



Affective Meaning in Song Lyrics: Implications for TESOL Practice

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Abstract: *This study investigates how affective meaning is linguistically realized in English song lyrics and examines its pedagogical implications for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). While songs have frequently been used as instructional media in language classrooms, limited attention has been paid to how emotional meanings are constructed and interpreted semantically by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This qualitative study analyzed three contemporary English songs—Someone Like You by Adele, Fight Song by Rachel Platten, and Fix You by Coldplay—using Leech's framework of affective meaning. The study also involved 25 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Musamus, Indonesia, who were observed in the classroom, asked to complete written interpretation tasks, and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that affective meaning is predominantly realized through three linguistic resources: evaluative lexical items, metaphorical expressions, and connotative symbols. Among these, evaluative lexis was the most readily interpreted by students, whereas metaphorical and symbolic expressions required contextual discussion and semantic scaffolding to achieve deeper understanding. The classroom implementation further demonstrated that guided semantic analysis of song lyrics enhanced learners' interpretative competence, encouraged critical discussion, and promoted greater awareness of emotional meaning in authentic discourse. This study contributes to semantic research by extending the application of affective meaning theory to authentic song lyrics and demonstrates its pedagogical value for TESOL. The findings suggest that song lyrics should be regarded not merely as motivational classroom materials but also as linguistically rich texts that foster semantic awareness, critical interpretation, and contextual language learning.*

Keywords: *Affective Meaning, Language Learning, Semantics, Song Lyrics, TESOL*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary language education, the use of authentic materials has become a central strategy for enhancing learners' engagement and communicative competence. Within Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), authentic texts such as films, podcasts, and song lyrics are increasingly integrated

into classroom practices to provide meaningful exposure to real language use. Among these, song lyrics are particularly effective due to their accessibility, repetitive structure, emotional appeal, and cultural relevance, which support both linguistic development and learner motivation (Medina, 2002; Murphey, 1992).

From a linguistic perspective, meaning extends beyond literal interpretation to include expressive and interpersonal dimensions. In semantic theory, Leech (1974) distinguishes affective meaning as the component of meaning that conveys the speaker's emotions, attitudes, and evaluations toward a particular referent. Affective meaning is often realized through connotative expressions, metaphorical language, evaluative lexis, and stylistic variation. In song lyrics, these linguistic resources are frequently foregrounded, making songs a rich site for exploring how emotional meanings are constructed and communicated through language.

In TESOL contexts, previous studies have highlighted the pedagogical benefits of songs, particularly in improving listening skills, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and learner motivation (Medina, 2002; Murphey, 1992; Totong et al., 2024). However, much of this research treats songs primarily as supplementary teaching tools rather than as linguistically complex texts that can be systematically analyzed. As a result, relatively little attention has been given to how specific semantic dimensions, particularly affective meaning, can contribute to deeper language comprehension and interpretative competence among learners.

This gap is especially relevant in Indonesian EFL contexts, where learners often struggle to interpret non-literal meanings, including emotional and evaluative expressions embedded in authentic texts. Such challenges indicate that language instruction should not only emphasize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition but also develop learners' sensitivity to meaning beyond the literal level. Integrating semantic analysis into TESOL practices, particularly by exploring affective meaning, can equip learners to interpret language more critically and contextually.

Despite the growing interest in both semantic studies and TESOL pedagogy, the intersection between affective meaning analysis and classroom application remains underexplored. Therefore, this study offers novelty by integrating semantic analysis of affective meaning with pedagogical applications in TESOL, positioning song lyrics not merely as instructional media but as linguistically rich texts that support meaning-making processes in language learning (Teng, 2021).

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how affective meaning is constructed in song lyrics and to explore its pedagogical implications in TESOL contexts. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question; how affective meaning realized in song lyrics is, and how it can be utilized in TESOL to enhance students' understanding of meaning and language use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Affective Meaning as a Semantic Construct

Meaning in language extends beyond literal reference to include emotional, interpersonal, and contextual dimensions. Among the influential classifications of meaning, Leech (1974) identifies affective meaning as the semantic component that

reflects a speaker's emotions, attitudes, and evaluations toward an object, event, or interlocutor. Unlike conceptual meaning, which conveys denotative information, affective meaning is inherently subjective and depends on speakers' intentions and listeners' interpretations. Consequently, understanding affective meaning requires not only lexical knowledge but also sensitivity to contextual, cultural, and interpersonal cues.

