shared idea construction and visualisation of the creative process (Yamashita et al., 2022). From a cognitive perspective, the creative process of writing lyrics involves metacognitive awareness, with behaviours and mental states during lyric creation shown to predict perceived and computational measures of creativity (Schiavio et al., 2025). In educational settings, engaging learners in analysing and responding to song lyrics has been found to promote critical thinking and creative expression, particularly through workshop-based activities and free-writing exercises that encourage personal interpretation of music and texts (Crosier, 2012). Beyond classroom learning, lyric writing has also been used in therapeutic and cultural contexts, where adolescents' lyrics reveal personal experiences and identity formation (McFerran et al., 2006), and contemporary song lyrics reflect evolving cultural identities through the negotiation of tradition and modernity (Yuliantari et al., 2025). Overall, existing studies suggest that integrating song lyrics into writing and educational practices can effectively enhance creativity, idea generation, and critical engagement by encouraging reflective, collaborative, and culturally grounded meaning-making.

Technology and AI in Academic Writing

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed academic writing, offering various tools and applications that enhance the writing process and improve the quality of academic work. For instance, AI tools like ChatGPT and Grammarly assist in generating content, correcting grammar, and suggesting structures and arguments, acting as virtual assistants throughout the writing process. (Adam & Chowdhury, 2024; Latzel & Glauner, 2024; Reis et al., 2023). In addition, AI aids in conducting literature reviews, managing data, and performing analysis, thereby streamlining research tasks and enhancing efficiency (Latzel & Glauner, 2024). Moreover, AI tools provide real-time feedback, proofreading, and editing support, which helps improve the clarity and accuracy of academic writing (Cui, 2025; Rojas, 2024). Furthermore, AI tools increase efficiency by automating repetitive tasks, allowing researchers and students to focus on more critical aspects of their work (Latzel & Glauner, 2024; Reis et al., 2023). At the same time, AI creates dynamic and interactive learning environments, offering personalised support and improving accessibility to writing resources (Junio & Bandala, 2023; Partida, 2025). Consequently, the use of AI positively correlates with the quality of academic writing, as evidenced by studies showing improved writing outcomes among students using AI tools (Du et al., 2025; Elia, 2024). However, the integration of AI in academic writing raises concerns about plagiarism, originality, and the potential erosion of critical thinking skills (Aljuaid, 2024; Rezaei et al., 2024). In addition, there are significant ethical and legal implications, including issues of authorship, intellectual property, and the need for transparent and accountable use of AI tools (Al-Zubaidi et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2025). Similarly, over-reliance on AI tools may hinder the development of essential writing skills and critical thinking, necessitating a balanced approach to AI integration (Aljuaid, 2024; Junio & Bandala, 2023; Rezaei et al., 2024). Therefore, AI should augment rather than replace traditional academic writing methods, ensuring that core elements of writing education, such as critical thinking and creativity, are preserved (Aljuaid, 2024; Mugambiwa, 2024). In this matter, developing comprehensive guidelines and providing training for both students and educators on the ethical and effective use of AI tools is crucial (Adam & Chowdhury, 2024; Al-Zubaidi et al., 2024; Mugambiwa, 2024). Moreover, continuous evaluation of AI's impact on academic writing and the development of robust assessment mechanisms are necessary to ensure that AI supports equitable and ethical writing practices (Du et al., 2025; Partida, 2025). To conclude, AI has the potential to revolutionise academic writing by enhancing efficiency, improving quality, and providing valuable support throughout the writing process. However, it is essential to address

the ethical, legal, and educational challenges associated with AI integration to ensure that it complements rather than compromises the integrity and quality of academic work. A balanced approach that combines AI tools with traditional writing instruction and critical thinking is recommended for the best outcomes in academic writing.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the conceptual framework in Figure 1 below, this study posits that the Song-Assisted Learning (SAL) approach, which incorporates selected song lyrics and genres aligned with essay topics, has a meaningful influence on students' expository essay writing proficiency. In this study, the use of songs is believed to positively affect the students' idea generation and writing motivation by fostering automaticity, creating a non-threatening learning environment, and lowering affective filters. Supported by prior research, songs provide affective, cognitive, and linguistic benefits that collectively contribute to improved writing engagement and performance in ESL/EFL contexts.

