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# Learning Figurative Language through Taylor Swift's 'Willow': A Genre-Based and Multimodal Framework for Secondary ELT

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#### **Abstract**

Learning figurative language remains a complex yet important aspect of English language education. It often challenges students due to its abstract nature and cultural depth. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Taylor Swift's Willow and its music video can be integrated as multimodal materials for teaching figurative language through the six English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing. Using a qualitative method based on literature analysis, the study develops a structured lesson plan grounded in the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) and aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study identifies that Willow contains rich figurative elements such as simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism. These elements not only enhance linguistic understanding but also provide cultural and emotional depth. The music video further supports comprehension by giving symbolic visual cues, making abstract meanings more understandable for learners. The lesson plan outlines three meetings, each focusing on different skill pairs while embedding the five stages of GBA. The study highlights that incorporating Willow as a multimodal learning resource supports students' critical and creative thinking, improves cultural understanding, and increases engagement. It is a relatable and effective method for teaching figurative language in modern English classrooms.

Keywords: figurative language, multimodal learning, Taylor Swift, lesson plan, GBA

#### Introduction

People communicate in many ways, including through literature such as songs, novels, and poetry, where messages are conveyed with the help of figurative language (Nursolihat & Kareviati, 2020). Figurative language enriches communication by evoking imagery and emotion, but its non-literal nature can pose a unique challenge for language learners. It requires them to interpret meanings that extend beyond literal definitions. This complexity often leads to misunderstandings, particularly when it comes to recognizing cultural references and comprehending idiomatic expressions. Figurative language refers to

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expressions that convey meanings beyond their denotative interpretations. It is used imaginatively because the use of the words branching from its usual meaning that cannot be translated literally (Nainggolan, Siahaan, Sinurat, & Herman, 2021). This becomes a reason why mastering figurative language is essential, as it involves an individual's ability to understand the information within it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It also fosters learners' critical and creative thinking, enhances their intercultural awareness, and empowers them to engage more deeply with texts.

To help learners engage with these layers in a more accessible and authentic way, popular music becomes a powerful medium (Mitsalina, Fauziyah, & Nabila, 2024). One of the examples is Taylor Swift's Willow. Using this song offers an engaging way to explore figurative language with learners. As Taylor Swift is not only recognized as one of the best singers but also as a very talented songwriter, Willow comes to be rich with imagery and emotive language. The song's widespread popularity and emotional depth also make it relatable and memorable for learners (Trust, 2021). The story behind Willow is about a woman's love for her man, consisting of various types of figurative language that align with the themes of love and fate. Lyrics such as "I'm like the water when your ship rolled in that night" illustrate vivid comparisons that help learners grasp figurative expressions in meaningful and memorable ways (Yunanda et al., 2021).

Furthermore, using songs in language learning supports the development of multimodal literacy. Learners often grasp complex linguistic concepts more effectively when they are linked to culturally relevant examples, such as songs (Jankovic, 2020). This supports the fact that English learning today includes six skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing. The shift to digital-based learning during the Covid-19 pandemic emphasized the need to develop visual and technological literacy (Faloye, Obateru, & Alonge, 2021). Since many songs today are accompanied by music videos, they provide not only auditory but also visual stimuli, reinforcing comprehension through multiple modes.

Music videos with storytelling are effective tools for learning figurative language. They involve all six skills, particularly viewing and representing. Many music videos, though not all, are created narratively that helps viewers better understand the meaning of the related song (Al-Hamdun & Al Mozari, 2024). Music videos capture students' attention and increase their motivation to learn English with the help of audio, visuals, and lyrics aspects (Kurnia Aliffia & Arifani, 2024). Moreover, learning English through YouTube lectures, videos, and vlogs can be a practical strategy that focuses on different modes of communication (Sadaf, Rasheed, & Ahmad, 2024). It means visual media with sound can serve as a multimodal method to learn figurative language.