Subsequent developments in semantic theory have expanded this perspective by emphasizing that meaning is dynamically constructed through discourse and contextual interaction. Lyons (1977) argues that linguistic meaning cannot be separated from its communicative environment because speakers continuously negotiate emotional and interpersonal meanings during interaction. Likewise, cognitive semantic approaches suggest that emotional meaning emerges from conceptualization processes in which language activates mental representations and experiential knowledge, rather than merely functioning as isolated lexical items. Consequently, affective meaning should be understood as a dynamic semantic phenomenon constructed through lexical choice, figurative language, and contextual interpretation.

Leba & Yuwana (2025) and Zhao (2024) also note that words carry multiple layers of meaning, including emotional and associative dimensions, which are activated by context. In this regard, affective meaning is closely related to connotation and evaluation, as it reflects the speaker's subjective experience. Therefore, semantic analysis that focuses on affective meaning provides deeper insight into how language constructs emotional and interpersonal relationships.

In written discourse, affective meaning is frequently realized through evaluative lexis, metaphorical expressions, symbolism, and connotative associations. These linguistic resources enable writers and lyricists to convey complex emotional experiences that cannot always be expressed in literal terms. Therefore, semantic analysis provides an appropriate framework for revealing how emotional meanings are encoded and interpreted in authentic texts.

2. Song Lyrics as Objects of Semantic Analysis

Song lyrics constitute a distinctive form of discourse in which linguistic, poetic, and musical elements interact to construct meaning. Unlike ordinary written texts, lyrics frequently employ metaphor, imagery, repetition, symbolism, and evaluative language to communicate emotional experiences. Such characteristics make song lyrics particularly suitable for semantic investigation because emotional meanings are often encoded implicitly rather than explicitly.

Previous linguistic studies have predominantly examined figurative language, metaphor, and symbolism in song lyrics. For example, analyses of contemporary English songs consistently report that metaphor, hyperbole, symbolism, and personification are among the most frequently occurring linguistic devices used to express emotional experiences. These studies demonstrate that figurative expressions strengthen emotional intensity and enrich lyrical interpretation rather than functioning solely as aesthetic devices.

Recent semantic analyses have further shown that multiple layers of meaning coexist within song lyrics, including denotative, connotative, and thematic

meanings. Research employing Leech's semantic framework concludes that emotional interpretation cannot be achieved through literal reading alone because different categories of meaning interact to construct the overall message conveyed by a song.

Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies remain descriptive, focusing primarily on identifying figurative language or classifying semantic categories. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining affective meaning as a central semantic phenomenon or to explaining how language learners interpret emotional meanings in instructional settings.

3. Empirical Studies on Song Lyrics in TESOL

Within the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), songs have long been recognized as valuable instructional resources because they provide authentic linguistic input while simultaneously increasing learner motivation and classroom engagement (Murphey, 1992; Medina, 2002). Research has consistently demonstrated that song-based instruction contributes positively to vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation development, listening comprehension, and communicative confidence.

More recent studies also indicate that emotional engagement plays an important role in successful language learning. Derakhshan (2021) argues that emotionally supportive learning environments significantly increase learners' academic engagement, while Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019) demonstrate that positive emotional experiences contribute substantially to foreign language enjoyment and classroom participation. Similarly, Totong et al. (2024) report that affective and cognitive dimensions are closely interconnected during English language learning, suggesting that emotional involvement facilitates deeper comprehension and more meaningful interaction.

Although these studies provide valuable pedagogical insights, they generally investigate songs as instructional media rather than as linguistically rich semantic texts. Their primary emphasis remains on motivation, vocabulary learning, listening skills, or learner engagement, whereas relatively little attention has been given to how emotional meanings are linguistically encoded within song lyrics and subsequently interpreted by EFL learners. Consequently, the semantic dimension of affective meaning remains insufficiently explored in TESOL research.

4. Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

The foregoing review identifies several important research gaps. First, previous studies have predominantly examined song lyrics from stylistic or figurative-language perspectives, whereas affective meaning, as conceptualized in semantic theory, has received comparatively limited empirical attention. Second, existing TESOL research largely positions songs as pedagogical tools for improving language skills rather than as authentic linguistic texts that support semantic interpretation and meaning-making. Third, only a limited number of studies have attempted to integrate semantic theory with classroom-based language learning to investigate how learners interpret emotional meanings embedded in authentic discourse.

Positioned within these gaps, the present study integrates Leech's theory of affective meaning with TESOL pedagogy to examine how affective meaning is linguistically realized in selected English song lyrics and how such meanings are interpreted by Indonesian EFL learners during classroom interaction. Rather than treating songs merely as motivational materials, this study conceptualizes them as linguistically rich texts through which learners develop semantic awareness, interpretative competence, and contextual understanding. In doing so, the study contributes to both semantic research and TESOL by bridging linguistic theory and classroom practice through the analysis of authentic language.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the realization of affective meaning in English song lyrics and its pedagogical implications for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). A qualitative approach was selected because the study's primary objective was to interpret how emotional meanings are linguistically constructed and how these meanings are understood by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in authentic classroom contexts. The study combined semantic text analysis with classroom-based observation to provide both linguistic and pedagogical perspectives on affective meaning.

The research used two data sources. The primary data consisted of the lyrics of three contemporary English songs:

Someone Like You – Adele (2011)

Fight Song – Rachel Platten (2015)

Fix You – Coldplay (2005)

These songs were selected through purposive sampling based on four criteria: 1) they contain rich affective expressions representing various emotional states; 2) they employ metaphorical and connotative language extensively; 3) they are widely recognized by EFL learners, making classroom interpretation feasible; and 4) they present different emotional themes, including loss, hope, resilience, and self-empowerment. The secondary data consisted of classroom observations, students' written interpretation tasks, and semi-structured interviews involving undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Musamus, Merauke, Indonesia. Twenty-five undergraduate students enrolled in the fourth semester of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Musamus voluntarily participated in this study. The participants had completed prerequisite courses in Reading, Vocabulary, and Introduction to Semantics, ensuring sufficient linguistic competence to interpret English song lyrics. Prior to data collection, all participants provided informed consent, and ethical principles regarding anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research.

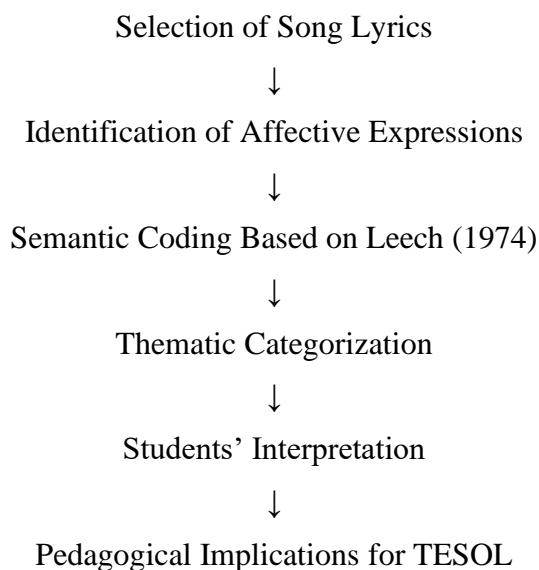
Data collection was conducted in four sequential stages. First, the researcher selected song lyrics according to predetermined semantic criteria. Second, the lyrics were analyzed to identify lexical items, metaphorical expressions, connotative meanings, and evaluative language that represent affective meaning, based on Leech's (1974) semantic framework. Third, the selected songs were implemented

in classroom learning activities. Students listened to each song while reading the lyrics, followed by guided semantic interpretation in class. They subsequently completed written interpretation tasks explaining the emotional meanings conveyed by selected linguistic expressions. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to explore how they interpreted emotional meanings and how the song-based learning activities influenced their semantic understanding.

