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# DOES MEANING MATTER MORE THAN TUNE? (The adult learners' perceptions on the application of Taylor Swift's song in EFL context)

**Edy Supriyanto[1], Galuh Fitriana Sakti[2], Mahyati[3], Albertus Krisna Prihasdha[4] ,Aam Alamsyah[5] ,Dwi Novita Sari[6]**

*Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Technocrat Tangerang,*

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**Abstract**
Song efficacy in EFL and the figurative language in songs have both been separately researched. This study examined figurative language in a popular Taylor Swift song and its application in the EFL context. It focused on students' perceptions of using English songs in their EFL programs, whether the lyrics motivate adult students to learn more, and their perceptions of using Taylor Swift's song (Eldest daughter) in EFL learning. The study used a qualitative method to identify students' perceptions regarding the use of English songs and figurative language in EFL learning. It involved 26 participants, mainly fourth- and fifth-semester English department students, who had attended an English adult EFL program. There were tow instruments adopted in the present study:a) Questinnaire, b) Open-ended interview. The two instruments were further triangulated to ensure valid findings. The main findings showed that, while students found English songs to be an effective alternative in EFL activities, most preferred songs with topics relevant to their personal learning objectives. The specific use of a Taylor Swift song ('Eldest Daughter') was seen as less relevant to their cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: The analysis, song, figurative language, Taylor Swift, adult EFL

## Introduction

Analysis of figurative language has largely been limited to English letter faculty (Sriyanti et al., 2024; Syamsu & Weda, 2023; Tusino et al., 2026). Meanwhile, the use of songs—which often employ figurative language—in EFL contexts has also proven beneficial (Almauizzah & Hindriana, 2025; Pham & Le, 2024; Rohana & Saharani, 2022). Despite their significance, studies addressing both aspects simultaneously are scarce. In fact, the link between figurative language and songs, which are commonly adapted as the learning strategies in EFL remains underexplored.

Particularly, the use of songs, which is incorporated in figurative language, may offer much richer perspectives which evoke insightful ideas, thus encouraging the adult learners to speak up (Pham & Le, 2024). Building on this, listeners enjoy not only the tunes but also the lyrics, making songs more appreciable. Additionally, expressions conveyed through figurative language deepen understanding and appreciation of the songs (Farinawati et al., 2025).

Farinawati et al. (2025) found that songs generally use repetition, helping listeners memorize and recall them longer than non-tune texts. More specifically, music is a powerful and universal form of expression that evokes emotions, captures attention, and facilitates learning (Bakirova, 2023 as cited in Chen et al., 2024). Integrating musical elements into language instruction allows educators to leverage learners' natural inclinations for rhythm, melody, and song (Chen et al., 2024). Gesta et al. (2025) found that English entertainment can partially improve students' understanding.

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In similar concepts, Entertainment Education (EE) is a communication approach that educates the public while addressing health and social issues through entertainment media (Kohler, 2025). Over time, EE has expanded beyond its original scope and entered various fields, including English teaching. Regardless of the terminology, using entertainment media—such as songs and figurative language—may be one of the most effective learning tools, helping learners engage more actively.

The present study went beyond the mere figurative language analysis conducted in numerous studies (Fitriani et al., 2025; Sriyanti et al., 2024; Tusino et al., 2026; Yunanda et al., 2021); in fact, it focused on how songs that use figurative language could attract and motivate students to communicate among their peers when learning in the English classroom. In line with the modernization paradigm of the application of language teaching, which should not only the highlight words, sentences, or phrases to be communicated during the class, but also the meaningful messages which can inspire students to deliberate on the topic in the songs, the present study attempted to highlight the use of the song written and performed by Taylor Swift, namely "Eldest Daughter", and the potential benefit of this learning strategy in supporting students' communication practices during the adult EFL class.

