LEXICALLY NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF 'KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE' FROM EPIC: THE MUSICAL IN EFL LEARNING

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Abstract: *This study aimed to analyze the narrative and lexical aspects of Jorge Rivera-Herran's song "Keep Your Friends Close" from Epic: The Musical and examine the pedagogical value in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines textual analysis with empirical data collected from 31 EFL students through questionnaires and written responses. Despite the majority of participants being unfamiliar with The Odyssey or Epic Literature, findings reveal moderate vocabulary recognition (mean score 160/200, median 170) and strong narrative comprehension (86% identifying loyalty/betrayal as the main theme), even among those unfamiliar with The Odyssey, indicating that narrative-driven songs enhance contextual vocabulary uptake and cultural understanding. These results affirm musical texts as effective EFL tools for bridging literal and inferential meaning.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary retention; Narrative analysis; Musical; EFL learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary comprehension and retention have long been a challenge in EFL learning. In the classroom, learners discover a large number of new words in recent years, but these words are often limited to textbooks and have never been used in everyday contexts. As a result, learners may recognize this vocabulary during lessons but still limit their ability to internalize and retain it in long-term use. This problem becomes more apparent in literary texts where learners often struggle to grasp meaning

due to the complexity of language, figurative expressions, and occasionally repeated words in different contexts. Therefore, vocabulary retention is not only a linguistic challenge but also a critical factor in understanding literary works more deeply.

Previous research has addressed vocabulary retention, narrative structures, and lexical analysis as separate but related dimensions of language learning in different perspectives. Phuong Linh (2025) explains that vocabulary retention refers to the ability to recall words over time, which is a key element in vocabulary development. Similarly, Nguyen (2022) found that context-based vocabulary strategies significantly outperformed rote learning for both immediate and delayed retention among EFL learners. Meanwhile, Wei Ye and Jianda Liu (2023) show that narrative tasks can support EFL learners' vocabulary retention by incorporating words in meaningful contexts. Peters (2021) further outlines an approach to narrative instruction for second language learners, demonstrating how story structures enhance comprehension and pragmatic awareness through contextualized language exposure. Meilievna (2022) emphasizes the importance of lexical grouping in examining repeated and metaphorical expressions, which contributes to learners' socio-cultural competence. Together, these studies show that vocabulary retention, narrative analysis, and lexical analysis are closely connected, but they have mostly been examined separately instead of within a unified teaching framework.

This separation points to a clear research gap. Although previous studies have provided valuable insights, there's still limited discussion of vocabulary retention, narrative analysis, and lexical analysis within a single musical text for EFL learning. Reynolds (2025) stated that much of second language vocabulary development occurs informally or incidentally through learner-initiated exposure beyond the classroom. Nguyen et al (2025) further report that music-mediated pedagogy can boosts EFL students' listening engagement, fluency, and vocabulary retention through songs. Yet few studies focus specifically on narrative-driven musical texts. Studies focusing specifically on narrative-driven songs remain scarce. From a broader theoretical perspective, scholars such as Carter and McCarthy, Widdowson, and Halliday have long emphasized that vocabulary meaning is shaped by use, context, and discourse rather than isolated word knowledge. The distinct contribution of this article lies in its integrative perspective,

combining vocabulary retention, narrative analysis, and lexical analysis to interpret literary texts in EFL contexts. This approach, which has not been widely addressed in earlier research, offers new insights into the field. Accordingly, the present study analyzes the narrative and lexical features of Jorge Rivera-Herrans's *"Keep Your Friends Close"* from *Epic: The Musical*, while considering its implications for vocabulary retention in EFL learning.

METHODS

This study used a mixed-methods design that integrates textual analysis with empirical data from EFL learners to capture both the narrative and pedagogical dimensions of musical text. The textual strand focuses on Jorge Rivera-Herrans's *"Keep Your Friends Close"* from *Epic: The Musical*, analyzed for narrative conflict, character dynamics, thematic progression, and lexical features such as repetition and metaphor.