The data were analyzed using thematic semantic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) and guided by Leech's (1974) theory of affective meaning. The analysis consisted of five stages. The first stage involved identifying linguistic units containing affective meaning, including evaluative lexical items, metaphorical expressions, connotative symbols, and emotionally loaded phrases. The second stage involved semantic coding. Each linguistic expression was categorized according to its dominant affective function and interpreted within its textual context. The third stage involved cross-validation of interpretations using students' written responses and interview data to examine whether learners' interpretations corresponded with the semantic analysis conducted by the researcher. The fourth stage consisted of thematic categorization, in which recurring affective patterns across the three songs were identified. Finally, the pedagogical implications of each affective category were analyzed by examining how learners interpreted emotional meanings during classroom interaction and how these interpretations contributed to semantic awareness in TESOL.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by integrating lyric analysis, classroom observations, written interpretation tasks, and interview data. Investigator triangulation was also applied through peer discussion with two linguistics lecturers specializing in semantics and discourse analysis. Member checking was conducted by confirming interview summaries with participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. These procedures strengthened the trustworthiness and dependability of the research findings.

The analytical framework of this study is illustrated as follows:



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings on how affective meaning is realized in song lyrics and how it is interpreted by students in TESOL classroom contexts. The findings reveal that affective meaning is systematically constructed through specific linguistic patterns and that students respond to these patterns in varying degrees of interpretative depth.

1. Realization of Affective Meaning through Evaluative Lexis

The semantic analysis revealed that evaluative lexical items were the most frequently occurring linguistic resources used to express affective meaning across the three selected songs. These lexical choices explicitly convey emotional attitudes, allowing listeners to infer the speakers' psychological states without relying solely on context.

Table 1. Evaluative Lexical Items Identified in the Song Lyrics

No.	Song	Lyric Excerpt	Evaluative Lexis	Affective Meaning
1	Someone Like You	"I hate to turn up out of the blue uninvited."	hate	disappointment and emotional pain
2	Someone Like You	"Never mind, I'll find someone like you."	never mind	acceptance mixed with sadness
3	Fight Song	"This is my fight song."	fight	determination and resilience
4	Fight Song	"I've still got a lot of fight left in me."	fight	persistence and self-confidence
5	Fix You	"Tears stream down your face."	tears	grief and emotional suffering

The findings indicate that evaluative lexical items function as direct indicators of emotional experience. Among the three songs, "Someone Like You" predominantly conveys negative emotions of loss and regret, whereas "Fight Song" emphasizes confidence and perseverance. In contrast, Fix You portrays emotional vulnerability while simultaneously offering reassurance and hope. Students generally interpreted explicit evaluative words correctly. Classroom observations showed that 23 of the 25 participants accurately identified emotional meanings associated with lexical items such as hate, fight, and tears. However, several students initially interpreted "never mind" as emotional indifference rather than acceptance, suggesting that contextual understanding plays an important role in semantic interpretation.

These findings support Leech's (1974) argument that affective meaning is frequently encoded through evaluative vocabulary reflecting speakers' attitudes and emotions. They also demonstrate that lexical evaluation constitutes the most accessible semantic category for EFL learners because emotional meanings are explicitly realized through vocabulary choices.

2. Affective Meaning through Metaphorical Expressions

Beyond evaluative vocabulary, the analysis revealed that metaphorical expressions serve as important vehicles for conveying affective meaning.

Table 2. Metaphorical Expressions in the Selected Songs

No.	Song	Lyric Excerpt	Metaphorical Expression	Semantic Interpretation
1	Fight Song	"My power's turned on."	power	renewed confidence
2	Fix You	"Lights will guide you home."	light	hope and emotional support
3	Fix You	"Ignite your bones."	ignite	emotional recovery
4	Someone Like You	"Out of the blue."	blue	unexpected emotional encounter

Unlike evaluative lexical items, metaphorical expressions require deeper interpretation. Students frequently relied on literal meanings during their initial responses. For example, fourteen participants interpreted lights as physical illumination before the classroom discussion. After guided semantic analysis, twenty-two participants recognized that lights symbolized hope and emotional guidance. Interview data further revealed that metaphorical expressions encouraged learners to engage in collaborative interpretation, allowing them to negotiate meanings through contextual discussion. This suggests that songs provide authentic opportunities for developing higher-order semantic competence rather than simple vocabulary recognition.

