A Study of Taylor Swift's Pop Songs for EFL Learners: Categorizing Words Based on the Oxford 3000 and 5000 Word Lists and CEFR Levels

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the extent to which Taylor Swift's song lyrics incorporate vocabulary from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists and to categorize these words based on CEFR levels. The goal is to narrow down the vast selection of songs available to EFL learners, focusing on the most essential vocabulary to enhance their learning effectively and effortlessly. The Taylor Swift Pop Song Corpus (TPC) was compiled using the AntConc 4.2.4 program. The analysis involved three steps: data preparation, lexical profiling, and word categorization. The results revealed that 18.08% of the words in the songs appeared in the Oxford 3000 word list, while 1.99% were found in the Oxford 5000 word list. The highest frequency CEFR level in the songs was A1, with a lexical coverage of 41.44%. In summary, Taylor Swift's songs can serve as valuable materials for learning or teaching essential vocabulary for general purposes and beginners.

Keywords: vocabulary, Taylor Swift's pop song lyrics, the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists, CEFR, EFL learners

Introduction

A successful American singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift, has received considerable awards, nominations, and popularity throughout her career (Grammy Awards, 2024; The Taylor Swift Museum, 2021-a) due to her remarkable songwriting and story-telling ability, which has been praised by many people (Ahlgrim, 2023). A number of universities have applied her songs as materials in literature courses, e.g., Taylor Swift and Literature (Queen Mary University of London, 2023) and The Taylor Swift Songbook at the University of Texas at Austin (Macknight, 2022). Many of her songs were also used as research instruments, such as in the study of Vocabulary Load of English Song Lyrics for EFL Learners by Ozturk (2017). However, no studies have focused on the use of Taylor Swift's songs to improve learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Since vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to all language use (Schmitt et al., 2017), vocabulary improvement is essential for EFL learners. Some words are more important to know than others, despite the vast number of existing words (Moore, 2020). To address this, Oxford University Press has designed the Oxford 3000 and Oxford 5000 word lists ("Oxford 3000 and 5000", 2023). According to Paul Nation, the Oxford 3000 word list compiles high-frequency words that form the crucial core vocabulary for English proficiency, while the Oxford 5000 word list extends this core vocabulary for advanced learners. These word lists help learners focus on the most essential words to achieve their communicative aims. Words in the Oxford word lists are also categorized according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), from A1 (beginner level) to C1 (advanced level) (Cambridge English, 2023). This categorization is beneficial for learners, as the CEFR levels can assist them in improving their vocabulary with measurable progress (Moore, 2020). Consequently, focusing on the most important and frequently used words suitable for their English proficiency, as outlined in the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists, is highly beneficial for English language learners.

Regarding vocabulary acquisition, many research studies have indicated positive results from learning English through songs. For instance, one study showed that engaging lyrics could enhance a person's memorization and recall, helping EFL learners remember vocabulary and usage effortlessly (Kimprasit, 2021). Another study revealed that using popular songs in English classes could benefit learners since song themes often connect to real-life experiences (Satyan, 2020). Moreover, American pop songs, which are motivating and enjoyable, have been highlighted for their potential to enhance students' English skills (Oh, 2015).

However, the vast number of English songs available today may leave learners feeling overwhelmed and indecisive about which songs to choose as learning materials. Therefore, considering the popularity of Taylor Swift and the benefits of the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists, this study examined the extent to which Taylor Swift's song lyrics incorporate vocabulary from these lists. This was done by comparing words from Taylor Swift's song lyrics with those from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists. Additionally, this study categorized words from Taylor Swift's song lyrics based on CEFR levels. This approach aims to help EFL learners focus on the most important and frequently used words according to their CEFR levels, as derived from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists, utilizing Taylor Swift's songs to narrow down the choices.

Literature Review

Definition of Vocabulary, Word, and Lemma

The terms "vocabulary" and "word" need to be understood and clarified when used in any research relating to vocabulary because they are not completely synonymous. Even though they have been widely used interchangeably in some cases, they do not have the exact same meanings and purposes. Vocabulary is generally considered a set of words or a list containing many words that an individual knows (Oxford University Press, 2023-a), while a word is a single unit with its own meaning and may be referred to as a "vocabulary item" or "lexical item" (Oxford University Press, 2023-b). In the present study, these terms are not synonymous and are used based on their specific meanings as previously mentioned.