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However, to fully leverage these multimodal resources, a structured pedagogical framework as guidance in classrooms is needed (Damayanti, 2018). It requires a clear structure, which can be applied in the form of a lesson plan that helps both teachers and students to be more specific in their learning activity (Brown, 2001). In addition, the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) provides a structured model for developing students' understanding of texts through five stages such as Building Knowledge of Field, Modeling of Text, Joint and Independent Construction, and Linking of Related Text. It supports students in analyzing and producing texts that contain figurative language (Agustien, 2020). Multimodality learning supports deeper comprehension by engaging multiple modes (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). Combined with the use of music as comprehensible input, this creates a low-stress, effective learning environment (Krashen, 1982). In this context, aligning language learning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly Goal 4 on Quality Education—encourages the integration of inclusive, equitable, and innovative pedagogical practices in English classrooms. Despite increasing use of music in English learning, limited studies have focused on creating a structured multimodal lesson plans using a single contemporary song to develop all six English skills while aligning with SDGs.

Therefore, this research is designed to fill that gap by integrating Taylor Swift's Willow and its music video into a lesson plan aimed at learning figurative language through multimodal learning. It effectively draws learners into the subject matter, creating a space for them to perceive English not just as a language to be learned but as media for creative expression (Bawemenewi & Swarniti, 2024). It explores two key questions: (1) How can Taylor Swift's Willow and its music video be effectively utilized as multimodal media for learning figurative language through the six English language skills? (2) How does a structured lesson plan incorporating Willow and its music video, based on the 5 Genre-Based Approach, facilitate students' understanding and application of figurative language in English learning while integrating SDG? This article is highly expected to develop a structured lesson plan that integrates songs and their multimodal features to enhance students' comprehension and application of figurative language through the six English language skills, guided by the Genre-Based Approach and aligned with SDG principles. This study supports Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive and equitable language learning through multimodal resources. By using culturally relevant materials like songs and music videos, it lowers learning barriers for students from diverse backgrounds and encourages critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and meaningful engagement—key competencies in today's globalized education.

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#### Methodology

This study employs a conceptual and qualitative research approach to analyze how Taylor Swift's Willow and its music video can be used as multimodal texts to teach figurative language through six English skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing). It also explores how a structured lesson plan based on the 5 Genre-Based Approach and aligned with SDG principles can support learning. The study does not involve human participants or empirical data collection. Instead, it draws on textual and visual materials—specifically, the official lyrics and music video of Taylor Swift's Willow—as the primary data sources.

The analysis involved a close reading of the lyrics and viewing techniques, using relevant linguistic and literary theories. It identified figurative language in the lyrics, their meanings, and their contribution to the song's narrative structure and aesthetic qualities. These texts were analyzed through qualitative document analysis, using frameworks from figurative language theory (Perrine, 1977) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). The music video, rich in symbolic scenes, mystical visuals, and narrative continuity from Cardigan, was analyzed for its multimodal elements that complement the figurative language in the lyrics. Researchers served as the primary instrument and applied theoretical frameworks systematically to maintain academic rigor and minimize subjectivity.

The primary data sources are the official lyrics and music video of *Willow*. This study addresses how *Willow* and its music video can serve as multimodal media for understanding figurative language in a real-world and culturally meaningful context. The study presents a structured lesson plan grounded in the Genre-Based Approach (GBA), with detailed stages described in the Findings section. It supports goals from Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). The integration of SDG 4 is explained by aligning the lesson plan with relevant education indicators, which will be described in the Findings section.

The resulting lesson plan serves as both a practical tool and a theoretical model for integrating multimodal pop culture texts into language learning. Despite the absence of field implementation, the lesson plan is grounded in pedagogical theory and existing research on multimodal learning which contributes to English language education. This study proposes the lesson plan as a valid tool based on the integration of multimodal media and educational frameworks.

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#### **Findings**

#### Figurative Language Found in Willow

The researcher identified several types of figurative language found in the song Willow according to Perrine's classification as a theoretical foundation. However, only the types that appear in Willow are presented in the findings. This following section presents a table containing the figurative language expressions in Willow along with their corresponding lyric examples and descriptive interpretation. The findings are conceptual in nature, based on a close analysis of textual and visual materials. Despite the absence of field implementation, these findings aim to provide theoretically grounded insights into how authentic multimodal texts like Willow can be used in English language education.

