

Exploring clause awareness through song lyrics: EFL learners' challenges and perceptions in contextualized grammar instruction

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ABSTRACT

Traditional grammar instruction in EFL classrooms often emphasizes rule memorization and mechanical drills, which limit students' ability to apply grammatical knowledge in authentic contexts. To address this gap, the present study explores the use of English song lyrics as authentic material to develop clause awareness, focusing on students' ability to identify noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses. Forty-third-semester undergraduate students at an Indonesian university analyzed selected song lyrics to identify clause types, followed by a focus group discussion with five volunteers. Analysis of students' work showed that over 83% adverbial clauses were successfully identified, followed by noun (70.8%) and adjective clauses (60%). The success is often aided by recognizable subordinators such as 'because' and 'when'. Meanwhile, errors were commonly linked to blurred syntactic boundaries, poetic compression, and the absence of standard punctuation in lyrics. These results demonstrate that song lyrics can enhance clause recognition, particularly for adverbials, but require scaffolding for more complex clause functions. Beyond task performance, focus group discussions revealed that students found the activity engaging and motivating, confirming earlier claims about the affective benefits of music in language learning. Unlike previous studies that emphasize songs for vocabulary or listening, this study highlights their potential for explicit grammar instruction, contributing evidence of both cognitive gains and affective value. The findings support the integration of multimodal, student-centered materials into grammar pedagogy to promote deeper syntactic awareness and learner engagement in EFL contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Grammar teaching remains a cornerstone of English Language Teaching (ELT), especially for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Ananda & Sardi, 2024; Elfalih, 2024; Jung, 2024; Shofiyah & Armanda, 2024). A solid understanding of grammar supports effective communication and underpins advanced skills such as reading comprehension and academic writing (Aghayeva, 2023; Alqahtani, 2022; Ghafar & Sawalmeh, 2024). In Indonesia, where English is taught primarily as a foreign language, grammar instruction has long relied on traditional approaches emphasizing rote memorization and mechanical drills (Kuntso, 2024; Pawlak, 2023). While this method often helps students perform well on exams, it rarely fosters the ability to apply grammar meaningfully in authentic contexts. It becomes a persistent challenge in Indonesian classrooms where learners are expected to meet the broader educational aims of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

Among the many areas of grammar, understanding clauses, including independent and dependent, as well as noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses, is particularly important for developing syntactic and semantic competence (Frizelle et al., 2018; Owens et al., 2024). Yet students often struggle with clause identification because of the abstract nature of grammatical functions and the limited contextual grounding provided in conventional teaching (Hsiao & Li, 2024; Thompson, 2019). Recent pedagogical trends have sought to address these gaps by incorporating functional approaches, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which emphasize grammar as meaning in context (Halliday, as cited in Pawlak, 2023). However, as Jung (2024) observes, many instructional materials still do not translate these insights into practice.

One way to make grammar instruction more contextual is through the use of authentic materials. Authentic materials are texts reflecting real-life language use. Several scholars emphasize their potential to increase motivation and expose learners to complex structures not found in textbooks (Dja'far, 2023; Mamba, 2024; Treve, 2023). At the same time, others caution that authentic input can overwhelm learners without proper scaffolding, as its variability often departs from standard grammar rules (Popova, 2019; Werner, 2020). This debate highlights the need for classroom-based studies that not only introduce authentic texts but also examine how learners navigate their challenges.

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Song lyrics, in particular, have attracted attention for their cultural familiarity, emotional appeal, and linguistic richness. Research has shown that songs can reduce learner anxiety and increase retention, consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Ferreri & Verga, 2016; Macrides & Angeli, 2018). Studies largely focus on vocabulary or listening gains (Akbari et al., 2018; Rahmah & Siswana, 2025), with limited attention to grammar instruction, especially clause-level analysis (Davis, 2017; Embogama, 2023). Werner (2021) notes that despite decades of song-based pedagogy, few studies systematically explore how learners engage with grammatical structures such as noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses.