One popular word classification is a lemma. Lemmas are one of the counting units used as a criterion for selecting words for a word list. They consist of a headword or base form and its inflections, including only those inflections that have the same part of speech as the headword. For example, a headword such as "record" and its inflections—"records", "recorded", and "recording"—function as verbs. By applying the lemma as a word-counting unit, all these forms are considered the same word. Unlike a "word family", another well-known word classification, derived forms of words such as "recorder" are not counted as the same word. Moreover, "record" that functions as a noun, which has a different part of speech, is also not considered the same word (Gholaminejad & Sarab, 2021; Stoeckel et al., 2020; Webb, 2021). In summary, this study used "lemma" as a word-counting unit since the Taylor Swift Song Word List (TSSWL), the target word list of this study, was compared to the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists, which also use "lemma" as their word-counting unit.

The Importance of Vocabulary for EFL learners

Very little can be conveyed without grammar, but nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary (Wilkins, 1972). When a person has a limited vocabulary in a second language, it would be difficult to successfully communicate. Vocabulary mastery therefore is seen as essential for second language learners (Alqahtani, 2015). Learning vocabulary is vital for enhancing all language abilities, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in both English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) (Nation & Webb, 2011). Many research studies related to the importance of vocabulary (e.g., Anggaira et al., 2022; Hadi, 2017) have shown that knowing a sufficient amount of vocabulary assists students in comprehending and communicating successfully. Thus, because of the advantages of improving vocabulary mastery for EFL learners, this study concentrates on the vocabulary aspect of English proficiency.

Vocabulary Learning through Songs

English songs help students develop their vocabulary and English proficiency. A habit of listening to English songs daily can significantly impact students' English skills as they are engaging and enjoyable mediums for learning new vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as being interesting teaching tools for teachers (Isnaini & Aminatun, 2021). A greater diversity of vocabulary used in songs improves understanding and retention (Medina, 1993). Moreover, song themes are easily relatable to students because they are typically tied to real-life experiences. American pop songs can also be incorporated into the curriculum to improve students' language proficiency (Oh, 2015). Therefore, the well-known and relatable songs of Taylor Swift, many of which are considered American pop songs, would benefit EFL learners by improving their vocabulary skills effortlessly and enjoyably (Jordan, 2016).

Vocabulary in CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) categorizes learners into three main groups according to their levels i.e., basic leaners (A1 and A2), independent learners (B1 and B2), and proficient learners (C1 and C2) (English Profile, 2015), and also suggests what learners can do to improve their language skills. Integrating CEFR levels with the vocabulary aspect helps learners develop their vocabulary knowledge and measure their progress (Moore, 2020). The CEFR, aligned with vocabulary, provides level-appropriate vocabulary, suggesting learners select suitable

words for their English proficiency (Benigno & Jong, 2019). CEFR levels are also assigned to the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists (O3WL and O5WL) to help learners achieve their vocabulary improvement goals with measurable progress. Therefore, categorizing CEFR levels of words in Taylor Swift's songs based on O3WL and O5WL would be beneficial for EFL learners, allowing them to learn individually suitable words from O3WL and O5WL using Taylor Swift's songs.

The Oxford Word List

Oxford University Press provides numerous word lists for English language learners to help them improve their English proficiency, particularly for communicative purposes. These lists include the Oxford 3000, the Oxford 5000, the Oxford Phrase List, and the Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon. However, this present study focused on the Oxford 3000 and the Oxford 5000 because both word lists are essential foundations for English learners and consist of high-frequency words that learners are likely to encounter in class or lessons (Bui et al., 2023).

The Oxford 3000 word list contains approximately 3,000 words, while the Oxford 5000 word list includes these 3,000 words plus an additional 2,000 words, totaling 5,000 words. The Oxford 3000 word list covers four CEFR levels: A1, A2, B1, and B2, while the Oxford 5000 includes additional B2 and C1 levels. Both word lists are widely employed by learners, teachers, material writers, syllabus designers, and researchers (e.g., Bui et al., 2023; Rijeng et al., 2023). They are also accessible online for free on the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries website. Due to these advantages, the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists were chosen as useful resources for EFL learners in the present study.

Research Methodology

There were three steps undertaken in collecting and analyzing the data, namely data collection, data processing, and data analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

First, words from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists were counted to find the total number of words for each CEFR level, and then they were sorted into six Excel files according to the CEFR level (i.e., A1, A2, B1, B2 of the Oxford 3000, B2 of Oxford 5000, and C1). Table 1 shows the number of words of the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists.