	Table.1 Figurative Languages in Willow							
Figurative Language	Lyric Example	Brief Description						
Simile	"I'm like the water when your ship rolled in that night"	It portrays the narrator as someone who is easy to adapt to the emotional presence brought by a loved one.						
	"Rough on the surface but you cut through like a knife"	This line compares the narrator's emotions to a rough exterior, which the loved one is able to pierce with ease, like a sharp knife.						
	"Lost in your current like a priceless wine"	This lyric describes the narrator being so in love, likened to a precious wine that gains value over time.						
	"As if you were a mythical thing"	The loved one is described as almost perfect and unattainable, like a legendary creature.						
	"Like you were a trophy or a champion ring"	This line presents the loved one as highly valuable, similar to a significant achievement.						
Metaphor	"Life was a willow and it bent right to your wind"	Life is defined as a willow tree bending to the wind, showing the narrator's emotional dependence on her lover.						
	"You know that my train could take you home"	The metaphor of a train represents a life journey in which the narrator offers a sense of belonging and refuge.						
	"Anywhere else is hollow"	This line defines all places without the loved one as emotionally empty and meaningless.						
	"Show me the places where the others gave you scars"	This metaphor expresses a desire to understand the emotional wounds affected the loved one because of the past relationships.						
	"Every bait and switch was a work of art"	Deceptions in a relationship are described as artistic, suggesting that even imperfections have value.						
	"Wreck my plans, that's my man"	It defines the narrator's deep affection and willingness to sacrifice personal goals for love.						
Personification	"Head on the pillow, I could feel you sneaking in"	This line attributes human-like movement to a feeling, suggesting that emotions sneak into the narrator's thoughts like a person did.						

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Figurative Language	Lyric Example	Brief Description
Hyperbole (Overstatement)	"Life was a willow and it bent right to your wind"  "There was one prize I'd cheat to win"  "They count me out time and time again"  "But I come back stronger than a	The willow tree in this line is personified as having the human ability to bend.  It exaggerates the value of the loved one, presenting them as a prize worth breaking rules for. This hyperbolic line illustrates the narrator's feeling of being repeatedly underestimated.  This line exaggerates the narrator's strength and
Symbol	90's trend" "Wait for the signal and I'll meet you after dark"	resilience. The words signal and dark act as symbols—signal represents hope or timing, while dark symbolizes mystery or hidden emotions in the relationship.

#### Visual Elements in Willow Music Video

The Willow music video was released on December 11, 2020, on YouTube. It was directed by Taylor Swift herself, who also played as main lead in the video. This music video was produced by Rebecca Skinner, Jill Hardin, and Kathy Palmer working together with a dedicated creative team consisting of cinematographers, editors, production designers, costume designers, and stylists. The main idea talks about a deep emotional love felt by someone toward his or her beloved. Continuing the storyline from Cardigan, it begins with Taylor Swift following a glowing golden thread that led her through various symbolic scenes. She arrived at a lake and saw a reflection where she rested her head on a man's shoulder. As she tried to touch him, the reflection disappeared. She dove into the water, and the scene shifted to two children playing with the golden thread—assumed to represent young versions of Taylor Swift and the mysterious man. The next scene shows Swift inside a glass box, playing the mandolin while singing a few lines from Willow. She saw the mysterious and tried to approach him, but the box kept her locked. Taylor noticed the golden thread leading to a secret door below her and she opened it.

The scene undergoes an immediate change to a wintry forest where she participates in a ritualistic dance around a bonfire. Then, the scene shifts into Taylor who was in an unfamiliar room and held onto the golden thread. She discovered she has reached its end met the man. The video ended with them walking hand in hand out of the room and into the forest. The closing credits then come out, presenting the names of those involved in the making of the *Willow* music video. The music clip is visually dominated by shades of gold, warm browns, and earthy tones to arouse a mystical and romantic atmosphere. The lighting is dim and candlelit which enhances the dreamy mood. The settings create the impression of a magical universe which is also supported by vintage-style wardrobes. The cinematography is multifarious and features smooth transitions that highlight the magical theme. Several scenes were

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shot by following Swift's movements, making audiences feel as though they are joining her on the journey.