Research Design

The textual analysis focuses on Jorge Rivera-Herrans's *"Keep Your Friends Close"* from *Epic: The Musical*, examining its narrative and lexical features. Narrative aspects such as conflict, character dynamics, and thematic progression are analyzed alongside lexical choices, including repetition, metaphor, and register, to highlight the pragmatic cues embedded in the lyrics. Following Creswell's framework, mixed-methods research is characterized by the deliberate integration of qualitative and quantitative strands to enhance validity through triangulation, complementarity, and development. In this study, the qualitative strand is represented by the textual and thematic analysis of the song, while the quantitative strand is drawn from learners' questionnaire responses and written tasks that measure lexical recognition and pragmatic awareness. The rationale for employing mixed methods is that neither textual analysis nor learner data alone would sufficiently capture the pedagogical potential of musical texts; their combination provides a more comprehensive understanding of how narrative-driven lyrics can foster pragmatic competence in EFL contexts.

Data Collection

The empirical component of this study involves data collection from 31 college EFL learners through questionnaires and written responses administered via Google Forms. Students were asked to reflect on the narrative and lexical features of the text, and their responses were examined qualitatively to identify recurring themes in comprehension and communicative strategies, as well as quantitatively to measure lexical recognition and pragmatic awareness. By triangulating textual analysis with learner data, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive account of how narrative-driven musical texts can function as effective pedagogical tools in EFL pragmatics instruction. This methodological integration ensures that the findings are both theoretically grounded and pedagogically relevant.

Data Analyze

Data analysis in this study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative responses from the questionnaires and written responses were coded thematically to identify patterns in learners' comprehension and communicative strategies. Quantitative data were obtained through multiple-choice items designed to measure students' understanding of the song lyrics and their ability to recognize lexical features. These two strands were then analyzed in combination, with triangulation used to compare narrative and lexical themes against measurable indicators of vocabulary retention and pragmatic awareness. This integrated approach ensured that the findings were comprehensive and methodologically valid.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The section presents the results of the analysis. It is organized to show how learners engaged with the musical text both quantitatively, through comprehension scores, and qualitatively, through reflective insights. By integrating these strands, the discussion highlights the extent to which narrative-driven lyrics can foster pragmatic awareness and lexical recognition in EFL contexts.

Findings

Students were first provided with the song *'Keep Your Friends Close'* and its lyrics as stimulus material. They analyzed its narrative and lexical features before completing the questionnaires. At this stage, the researcher examined how effectively learners could interpret and analyze the lyrics. The questionnaire was then distributed via a Google Form link. Data collection consisted of two parts: twenty multiple-choice questions designed to check comprehension and interpretation, and two open-ended reflection questions aimed to capture learners' personal insights. This two-part procedure was designed to capture both measurable comprehension of the lyrics and deeper personal reflections, thereby ensuring that the data collected addressed both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study.

Knowledge	Number	Percentage
I never heard of it	17	54.8%
I have heard of it but don't know the details	11	35.5%
I know a lot about the story	3	9.7%

Table 1. Participants' Prior Knowledge of *The Odyssey*

Table 1 shows the varying levels of familiarity respondents had with The Odyssey. Nearly half of the participants (54.8%) reported that they had never heard of the story, while 35.5% indicated that they had heard of it but did not know the details. Only 9.7% stated that they knew the story well. This distribution suggests that most learners approached the song without substantial prior knowledge of the original epic, which highlights the importance of using accessible narrative texts in EFL contexts. These results indicate that the majority of learners engaged with the song without prior exposure to The Odyssey, yet they were still able to identify its central themes. This underscores the pedagogical value of musical texts as entry points into complex narratives.

The quantitative analysis revealed that the majority of learners achieved scores in the mid-to-high range, indicating a solid comprehension of the song's narrative and lexical features. Most participants correctly identified the dominant theme as the fragility of loyalty and the possibility of betrayal from friends. This suggests that learners not only understood the literal meaning of the lyrics but also grasped the deeper message about how trust can weaken, even between a captain and his crew.

