

# *Learning English Language Through Pop Culture: Students' Experiences*

Thrixzy Chloe Gerica J. Estoque<sup>1</sup>, Dizzy Jane R. Cinco<sup>2</sup>, Thea B. Pernito<sup>3</sup>, Andre Angelo M. Soon<sup>4</sup>,  
Claudine B. Tabangco<sup>5</sup>, Remedios C. Bacus<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Teacher Education, Cebu Normal University – Main Campus,  
Cebu City, Philippines,  
[main.22000250@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:main.22000250@cnu.edu.ph)

<sup>2</sup>College of Teacher Education, Cebu Normal University – Main Campus,  
Cebu City, Philippines,  
[main.22000262@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:main.22000262@cnu.edu.ph)

<sup>3</sup>College of Teacher Education, Cebu Normal University – Main Campus,  
Cebu City, Philippines,  
[main.22000429@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:main.22000429@cnu.edu.ph)

<sup>4</sup>College of Teacher Education, Cebu Normal University – Main Campus,  
Cebu City, Philippines,  
[main.22000236@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:main.22000236@cnu.edu.ph)

<sup>5</sup>College of Teacher Education, Cebu Normal University – Main Campus,  
Cebu City, Philippines,  
[main.22000580@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:main.22000580@cnu.edu.ph)

<sup>6</sup>Faculty of College of Teacher Education, Cebu Normal University – Main Campus, Cebu City, Philippines  
[bacusr@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:bacusr@cnu.edu.ph)

Corresponding Author: Thrixzy Chloe Estoque E-mail: [main.22000250@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:main.22000250@cnu.edu.ph)



**Abstract** — English proficiency is a highly sought-after skill in today's globalized world. This qualitative research explores the lived experiences and influence of pop culture on English language learning among tertiary-level students in state universities in region 7, Cebu. Employing a phenomenological approach, an interview guide consisting of eight questions facilitated the inquiry process, and Colaizzi's method of data analysis was used to interpret the experiences of learners. Findings revealed three key themes: (1) Sustained Exposure to Pop Culture Influences Language Skills Over Time, with sub-themes highlighting the development of macro skills and enhanced linguistic competence; (2) Variability of Students' Experiences, underscoring diverse learner perspectives; and (3) Setbacks, with its sub-themes identifying cultural displacement and minimal improvement in speaking skills. The study recommends integrating pop culture into the curriculum through targeted lesson plans and assessments that align with students' interest. This integration can enhance language skills, shape beliefs and attitudes, and foster cultural awareness, addressing existing learning gaps and promoting more meaningful engagement in English language learning.

**Keywords** — engagement, communication, platform, macro skills, linguistic competence

## I. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, English proficiency has become an essential skill for success in a way that is highly beneficial in terms of professional, academic, and personal success. One effective way to build this essential English proficiency is through engaging methods into instruction, and one of these is pop culture. By incorporating pop culture into English language instruction, it fosters a learning environment that is engaging, entertaining, and relevant to students' interests. This approach not only sustains their engagement but also helps them develop language skills effortlessly and naturally, creating a more inclusive, accessible, and stress-free educational experience. Furthermore, it supports the vision of Ambisyon Natin 2040, which aspires to improve the quality of life for Filipinos over the next 25 years.

Learning English by integrating pop culture can significantly enhance macro skills. Engaging with popular media, such as movies, music, and social media, improves reading skills as learners explore song lyrics and movie scripts while listening skills are developed by understanding diverse accents and colloquial expressions in media. Writing abilities are sharpened as learners write reviews, summaries, or personal reflections on pop culture content. Speaking skills are refined through discussions about movies, TV shows, or trends, enabling more natural and conversational language use. Hence, mastery of the language enables individuals to access a wider range of opportunities. The integration of pop culture into English language learning makes the process engaging and relevant, providing practical context and enriching the overall learning experience— from pursuing higher education in English-speaking institutions to thriving in multinational workplaces. This study investigates how three long-debated variables, namely sex, initial age of exposure to English as a Second Language (ESL), and academic specialization, relate to grammatical competence. While factors such as attitude and motivation [10], first language [6], classroom experience [6], study style [11], and language use [12] have been shown to influence grammar skills, the relationship of sex, ESL exposure age, and specialization remains inconclusive.

