Lyrically Enriched: Effects of Taylor Swift's Songs on Vocabulary Enhancement

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effectiveness of Taylor Swift's songs in enhancing vocabulary and improving reading comprehension among first-year Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice Education (BSCrim) students at Trinidad Municipal College during the 2025-2026 school year. The researcher observed that although the students demonstrate basic comprehension skills, they still need to further develop their reading comprehension due to limited vocabulary. Driven by the need to address this issue, the researcher investigated the effectiveness of exposure to Taylor Swift's songs in improving students' vocabulary. The researcher employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design with a one-group pre-test-post-test approach, administering one pretest and one posttest, following a 5-day intervention phase. The Study combined 10 selected Taylor Swift songs, printed lyrics, and researcher-developed questionnaires to determine the effectiveness of Taylor Swift's songs in enhancing vocabulary levels. The researcher conducted a five-day blended intervention that included listening activities, lyric-based tasks, and reflection exercises focused on ten (10) selected songs chosen for lexical density and figurative language. The data included Likert-scale and open-ended responses, which were analyzed qualitatively. The results demonstrated significant pre-to-post vocabulary improvement, as evidenced by a paired-samples t-test, and were supported by qualitative themes of increased motivation and engagement. Exposure to Taylor Swift's songs showed a sustained positive effect on students' vocabulary development. This Study highlights the potential of integrating popular music into instruction, even in specialized fields such as criminology, because it helps learners develop and comprehend technical vocabulary by connecting meanings through engaging and enjoyable listening to song lyrics.

Keywords: Taylor Swift songs, vocabulary enhancement, incidental vocabulary learning, music-based language teaching, mixed-methods

INTRODUCTION

Musical engagement facilitates the retention of new vocabulary. It improves reading comprehension by helping learners memorize phrases and the meanings of words, as well as how to use them in real-time processing of the given language (Medina, 2022; Nie et al., 2022). It improves both receptive and productive vocabulary. Music is an effective and motivating teaching resource (Nie et al., 2022).

Taylor Swift's songs incorporate effective lyrics and storytelling that have often been compared to those of authors such as Shakespeare (Burt, 2024; Doyle, 2024; McCausland, 2024; Bloom, 2024). As a result, her music elicits emotional reactions from listeners, has a story structure that accurately presents a story, and can be analyzed critically, all of which provide excellent examples for literature (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Medved, 2014; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Corpus linguistics studies suggest that vocabulary learning occurs by associating high-frequency words with word families listed in the Oxford 3000 and mid-frequency words included in the Oxford 5000 (Nation, 2013). It establishes that song lyrics constitute suitable literature. They enable incidental vocabulary acquisition and provide authentic context for English learners. In addition, second-language acquisition studies show that exposing learners to semester texts that are rich in meaning and emotionally significant helps increase retention and motivation (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Medved, 2014; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Therefore, Taylor Swift's lyrics are an effective resource for teaching language.

Listening to Taylor Swift's music is a way for Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice students to learn key vocabulary related to their field. The emotions created by the songs (ex. moral dilemmas, tension, accountability,

trauma) complement the themes of deception, secrecy, and consequences, all of which are vital to the Study of crime and law enforcement. As they listen to and engage with these songs, students remember

various words (e.g. “clandestine,” “scheming,” “trace,” “maim,” “bruise,” “haunt,” “flashback,” “glare,” “breakable” and “insurmountable”) that are used in several ways: writing reports, evaluating criminal intent, writing affidavits, interviewing victims/witnesses, documenting the psychological impact of a crime, analyzing evidence and developing courtroom testimonies. To analyze this Study, the researcher used the principles of narrative criminology (Presser, 2016). This research inquiry examined whether students could develop higher-level vocabulary through repeated exposure to the lyrics of Taylor Swift’s songs. If they did, it would increase the communication skills of Bachelor of Criminal Justice students, which is critical in the field of criminology.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETHICAL BACKGROUND

The study drew on three related perspectives. First, incidental learning explain how people learn new words unintentionally and without knowing they have learned them. The Incidental Vocabulary Learning Theory, developed by Huckin and Coady, states that when people are exposed to language in context numerous times, they will acquire vocabulary; they will not know they have acquired it until they are exposed again (Huckin & Coady, 1999).