The findings are consistent with Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that metaphor structures human conceptualization rather than functioning merely as a stylistic ornament. Similarly, Gibbs (1994) emphasizes that metaphorical language reflects conceptual experiences, enabling speakers to express emotions beyond literal linguistic representation.

3. Connotative Symbols and Emotional Interpretation

The third pattern identified involved symbolic expressions carrying connotative affective meanings.

Table 3. Symbolic Expressions

No.	Song	Symbol	Connotative Meaning	Emotional Function
1	Fix You	home	emotional security	comfort
2	Fix You	light	hope	encouragement
3	Someone Like You	blue	sadness	longing

4	Fight Song	fight	personal struggle	empowerment
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Unlike evaluative vocabulary, symbolic expressions demanded greater inferential processing because emotional meanings were implicitly encoded. Students demonstrated greater variation in interpretation, particularly when symbols depended on cultural knowledge or contextual understanding.

The interview findings indicate that learners gradually developed richer semantic awareness after teacher-guided discussion. Several participants acknowledged that they initially focused on dictionary meanings before recognizing symbolic meanings through contextual analysis. This finding demonstrates the importance of semantic scaffolding in TESOL classrooms.

4. Pedagogical Implications for TESOL

The classroom implementation demonstrated that the semantic analysis of song lyrics positively contributed to learners' interpretative competence. Observation data indicated that students became increasingly active during collaborative discussions because songs prompted them to justify their semantic interpretations with textual evidence.

The written interpretation tasks also revealed qualitative improvement. While initial responses tended to provide literal explanations, later responses incorporated contextual, metaphorical, and affective interpretations. This development suggests that semantic analysis enables learners to move beyond surface-level vocabulary learning toward deeper discourse comprehension.

From a pedagogical perspective, songs function not merely as motivational media but as authentic linguistic resources that integrate vocabulary, discourse, pragmatics, and semantics simultaneously. Consequently, affective meaning should be incorporated into TESOL instruction as part of semantic literacy, enabling learners to interpret authentic texts critically rather than relying solely on literal meanings.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that affective meaning is realized through the interaction of evaluative lexis, metaphorical expressions, and symbolic representations. The classroom evidence further indicates that explicit semantic instruction significantly enhances learners' ability to interpret emotional meanings embedded in authentic English song lyrics. These findings extend previous TESOL research by positioning songs not only as language-learning materials but also as valuable resources for developing semantic competence and interpretative literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that affective meaning in English song lyrics is linguistically realized through the interaction of evaluative lexical items, metaphorical expressions, and connotative symbols. Rather than functioning as isolated semantic features, these linguistic resources collectively construct emotional experiences that require contextual interpretation. The findings indicate that evaluative lexis provides the most explicit representation of affective meaning,

whereas metaphorical and symbolic expressions require higher levels of semantic inference and contextual understanding. Consequently, interpreting affective meaning involves not only lexical knowledge but also the ability to integrate linguistic, cultural, and experiential information. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings confirm that English song lyrics can function as authentic semantic resources for developing learners' interpretative competence in TESOL classrooms. Classroom implementation showed that guided semantic analysis encouraged students to move beyond literal interpretation toward a deeper understanding of emotional and contextual meanings. This suggests that integrating semantic analysis into song-based instruction may simultaneously enhance learners' semantic awareness, critical interpretation, and classroom interaction. Therefore, songs should be viewed not merely as motivational materials but as authentic discourse that facilitates higher-order language learning.

The present study also contributes theoretically by extending Leech's framework of affective meaning into classroom-based semantic analysis. While previous research has primarily examined songs from stylistic, figurative-language, or motivational perspectives, this study demonstrates how semantic theory can be integrated with TESOL pedagogy to explain learners' interpretation of authentic emotional discourse. In doing so, the study bridges semantic theory and language teaching through an empirically grounded analysis of English song lyrics. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study analyzed only three contemporary English songs and involved a relatively small group of undergraduate EFL learners from a single institution. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to all musical genres or learner populations. Future research is therefore recommended to investigate affective meaning across different genres, including pop, rock, indie, rap, and folk music, and to compare learners with varying proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, integrating semantic analysis with discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, corpus linguistics, or cognitive linguistics may provide deeper insights into how emotional meaning is constructed and interpreted in authentic communication.

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