This approach goes beyond traditional classroom settings, offering dynamic and engaging opportunities for practice. Popular culture permeates students' home literacy practices through music, television, movies, advertisements, magazines, newspapers, online blogs, etc. [5]. Exposure to English pop culture often introduces learners to new vocabulary and grammatical structures in a natural and context-rich manner and uncovers how one can learn a lot about how to use it in an everyday scenario and how it is now used on a global scale. By immersing themselves in popular movies, music, and online trends, learners encounter real-world language use and colloquial expressions, making their studies more relevant and enjoyable. This method not only enhances their language skills in a natural context but also fosters a deeper connection to the language, as they interact with content that resonates with contemporary global culture.

Recent studies have shown that incorporating pop culture into language learning can boost motivation and engagement among students. Research has explored various media, including films, music, and social media, revealing positive impacts on language skills and understanding.

Despite these insights, several gaps remain in current research. There is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the longitudinal effects of pop culture on language acquisition and the variability of student experiences.

**a. Longitudinal Effects:** The long-term impact of pop culture on language learning may not be well-studied. Research could benefit from examining how sustained exposure to pop culture influences language skills over time.

**b. Variability of Student Experiences:** The study might not account for variability in students' prior language skills or backgrounds and how these factors influence their experiences.

Examining these gaps contributes to the long-term effects of pop culture and how various media elements impact students' language learning, engagement, and proficiency in diverse educational settings— considering prior language skills and backgrounds.

To address this gap, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how students' prior language skills and backgrounds affect their ability to learn the English language through pop culture. By focusing on these unexplored matters, this

study will aim to achieve the primary objectives:

- a. Explore how regular exposure to pop culture in a target language, whether through music, television, movies, social media, or other forms—impacts learners' ability to understand and use the language in a practical context.
- b. Seeks to understand how students' prior language skills and linguistic backgrounds influence both their learning experiences and the effectiveness of using pop culture as a learning tool.
- c. Exposure to English pop culture (like movies, TV shows, and music) often introduces learners to new vocabulary and grammatical structures in a natural and context-rich manner. The question seeks to understand how effectively this incidental learning contributes to acquiring new words and grammatical patterns. It also investigates how learners pick up idiomatic expressions, slang, and colloquial language that may not be typically covered in traditional language instruction.

To achieve these objectives, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- a. How does consistent engagement with pop culture in a target language improve various macro listening, speaking, reading, and writing along with linguistic competence and pragmatic language use over several years?
- b. How do students' prior language skills and backgrounds affect their experiences and outcomes when using pop culture for language learning?
- c. How does one's exposure to English pop culture affect English Language learning whose primary language is not English?

Answering these research questions is crucial to understanding the influence of pop culture in learning the English language despite the prior language skills and backgrounds.

Popular culture can be interpreted as habits or traditions that have been attached to the daily lives of all people in a society [30]. Different forms of media have been deemed very beneficial and paramount in language teaching and learning, helping learners understand how the language is used in real-life contexts. Pedagogically, “films [and TV programs] are motivating and enjoyable, providing authentic and varied language, giving visual [and very vivid] context;” thence, they are greatly and widely used by language teachers globally. [1]

Young people often appropriate pop culture resources for pleasure, identification, and a sense of personal power; these technologies help them circumvent limits on learning and meaning. Integrating pop culture into the teaching and learning process often introduces colloquial expressions, slang, and idiomatic phrases that might not be covered in traditional textbooks. This exposure can enrich students' vocabulary and help them understand informal language use.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

English has always been a dominant language and is catered in films, franchises, and universes that have drawn in audiences from all around the world. Because of its extensive usage and global reach, English plays a significant role in the ability to interact with current cultural trends as well as to consume and understand media content [7]. Pop culture has proven capable of developing language skills across the world. With many seeking entertainment, ideas, and content pertinent to them, learning languages is just an additional offering that pop culture can provide [19]. The term pop culture is defined as a set of beliefs, values, actions, objects, or goods and practices that are popular at any given time and space in society. It can refer to various elements including art, literature, film, television, magazines, and ways of living - just to name a few [n.d.]. English as a lingua franca refers to the teaching, learning, and use of English as a common means of communication thus, this influence extends to language learning ultimately impacting individuals across various media [30]. These cultural icons provide engaging and relatable content that exposes learners to authentic language use, increasing motivation, and engagement towards the language they are learning. Communicative activities such as watching TV, listening to music, radio and podcasts, reading, social media, video games, interacting with other speakers as informal sources of language exposure, can utterly improve vocabulary knowledge [25]. Since they provide a convenient environment and a flexible amount of input. The dynamic nature of pop culture makes language

learning more accessible and enjoyable, reaching a wide audience globally.