By applying the figurative language found in songs, English learners gain both meanings that can trigger conversation and the joy of the entertainment aspect, which motivates them to do more than just learn. Overall, research on figurative language in language-learning media, namely songs, encourages education stakeholders, especially teachers, to use more varied strategies, leading to multimodal rather than single, and static activities.

**Research questions**

1) What are the students' perceptions on the use of English song in their EFL program?
2) To what extent can lyric inside the song inspire adult students to learn more?
3) What are the students' perceptions on the use of Taylor Swift's song (Eldest daughter) for their EFL learning activity?

# Literature Review

### Entertainment vs. Value-laden learning materials

Entertainment education (EE) is a social intervention/communication approach to educate the public while addressing health and social issues through entertainment media (Kohler, 2025). As time goes on, the concept of Entertainment Education (EE) has also been adopted in various fields, including English teaching. As part of entertainment, the role of songs as a medium for learning English has also been extensively studied (Almauizzah & Hindriana, 2025; Ella et al., 2021; Sunarti et al. 2023). According to Sulaiman and Djauhari (2025), songs are unique in that they combine language and sound, allowing listeners to engage with meaning on both cognitive and affective levels. Ibrahim et al. (2019 as cited in Sulaiman & Djauhari, 2025) explain that song lyrics often encapsulate experiences and emotions that are difficult to convey through ordinary speech.

### Meaning inside the songs

Admittedly, the song presented by the singers generally contain not an ordinary meaning. In fact, they tend to present contextual meaning. According to Crystal (2003), figurative language refers to the creative use of language where words or phrases are employed in a non-literal way to convey Meaning, emotion, or imagery. Figurative language is language that uses words or expressions with a meaning that is different from the literal interpretation (Azzahraini, 2022). Azzahraini (2022) further explain that figurative language has been widely examined by linguist in the study of literature in recent years.

Figurative language is usually used in literary works, such as speech, newspaper, poem, prose, and nonfiction writing as well. According to Sulaiman and Djauhari (2025) figurative language is widely used in various forms of communication, particularly in literature and music. It includes a variety of linguistic devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism. These devices are not only stylistic tools but also contain mechanisms that

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deepen the listener's or reader's understanding of themes and emotions.

In line with the present study, the researchers took one sample of the song popularized by Taylor Swift which would be used in the study. The consideration of choosing her songs is due to the popularity of the singer as well as the English song performed by her.

Eldest daughter

Everybody's so punk on the internet
Everyone's unbothered 'til they're not
Every joke's just trolling and memes
Sad as it seems, apathy is hot
Everybody's cutthroat in the comments
Every single hot take is cold as ice
When you found me I said I was busy
That was a lie
I have been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness
I've been dying just from trying to seem cool
But I'm not the baddest
And this isn't savage
But I'm never gonna let you down
I'm never gonna leave you out
So many traitors
Smooth operators
But I'm never gonna break that vow
I'm never gonna leave you now, now, now
You know the last time I laughed this hard was
On the trampoline in somebody's backyard
I must've been about 8 or 9
That was the night I fell off and broke my arm
Pretty soon I learned cautious discretion
When your first crush crushes something kind
When I said I don't believe in marriage
That was a lie
Every eldest daughter
Was the first lamb to the slaughter
So we all dressed up as wolves and we looked fire
But I'm not the baddest, and this isn't savage
But I'm never gonna let you down
I'm never gonna leave you out
So many traitors, smooth operators
But I'm never gonna break that vow
I'm never gonna leave you now, now, now
We lie back
A beautiful, beautiful time lapse
Ferris wheels, kisses and lilacs
And things I said were dumb
'Cause I thought that I'd never find that beautiful, beautiful life that
Shimmers that innocent light back
Like when we were young
Every youngest child felt
They were raised up in the wild
But now you're home
'Cause I'm not the baddest
And this isn't savage
And I'm never gonna let you down