Addressing this gap is particularly urgent in the Indonesian EFL context, where grammar remains test-oriented yet disconnected from real-life communication. By investigating how students identify different clause types in song lyrics, as well as the challenges they encounter and their perceptions of the activity, this study seeks to contribute to both local and global discussions on contextualized grammar instruction.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Indonesian EFL students demonstrate awareness of clause types through song lyric analysis? (2) How do Indonesian EFL students experience cognitive and linguistic challenges when identifying clause types in song lyrics? (3) How do Indonesian EFL students perceive song lyrics as a tool for enhancing grammatical understanding and engagement? By focusing on the use of authentic materials such as song lyrics, this study aims to provide a more inclusive, relevant, and engaging approach to grammar instruction. It seeks to enhance the quality of language education by aligning teaching methods with real-life communication and promoting deeper learning. In doing so, the research supports the broader goal of SDG 4 by encouraging innovative, student-centered practices that improve grammar literacy and educational outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, chosen for its suitability in providing a rich, detailed account of students' experiences and perceptions without imposing a priori theoretical frameworks. Unlike case study or phenomenology, which focus on bounded systems or lived experiences, the descriptive qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the aim was to generate a clear, practice-oriented description of how students engaged with grammar tasks in the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). This orientation allowed the researchers to foreground students' actual responses and reflections, while maintaining flexibility in interpreting their challenges and perceptions.

At the same time, the study incorporated quantitative elements to complement the qualitative insights. The quantitative elements contain the calculation of percentages for students' correct and incorrect clause identifications. This pragmatic integration of descriptive statistics within a predominantly qualitative framework aligns with the logic of mixed-methods research, where numerical trends help corroborate and contextualize qualitative findings (Velez et al., 2023). Acknowledging this mixed-method dimension ensures clarity and avoids methodological ambiguity, while also reinforcing the validity of the interpretations.

Data were collected through two primary sources: students' analyses of song lyrics, which provided evidence of their clause identification skills, and a focus group discussion, which captured their reflections on the difficulties encountered and the perceived value of the activity.

Participants

The participants in this study were 40 third-semester students enrolled in a grammar course at a local university in Sidoarjo. A purposive sampling strategy was used, as these students had already been introduced to basic grammatical concepts, including independent and dependent clauses as well as noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses. This prior knowledge ensured that they were adequately prepared to engage with the tasks and reflect meaningfully on their experiences.

From this larger sample, a smaller subset of five students volunteered to take part in a focus group discussion. While relatively small, this number aligns with recommendations for focus group research, where 4–6 participants are often considered optimal for encouraging participation, managing turn-taking, and eliciting diverse perspectives without overwhelming the discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The voluntary nature of participation also ensured that the students who joined were motivated and willing to share reflective insights, which enriched the qualitative data. Although the focus group cannot fully represent the views of all 40 participants, it provided in-depth perspectives that complemented the broader trends observed in the class task data.

It is important to note that purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the findings beyond this specific group of learners. However, the intention of the study was not to generalize statistically, but to provide a contextually grounded understanding of how EFL students engage with authentic materials in grammar learning.

Data Collection

The main teaching materials consisted of English song lyrics, which students selected based on their own preferences. Allowing students to choose the songs increased engagement, ensured cultural familiarity, and aligned with learner-centered pedagogy. At the same time, it exposed the class to a variety of genres and styles, which provided opportunities to encounter diverse and authentic clause structures. While this approach introduced variability in text type, it reflected the real-life choices learners make in engaging with music and thus enriched the authenticity of the task.

Data collection involved two primary sources. First, students' written analyses of the chosen song lyrics served as evidence of their ability to identify and differentiate between clause types in authentic texts. Second, a focus group discussion was conducted with five student volunteers after class, lasting approximately 30 minutes. The discussion was held in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed for analysis. Guiding questions focused on the difficulties students encountered when identifying clause types and their perceptions of how the activity supported their grammar learning.

The first author, who was also the course instructor, facilitated the discussion. To minimize potential power dynamics and social desirability bias, students were reassured that their responses would remain anonymous and that participation or responses would not affect their grades. In addition, open-ended questions and a relaxed, informal atmosphere encouraged candid sharing of experiences. The remaining authors supported the process by reviewing transcripts and interpretations to ensure analytical distance and reduce bias.

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Students were informed of the study's purpose, assured of voluntary participation, and provided written informed consent. Reflexivity was maintained, with the research team reflecting on their roles and possible influence during data collection and interpretation.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a qualitative-dominant approach, with quantitative elements included to support and contextualize the findings. First, students' written work was examined for the accuracy and completeness of clause identification. The percentage of correctly identified clauses for each type was calculated to provide a descriptive overview of their grammatical ability. Common errors were grouped to highlight recurring misconceptions and areas of difficulty, offering insight into specific challenges faced by the learners.

Second, the focus group discussion transcript was analyzed thematically. A deductive coding approach was applied, guided by pre-set categories derived from the research

questions, such as “challenges” and “perceptions.” Within these categories, sub-themes were allowed to emerge inductively, capturing nuances in how students described their struggles and engagement. Coding was carried out manually, with the aid of spreadsheets to organize and compare responses systematically.