Score Range	Raw Data (n=31)		Clean Data (n=28)	
	Number of participants	Percentage	Number of participants	Percentage
90 – 120	4	12.9%	2	7.1%
130 – 150	7	22.6%	6	21.4%
160 – 170	11	35.5%	10	35.7%
180 – 190	8	25.8%	8	28.6%
200	1	3.2%	2	7.1%
Total	**31**	**100%**	**28**	**100%**

Table 2. EFL Students' Comprehension Scores: Raw vs. Clean Data (n=31)

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of EFL students' comprehension scores (clean data, n=28), showing a clear concentration in mid-to-high ranges. Table 2 presents both raw (n=31) and cleaned distributions, with three cases excluded due to excessive missing values. The largest group (35.7%) scored 160-170, followed by 28.6% in 180-190, confirming that most learners (64.3%) achieved solid comprehension of the song's narrative and lexical features. Only 7.1% fell in the lowest range (90-120), with 7.1% reaching the maximum score of 200 (M=160, Median=170).

Main Theme	Number of participants	Percentage
Loyalty vs Betrayal (1)	24	86%
Love vs Duty (2)	3	11%
Missing/Not sure (99)	1	3%
Total	**28**	**100%**

Table 3. Main Theme Identification (86%, n=28)

Table 3 shows how participants identified the main theme of the song. The overwhelming majority (86%) recognized “Loyalty vs Betrayal” as the central conflict, while a smaller group (11%) interpreted the theme as “Love vs Duty.” Only one participant (3%) was uncertain. This strong consensus indicates that learners were able to grasp the deeper narrative message: loyalty is fragile and can be undermined by betrayal, even among close companions. The fact that nearly nine out of ten participants aligned on this theme highlights their ability to move beyond literal interpretation and engage with the symbolic meaning of the lyrics.

The quantitative analysis revealed a mean score of 160, with a median of 170, indicating that the majority of learners identified the dominant theme as the fragility of loyalty and the possibility of betrayal by friends. Most participants (86%) correctly identified the dominant theme as the fragility of loyalty and the possibility of betrayal from friends. This suggests that learners not only understood the literal meaning of the

lyrics but also grasped deeper symbolic messages about how trust can weaken, even between a captain and his crew. Some participants further interpreted loyalty as strategic rather than purely traditional, recognizing how rumors and uncertainty in Odysseus's leadership contributed to distrust among the crew.

The quantitative analysis was conducted using a cleaned dataset of 28 participants, after excluding three participants due to excessive missing responses in the multiple-choice section. However, all 31 participants provided valid responses to the open-ended reflection questions, therefore, the qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using the full dataset (n = 31).

Main Theme	Frequency	Short Description	Example of Participant Quotes
Trust/Distrust	18	Many participants highlight the tension between trust and suspicion in relationships.	"In my opinion, the theme of loyalty in the song shows that **trust** can easily be broken, especially when people are tempted or feel suspicious of each other." (P9)
Betrayal from friends	15	Participants saw that betrayal actually came from those closest to them, not enemies.	"it is to be alert on who you are standing to, not friends are all friends and **enemies** can be in form of **friends**" (P2)
Loyalty is Fragile	14	Many participants emphasized that loyalty can easily crumble due to doubt, rumors, or temptation.	"The song shows that **loyalty is fragile** and can easily break under pressure. At the beginning, Odysseus trusts his crew, but as suspicion and temptation grow, that loyalty weakens. It suggests that even strong relationships can fall apart when people lose trust or act out of selfishness." (P4)
Warning / Alertness	3	The phrase *"Keep your friends close"* is understood as a warning to always be alert.	"In my opinion, the meaning of that sentence is that the god of the winds is **warning** Odysseus that, compared to the wickedness of your enemies, your friends can actually be the most wicked of all by betraying you. That is why you need to be on your guard." (P8)

Table 4. Thematic Coding of Open-ended Responses (n=31)

Based on thematic coding of 31 participants' open-ended responses, the most frequently mentioned theme was trust and distrust, appearing in 18 responses. Participants frequently emphasized that trust plays a central role in maintaining loyalty, but can easily weaken when suspicion arises. The second most common theme was betrayal from friends, identified in 15 responses, showing that many learners interpreted

betrayal from close companions as more dangerous than threats from enemies. Additionally, loyalty is fragile emerged in 14 responses, indicating that participants viewed loyalty as unstable and vulnerable to temptation, doubt, and rumors. A smaller number of participants interpreted the phrase as a warning or reminder to remain alert, emphasizing vigilance in relationships. These findings suggest that learners moved beyond literal understanding of the lyrics and were able to interpret deeper symbolic meanings related to trust, loyalty, and betrayal.