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I'm never gonna leave you out
So many traitors
Smooth operators
But I'm never gonna break that vow
I'm never gonna leave you now, now, now
Never gonna break that vow
Never gonna leave you now, now
I'm never gonna leave you now

**Adult EFL**

Adult learners are generally known as 'non-traditional students' which refer to the category of 20-65 years of age, who enroll into higher education studies in a non-traditional way, who is financially independent, with several social roles of life, studying full-time or part-time, and working fulltime or part-time, or not working at all (Treiniene, 2017 as cited in Alshebou & Taqi, 2019). Furthermore, scholars coined the term "Andragogy" to describe the characteristics of learning for adults, including in language learning (Knowles, 1988 as cited in Purwati et al., 2022). Some learning characteristics belong to adults, such as self-concept, learning experiences, readiness to learn, motivation, need to know, and problem-centered learning. It is therefore important to determine whether the songs delivered during the class align with values generally adopted by the learners.

# Research Method

**Design of the study**

The study used a qualitative design to describe how adult students perceive figurative language. The use of qualitative methods was supported by scholars who suggest such methods help describe phenomena experienced by participants (Bazen et al., 2021). To capture data, the researchers used both questionnaires and interviews. The researchers also used triangulation to support data validity. Specifically, they compared questionnaire and interview results to identify relevant links.

**Participants of the study**

The participants in the present study were 26 foreign language students who had previously attended an English course prior to entering their language college. Most participants were recruited from semester IV or V. To be eligible, participants must have taken a non-formal English course before or while studying in the foreign language college. The researchers recruited the participants purposively due to some considerations: 1) Not all students currently studying in the English department had previously taken an English course, and 2) Not many foreign language college who were able to participate in the research due to their hectic work schedules. Future recruitment should account for these factors to strengthen the validity of the findings.

Table 1. Participants of the present study

| Participants | Sex | Semester |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Female | IV |
| 2 | Male | IV |
| 3 | Male | IV |
| 4 | Male | IV |
| 5 | Male | IV |
| 6 | Female | IV |
| 7 | Female | IV |
| 8 | Female | IV |
| 9 | Male | IV |
| 10 | Male | IV |
| 11 | Male | IV |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 12 | Male | IV |
| 13 | Male | V |
| 14 | Male | V |
| 15 | Male | V |
| 16 | Male | V |
| 17 | Male | V |
| 18 | Male | V |
| 19 | Male | V |
| 20 | Male | V |
| 21 | Male | V |
| 22 | Male | V |
| 23 | Male | V |
| 24 | Male | V |
| 25 | Male | V |
| 26 | Male | V |

**Instruments**

Instruments are tools used or adopted by the researcher to elicit information from the sources of data (Bastos et al., 2014). There were two instruments used in the present study. Firstly, the questionnaire was applied to elicit the data on the first and second questions. Secondly, the semi-structured interview was adopted to elicit the third research question regarding the application of Taylor Swift's song (i.e., Eldest daughter) in their learning activity.

**Questionnaire**

| **Statements** | **Options (N=26)** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Students' perceptions on the use of song in EFL learning activity** | **SD** | **D** | **D** | **A** | **SA** |
| I think the songs presented in the EFL class is important. | | | | | |
| The popularity of the singers presented during the class is more important. | | | | | |
| The figurative languages identified inside the song might trigger students to think and speak more. | | | | | |
| I think the song presented in the EFL class is not really important. | | | | | |
| Presenting the song to the students who do not like singing is not effective. | | | | | |
| The messages or the values inside the songs are more important | | | | | |
| The text/lyric inside the songs which is understandable and easy to read is more important. | | | | | |
| The time management when presenting the song is important. | | | | | |
| The relevance between the song and the topic inside the book or to teach is important. | | | | | |
| The words, phrases, or sentences inside the songs are not always easy to understand. | | | | | |
| **Students' perceptions on the use of song in EFL learning activity** | **SD** | **D** | **D** | **A** | **SA** |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Every song has an important message or values to appreciate. | | | | | |
| I usually listen to the tune more than the lyrics or the text of the song. | | | | | |
| I consider the singer before I listen to the song. | | | | | |
| I listen to whatever the song as long as it is nice and easy listening. | | | | | |
| Most of the English songs are easy listening. | | | | | |
| Most of the English songs are easy to understand. | | | | | |
| The value which matter most is to help each other. | | | | | |
| The value which matters most is respect among each other. | | | | | |
| What matters most for me is the relevance of the value and the learning process. | | | | | |