Independent Variables (IV)

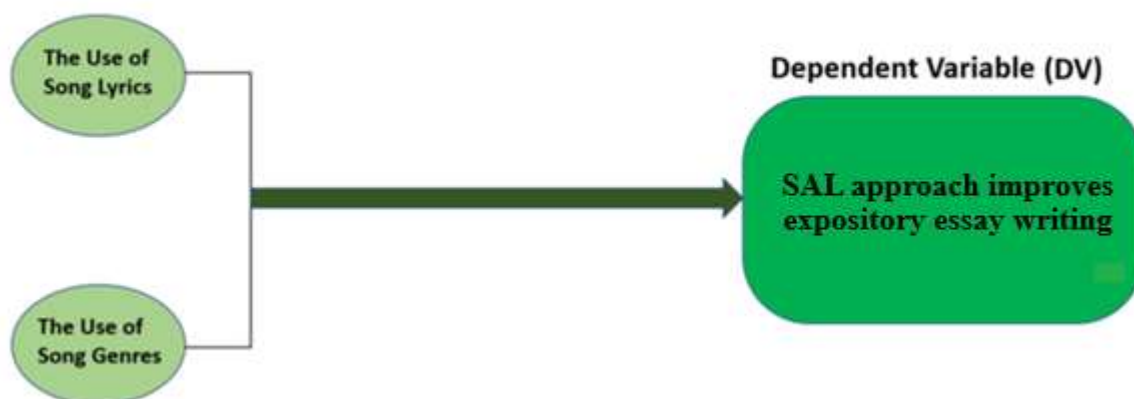


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Four theoretical foundations support the framework: (i) Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1981), (ii) Cognitive Load Theory by Sweller (1988), (iii) Theory Of Writing by Flower and Hayes (1981), and (iv) Multiple Intelligences Theory by Gardner and Hatch (1989).

In general, the Cognitive Load Theory explains how song lyrics and music reduce mental processing demands by providing cognitive scaffolding, thereby supporting idea generation and planning during writing, while the Theory of Writing supports the framework by explaining how SAL facilitates the planning stage of the writing process, particularly through enhanced idea generation and organisation of content. In the Theory of Multiple Intelligences by Gardner and Hatch (1989), it underpins the framework by justifying the use of musical input as a means of engaging learners' musical and linguistic intelligences simultaneously, thus increasing engagement and motivation. Finally, the Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1981) supports the framework by explaining how songs create a low-anxiety, emotionally supportive learning environment that reduces writing apprehension, which in turn enhances motivation. Together, these theories provide a coherent cognitive–affective foundation that explains how SAL mediates students' emotional and cognitive processes, leading to improved writing outcomes.

Results and Discussion

Data from the semi-structured interview revealed that SAL assisted the students' brainstorming productivity and made them active in idea generation efforts. Upbeat genres helped them forget matters that negatively affect their moods, and these genres trigger happiness. Genres that contain melancholic nature should be avoided since the participants emphasised their effects in triggering sadness feelings that negatively impact their writing performance. In addition, it is worth noting that not all students in this study preferred English songs, as the participants also mentioned about the importance of considering the students' demographic backgrounds that may not find English songs to be interesting to all students in the study, despite genre match. The excerpts are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Excerpts of the Semi-Structured Interview

Theme	Number of References	Sample Excerpts
Reduce Over-Reliance on AI-Related Tools	10	<i>"I like writing, honestly, but it can dim my excitedness when I see some of my classmates are using Google or AI for their writing and I think it's unfair because I think that writing needs to come from the heart. Yes, so you know I used to be excited of it because I think we are all writing based on our own fluency, on our own level of what we actually think of, but then when I see most of my friends are using AI and I start to go, oh, I don't like it".</i>
Nurtures Cognitive Functions	43	<i>"Some of the songs that you play, it sometimes helps me because the lyrics of the music have information that will help me to write the essay and also can give me an idea of what I want to write even further."</i> <i>"When I... I think it's all on imagination. When I listen to the sad songs, all the words are coming and just describing how it's about depression, how life is unfair. It's kind of... I think it's because of my experience itself."</i> <i>"The words, maybe, from the words, from the lyrics, I think, like, it can, I can feel from the lyrics, and I can relate with my life. So it's really helped me to express my, my writing through the, my feelings about the, the feelings that I feel through my writing."</i> <i>"Some of the songs that you play, it sometimes helps me because the lyrics of the music have information that will help me to write the essay and also can give me an idea of what I want to write even further."</i>
Writing Motivation	23	<i>"After that, using song-based learning felt like something new and fun. Before this, songs were only used for learning listening skills. Some people really don't like writing because they find it boring."</i> <i>"Actually, songs do help me motivate myself and keep me rooted to my seat to study because, you know, I listen to high beat songs like EDM, etc. And even songs that are not in English, Spanish, or even they don't even have lyrics, I do listen to them because it keeps me motivated and I am actually, I like to daydream sometimes."</i>