Second, the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, developed by Richard Mayer, will serve as the underlying theory for this Study. According to the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, learning is greater when verbal and non-verbal information are presented simultaneously or separately. In a music learning environment, song lyrics are an example of a verbal part of the learning experience, while melody is an example of an auditory non-verbal part of the learning experience; thus, creating a multimodal learning experience (Mayer, 2001).

Third, is Dual Coding Theory, proposed by Allan Paivio. Paivio theorizes that the brain uses two interrelated systems for cognition: the first is a verbal system for language processing; the second is a nonverbal system for images. When students use music as their learning medium, they use a verbal processing system to read the lyrics of a song and a non-verbal processing system to process the sounds in a song (melody & rhythm) (Paivio, 1971).

METHODOLOGY

The study comprised qualitative and quantitative components, which were analyzed using a convergent parallel mixed-methods model (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2018). The researcher shared the data post-intervention and integrated both quantitative and qualitative data in the results section. The researcher also compared findings from both methods to ensure convergent interpretative validity.

To assess the intervention’s effect on participants’ vocabulary comprehension, a one-group pretest/posttest design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) was used for the quantitative component. Within the designated period, all subjects served as their own controls. Participants completed a tailored 40-item Swift-Lyric Vocabulary Comprehension Test (SL-VCT), adopted from the Vocabulary Size Test (VST) model (Nation and Beglar, 2007), as a pretest before the 5-day intervention and as a posttest immediately afterward. The vocabulary comprehension data from the pretest and posttest assessments were analyzed using a paired-samples t-test.

As Trinidad Municipal College had limited options for scheduling, a five-day intensive format with 10 hours of contact time was selected (to accommodate the principles of incidental vocabulary learning and massed practice). There was a high reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha approximately .90) and criterion validity for the SL-VCT version of adapted instruments, reducing the need for extensive piloting (Nation & Beglar, 2007; Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001). However, a pilot study with 15 first-year criminology students (not part of the main sample) confirmed the instrument’s appropriateness for the target group. The factor structure of the combined instrument (Vocabulary Recognition, Vocabulary Context, and Likert item) had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .832 (Taber, 2018).

The qualitative component of the SL-VCT consisted of Part C, with eight Likert-scale items, and Part D, comprising four open-ended questions. The researcher analyzed this section by examining students’ perspectives based on their responses immediately after the posttest. These responses were coded and thematically analyzed

using NVivo to identify key themes related to motivation, emotional engagement, and potential applications of learning.

Research indicates that incidental vocabulary learning leads to stronger measurable outcomes, while engagement in meaning tasks is also associated with improved learning performance (Webb et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024; Reynolds, 2025).

Table 1: The pretest and posttest distribution of participants' vocabulary proficiency.

Proficiency Level	**CEFR**	**Pretest**		**Posttest**	
	Level	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Frequency**	**Percentage%**
Upper-Intermediate Vocabulary Proficiency (36-40)	B2	0	0	25	62.5
Intermediate Vocabulary Proficiency (28-35)	B1	0	0	8	20
Elementary Vocabulary Proficiency (20-27)	A2	21	52.5	7	17.5
Beginner Vocabulary Proficiency (0-19)	A1	19	47.5	0	0

The score distribution also shifted across the study-defined proficiency bands. Before the intervention, 19 participants (47.5%) were classified as A1 and 21 (52.5%) as A2; none was classified as B1 or B2. After the intervention, 25 participants (62.5%) were classified as B2, eight (20.0%) as B1, and seven (17.5%) as A2. No participants were classified as A1 after the intervention.

Table 2: Test of Significant Difference in Vocabulary Skills

Test	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***	***p***
Pretest	16.85	7.08			
Posttest	34.16	5.59	16.91	39	< .001

Note. $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance

The findings provide evidence that music significantly affects vocabulary development. Overall, the results support the use of song-based instruction in the educational process.

Themes from participants' responses

Theme 1: Contextualized learning through lyrics

Participants described the song narratives as useful cues for interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. One response recorded in the thesis stated, "The lyrics helped me understand the meaning of new words because of the situation in the song" (R1, R11, R27). Another participant explained, "I learned new words by understanding what the song is talking about" (R20). These responses suggest that learners used the surrounding narrative and situation to make sense of words rather than relying only on isolated definitions.