**Interviews**

Additionally, interview was adopted to reassure the data taken from the questionnaire. The statements which were perceived important and could provide important information were further reconfirmed to the participants.

**Venues of the study**

The present study took place in the participants' college. The participants who are the active students of the foreign language college were invited to participate in the study.

**Sources of data and data analysis**

There were two sources of data taken for further analysis, such as questionnaire and verbal responses. The first source of data were taken from the written instrument, which was distributed earlier to the participants after the learning process. The other sources of data taken was verbal responses. The verbal responses were elicited from the open-ended interviews conducted after the questionnaire distribution.

**Data collection procedures**

There are some steps conducted in order to collect the data effectively as the followings:

a. The students were briefed on the purpose of the research.
b. The students were given sufficient information regarding the benefits and the participants' right in the commencement of the research.
c. The students were presented with a Taylor Swift's song entitled 'Eldest daughter'.
d. The students were asked to respond to the questionnaire regarding the above song.
e. The students were called for an interview one by one to reconfirm their perceptions of the song.
f. The findings of the two instruments (e.g., questionnaire and interviews) were further triangulated so that the relevance between them can be captured.

## Results and Discussion

**Students' perceptions on the use of song during the EFL learning activity**

| **Statements** | **Options (N=26)** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Students' perceptions on the use of song in EFL learning activity** | **SD** | **D** | **D** | **A** | **SA** |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I think the songs presented in the EFL class is important. | 0 | 3 (11.53 %) | 5 (19.23 %) | 10 (38. 46 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) |
| The popularity of the singers presented during the class is more important. | 0 | 0 | 9 (34.61 %) | 9 (34.61 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) |
| The figurative languages identified inside the song might trigger students to think and speak more. | 3 (11.53 %) | 5 (19.23 %) | 3 (11.53 %) | 9 (34.61 %) | 6 (23.07 %) |
| I think the song presented in the EFL class is not really important. | 2 (7. 69 %) | 3 (11.53 %) | 6 (23.07 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) | 7 (26.92 %) |
| Presenting the song to the students who do not like singing is not effective. | 3 (11.53 %) | 4 (15.38 %) | 6 (23.07 %) | 6 (23.07 %) | 7 (26.92 %) |
| The messages or the values inside the songs are more important | 0 | 2 (7. 69 %) | 6 (23.07 %) | 10 (38. 46 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) |
| The text/lyric inside the songs which is understandable and easy to read is more important. | 0 | 0 | 3 (11.53 %) | 12 (46.15 %) | 11 (42.30 %) |
| The time management when presenting the song is important. | 0 | 0 | 2 (7. 69 %) | 13 (50 %) | 11 (42.30 %) |
| The relevance between the song and the topic inside the book or to teach is important. | 0 | 0 | 3 (11.53 %) | 11 (42.30 %) | 12 (46.15 %) |
| The words, phrases, or sentences inside the songs are not always easy to understand. | 0 | 0 | 4 (15.38 %) | 11 (42.30 %) | 11 (42.30 %) |