As song lyrics are normally attached to genres, with melancholic songs containing gloomy messages and lyrical contents, or upbeat genres containing passionate and motivation-lifting messages, the students found that experimenting with ideas they found from the lyrics as promoting greater self-assurance in writing expressions, related to their idea generation efforts. The connection between upbeat genres and the students' idea generation capacities was proven by the positive results obtained in the manual thematic analysis based on the emerging themes, with the most numbers of ideas in their post-tests were connected to the songs and genres used in the intervention, as opposed to tests that used the least favoured genres.

In addition, information carried by the lyrical contents also supplied the students with key information varying from multiple cultural differences and their similarities. The SAL approach that used English songs from various themes allowed discussions to be made between the instructor and the students regarding various issues, factors, effects, solutions, and problems that were found from the lyrics, and relate them to their general and current knowledge about the world. The exploitation of the lyrics based on the learning purposes in the classroom, as relevant to the topic at hand, allowed the students to view matters from a bigger perspective, and those perspectives were widened by the instructor, and the students were encouraged to use their cognitive skills to open up a wider picture of the issues posed to them, and create a comparison between their own cultural differences with those found from the lyrics. For instance, (Arevalo, 2010) revealed that songs were able to be used to compare cultural differences when different details of contents or characteristics of language were studied, to enable an understanding between the native speakers and English-speaking countries.

Songs should not be used solely to create a relaxed or enjoyable classroom atmosphere, but also as meaningful learning resources that help students deepen their understanding of complex issues through lyrical content. In relation to idea generation, one interview participant reported that listening to relevant songs before writing an essay on global warming provided a new and transformative writing experience. Initially, the student viewed global warming mainly in terms of pollution and deforestation. However, songs that highlighted animals' dependence on environmental resources broadened the student's perspective, enabling them to recognise the impact of global warming on animal life. This expanded understanding enriched the student's essay by introducing ideas that had not been previously considered. This matter encourages the students' cognitive abilities in making connections between animals and global warming, since this issue does not affect humans only, yet everything that inhibits earth, like the animals and plants. Hence, reasonings are promoted too, when the SAL approach was used to aid idea generation, as stated by (Tegge, Pop songs in the classroom: time-filler or teaching tool?, 2018) who said that songs are frequently used as a purposeful and diverse teaching unit that reveal results related to cognitive-psychological findings, yet official materials are still lacking. This means, more research about the use of songs in teaching other components of English are required, especially those focusing on writing – since the effects are still scarcely found in literatures, as many of them did study about the effects of using songs in class, in improving expository essay writing skills. In essence, the use of songs in the classroom served as a powerful educational tool, expanding the student's awareness and deepening their understanding of the multifaceted effects of global warming. It underscored the importance of considering all aspects of the environment, including animal life, when discussing ecological issues. This holistic approach not only made the student's essays more comprehensive but also highlighted the value of diverse learning methods, such as using music to explore complex topics.