Table 1

The Oxford 3000 and 5000 Word Lists description

Word List	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	Number of Words
The Oxford 3000	900	872	809	727	0	3,308
The Oxford 5000	0	0	0	700	1,315	2,015
Total	900	872	809	1,427	1,315	5,323

There are a total of 5,323 distinct words from both word lists, with 3,308 words from the Oxford 3000 and 2,015 words from the Oxford 5000 word lists (excluding duplicated words between both lists). These numbers were used to calculate the lexical coverage between the Taylor Swift Song Word List (TSSWL) and the Oxford word lists.

The Taylor Swift Song Word List (TSSWL) was generated from the lyrics in the Taylor Swift Pop Song Corpus (TPC) for comparison and analysis with the Oxford word lists. The TPC was compiled in this study and includes the lyrics of 21 Taylor Swift songs from the original studio album "1989 (TV)", totaling 5,482 words (including duplicated words). Repetitive elements such as "oh oh oh" and "ah ah ah" were removed from the lyrics because they do not add specific meaning to the songs. Additionally, repeated lyrics such as repeated sentences or phrases were kept only twice to avoid redundancy while maintaining a balance between meaningful content (Kendong et al., 2023).The three following criteria were set to select the songs for the TPC:

(1) Only pop songs were selected for the TPC. Generally, pop music is the most popular music genre (Steen, 2023; Susic, 2023), so selecting only pop songs could narrow down the scope of the study, ensuring that the results would be generalizable to EFL learners or listeners.

(2) Only songs that are free on digital music services such as Spotify and YouTube were selected to provide accessible songs that can be learned online for free anywhere and anytime.

(3) Only songs from original studio albums that are either labeled as Taylor's Version (TV) or released before 2019 (e.g., Lover and Midnight) were included in the Taylor Swift Pop Song Corpus (TPC). Original studio albums are the first released albums by artists to introduce their new music. Taylor Swift tends to release additional editions of her original albums, which typically include more songs. However, these additional songs may not be free to access, so only songs from the original studio albums were selected to meet the second criterion. Moreover, due to her personal circumstances, Taylor Swift encourages people to listen

to the TV or her re-recorded albums (Bruner, 2023). This criterion was set to show respect to the artist and the rightful owner of the songs.

In conclusion, there are 21 Taylor Swift songs from the album "1989 (TV)" in the TPC. "1989" is her first full pop album that brought her considerable success. The original studio version of the album was released in 2014 and included 16 songs. She later released the Taylor's Version album with an additional five songs in October 2023. The album received numerous awards, such as Album of the Year and Best Pop Vocal Album at the Grammy Awards in 2016, and was ranked as one of the best albums of 2014 (Grammy Awards, 2024; "The Taylor Swift Museum", 2021-b). The album includes hugely popular songs such as "Blank Space" and "Shake It Off", which have more than three billion views on YouTube. The popularity of the album makes "1989" a good choice to attract a broad range of learners, especially those who might have never listened to Taylor Swift's songs before.

Data Processing

Words were extracted from song lyrics and then analyzed by three steps repeated for every single word to ensure thorough analysis: data preparation, lexical profiling, and word categorization. The tool used in this study was the "Word" function by AntConc version 4.2.4 (Anthony, 2023). To prepare the data for the analysis stage, words extracted from the lyrics consisting of some contractions, inflections, and multi-word items were changed to their headwords to facilitate the analysis between the TSSWL and the Oxford word lists, since lemmas were the word counting unit of the Oxford word lists. The following three criteria were used to prepare the data:

(1) Contractions such as *possessive s*, *is, has* appearing in "s" form were changed to their original forms.
(2) Inflections, such as "takes", "taking", "took", and "taken", were also changed to their headword, which is "take", if they have the same meaning and part of speech in the context, known as a lemma.
(3) Multi-word items such as formulaic expressions or phrasal verbs, where words need to be together to convey the same meaning as expressed in the lyrics, were not separated. For example, the phrasal verb "turn around" would be kept together as one word to retain its original meaning.

An Excel file named "TSSWL.xlsx" including coding columns was used to encode each word. A column named "Found" was used to code if a word from Taylor Swift Song Word List was found either in the Oxford word lists; otherwise, it was coded as "NO", meaning the word was not found in

either word list. Each word was compared not only by its appearance but also by its part of speech and its meaning in the context and then categorized based on CEFR levels. There were two criteria used to categorize words into their most suitable CEFR level:

(1) If a word was found in either the O3WL or O5WL and had the same part of speech and meaning in its context (considered in the second criterion), it would be coded in the "Found" column as either "O3WL" or "O5WL" and assigned its CEFR level based on the same CEFR level from the Oxford word lists. Additionally, a list of songs containing the word was coded in the "Song" column.

