Exploring Students' Experiences in Learning English Vocabulary through Taylor Swift's "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)": A Narrative Study

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Abstract

This study investigates university students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through Taylor Swift's All Too Well (10 Minute Version). Unlike prior studies that predominantly employed quantitative methods or analyzed songs broadly, this research addresses a gap by deeply exploring how popular songs with strong narrative and emotional qualities foster meaningful vocabulary comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two purposively selected students from the English Education Program at a university in Pekalongan City, chosen for their engagement with the song. Findings reveal that the song's narrative structure significantly enhances contextual learning, enabling participants to infer and retain complex vocabulary. Furthermore, the emotional depth of the lyrics cultivates intrinsic motivation and engagement, transforming vocabulary acquisition into a more meaningful process. Participants also demonstrated active vocabulary application by integrating new words into authentic contexts, such as daily journaling. These findings underscore the potential of narrative-driven popular music as an effective and engaging tool for EFL vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: *English vocabulary, song-based learning, learner experiences.*

INTRODUCTION

Mastery of vocabulary is a critical component in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), as insufficient vocabulary knowledge hinders the optimal development of other language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, many university students majoring in English education encounter difficulties in effectively expanding their vocabulary. This challenge often stems from traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on rote memorization of vocabulary lists without contextual application and fail to engage students' affective dimensions (Mousavi & Gholami, 2014). Consequently, the vocabulary learned is quickly forgotten and rarely applied in authentic contexts.

Several prior studies have explored the integration of popular media, such as songs, into English language learning, demonstrating that songs can enhance motivation, emotional engagement, and provide meaningful contexts for vocabulary acquisition (Shen, 2009; Hermida, 2019). However, most of these studies are quantitative or analytical-descriptive in nature, lacking direct exploration of students' learning experiences or the use of specific song lyrics with strong narrative and emotional qualities. In other words, there is a research gap in deeply investigating how students' learning experiences with popular songs can foster more meaningful and contextual vocabulary understanding.

One song with significant potential in this context is Taylor Swift's "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)." This song is not only globally popular but also features complex, poetic, and emotionally rich lyrics. The narrative structure of its lyrics provides a robust context for understanding and retaining new vocabulary (Engh, 2013). Furthermore, the presence of idioms, connotative diction, and repetition in the lyrics enhances opportunities for incidental learning (Vishnevskaia & Zhou, 2019).

Based on this background, this study aims to address the gap in previous research by exploring university students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through "All Too Well

(10 Minute Version)." Employing a qualitative narrative approach, the study focuses on how the meaning, emotions, and context embedded in the song's lyrics can support a deeper, more engaging, and relevant vocabulary acquisition process for EFL students in higher education.

METODE

This study aims to explore university students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through Taylor Swift's All Too Well (10 Minute Version) and to identify factors influencing the effectiveness of this learning process. A qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design serves as the primary framework for delving into the personal stories and experiences of the participants.

The narrative inquiry design was selected because it enables researchers to gain a deep understanding of the meaning behind participants' language learning experiences through their stories (Creswell, 2012). This design emphasizes the significance of subjective perspectives, personal interpretations, and the emotional significance of the learning process. It is deemed relevant due to the song's strong narrative structure and emotional depth, which align well with the exploration of narrative-based learning experiences.

The study was conducted at a university in Pekalongan City, involving two active students from the English Education Study Program who voluntarily participated. Both participants had listened to All Too Well (10 Minute Version) and reported that the song provided a meaningful vocabulary learning experience.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing their experiences and emotions freely. The interview instrument included open-ended questions about how participants became familiar with the song, memorable lyrics, newly encountered words, and strategies they employed to understand and retain vocabulary. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Data analysis was performed using a narrative thematic technique, identifying key themes from the participants' stories and linking them to relevant theoretical concepts in vocabulary learning and the use of songs in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms—Ana and Lala—were used.

Through this methodology, the study seeks to provide deeper insights into how emotional experiences, narrative contexts, and personal engagement with a song can contribute to contextual, reflective, and meaningful vocabulary acquisition.

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

This study investigates the experiences of two university students, referred to as Ana and Lala (pseudonyms), in learning English vocabulary through Taylor Swift's All Too Well (10 Minute Version). Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian to ensure participants could express their experiences comfortably and authentically. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a narrative thematic technique to identify key patterns. The findings highlight how the song's narrative structure, emotional resonance, and linguistic richness facilitate vocabulary acquisition in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The discussion is organized into three key themes: contextual learning through narrative, emotional engagement and motivation, and active vocabulary application.

A. Contextual Learning Through Narrative

The narrative structure of All Too Well (10 Minute Version) significantly enhanced participants' ability to acquire vocabulary by providing a meaningful context for understanding new words. Ana emphasized that the song's storytelling made complex vocabulary more accessible.

> *"I really like the lyrics. The words are unique and sometimes hard, but because I know the story, I understand and remember them better" (Ana, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

This aligns with Shen (2009), who argues that songs integrate cognitive and affective elements, enabling learners to process vocabulary within a narrative framework. The song's coherent storyline allowed Ana to employ contextual guessing, a strategy supported by Mousavi and Gholami (2014), who assert that inferring word meanings from context enhances retention. For instance, Ana described deducing the meaning of "reminisce" by connecting it to the song's theme of memory.