#### Lesson Plan Development

Based on the findings of figurative language and the visual presentation found in the lyrics and music video of *Willow*, a multimodal and Genre-Based Approach (GBA)-oriented lesson plan can be developed as follows. The lesson plan is designed for secondary-level learners, particularly senior high school students, who are developing competence in both literary interpretation and multimodal communication (Maduwu, 2016). The lesson plans are theoretical and have not been implemented in classrooms. They are developed as conceptual models grounded in the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) and multimodal theory, intended to inspire educators seeking to integrate authentic cultural texts into language teaching.

Table. 2 Lesson Plan Development

Meeting	Skills Focused	Activities	Multimodal Resources	GBA Stages	SDG Focus
1	Listening, Speaking	Listening for gist & detail, group discussion, singing, personal reflection & presentation	Willow audio, lyrics	BKOF, MoT, JCOT, ICOT, LoT	SDG 4
2	Reading, Viewing	Reading lyrics, analyzing figurative language, viewing music video, discussion, reflection, creative rewriting	Willow lyrics, music video	BKOF, MoT, JCOT, ICOT, LoT	SDG 4
3	Writing, Representing	Creative writing using figurative language, visual/digital representation, peer review, reflection, presentation	Lyrics, MV, digital tools	BKOF, MoT, JCOT, ICOT, LoT	SDG 4

The integration of the Willow song and its music video as a learning material for figurative language through a multimodal approach and in alignment with the structure of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) is realized in the form of three lesson plans, designed for three classroom meetings. Each meeting is allocated 90 minutes for teachers and students to explore Willow as a learning medium. Every meeting focuses on two English language skills, with all learning activities customized to improve those particular skills.

The first lesson plan focuses on enhancing students' listening and speaking skills through the analysis of figurative language in Taylor Swift's Willow. Students comprehend its meaning through listening activities, involved in small group discussions, and express their perspective orally. The learning materials are the audio of Willow, printed or digital song lyrics, and a figurative language explanation

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sheet which contains common types of figurative language along with explanations, examples from song lyrics, and the meanings behind them. The lesson plan incorporates all five stages of the Genre-Based Approach and aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive, engaging, and meaningful language learning experiences.

In the second meeting, the focus shifts to reading and viewing skills. Students read the lyrics, identify figurative language, watch the Willow music video, and analyze how its visual features enhance the lyrical message. The learning materials are similar to those used in the first lesson, with the addition of a visual analysis worksheet. This lesson plan also embraces a complete sequence of GBA stages, with each stage designed to support the development of the target skills. This lesson plan allows students to explore the relationship between textual and visual meaning in the song and music video. It also reflects SDG 4 (Quality Education) promoting critical and creative engagement, reinforcing multimodal and collaborative learning

The third lesson plan concentrates on writing and visual representing skills which highlights how students can develop their ability to write and present their ideas visually. Students are encouraged to construct their own narrative or poem and present it in the form of a poster, digital collage, dramatic reading, or video. The learning materials are sample figurative language in poetry or narrative writing and digital tools for representation (e.g., posters, slides, digital storytelling tools). The lesson plan contains all the GBA stages and aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by providing students with the tools to express their ideas in diverse ways and by fostering skills that enhance both personal creativity and academic literacy.

While this study does not present empirical validation through classroom trials, its strength lies in the pedagogical frameworks and theoretical analysis it provides. The proposed lesson plans serve as practical illustrations of how multimodal texts can be integrated within a GBA-based perspective to promote meaningful language learning. Future research is encouraged to implement and evaluate these lesson plans in real educational contexts to explore their impact on learner engagement and achievement.