### ***Pop Culture Serves as a Way to Entertain and Educate***

Pop culture has increasingly become a powerful tool in language education, offering dynamic and engaging ways to motivate learners and support their skills development. Numerous studies show that integrating elements of pop culture— such as anime, music, and video games— into English language learning not only heightens students' motivation but also facilitates meaningful language acquisition. Learners actively use pop-culture-related media to improve their English proficiency. Among the most effective tools were English songs, which were perceived as simple yet impactful in sparking student's interest in learning [16].

Anime-inspired English learning is another incorporation of student's interest in language learning, significantly enhancing motivation, improving listening comprehension, facilitating vocabulary acquisition, and fostering cultural awareness [4]. These findings highlight how connecting language learning to student's personal interests and experiences can encourage them to take more risks in language production— an important factor in language development [1].

The educational value of pop culture extends further through video games, which combine entertainment with interactive learning experiences. While traditionally seen as sources of amusement, video games are increasingly recognized for their potential to support language development, particularly in vocabulary acquisition. Regular gameplay significantly enhances vocabulary retention, emphasizing the importance of consistent engagement with rich, authentic language environments [29]. Expanding on this, video games help learners improve not only vocabulary, but also foundational language skills like grammar and spelling. Their immersive nature allows students to internalize language patterns and nuances in a low-pressure, enjoyable setting, which aligns with diverse learning preferences and styles [10].

### ***Pop Culture Wields Considerable Influence Over the Process of English Language Acquisition***

Additionally, pop culture; encompassing movies, TV shows, and music —wields considerable influence over the process of English language acquisition [24]. It enhances pronunciation and speaking skills, engaging students effectively. Utilizing media relevant to students' lives, such as movies and social media, can captivate their interest [11]. Moreover, pop culture significantly boosts listening skills and engagement [3]. Furthermore, English songs convey cultural insights and emotional connections, enriching learners' understanding of both the language and its cultural context, thereby making their skills more practical and adaptable [21]. This exposure helps learners comprehend not just the language itself but also the cultural context in which it is used, making their language skills more practical and adaptable.

Pop culture serves as a transformative tool in English language education, bridging entertainment and learning to create a more engaging, relatable, and effective experience for learners. Its widespread influence, stemming from its integration into films, music, video games, and social media, make it an invaluable medium for enhancing language skills. By leveraging pop culture, learners are exposed to authentic language use and cultural contexts, fostering motivation and engagement while promoting deeper understanding and practical application of English.

Research consistently highlights the benefits of incorporating pop culture into language learning, from improving vocabulary, listening comprehension, and pronunciation to enhancing cultural awareness and pragmatic competence. Whether through music, video games, or social media platforms, pop culture transforms everyday media consumption into meaningful opportunities for linguistic growth.

In alignment with global initiatives like SDG 4 and national visions such as Ambisyon Natin 2040, integrating pop culture into education not only addresses the need for quality learning experiences but also prepares individuals to thrive in a globally connected world. By making language learning more accessible and enjoyable, pop culture reinforces its role as both an educational resource and a cultural bridge, equipping learners with the skills they need to navigate and succeed in an increasingly dynamic and competitive global environment.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study aimed to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the effectiveness of integrating pop culture into

English language learning. To provide comprehensive insight into this concept, the chapter outlined various data gathering and analysis strategies relevant to the research, including research design and environment, participant selection, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations. Employing a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the study of individual lived experiences, seeking to understand the subjective experiences and motivations of participants, asserting that in-depth interviews can challenge assumptions and reveal deeper insights [15]. The research was conducted in state universities within Region 7, specifically Cebu, involving undergraduate students from the College of Arts and Sciences enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts major in Literature program. Interviews were held primarily face-to-face within university premises, with online alternatives when necessary, ensuring that rich, unfiltered data was collected. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure participants had shared experiences related to using pop culture—such as films, music, television, and social media—for English language learning. Participants were required to meet specific inclusion criteria, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached at 15 participants. The researchers served as the primary instruments of data collection, guided by a validated eight-question interview guide focusing on the participants' language learning experiences via pop culture. Upon approval from the Research Ethics Committee, researchers conducted interviews lasting a minimum of 45 minutes, beginning with rapport-building conversations and followed by consent form distribution and recording (with permission). Transcribed interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method of thematic analysis, which involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, and validating results with participants to ensure accurate thematic representation. The resulting themes—such as the influence of movies, music, and social media—highlighted how pop culture facilitates motivation, engagement, and practical language use. Issues of conflict of interest, privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, recruitment, benefits, and compensation were addressed. Data anonymization and secure storage protocols were enforced to protect participant identities. The informed consent process ensured participants understood their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal. Cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse experiences were maintained throughout the research, reinforcing transparency, accountability, and ethical rigor in the study's execution and presentation.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes derived from the data sets and following the phenomenological steps by Colaizzi.