Effective Pedagogical Method to Reduce Over-Reliance on Internet-Related Tools

Despite having AI evaluators in the current era, it was found that fairness and objectivity of the grading by these tools are raising concerns, since the scoring are not truly effective nor broadly accepted, since the grading was less fairer than human professors or rates (Mo Jones-Jang, Jihyang Choi, Nuri Kim, & Sangwon Lee, 2025). So, if AI grading was found to be unfair, it is unfair to grade work that received too much assistance from AI tools, since the graded work would be biased, since students who used the most AI tools could have scored even higher than students who did not. However, some people are completely satisfied with such bias, as long as the grading fit their self-interests – scoring can be unfair as long as they received better marks, and fairness to everyone else was not a concern (Cho & Cho, 2017). In addition, some students or writers placed the least regard on this matter, as long as the generative AI or writing tools can help them score higher marks, since the usage of their own cognitive abilities may not render such favourable result at all. (Moliner, Martinez-Tur, Peiro, & Cronpanzano, 2012) stated that people tend to justify unequal distributions only when they are favoured by them. This was strengthened by the semi-structured interview data that highlighted the unfairness of essay writing as pointed out by the participants, as other students were seen to had completed their given tasks using AI and ChatGPT under the controlled group’s intervention involving online articles. Several participants also highlighted that the essay writing tasks should be completed from the heart, and submission of the completed tasks should not be for the sole focus of getting graded, yet it should be viewed as a medium of sharing feelings and emotions. However, past literature still found that students find AI tools in academic essay writing as beneficial, since they assist them in grammar checks, language translation, and essay outlines, enhancing their writing abilities, self-efficacy, and understanding academic integrity (Agung Rinaldy Malik, et al., 2023). But, there are still concerns on creativity impacts, critical thinking, and ethical writing (Agung Rinaldy Malik, et al., 2023). For instance, the contents covering elaborations and examples that followed from the controlled group’s essays mainly came from the online articles, leaving their essays lacking “voice” and could possibly lead to plagiarism. This highlights the benefits of the SAL approach to gain the students’ interests in making sense of the songs used in class, and developing their essays based on the stimuli provided to them and not being over-dependent with AI tools to assist the essay development.

Nurtures Cognitive Functions

The participants of this study stated that songs stimulated their emotional responses, increased writing interests, assisted personal experience connection, and stimulated idea generation – all connected to cognitive functions. These forms of song assistances affected their idea generation skills positively, as backed by (Heba Al-efeshat & Abdallah Baniabdelrahman, 2020) – songs change the classroom environment by energizing it, and when the students want to understand the focus of the song, they were required to read and translate the lyrics on their own, and the learning of vocabulary happen subconsciously, while relaxing their mind. Here, it can be observed that the songs had a large impact on the students’ essays, as proven by a study by (Yifei Song, 2023) who discovered that executive functions, IQ, and logical-mathematical abilities can be affected by music, where Mozart’s music were found to affect children’s reading, and musical understanding can be cultivated when they enjoy listening to music, which lead to better memories, more expressive, and creative. This finding revealed that the experimental students applied the skills they learned during the lesson using the SAL approach that taught them skills to decipher song lyrics, and the application was apparent in their expository essays, based on the emergent themes from their writings. This in line with the findings from (Lems, 2018), who found that pop songs work especially well in teaching English language learners (ELLs), and creating a heightened attention in the classroom as the

atmosphere becomes more conducive to learning, and leading to a dramatic reduction in behaviour related problems, which in turn positively affect learning.

Some students were able to relate song lyrics to their own life experiences, which helped them generate ideas and better understand the writing topics. One interview participant noted that songs function as a storytelling medium that conveys a wide range of themes, such as emotions, challenges, inspiration, and human struggles, which can inspire learners to express their thoughts and feelings in writing. She explained that even when learners have not personally experienced certain emotions, such as depression, relevant songs can portray emotional progression and enable listeners to empathise with these experiences, thereby enriching their written expression. As P1 stated, the lyrics “did help to gain some prompts to write,” indicating that songs served as effective idea-generating stimuli. However, the participant also highlighted that writing essays by interpreting lyrics line by line would be challenging and could result in descriptive writing about the songs rather than expository writing. Once students were clarified that the task did not require lyric interpretation but rather the use of songs as inspiration, they found it easier to write freely and employ the lyrics to support idea generation, elaboration, and example development.