#### Discussion

#### Figurative Language in Willow and Its Implication in Language Learning

The analysis of the lyrics in Willow reveals several types of figurative language, including simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism. While the use of such devices enriches the lyrical meaning, their interpretation may vary depending on the listener's cultural background and level of English

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proficiency, posing potential challenges in the classroom. One example that uses simile is "like you were a trophy or a champion ring." This line does not define "you" literally as a trophy or a champion ring, but instead compares it to something highly desirable that the narrator is willing to strive for at all costs. However, metaphoric meanings like these may be misunderstood by learners unfamiliar with Western imagery. Another line, "lost in your current like a priceless wine," describes that the narrator is really being in love, like a precious wine which becomes valuable over time. Similes are capable of creating intense visual details, provoking emotions and memories, and expressing complicated ideas through analogical thinking (Hayeesa-i & Maisarah, 2023).

The lyrics of Willow also feature metaphors which directly state one thing is another to create a more powerful meaning, rather than simply comparing the two (Nur Fadilla, Ariani, & Dewi Max, 2023). One example is "life was a willow and it bent right to your wind," which illustrates how someone in love is like a willow tree, bending in response to the wind—deeply influenced by the presence of the loved one. Another line, "anywhere else is hollow," does not refer to literal emptiness, but instead conveys a sense of loneliness and emotional void when away from the loved one. These metaphors may require differentiated scaffolding such as visual elements, simpler paraphrases, or guided discussions to ensure comprehension for learners at basic proficiency levels.

Apart from simile and metaphor, personification is also present in the lyrics where non-human entities are described as if they have human attributes (Bawemenewi & Swarniti, 2024). One example is "head on the pillow, I could feel you sneaking in," which represents an emotion entering quietly—much like a person sneaking into a room. Another example, "life was a willow and it bent right to your wind," assigns the willow tree with human-like movement, bending under emotional influence. The recurring metaphorical and personified imagery, while emotionally resonant, calls for multimodal explanation—particularly for visual or kinesthetic learners.

Following personification, hyperbole is also found in the lyrics. One example is "but I come back stronger than a 90's trend," which illustrates the narrator's resilience. Another is "they count me out time and time again," emphasizing repeated underestimation. Hyperboles might appear exaggerated for learners without cultural references to 90s trends or idiomatic expressions, making cultural contextualization crucial in instruction (Aljadaan, 2018). Another type of figurative language found is symbolism. It involves the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities about something that surpass their literal meaning (Yuliasari & Virtianti, 2023). In Willow, "wait for the signal and I'll meet you after dark" shows symbolism

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where "signal" means hope or timing, and "dark" represents a challenging period. Symbolism invites multiple interpretations, which, while fostering creativity, may confuse students unless guided through structured exploration.

From a pedagogical perspective, Willow can serve as a multimodal learning medium for figurative language by activating all six English language skills. Categorized as an indie folk song, Willow is authentic with its soft acoustic instrumentation, melancholic ambience, and poetic lyrical narratives. Apart from the song, Willow is also presented with a music video, which supports the song through the drama featuring Taylor Swift as the main character. However, it may pose interpretative difficulty without adequate scaffolding as it requires adaptation to students' language levels and prior exposure to music-based materials. To address this, teachers may provide guiding questions or visual sequencing tasks to help students decode the storyline progressively.

The music video incorporates figurative language elements, such as the golden thread, which symbolizes a deep soul connection that enables two people to find each other although they were once in different paths. The storyline presented in the drama involves various other visual aspects, such as acting, lighting, effects, wardrobe and styles, as well as cinematography, which significantly influence how the plot strengthens the meaning of the song. This comprehensive visual presentation also makes the music video a multimodal learning material. Still, integrating visuals in learning activities requires strategic design to avoid overwhelming students with multiple modes of input simultaneously. As a multimodal learning medium, *Willow* serves as an effective material for figurative language—through melody, lyrics, and visuals—while activating listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and representing

# The Role of the Genre-Based Approach and SDGs Integration in Structuring Learning with Willow

Willow can be used to enhance all six English skills. According to the first lesson plan, students are required to listen to the audio. Listening is important to develop communicative competence (Jamila & Rahman, 2024). When they focus on lyrics and pronunciation, they are exposed to native sounds. Students also discuss and express ideas related to the material, cultivating speaking skills. In the Building Knowledge of the Field (BKoF) stage, the teacher begins by asking students about their favorite English songs before introducing Willow. Then, they discuss figurative language using real-life examples and complete worksheet containing definitions and common examples of figurative language.