These themes show that learners moved beyond surface-level comprehension of the lyrics and were able to express more nuanced interpretations. Their reflections reveal an awareness of how loyalty, trust, and betrayal operate not only within the narrative of Odysseus and his crew but also in broader human relationships. Learners grasped the meaning and storyline conveyed through the lyrics with immediacy, highlighting the depth and richness of their engagement with the text. Taken together, the findings suggest that the song functioned as an effective stimulus for both comprehension and critical reflection.

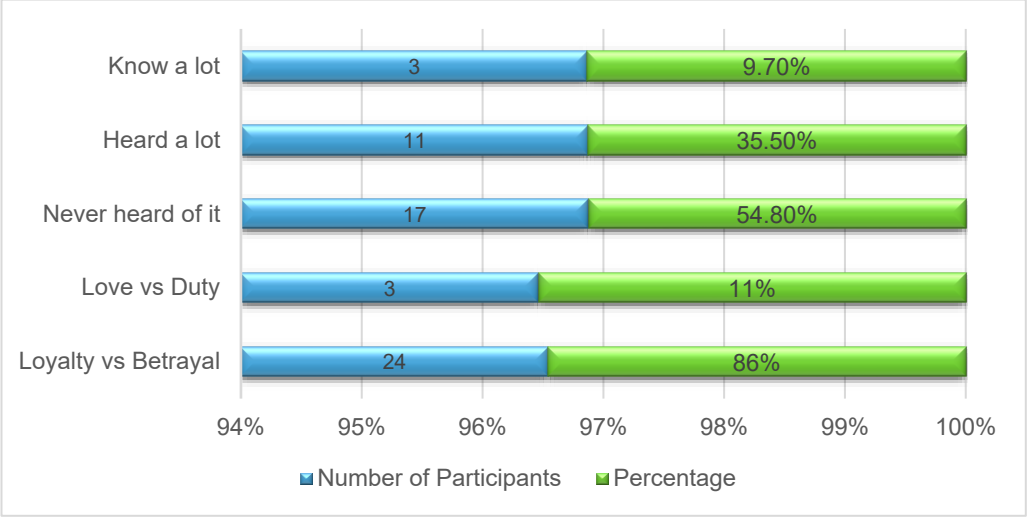

Chart 1. Overall Learner Knowledge and Comprehension

The chart shows that most participants (54.8%) had never heard of the Odyssey, while 35.5% reported some familiarity and only 9.7% claimed strong prior knowledge. Despite this limited background, learners demonstrated clear thematic understanding, with 86% identifying Loyalty vs Betrayal as a central theme compared to just 11% recognizing Love vs Duty. These results suggest that although many participants were

unfamiliar with The Odyssey, the lesson helped them grasp and interpret the key narrative conflicts of the story.

Discussion

Based on the findings, the study showed positive results despite the majority of the respondents are unfamiliar with *The Odyssey* and *EPIC: The Musical*. Most participants were still able to identify the central theme of loyalty and betrayal, suggesting that narrative-driven songs can make complex literary content more accessible for EFL learners. The song title, *Keep Your Friends Close*, already foreshadows the central tension of the narrative by implying caution and suspicion within close relationships. The narrative analysis of the lyrics revealed a clear storyline centered on the conflict between Odysseus and his crew, highlighting tensions between trust and suspicion. The progression from Odysseus receiving the windbag to the crew's betrayal illustrates how loyalty gradually weakens over time, making the narrative meaningful and easier for learners to interpret.

This finding supports Peters (2021), who argued that narrative-based instruction helps second-language learners understand story structures more effectively through contextualized language exposure. Similarly, the findings align with Wei Ye and Jianda Liu (2023), who found that narrative-based tasks promote vocabulary learning by embedding language in meaningful contexts. However, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on general storytelling or vocabulary acquisition, the present study extends existing literature by demonstrating that musical narratives can also help learners interpret deeper symbolic themes, such as trust, loyalty, and betrayal, even when learners have limited prior knowledge of the source material.