TABLE 1. Summary of themes and subthemes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub themes</i>
Theme 1. <i>Sustained Exposure To Pop Culture Influences Language Skills Over Time</i>	1.1 <i>Development of Macro Skills</i> 1.2 <i>Enhanced Linguistic Competence</i>
Theme 2. <i>Variability of Students Experiences</i>	
Theme 3. <i>Setbacks</i>	3.1 <i>Cultural Displacement</i> 3.2 <i>Little Improvement in Speaking Skills</i>

##### 4.1. *Sustained Exposure to Pop Culture Influences Language Skills Over Time*

There is a strong relationship between exposure to English language and English language acquisition that can take different forms such as: listening to English broadcast and songs on the radio, watching English program and movies on the television, traveling to English speaking countries, talking face to face with English native speakers, using English language in real-life situations, surfing the internet using English language, using social media in the English language as well as, reading English books, magazines, and newspapers [18]. Which means that exposure to English in diverse formats such as media, direct interactions, and real-life situations, can contribute to language acquisition by providing consistent practice and reinforcement.

This further supports how sustained exposure to pop culture influences language skills. Social media, which is a significant part of pop culture, helps learners understand language in real-life situations [11]/ By engaging with authentic content, learners



improve their ability to understand the complexities of spoken and written language. This is directly supported by the participants' response during the interview with the researchers, where listening to songs and watching movies help with the improvement of the vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing.

Along with that, Krashen's Input Hypothesis supports the idea by showing how exposure to language in pop culture helps learners pick up new words, grammar, and pronunciation naturally. Pop culture content such as movies, music, and social media provides a rich context that helps learners understand new words without needing explicit explanations. When learners watch movies or listen to songs, they naturally pick up on the grammar and pronunciation patterns, even without formal teaching. This explains how learners begin to use language correctly without consciously thinking about it, and just by listening to native speakers in pop culture, which suggests that this happens when learners are exposed to language in a meaningful, and natural context. Consequently, this sustained exposure not only fosters the development of macro skills, but significantly enhances learner's linguistic competence, paving a way to further explore interconnected subthemes.

#### ***4.1.1 Development of Macro Skills***

The integration of pop culture in learning English has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Its impact on language acquisition, particularly in the development of macro skills, is generally acknowledged. Among these, reading and writing have shown significant improvement, attributed largely to the incorporation of pop culture into educational settings.

In the present study, pop culture emerged as a significant influence on the development of students' reading and writing skills. Engagement with media such as song lyrics, subtitles, and fan-created content introduced learners to diverse vocabulary and sentence structures, encouraging deeper comprehension and critical analysis. These interactions not only enriched their understanding of unfamiliar words but also motivated them to explore their meanings, contributing to the enhancement of reading skills. Similarly, writing skills were developed as students drew inspiration from pop culture materials to craft their own narratives, analyze texts, and express emotions through written outputs. This integration allowed learners to expand their vocabulary, refine their ability to construct meaningful sentences, and apply language in creative and contextually appropriate ways.

While speaking and listening skills were also influenced, primarily through the pronunciation of words and active discussions, reading and writing showed the most significant progress. The frequent interaction with written texts provided opportunities for learners to practice and improve these macro skills, underscoring the valuable role of pop culture in language development. Learners with high levels of engagement with pop culture media demonstrate greater proficiency in key language skills [16]. This reinforces the idea that pop culture serves not just as a motivational tool but as a practical resource for enhancing reading and writing abilities, making it an effective avenue for language learning that enhances vocabulary, comprehension, and writing proficiency.