(2) Each word was analyzed for its part of speech and exact meaning in context. The "POS" column was added to assign parts of speech such as noun, verb, and pronoun. The "Meaning" column was added to capture the word's meaning, and the "CEFR" column was added to encode CEFR levels.

Lastly, a column named "Frequency" was added to capture the frequency of each word for further analysis. In conclusion, this process assigned a CEFR level to each word and indicated whether the word is found in any Oxford word lists. The examples below provide a clearer picture:

The word "forever" from the lyrics was found in the O3WL at the B1 level. After analysis, it was determined that both were adverbs with the same meaning in context, which means "something will always exist". Therefore, the word was coded in the "Found" column as "O3WL" and assigned the CEFR level "B1".

The word "love" found in the lyrics was also listed in the O3WL at the A1 level. However, upon analysis, it was determined that while "love" functions as a noun in both contexts, it has different meanings. In the O3WL, "love" refers to a strong feeling of liking and caring for something or someone, while in the lyrics "Just grab my hand and don't ever drop it, my love", it refers to a person you care deeply about and is categorized at the A2 level. Accordingly, the word was coded as "NO" in the "Found" column and assigned the part of speech as "noun" and the CEFR level as "A2" in the corresponding columns.

Data Analysis

Lexical Coverage between TSSWL and O3WL and O5WL

According to the TSSWL Excel file, lexical coverage was calculated using the data and results derived from the word decoding and analyzing process with Excel tools. The findings illustrate the percentage of words from

the songs in the 1989 (TV) album that cover words from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists. This process also answers to what extent Taylor Swift's song lyrics consist of words from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists.

CEFR Levels of Words from Taylor Swift's Songs

The final number of words counted from "CEFR" column in the Excel file indicates how many words of Taylor Swift's songs appear in each CEFR level. The results indicate which CEFR levels are most appropriate for EFL learners using these songs to learn vocabulary from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists. Specifically, the analysis determined the CEFR levels of words from Taylor Swift's song lyrics based on these lists.

Results and Discussion

The results provided by AntConc showed 5,482 tokens (where the same word counted again was considered as an additional token) from 21 songs. After analyzing the words according to the research methodologies, 638 matching words were identified between the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists and the Taylor Swift Song Word List. This means learners would be exposed to 638 words out of 5,323 types (with duplicates not counted again) from the Oxford lists through the 21 songs. Tables 2 and 3 present the number of matching words categorized by CEFR levels, along with the lexical coverage percentage. A comparison of the results from both tables can be found in Table 4.

Table 2

Lexical Coverage between the Oxford 3000 Word List and Taylor Swift's Pop Songs

CEFR	No. of Matching	The Oxford 3000	Lexical Coverage
A1	373	900	41.44%
A2	127	872	14.56%
B1	61	809	7.54%
B2	37	727	5.09%
Total	598	3,308	18.08%

According to Tables 2 and 3, the maximum number of matching words is 373 at the A1 level, with a lexical coverage of 41.44%. Conversely, the minimum number of matching words is 20 at the C1 level, with a lexical coverage of 1.52%. This indicates that EFL learners would encounter 41.44% of the Oxford 3000's A1 level words (373 out of 900 words) by listening to the 21 Taylor Swift songs. These songs appear to be particularly suitable for

Table 3

Lexical Coverage between the Oxford 5000 Word List and Taylor Swift's Pop Songs

CEFR	No. of Matching	The Oxford 5000	Lexical Coverage
B2	20	700	2.86%
C1	20	1,315	1.52%
Total	40	2,015	1.99%

Table 4

Comparison of Lexical Coverage between the Oxford 3000 and 5000 Word Lists

CEFR	The Oxford 3000 Word List	The Oxford 5000 Word List
A1	41.44%	0
A2	14.56%	0
B1	7.54%	0
B2	5.09%	2.86%
C1	0	1.52%
Total	18.08%	1.99%

EFL learners at the A1 level or beginners. However, learners seeking to acquire vocabulary for specific purposes or aiming to learn advanced or academic vocabulary may find Taylor Swift's songs too simplistic and not aligned with their expectations.