The lexical analysis further demonstrated how language features contributed to learners' comprehension through repetition *("keep your friends close"*), metaphor (the windbag as a symbol of hidden danger), and pragmatic cues such as warnings and admonitions from Aeolus. These devices not only reinforce the theme of loyalty and betrayal but also provide learners with authentic examples of how meaning can extend beyond literal interpretation. This suggests that vocabulary understanding emerged from both forms of observation, as learners demonstrated lexical comprehension not only

through quantitative scores but also through qualitative reflections on the song's meaning. This finding is consistent with Meilievna (2022), who emphasized that lexical grouping and repeated expressions support socio-cultural understanding and help learners interpret figurative language more effectively. While previous studies mainly examined lexical understanding in conventional learning materials, the present study suggests that musical narratives provide an additional multimodal context, where lyrical structure, storytelling, and musical elements collectively enhance vocabulary comprehension and interpretive learning.

The quantitative findings further showed that most participants achieved mid-to-high comprehension scores (mean = 160, median = 170), indicating strong vocabulary recognition and overall comprehension. This supports Nguyen (2022), who found that context-based vocabulary strategies are more effective than rote memorization for both immediate and delayed retention. Since the vocabulary in the song was presented within a meaningful narrative context, learners were better able to understand and retain lexical items. The results also align with Phuong Linh (2025), who stated that vocabulary retention improves when learners engage deeply with meaningful texts rather than memorizing isolated words as well as Reynolds (2025), who explained that second-language vocabulary development occurs incidentally through informal exposure outside traditional classroom settings. Additionally, the present study suggests that musical narrative such as songs provide valuable opportunities for this type of incidental learning because learners acquire vocabulary naturally while focusing on meaning and enjoyment.

Finally, this finding aligns with Nguyen et al (2025), who found song-based interventions enhance EFL learners' listening engagement through contextual vocabulary exposure. In the present study, the musical elements enhanced learners' exposure to different kinds of English lexical expressions commonly used in songs. This helped learners improve their vocabulary during learning engagement and helped them connect lexical meaning with narrative interpretation. However, unlike previous studies that examined vocabulary retention or narrative learning separately, the present study integrates narrative analysis, lexical analysis, and musical pedagogy within a single framework. Therefore, narrative-driven songs can serve not only as entertainment but also

as effective pedagogical tools for vocabulary development, narrative comprehension, and critical reflection in EFL learning.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the use of song analysis in EFL classrooms can greatly improve learners' narrative comprehension and vocabulary development. Although 54.8% of participants had never heard of *The Odyssey,* most learners were still be able to engage meaningfully with the song and interpret its narrative. Quantitative findings showed that 86% of participants identified loyalty versus betrayal as the dominant theme, with a mean score of 160 and a median score of 170, indicating strong overall comprehension of both lexical and narrative elements. Qualitative reflections further revealed that learners were able to recognize deeper themes related to loyalty, trust, suspicion, and betrayal. Overall, these findings suggest that musical narratives are particularly helpful for building vocabulary, as they allow students to understand lyrics more deeply. Importantly, this highlights that prior familiarity with the source narrative is not a prerequisite for meaningful learning engagement, as learners could still engage and infer meaning through contextual cues in the lyrics and musical structure.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, teachers are encouraged to incorporate narrative-driven songs into EFL instruction to support vocabulary development, narrative comprehension, and critical interpretation. The findings of this study showed that the use of songs supports the development of students' vocabulary and comprehension skills, even when they are unfamiliar with the source narrative. Classroom activities such as lyric analysis, thematic discussion, and reflective questioning may further enhance students' engagement and interpretive skills. For future research, it is recommended to involve larger participant groups and a wider range of songs with more complex lyrics in order to explore alternative approaches to language learning and examine the long-term effects of song-based learning on vocabulary retention and comprehension. This study is expected to serve as a useful reference for both teachers and future researchers in

developing effective song-based approaches to vocabulary learning and narrative comprehension in EFL contexts.

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