The responses align with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which asserts that when learners are exposed to language slightly beyond their current proficiency level, they naturally acquire new skills and progress in their learning journey, indicating that the development of macro skills can stem from their environment, exposure, and interests. The use of pop culture has significantly contributed to this development, with students increasingly relying on it in contemporary times. Pop culture has long permeated various aspects of daily life in modern society [38]. Through its widespread usage, pop culture has become an integral part of students' daily lives, as well as that of many others. Macro skills such as reading and writing are among the most dominant skills cultivated within this domain, often influenced by an individual's interests shaped by pop culture.

#### ***4.1.2 Enhanced Linguistic Competence***

Along with that, Krashen's Input Hypothesis supports the idea by showing how exposure to language in pop culture helps learners pick up new words, grammar, and pronunciation naturally. Pop culture content such as movies, music, and social media provides a rich context that helps learners understand new words without needing explicit explanations. When learners watch movies or listen to songs, they naturally pick up on the grammar and pronunciation patterns, even without formal teaching. This explains how learners begin to use language correctly without consciously thinking about it, and just by listening to native

speakers in pop culture, which suggests that this happens when learners are exposed to language in a meaningful, and natural context. Consequently, this sustained exposure not only fosters the development of macro skills, but significantly enhances learner's linguistic competence, paving a way to further explore interconnected subthemes.

Exposure to authentic materials such as song lyrics, music, Western movies, and other pop culture-related media allow learners to unconsciously develop key skills, such as linguistic competence. Additionally, pop culture serves as an effective tool for enhancing English language proficiency by providing regular, immersive language experiences.

*Linguistic competence* refers to the unconscious knowledge of grammar that allows a speaker to use and understand a language [31]. Linguistic competence functions subconsciously, enabling individuals to form and understand sentences without actively thinking about grammatical rules. This concept suggests that humans have an inherent ability to acquire language, an ability that is developed through exposure and immersion in linguistic environments, in this case, pop culture. As a result, language learners naturally absorb and internalize the structures and rules of a language over time, often without formal instruction.

Participants in this study shared how pop culture positively influenced their language skills. For instance:

These responses highlight the effectiveness of English-language media platforms, particularly pop culture, in enhancing linguistic competence through consistent exposure. The findings of the study, *"Video Games: A Tool for Expanding English Vocabulary Knowledge,"* concluded that video games—an integral part of pop culture—can significantly contribute to the development of English language proficiency [29]. On the other hand, the study emphasized that regular exposure is crucial for these benefits to be fully achieved.

The participants' experiences are in line with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which highlights that exposure to comprehensible input—language that is just slightly above the learners' current level of comprehension, which in this case, is the English language—is essential for effective language learning. Pop culture is a great source of such input as it offers realistic, authentic, and everyday language in meaningful contexts. Pop culture resources, whether they be movie dialogues, or song lyrics, are full of linguistic content that students may absorb and process, frequently with the help of images, music, or context clues. In addition, language becomes both accessible and stimulating enough to encourage learning and support the idea that consistent exposure to meaningful input promotes natural language acquisition.

Furthermore, pop culture lowers the affective filter as explained in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Learners thrive in language acquisition when they are motivated, confident, and free from pressure or anxiety. It suggests that unmotivated learners or those with anxiety are more likely to struggle with the learning process than those who are not. The higher the filter, the more likely language learning will be impeded; the lower the filter, the more likely that language learning will take place. In this study, participants view pop culture as both inspiring and helpful. It offers an engaging and enjoyable environment that minimizes stress. As a result, participants experience a lower affective filter, allowing them to engage with pop culture freely without pressure or anxiety. When learners are not pressured by expectations, they are able to absorb and process language more effectively, enhancing their linguistic competence and macro-skills over time.

#### **4.2 Variability of Student's Experiences**

Along with that, Krashen's Input Hypothesis supports the idea by showing how exposure to language in pop culture helps learners pick up new words, grammar, and pronunciation naturally. Pop culture content such as movies, music, and social media provides a rich context that helps learners understand new words without needing explicit explanations. When learners watch movies or listen to songs, they naturally pick up on the grammar and pronunciation patterns, even without formal teaching. This explains how learners begin to use language correctly without consciously thinking about it, and just by listening to native speakers in pop culture, which suggests that this happens when learners are exposed to language in a meaningful, and natural context. Consequently, this sustained exposure not only fosters the development of macro skills, but significantly enhances learner's linguistic competence, paving a way to further explore interconnected subthemes.