To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was employed by comparing the patterns from student task results with the reflections expressed during the focus group. Additionally, the co-authors conducted cross-checks and participated in peer debriefings to validate the interpretations and reduce researcher bias. Together, these procedures contributed to a transparent and comprehensive understanding of how song lyrics can be used to support clause-based grammar instruction.

RESULTS

Students' Ability to Identify Clauses

Analysis of students' written work showed varying levels of success in identifying clause types. Overall, students were most accurate with adverbial clauses, correctly identifying 83.5% of instances. This relatively high accuracy was aided by familiar subordinators such as because, if, and when. In contrast, accuracy for noun clauses was lower at 70.8%, with many students confusing them with independent clauses. Adjective clauses posed the greatest challenge, with only 60% identified correctly. Common errors included misinterpreting relative pronouns (who, which, that) and failing to recognize reduced or stylistically fragmented structures in song lyrics. It suggests that while students could recognize clause boundaries, distinguishing specific functions remained difficult.

The analysis of student work reveals that the activity of identifying clauses in song lyrics contributed positively to students' understanding of clause types, particularly in recognizing real-life applications of grammar. Among the three targeted types, noun clauses, adjective clauses, and adverbial clauses, students showed the highest accuracy and confidence in identifying adverbial clauses. These were often marked correctly due to their familiar conjunctions (e.g., if, when, because, since), which appear frequently in lyrical expressions of time, condition, cause, or contrast. For example, some students working with “Ghost of You” by 5 Seconds of Summer consistently identified adverbial clauses like “If I can't be close to you” and “If you can't be next to me”. Similarly, some other students accurately labeled clauses like “When you try your best but you don't succeed” in Coldplay's “Fix You”.

Noun clauses, while generally well understood, were slightly more challenging. Students most often identified noun clauses functioning as the object of reporting or thinking verbs. For instance, most students correctly labeled “Now isn't that a laugh?” and “Just trust me, you'll be fine” as noun clauses. Few students working with “Mean

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It" recognized "Don't tell me you're falling" and "When it feels right to you", which are accurate reflections of noun clauses used in both object and subject complement positions. However, there were several misclassifications where noun clauses were confused with adverbial clauses, particularly in complex sentences where temporal or conditional conjunctions co-occurred with reporting verbs. This suggests a partial understanding of how noun clauses function syntactically and semantically.

Adjective clauses proved to be the most difficult for students to identify accurately. Although many students correctly recognized relative clauses modifying nouns, such as "who brings out the better in you" and "that I used to know", others frequently misclassified phrases or omitted them altogether. One common error was labeling "when you're too in love to let it go" as an adjective clause, although it functioned adverbially. More students demonstrated some accuracy in identifying adjective clauses within One Direction's "Perfect", such as "the one who brings you flowers", though some overlapping labels (e.g., tagging the same line as adjective, noun, and adverbial clauses) revealed uncertainty in clause classification. Furthermore, some students appeared to equate any relative pronoun (who, that, which) with an adjective clause without fully evaluating the clause's function in the sentence.

Another pattern across several groups was the tendency to overlabel or multi-label a single clause line with more than one clause type. While this may reflect students' attempts to be thorough, it also points to confusion between embedded and coordinated clause structures. For example, some students occasionally labeled a single sentence as containing an adjective clause, a noun clause, and an adverbial clause simultaneously, even when the structure only supported one. This suggests that while students can locate clauses, they are still developing the ability to analyze their grammatical role precisely. To support this analysis, Table 1 summarizes how well students identified each clause type across all groups.

Table 1. Clause identification accuracy

Clause Type	Accuracy Level	Common Mistakes
Adverbial Clauses	83.5%	Minor confusion in function vs. form
Noun Clauses	70.8%	Misidentified as adverbial; unclear boundaries
Adjective Clauses	60%	Confused with prepositional phrases or noun clauses

Despite the variation in accuracy, the overall quality of student responses shows that identifying clauses in song lyrics helped bridge theoretical grammar knowledge and its practical application. The meaningful context and emotionally resonant content of the lyrics appeared to support comprehension, especially for adverbial clauses that express feelings, reasons, or actions. Students were more likely to correctly analyze

clauses that resembled everyday spoken English rather than formal or academic constructions, suggesting that familiarity with the genre of songs positively influenced their understanding.