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interview also unveiled that emotions were evoked when the students received their lessons in the SAL environment. By definition, (Adolphs, Mlodinow, & Barrett, 2019) viewed that emotions are the functional states of the brain that provide causal explanations of certain emotional state, such as the fear, anger and so on. People in these different functional states will process somatic and environmental information differently. Environmental information in this study includes the SAL approach that changes the environment into a song-assisted learning ambience that makes the normal quiet lecture or class session into a hyped and happening session that uses multiple songs per session with the objective of evoking emotions and passions to learn expository essay writing. The musical perceptions of the melodies of the voice or of the sounds of musical instruments start very early and remain in the memory (Adolphs, Mlodinow, & Barrett, 2019), which can somehow aid students’ idea generation for their essays, since memories from the facial expressions that were remembered based on the music videos can also aid thinking skills to produce ideas. Besides the fact that music listening is a worthwhile activity in itself, music and emotion studies point increasingly to a range of benefits for society, for instance regarding physical health and subjective well-being (Juslin & Sloboda, 2013).

The participants in this study also revealed that they normally listen to songs outside of the classroom sessions to provide them with the mood to study, and to make sure that they are rooted to their current activity without procrastinating or engage in short-time span activities. However, it was discovered that very few listen to English songs, while many others have Malay song playlists on their mobile phones to listen to, and they were not fond to listening to English songs. When discussing about evoking emotions in writing when listening to songs, a previous literature believed that a vocalized affection teaches emotions to the listeners (Adolphs, Mlodinow, & Barrett, 2019), as the vocalization of singers can be understood based on the production of sound that they make, referring to anger, frustration, sadness, and others, that could lead a writer to emote their feelings. In the context of this study, when songs were used in the classroom to help students generate ideas in their essays based on the lyrics from the songs that were briefly explained to them, those songs evoked certain emotions to them, such as happiness and excitement, that gave them the mood to continue what they were doing in a more focused manner. These emotions were proven to be useful for idea generation from

the interview sessions with all five participants, since they stated that the relevant lyrics made them recall past experiences that were relatable to them, which allowed them to be immersed in their emotions and recall information that were lost before, since their minds became calmer by certain songs. For instance, playing a childhood song that used to be played on the radio for numerous times during one's childhood could suddenly make one receives flashbacks of the very moments that one had during those special years. Psychological theories of emotion outline the structure of the individual, incoming and stored information that is processed, and dynamic interactions with the environment (Frijda, 2008), such as what was mentioned earlier, that could help the students produce or think of ideas from their own interaction with the song lyrics.

Improves Writing Motivation

This study linked several theories like the Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1981), Cognitive Load Theory by Sweller (1988), Theory Of Writing by Flower and Hayes (1981), and Multiple Intelligences Theory by Gardner and Hatch (1989).

In relation to motivation, intrinsic reinforcement mentioned in the behaviourism theory refers to the reward that a person feels internally, because of performing a certain action, including the sense of accomplishment or enjoyment gained from a given activity (Aubret et al., 2019). From the semi-structured interviews, the participants mentioned that they felt a sense of unfairness when certain students completed their writing tasks using generative AI or ChatGPT for their essays, and such action made their essays not to be written "from their hearts", and making the others who wrote their essays on their own to feel less excited when doing the tasks, since the graded work will no longer reflect the students' actual fluency, making some of the participants to begin disliking the writing class. The participants believed that songs allowed them to "convey" themselves through music. Some others properly used Google to gain some insights and backgrounds about the songs used during the SAL approach to assist them in comprehending certain lines and phrases before connecting their own ideas or contents with the lyrics. In turn, the students who completed their expository essays felt a sense of accomplishment, because they managed to complete the work on their own, and learned something valuable from the class, rather than leaving most parts of the writing to generative AI or ChatGPT.

The data from the semi-structured interview revealed that the participants repeatedly mentioned about relating their personal experiences and known knowledge with the lyrics of the songs to help them form new ideas in their essays. They stated that the generic ways of answering a similar-themed question (e.g.: global warming) will normally lead to similar ideas written by the students. However, when the song lyrics have been comprehended, and the hidden meanings or metaphors were explained and deciphered by the instructor to the students, new ideas were able to be developed by them, and they found that such an approach makes them viewpoints from a different angle. One of the participants said that certain songs require a higher English competence level to comprehend the metaphors used in the lyrics. In general, not many students can comprehend metaphors, phrasal verbs, idioms, and phrases that are used in song lyrics, unless the instructor explains the lyrics to them.