There is considerable variation in students' learning experiences, e.g., their engagement, beliefs, motivation, emotions, and performance from one situation to another [33]. This research understands how each learner has a unique constellation of strengths and challenges that impact their learning. Their differences in emotional state, experiences, background knowledge, interests and abilities all affect how they learn and acquire knowledge [11] — in this case, the English language.

Student variability plays an important and a much-seen role in learning. Their interests and personalities should be considered as it is a driving force as to what, and why they push through to learn a significant skill in that particular subject. Dependent on the Affective Filter Hypothesis stated by Stephen Krashen, highlights that effect has a role — students' personalities and emotional responses — in creating “filters” that facilitate or impede learning. Learners with higher motivation, self-confidence, and good self-image are better equipped for success in second language acquisition; in contrast to those who lack thereof [23]. A phenomenon wherein through the unique set of a learner, it challenges and shapes the way one can learn: even making meaningful connections with new content [28].

### **4.3 Setbacks**

Along with that, Krashen's Input Hypothesis supports the idea by showing how exposure to language in pop culture helps learners pick up new words, grammar, and pronunciation naturally. Pop culture content such as movies, music, and social media provides a rich context that helps learners understand new words without needing explicit explanations. When learners watch movies or listen to songs, they naturally pick up on the grammar and pronunciation patterns, even without formal teaching. This explains how learners begin to use language correctly without consciously thinking about it, and just by listening to native speakers in pop culture, which suggests that this happens when learners are exposed to language in a meaningful, and natural context. Consequently, this sustained exposure not only fosters the development of macro skills, but significantly enhances learner's linguistic competence, paving a way to further explore interconnected subthemes.

Pop culture has become a dominant force in shaping global communication and cultural exchange, significantly influencing English language learning. While pop culture in this case helps in enhancing the reading, writing, and listening skills, its impact on speaking fluency requires more attention. Likewise, as learners consistently engage with pop culture as a medium of learning the English language, a sense of detachment from their native language and cultural roots may arise, as observed among Filipino participants.

#### **4.3.1 Cultural Detachment**

Engagement with pop culture significantly aids English language learning by improving fluency, vocabulary, and cultural familiarity; however, it also presents notable challenges, particularly regarding cultural identity. From the consumption of pop culture forms, such as television channels, social networking sites, blogs, music and film genres, and computer games, it is evident how these mediums have entirely dominated the lives of the majority population globally. Language, as one of the functioning factors of culture, has no exemption from these underlying changes [16]. Participants expressed that immersion in English language media often leads to adopting the Western accents, attitudes, and perspectives, a phenomenon they referred to as “The White Man's Perspective.”

This further highlight that engaging with the English language can influence and create a sense of cultural detachment, where learners prioritize English communication to the extent that they forget or devalue their native languages, such as in this case the Cebuano language.

#### **4.3.2 Slow Progress in Speaking Proficiency.**

While engaging with pop culture enhances macro skills like reading, writing, and listening, it appears to have limited impact on developing speaking abilities. Participants observed that, despite acquiring a broad vocabulary and improved writing skills from exposure to English media, their oral fluency does not show similar progress.

While pop culture remains a valuable tool for language acquisition, it should be supplemented with active speaking practice to ensure balanced skill development.



## V. CONCLUSION

The varied experiences of students provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of using pop culture as a tool to enhance English language proficiency. Beyond its role as entertainment, pop culture serves as an educational resource that can significantly enrich language learning. It provides relevant and relatable content, allowing individuals to encounter language in context, not just through traditional teaching materials that may feel abstract or disconnected from real-world applications. This contextual exposure enables learners to see how language operates in everyday scenarios, such as conversations, storytelling, and expressions of emotions, making the learning process more meaningful and applicable.

The themes on interest and varied experiences of the language learners provide insights on the long-term impact of incorporating pop culture on language learning, and the variability in students' prior language skills or backgrounds — how these factors influence their experiences.

Despite incorporating interests and considering the varied experiences of the language learner — improved macro-skills, enhanced linguistic competence, white man's perspective and notable challenges, particularly cultural identity and slow progress in speaking proficiency — students require stimulating and development opportunities that will keep them engaged in the medium of learning — pop culture. These existing learning gaps can be approached by integrating pop culture as part of the curriculum to realize its application inside the classroom. This can include purposefully crafted assessments on lesson plans whose objective is to incorporate interests. In doing so, it will impact their language skills thus, shape beliefs, attitudes, and values, and raise cultural awareness.

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