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During the Modeling of the Text (MoT) stage, students do two kinds of listening activities, for gist and details, to improve their competence in grasping main idea and understanding detailed information. In Joint Construction (JC), students join small group discussions to interpret lyrics and answer questions, promoting speaking confidence. However, grouping strategies must be managed carefully to ensure balanced participation and to avoid dominance by more proficient learners. The Independent Construction (IC) stage is seen when students present their interpretations. Lastly, in the Linking to Other Texts (LoT) stage, students compare Willow to another song to notice tone and meaning differences. The integration of SDG 4 is shown through listening skills, teamwork, and critical thinking. Despite these benefits, time allocation can be a constraint, so teachers must prioritize the most impactful stages or blend tasks across meetings.

Furthermore, Willow's lyrics and video can develop students' reading and viewing skills. In the context of modern literacy, reading sources are not limited to written texts but extend to the comprehension of various forms of multimodal communication (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). By observing symbols, gestures, lighting, costumes, and settings, students capture visualized figurative meaning. Based on the second lesson plan that were designed, Building Knowledge of the Field stage allows students to activate their prior knowledge of the song and music video Willow. They analyze the selected images, predict the storyline, and match scrambled lyrics to spark curiosity and engage students cognitively. In Modeling of the Text stage, students read the lyrics without the music, identify the figurative language and discuss their meanings. Then, they are involved in groups to analyze both the lyrics and the visual elements of the music video before presenting their findings to the class as the reflection of Joint Construction stage. After that, in Independent Construction stage, students are given time to deepen their understanding and explore the learning material further. Finally, in the Linking to Other Texts stage, students compare Willow to another song or an Indonesiantranslated poem to improve their understanding of creative texts. This lesson plan develops multimodal literacy, critical thinking, and comprehension of various types of text, aligning with SDG 4 which promotes 21st-century skills.

Besides the four skills mentioned, *Willow* can enhance writing and representing. Modern literacy involves interpreting various forms—texts, images, videos, gestures (Nuriyah & Afifi, 2023). However, access to digital tools and students' familiarity with visual editing may limit the effectiveness of creative representation. Teachers may provide low-tech alternatives like hand-drawn posters or oral presentations to ensure all learners can participate. In Building of Knowledge Field, students are introduced different ways to represent ideas, for example

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through poetry, short stories, posters, digital art, etc. In Modelling of Text, students analyze sample creative texts such as narratives or poems, accompanied by supporting questions to help students develop ideas. In the Joint Construction stage, there will be peer reviews activity that focus on offering feedback, fostering evaluative and collaborative skills. Then, students are given time to express their creativity through multimodal products such as illustrated poems, digital posters, or short performances based on their interpretations of *Willow* to highlight the Independent Construction stage. Lastly, Linking to Other Texts stage allow students to compare their works with other creative texts to enrich their understanding of genre. This supports SDG 4 by enhancing writing and representing skills. Nonetheless, facilitating diverse creative outputs demands flexibility and empathy of the teacher to offer support across varying skill levels.

#### Conclusion

This study explored how Taylor Swift's Willow and its music video can be used as multimodal media to learn figurative language through the six English language skills, supported by a structured lesson plan based on the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) and aligned with SDG principles. The findings show that the song and video are rich in similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism. The combination of audio, textual, and visual forms makes Willow a multimodal example for learning figurative language with the help of lesson plans. The lesson plan developed demonstrates how all six English language skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing—can be meaningfully integrated through GBA stages.

This approach not only supports language development but also reflects the goals of SDG 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive, engaging, and creative learning experiences through popular culture. By connecting language content to students' real-world interests, it promotes deeper motivation and critical literacy. However, this study has limitations as future research is encouraged to explore the classroom implementation of the proposed lesson plan, focusing on student engagement, responses, and learning outcomes. Researchers are also suggested to explore different songs or music videos from diverse genres and cultures to expand the use of multimodal learning. By incorporating *Willow* and its music video, this study offers a fresh way to reimagine English language teaching through multimodal, culturally relevant, and SDG-driven practices.

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