**Students' perceptions on the potential meaning and values inside the song**

| **Students' perceptions on the use of song in EFL learning activity** | **SD** | **D** | **D** | **A** | **SA** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Every song has an important message or values to appreciate. | 0 | 3 (11.53 %) | 5 (19.23 %) | 10 (38. 46 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) |
| I usually listen to the tune more than the lyrics or the text of the song. | 0 | 0 | 9 (34.61 %) | 9 (34.61 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) |
| I consider the singer before I listen to the song. | 3 (11.53 %) | 3 (11.53 %) | 6 (23.07 %) | 5 (19.23 %) | 9 (34.61 %) |
| I listen to whatever the song as long as it is nice and easy listening. | 2 (7. 69 %) | 3 (11.53 %) | 6 (23.07 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) | 7 (26.92 %) |
| Most of the English songs are easy listening. | 7 (26.92 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) | 5 (19.23 %) | 3 (11.53 %) | 3 (11.53 %) |
| Most of the English songs are easy to understand. | 0 | 2 (7. 69 %) | 4 (15.38 %) | 10 (38. 46 %) | 8 (30. 76 %) |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The value which matter most is to help each other. | 0 | 0 | 2 (7. 69 %) | 13 (50 %) | 11 (42.30 %) |
| The value which matters most is respect among each other. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 (53.84%) | 12 (46.15 %) |
| What matters most for me is the relevance of the value and the learning process. | 0 | 0 | 3 (11.53 %) | 11 (42.30 %) | 12 (46.15 %) |

**Important themes identified from verbal responses regarding the application of Taylor Swift's song (i.e., Eldest Daughter) in EFL learning activity**

| Datum | Extract | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | We are mostly the ones who try to learn for a serious matter and not for fun. | Specific learning objective. |
| 2 | Singing a song is okay, but please consider that there are numerous types of songs that might be less familiar to the students. | Identifying learners' personal background regarding the music and their preferences are important. |
| 3 | I personally think that listening to a song can be both entertaining and inspiring. | The incorporation of song can be both entertaining and motivating. |
| 4 | I think this song is interesting as it tells about the burden of being an eldest child. But, it seems that it is not always easy to ensure that the whole participants are interested in this topic. | It is not always easy to generalize the topic regardless of the popularity and the familiarity of the text of the song. |
| 5 | Both singer and the song are popular, however, I think we also need to know whether this song is suitable for the adult students. | Despite being popular, the relevance of the song with the students' preferences is essential. |
| 6 | Providing love song, which can universally be accepted might be more interesting and inspiring. | A love song, which discusses universal value might be more acceptable. |
| 7 | Being an eldest daughter does not pose any problem for some societies. In fact, they think that having daughters allows certain families to select wealthy husbands. | The topic of eldest daughter does not always suit in every society in Indonesia. |
| 8 | Culturally, an eldest does not always indicate bigger responsibility. In fact, poverty among families might result in more cases of domestic violence, which might be the more common occurrence at the moment. | Poverty or domestic violence might be more common topic for discussion in EFL. |

**What motivates more: The tune vs. The song lyric**

The findings indicate that, despite being interested in the song, the participants tend to perceive that the efficacy of the song in EFL will depend on a variety of factors. In fact, some of the students might have different ideas on the preferred lyrics of the songs, while others might have a different preference for the song presented during the class. It is important for the teachers to always identify the preferred topic by the majority of the students so that the application of the song during the English learning activities will impart more benefits than rejections. Previous studies have long identified and confirmed that, despite being potent (Almauizzah & Hindriana, 2025; Kitjaroonchai & Sukman, 2025; Sambonu et al., 2025), the use of song should be given painstakingly and based on the students' interest, English capacities and their familiarity with the songs (Putri et al., 2022).

In sum, while the application of the English song could generate the variety of benefits,

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such as the more natural exposure of listening sources, the and chances to practice based on the words or phrases provided by the songs, thus helping the students' to practice speaking, the application of the songs should also be in line with the important learning objectives to which the students will acquire their future learning goal after the completion (Almauizzah & Hindriana, 2025). Le (2023) suggests that, despite being beneficial, the teachers who apply music as one of the learning strategies should also anticipate some potential challenges which might arise, such as cultural differences and linguistic aspects of the lyrics (Le, 2023).