In addition, EFL learners can sometimes feel demotivated when confronted with unfamiliar words in song lyrics, which can hinder their learning. Therefore, using songs that match the learners' CEFR levels tends to be more effective and motivating, especially for beginners or A1 learners, as it reduces the risk of demotivation and boredom (Karim et al., 2022). Thus, Taylor Swift's songs could be particularly effective in such contexts, as illustrated by the themes presented in Table 5.

Table 5

List of themes of 21 Taylor Swift songs and the number of songs in each theme

Theme	Number of songs
Love or relationship	16
Motivation	4
Hatred	1
Total	21

Considering the 21 songs in this study, 16 are centered around the theme of "love or relationships", which accounts for 76.19% of Taylor Swift's repertoire. This finding aligns with the most popular song themes over the

decades, particularly within the pop genre (Donnelly, 2024). Easily comprehensible love songs are often relatable to listeners' experiences and tend to use A1-level vocabulary, making them accessible and enjoyable. Furthermore, relatable, motivating, and enjoyable songs can enhance students' English vocabulary acquisition (Oh, 2015; Satyan, 2020).

While this research suggests that Taylor Swift's songs are more suitable for general vocabulary learning, it does not imply that they cannot be used for advanced vocabulary development. Advanced vocabulary does appear in some of her songs across different genres; for example, the word "exile" from the song "Exile" on the album "folklore" is included in the Oxford 5000 word list at the C1 level. A study by Kanjanapong (2021) with a larger corpus demonstrated 82% lexical coverage of the General Service List's first 1,000-word families. This significant difference in corpus size indicates that including more songs or utilizing a larger corpus could enhance study results and better address the academic needs of learners.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the extent to which Taylor Swift's song lyrics incorporate words from the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists. The findings reveal that there are 638 matching words out of 5,323 total words between these lists and the Taylor Swift Song Word List, indicating that learners could encounter 638 words through the 21 songs analyzed. These words were also categorized by CEFR levels based on the Oxford lists. The results show that 373 of these matching words belong to the A1 level, suggesting that EFL learners could be exposed to approximately 41.44% of the A1-level words (373 out of 900) from the Oxford 3000 word list by listening to Taylor Swift's songs.

In summary, Taylor Swift's songs appear to be particularly suitable for EFL learners at the A1 level or beginners. This implies that her songs may not meet the needs of those seeking to acquire academic or advanced vocabulary. While this study indicates that Taylor Swift's songs are primarily beneficial for general vocabulary learning, it does not discount the potential for advanced vocabulary acquisition, as advanced vocabulary may be found in her other songs or genres.

Pedagogical Implications

Songs can be effective tools for helping students learn and remember new vocabulary enjoyably and effortlessly, as shown in findings from many studies (e.g., Isnaini & Aminatun, 2021; Kimprasit, 2021; Oh, 2015). Words in the Taylor Swift Song Word List (TSSWL) are words that appear in both Taylor Swift's songs and the Oxford 3000 and 5000, which are considered

fundamental words for English learners from levels A1 to C1. Thus, using Taylor Swift's songs as materials for students to learn these words would benefit them. Furthermore, teachers may integrate these songs into the curriculum (Oh, 2015) or recommend them to students. Students tend to be exposed to word repetition and real-life-connected themes, trying to learn and remember words while listening to the songs to sing correctly. This could help students easily remember words in songs, facilitating the learning of essential words from frequently used word lists. In summary, the combination of learning vocabulary through songs and word lists in this study would benefit students, especially beginners.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the TPC corpus consists of lyrics from only 21 songs from a single Taylor Swift album, specifically within the pop genre, totaling 5,482 running words. This relatively small corpus means that a broader selection of songs or genres may yield different results regarding lexical coverage and word frequency.

Secondly, the study focuses solely on words categorized into general parts of speech (e.g., nouns, adjectives, verbs), excluding phrasal verbs and idioms. These types of words appear in lyrics and real-life language use, and including them could provide additional vocabulary expansion opportunities. However, to align with the Oxford 3000 and 5000 word lists, which only include general types of words, this study restricts its analysis to general parts of speech.

Finally, while learning vocabulary from songs can offer effective and enjoyable language learning, understanding word meanings alone is insufficient for mastering a second language. Paul Nation's four strands principle emphasizes the importance of integrating vocabulary learning with other language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—as well as addressing pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and discourse (Nation, 2014). Therefore, to master a language, learners should engage with all essential skills. As this study does not encompass all skills required for comprehensive language mastery, this limitation is highlighted to encourage learners to seek a more holistic approach.

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