In sum, students demonstrated strong recognition of adverbial clauses, moderate success with noun clauses, and notable difficulty with adjective clauses. The findings indicate that while authentic materials like song lyrics effectively support clause awareness and syntactic analysis, additional scaffolding and explicit instruction may be necessary to deepen their understanding of clause functions, particularly in distinguishing adjective clauses from other types. Nonetheless, the use of authentic, engaging input encouraged students to explore grammar beyond textbook drills, thus supporting deeper learning aligned with real-world communication.

Challenges Encountered

The analysis of student errors and focus group discussion highlighted several linguistic and cognitive challenges. First, the poetic style of song lyrics, including omitted subjects or verbs, irregular punctuation, and non-standard syntax, confused students when determining clause boundaries. Second, many participants reported uncertainty about subject–predicate structures, which made it difficult to decide whether a unit functioned as a clause. Third, the focus group participants described their experiences of low confidence, often admitting to “guessing” when unsure. While these reflections represent only five volunteers, they provide illustrative insights into the difficulties students encountered. Taken together, these findings indicate that authentic texts present valuable but complex input that requires careful instructional mediation.

In detail, students’ reflections from the focus group discussion revealed a consistent set of challenges in identifying clause types within song lyrics. A dominant theme was confusion in distinguishing between noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses. Many learners expressed uncertainty about how to tell one type from another, particularly when the grammatical roles overlapped or were not clearly marked. This type of uncertainty was echoed in multiple written responses:

“Sometimes I know it’s a clause, but I’m not sure if it’s functioning as a noun or something else.”

“I’m still confused in identifying nouns, adjectives, and adverbs in song lyrics.”

“The main difficulty I experienced was distinguishing between different clauses, especially in recognizing adjective, adverb, and noun clauses, because sometimes the boundaries between them are not clear.”

Closely related to this difficulty was the challenge of recognizing grammatical function versus structure. Several students noted that while they could often identify the

presence of a clause, particularly one introduced by a common subordinator such as because or if, they were unsure of its role in the sentence. This distinction between identifying a clause and classifying it accurately points to a deeper issue of functional grammatical awareness, which many students have not yet fully developed. One participant in the discussion reflected,

"I understand the clause is there, but I don't know its purpose."

Students also commented on the non-standard structure and poetic nature of song lyrics, which further complicated their analysis. The lack of conventional punctuation, fragmented syntax, and line breaks in lyrics made it difficult to determine where a clause began or ended. These comments highlight how creative language use in music, while engaging, can obscure grammatical clarity, particularly for learners still developing their understanding of sentence structure. A few students shared,

"The sentences in the lyrics are sometimes cut into several lines, which makes me confused about how to complete the sentence."

"The difficulty is non-standard language and incomplete sentences."

Another related challenge was the presence of missing or implied grammatical elements, such as subjects or verbs. Some students noted that when independent clauses were not clearly stated, they questioned whether a dependent clause could still be identified. This was further complicated by difficulties in identifying the subject and predicate, a foundational skill that influenced their ability to analyze more complex sentence constructions. The focus group participant explained,

"We were confused in determining [adverbial clauses] because there was no independent clause, so we weren't sure if it was a clause or not."

"I was confused in determining the subject of the predicate."

These reflections were often accompanied by expressions of low confidence and hesitation. This affective dimension, which is rooted in cognitive struggle, underscores that the difficulty was not just technical but also emotional, involving uncertainty about correctness and discomfort with applying abstract grammar knowledge in a creative, real-world context. In the focus group, some students admitted that they felt unsure or lacked clarity throughout the task, saying things like:

"I was guessing a lot of the time."

"I don't really understand clauses."

Despite these challenges, a few students expressed balanced or optimistic views of the activity. One learner acknowledged the complexity but saw value in the task:

"I have not been able to understand clauses... but I agree with learning with song lyrics, besides learning, it can also refresh the brain."

While some students indicated no major issues, the majority of responses reflected a need for more explicit instruction, modeling, and guided reflection to support students in moving from clause recognition to confident clause analysis.

Taken together, these responses suggest that students were engaged and willing to try, but encountered persistent challenges tied to both the structure of the song lyrics and the demands of functional grammatical analysis. The findings affirm the importance of integrating authentic texts thoughtfully, with adequate scaffolding, such as targeted mini-lessons, peer collaboration, and visual modeling, to help students unpack complex sentence structures in poetic or non-linear formats.

To further illustrate the specific difficulties students experienced in identifying clauses, Table 2 below presents key qualitative themes that emerged from their responses, along with representative student comments and interpretive insights.