> *"When I found the word reminisce, I didn't understand it at first. But because the song is about memories, I tried to guess the meaning before checking the dictionary. It turned out to be right" (Ana, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

Similarly, Lala inferred the meaning of "oath" from the lyric, "You kept me like a secret, but I kept you like an oath," using the narrative context to guide her understanding (Lala, 2025). This contextual approach, as Deviani and Hendar (2024) note, leverages the song's rich narrative to make vocabulary learning intuitive and effective.

B. **Emotional Engagement and Motivation**

The emotional depth of the song significantly boosted participants' motivation and engagement in vocabulary learning. Lala highlighted how the song's compelling narrative sparked curiosity, driving her to explore new words.

> *"I feel this song is different because the story is strong. I become curious about the meaning of the words, so I check them in the dictionary. Without knowing, I learn more vocabulary" (Lala, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

This intrinsic motivation, as described by Engh (2013), arises from the emotional connection fostered by music, which enhances memory retention. The song's poetic and emotive lyrics, rich with rhetorical devices like metaphors and personification (Deviani & Hendar, 2024), deepened participants' emotional investment. For example, Lala noted the emotional impact of the word "oath".

> *"It means a special promise, and it really touched my heart" (Lala, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

Vishnevskaia and Zhou (2019) suggest that emotionally charged songs foster deeper learning by creating personal connections, encouraging learners to engage more actively with the language. Ana similarly expressed that the song's emotional lyrics made learning feel meaningful and less like a traditional academic task, supporting Sinyashina's (2020) claim that emotional engagement strengthens long-term vocabulary retention.

C. **Active Vocabulary Application**

The song also encouraged participants to transition from passive vocabulary recognition to active use in authentic contexts. Ana described incorporating new words into her daily journal.

> *"Now I try to use those words in my daily journal. Even though the writing is still simple, I feel more confident to use words that were new for me" (Ana, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

This shift from comprehension to production aligns with Kumar et al. (2022), who argue that applying vocabulary in new contexts enhances retention. Ana's increased confidence in using newly learned words underscores the role of self-efficacy in language learning, as highlighted by Nowell et al. (2017), who note that confidence motivates learners to pursue further vocabulary acquisition.

Lala's experience further illustrates this active engagement. She reported a newfound preference for songs with strong narratives and complex lyrics.

> *"After listening to All Too Well, I now choose songs that have stories. Like other Taylor songs, or other singers who have strong lyrics. I want to understand the meaning, not just enjoy the melody" (Lala, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

This shift indicates that Lala has evolved from a passive listener to an active learner, focusing on linguistic elements such as metaphors and sentence structure. Patmawati and Jayantini (2024) emphasize that Taylor Swift's lyrics, rich in idiomatic and figurative expressions, provide valuable material for deeper language learning. Lala's engagement with these elements suggests a growing awareness of linguistic nuances.

Additionally, Lala noted that the song's personal resonance enhanced her learning experience.

> *"Learning through songs feels different. I don't feel like I'm studying, but I still learn something. Especially when the lyrics match my personal feelings, it stays longer in my mind" (Lala, interview, Author's translation, 2025).*

This observation aligns with Creswell and Poth (2018), who argue that personal connections in learning foster transformative cognitive and emotional experiences. The song not only served as a tool for language acquisition but also encouraged reflection on personal emotions and experiences, making the learning process more meaningful.

The findings demonstrate that All Too Well (10 Minute Version) facilitates vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts through its narrative structure, emotional resonance, and linguistic richness. Ana and Lala's experiences highlight how the song's storytelling supports contextual guessing, its emotional depth fosters intrinsic motivation, and its engaging content encourages active vocabulary use. This approach transforms vocabulary learning from a rote academic task into a dynamic, personal, and meaningful process, engaging both cognitive and affective dimensions. These insights underscore the potential of narrative-driven songs as effective tools for enhancing EFL vocabulary acquisition, offering a model for integrating music into language education.

KESIMPULAN

This exploratory study addresses a gap in prior research, which has largely adopted quantitative or analytical-descriptive approaches, by deeply investigating university students' subjective experiences in learning English vocabulary through Taylor Swift's All Too Well (10 Minute Version). Using a qualitative narrative inquiry design, the findings demonstrate that the song's narrative structure, emotional resonance, and linguistic richness significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

The study identifies three key contributions to vocabulary learning. First, the song's compelling narrative provides a meaningful context, enabling purposively selected participants to employ contextual guessing strategies and improve retention. Second, the emotional depth of the lyrics fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement, transforming vocabulary acquisition into a personally relevant process. Third, the song's engaging content encourages participants to shift from passive recognition to active application of new words in authentic contexts, such as daily journaling, while enhancing self-efficacy.

These findings highlight the potential of integrating narrative-driven popular music into EFL curricula as an innovative pedagogical tool for vocabulary enhancement. By engaging cognitive and affective dimensions, this approach fosters dynamic and meaningful learning experiences.

However, the study's small sample of two participants limits generalizability, as findings are specific to their individual experiences. Future research could involve larger, more diverse participant groups to explore varied proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, investigating the long-term effects of consistent exposure to narrative-rich songs or comparing different musical genres could further elucidate their impact on vocabulary acquisition. Qualitative studies using methods like learning journals or focus groups could also provide deeper insights into learners' experiences.

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