**Knowing personal learning objective vs. Providing song in EFL**

It is also important to know that older learners are mature and aware of their learning goals (Javed et al., 2022); thus, identifying personal learning objectives is essential for a teacher. Up to now, scholars have long affirmed the importance of identifying and adopting the students' learning objective or learning goal (Heintalu et al., 2025; Schkolski, 2025) as it might instigate their performance, motivation, and accomplishments. Adult Education or andragogy is defined as the art and science of helping adults carry out learning activities (Manangsa et al., 2020). More specifically, the learning process pertaining to adult education or adult learning should cover some of the following aspects, such as adapting to the needs and the interests of the students, adopting the problem-solving-learning method, time-perspective learning, and students' experience (Manangsa et al., 2020).

In sum, combining the songs as part of educational entertainment is beneficial. However, there are inseparable aspects that the English teachers should also understand. For instance, the need to turn on the melodious song will not directly bring about the inspiring textual messages, allowing the students to communicate actively. In fact, there are some songs which should also be taught wisely, as they might contain relatively contradictory values inside the songs, and these songs might not suit the students' cultural backgrounds. As a culturally embedded product, a song might also be viewed differently from different perspectives. For instance, a culture adopting a collectivistic mindset might have a negative perception regarding the song presented by those coming from an individualistic society (Barradas & Sakka, 2022).

**Being more responsible as the eldest**

It is also interesting to identify the students' perceptions on the title of the song and the potential themes inside the song. Despite being popular, most of the participants perceive that being older child is not always burdensome. In fact, in some cultures, being the older, particularly the girl, can possibly put more benefits as the parents will tend to prioritize her due to potential benefits incurred with having the would be capable husbands (Zulfa et al., 2024). In sum, different cultures assign distinct roles and expectations to the eldest child, which can affect their upbringing, emotional development, and social positioning. In some societies, the firstborn is given greater authority and responsibility, while in others, they may experience stricter discipline or higher parental expectations (Kasimova, 2025).

## Conclusion

The present study attempts to highlight the application of English song along with the potential figurative language inside the song (i.e., Taylor Swift's song). The findings indicate that the use of song might be an alternative strategy that can be adapted by the teachers so that the students can possibly have less burdening and more exciting learning activities while accessing new information and new skills. However, despite being positively perceived by most students, the application of song into the adult class should consider several aspects, such as the students' learning objectives, familiarity with the songs, and potential students' skill diversity within the class.

Furthermore, the role of teachers in serving adult classes should also be the one who can resourcefully identify the potential connection between the song's themes, packaged in figurative language, to the exciting topics, which might trigger the adult students to speak. In fact, the song titled "Eldest daughter", despite being popular, has been proven not fully accepted as the participants' relevant topic due to the potentially cultural differences with them.

In sum, while the songs presented in class will not only rejuvenate the students' vigor but

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also inspire them to face the insurmountable challenges they encounter in life, most of the adults students tend to perceive that they must also have specific learning advantages which lead them to the expected goal after the completion of their EFL learning program.

The present study focuses on scrutinizing the issue of the adoption of the English song as one of the efficacious alternatives in adult EFL learning activities. Despite exploring some of the important findings, the present study is not fully free from some potential flaws. Firstly, these findings will certainly be specified and not generalizable to other songs written or performed by different singers. The participants purposively recruited in the present study were those who had attended the Elementary/above level adult class and had already understood sufficient English expressions, thus allowing them to appreciate the songs presented during the class much more easily.

The result will differ if the students do not have sufficiently preliminary English skills, leading to potential difficulties in understanding the meaning easily. Further study should not only involve those with elementary or intermediate English skills but also those who might be the new starters in learning English, so that the efficacy of the English songs containing figurative language in EFL classes can be more objectively examined.

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