However, one of the participants also stated that she could understand song lyrics most of the time, but it was because the participant was a proficient English user based on her English fluency during the interview session. However, the other students may not be able to comprehend hidden meanings in song's lyrics as easy as the others. It was also stated that song lyrics help relate present knowledge with the songs if the listeners pay attention to the song

being played in class and not let their minds wander due to the lack of focus. The song lyrics should also be displayed on the screen in class to ease students' reference to the song.

Another participant highlighted that song lyrics enabled learners to connect new ideas with their existing knowledge and view familiar topics from different perspectives. One of them explained that he typically reused the same points when writing essays on recurring themes, such as global warming. However, during the SAL session, the song Earth Song prompted him to consider the effects of global warming on animals, an aspect he had not previously included despite possessing prior knowledge of the issue. This shift illustrates how song lyrics can activate underused knowledge and encourage more varied idea development. Similarly, some others reported that song lyrics facilitated personal connections with themes related to relationships, allowing him to draw on his own experiences to write more meaningfully about depression. By evoking emotions and personal memories, songs enabled learners to produce writing that was more original, personalised, and engaging.

Suggestions to Promote SAL Approach in Tertiary Classrooms

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed to promote the implementation of the SAL approach in tertiary classroom contexts. First, instruction should incorporate explicit teaching of vocabulary learning strategies that encourage learners to notice, select, and reuse lexical items in meaningful contexts. Writing tasks should be designed to emphasise the learning process through planning, drafting, and revision, rather than focusing solely on the final product, thereby supporting active engagement with the available contents and ideas of the songs used, and the language itself. Finally, promoting critical awareness of AI-generated language can help learners understand the limitations of AI for long-term vocabulary development, and cognitive distress from its over-dependence, and reinforce the value of SAL-based learning to assist expository essay composition.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the SAL approach, particularly using carefully selected English songs plays a significant role in enhancing students' idea generation, cognitive engagement, and writing motivation. The integration of songs provided learners with meaningful thematic input that supported the expansion of ideas beyond their habitual perspectives, as evidenced by the increased number and variety of ideas in post-test essays and the emergent themes from qualitative analyses. By engaging with lyrical content linked to specific genres and social issues, students were able to draw connections between the songs, their personal experiences, and broader global concerns, such as environmental issues and emotional well-being. This process encouraged deeper reasoning, wider perspectives, and more original elaborations in their expository writing.

In addition, the SAL approach fostered cognitive functions by stimulating emotional responses, memory recall, and reflective thinking. The emotionally engaging nature of songs created a supportive learning environment that facilitated focus, reduced anxiety, and enabled learners to access prior knowledge that might otherwise remain dormant. As revealed through the semi-structured interviews, students were able to interpret lyrics as narrative prompts, allowing them to explore complex emotions, social issues, and life experiences in ways that strengthened their expressive and analytical writing skills. Importantly, when guided appropriately, students were able to use song lyrics as inspiration rather than as content to be reproduced, thereby maintaining originality and academic integrity in their writing.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the pedagogical value of the SAL approach as an effective alternative to over-reliance on internet-based and AI-driven writing tools. While AI tools may offer short-term assistance in terms of structure and language accuracy, they were perceived by participants as limiting creativity, diminishing personal voice, and raising concerns related to fairness and authenticity in assessment. In contrast, the SAL approach encouraged learners to write from personal understanding and emotional engagement, resulting in a greater sense of accomplishment and intrinsic motivation. By positioning writing as a meaningful process rather than a task completed for grades alone, SAL-based instruction supported the development of genuine writing competence rooted in learners' cognitive and affective engagement.

In conclusion, the use of songs within the SAL framework proved to be a powerful pedagogical tool that supports idea generation, nurtures cognitive and emotional engagement, and enhances motivation in expository writing. The findings suggest that SAL offers a holistic learning experience that promotes originality, deeper understanding, and sustainable writing development. As such, this study contributes to the limited body of research on Song-Assisted Learning (SAL) in tertiary writing instruction and underscores the potential of SAL as an effective pedagogical approach in contemporary tertiary classrooms, particularly in contexts where reliance on AI-generated content is increasingly prevalent.

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