Theme 2: Emotional engagement

Participants also associated the emotional quality of the music with remembering and understanding words. The thesis records the response, "The emotion generated from the music assisted me in learning as it made remembering the word easier" (participants identified in the thesis as R17, R21, R27, R29, and R34). This theme suggests that emotional engagement was a perceived support for vocabulary learning, although the study did not separately measure emotional processing or long-term retention.

Theme 3: Motivation and interest

Some participants reported that music made vocabulary learning more interesting. One participant stated, "When I listened to the songs, I wanted to learn new English words" (R12), while others reported enjoying the activity (R28, R40). These comments indicate that participants perceived song-based activities as an engaging alternative to learning vocabulary only through conventional materials.

Theme 4: Songs as a supplementary tool

Participants did not describe songs as a complete replacement for teacher explanation. One response stated, "Songs will help some, but I still need some sort of explanation about the words" (R13). This response highlights the importance of pairing music with explicit explanation, practice, and teacher guidance.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

The increase in test scores and the qualitative themes point in a similar direction: participants performed better on the posttest and described contextual clues, emotional connection, and motivation as helpful features of the intervention. At the same time, participants' comments emphasized the need for teacher explanation. Together, the results support the use of songs as structured supplementary learning materials rather than as a stand-alone instructional method.

DISCUSSION

The observed increase in vocabulary-test scores suggests that the song-based intervention was associated with improved performance among the participating students. The mean rose by 17.31 points, and the paired-samples test indicated that the pretest and posttest scores differed statistically. The qualitative responses provide a possible account of learners' experiences during the intervention: participants reported using narrative context to infer meaning, connecting words with the emotional tone of songs, and feeling more motivated to engage with vocabulary activities.

These patterns are consistent with the theoretical rationale for contextualized vocabulary learning. Huckin and Coady (1999) discuss incidental vocabulary acquisition in relation to meaningful language exposure and task involvement. Mayer's (2001) account of multimedia learning and Paivio's (1971) dual coding perspective also provide possible explanations for why lyrics, melody, and guided activities may work together in a learning task. However, the present study did not directly measure incidental acquisition, dual coding, or multimedia processing; these theories should therefore be treated as interpretive frameworks rather than mechanisms established by the data.

The findings also point to a practical teaching implication. Song-based instruction may be useful when learners are asked to do more than listen passively. Activities such as vocabulary matching, cloze completion, visual prompts, contextual discussion, and reflective writing can encourage learners to attend to word meaning and use. For criminology students, teachers may select words and contexts relevant to academic reading and professional communication, while avoiding the assumption that every lyric directly represents technical or legal terminology.

Participants' view of songs as supplementary resources is important. Music can create an engaging context, but unfamiliar words may still require definitions, examples, pronunciation support, and repeated practice. Teachers should choose age-appropriate songs, identify clear learning objectives, provide accessible lyrics through lawful means, and assess whether learners can transfer vocabulary to new contexts beyond the song itself.

The findings must be interpreted cautiously. The study involved one purposively selected cohort of 40 students and did not include a control group. Consequently, the improvement cannot be attributed exclusively to Taylor Swift's songs; repeated testing, teacher instruction, additional practice, and other influences may also have contributed. The use of the same test format, study-defined CEFR score bands, and an intervention schedule described inconsistently across sections are further issues that should be addressed transparently in future research.

CONCLUSION

Among the 40 first-year criminology students who participated, vocabulary-test scores were higher after a structured intervention using selected Taylor Swift songs and lyric-based activities. The mean score increased from 16.85 to 34.16, and the paired-samples t-test showed a statistically significant pretest–posttest difference. Participants' responses highlighted contextualized learning through lyrics, emotional engagement, motivation, and the need for teacher-guided explanation. The findings suggest that popular songs can serve as a useful supplementary resource for vocabulary instruction when combined with purposeful learning tasks. Because the design lacked a comparison group and did not measure long-term retention or a separate standardized reading-comprehension outcome, further controlled research is needed before making stronger causal or broader proficiency claims.

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