Table 2. Specific challenges students experienced in identifying clauses

Theme	Student Voice	Interpretation
Difficulty Identifying Clause Functions	<i>"I have difficulty distinguishing between nouns, adjectives, and adverbial clauses."</i>	Students can locate dependent clauses but struggle to classify their syntactic roles.
Confusion About Grammatical Structure	<i>"Confused about determining the subject and predicate."</i>	Indicates a lack of clarity on the structure of clauses (subject–predicate awareness).
Cognitive Overload or Uncertainty	<i>"No idea." / "I don't fully understand it, so I think it's difficult."</i>	Reflects feelings of overwhelm or insecurity, suggesting a need for more scaffolding.
Ambiguity in Song Structures	<i>"Sometimes the lyrics are not like normal sentences."</i>	Authentic texts can obscure grammatical clarity, challenging student analysis.

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently reported challenge was distinguishing between noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses. This was often compounded by difficulty in identifying basic clause elements, such as subjects and predicates. The excerpts reveal students' uncertainty and highlight the cognitive demands of applying grammatical concepts to authentic, non-standard language found in song lyrics.

Student Perceptions

Despite the challenges, students generally perceived the activity positively. Focus group participants described the task as "engaging" and "more enjoyable than usual

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grammar exercises." They emphasized that working with familiar songs made grammar feel relevant and motivating. Several participants also reported that the activity helped them "see grammar in real communication," which they contrasted with textbook-based drills. Importantly, they highlighted the value of peer discussion and teacher guidance, noting that collaboration helped clarify difficult points. While these views reflect the focus group sample rather than all participants, they illustrate how authentic, music-based materials can foster greater motivation, contextual awareness, and learner autonomy.

A key theme that emerged was how the activity fostered a deeper awareness of clause structure and function. Several students appreciated that song lyrics illustrated how clauses can appear in real, even non-standard, contexts. This allowed them to move beyond textbook grammar and see sentence structures in action, where authentic materials support meaningful grammatical insight. One student reflected,

"Now every time I listen to a song while reading the lyrics, I guess what clause is used, and that really helps me understand clauses more deeply."

The focus group also highlighted how the familiarity and emotional connection to music contributed to the students' learning experience. Many students emphasized that the use of songs made grammar feel less intimidating. Others noted that choosing their favorite songs increased motivation and helped them stay engaged throughout the task. These reactions echo the affective value of authentic texts highlighted in prior studies, which emphasize that enjoyment and personal relevance can enhance grammar learning outcomes. As one participant explained,

"Because everyone likes listening to songs, you can learn clauses from lyrics and make learning fun."

Students also reported that the collaborative and interactive nature of the activity supported their learning. The discussion format appeared to foster a learning environment where peer input and instructor guidance worked together to clarify difficult concepts. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of dialogue and scaffolding in learner-centered grammar instruction. One participant explained,

"The assignment made it easier for me to identify song lyrics, because my friends helped me."

Beyond immediate engagement, many students expressed a sense of growth and improvement over the longer term. These perceptions suggest that the benefits of the song-based grammar activity extended beyond a single session. The experience contributed to students' sense of progress and developing autonomy, reinforcing the idea that grammar learning can evolve through repeated, reflective exposure to authentic texts. Some noted,

"I think this has helped me enough in learning clauses; I just need to improve my ability."

"I feel like I've improved in recognizing sentence structures over the past weeks."

Although a few students admitted that they still needed more practice or sometimes forgot what had been taught, the overall tone was confident and forward-looking. This balance of enthusiasm and self-awareness highlights both the value and the challenge of applying grammar knowledge to non-linear, poetic texts, a learning process that is necessarily iterative. One student summed it up by saying,

"Yes, this activity really helps me understand clauses better, but sometimes I need to open my notes to be sure."

Collectively, these findings affirm that students valued the opportunity to engage with grammar through meaningful, real-life texts. They perceived the activity as both cognitively useful and emotionally satisfying, demonstrating not only improved grammatical awareness but also increased motivation and confidence. This supports the call for a grammar pedagogy that balances accuracy with engagement and reflects the broader goal of SDG 4 to provide relevant and inclusive education. When EFL learners are given tools to connect grammar instruction with lived language experiences, such as music, they are better positioned to develop both linguistic competence and the confidence to apply it beyond the classroom.

To capture students' reflections on the effectiveness of learning grammar through song lyrics, the following Table 3 organizes their perceptions into three emergent themes.

Table 3. Student Perceptions of Learning Grammar through Song Lyrics

Theme	Representative Student Quotes
Increased Understanding	"This activity really helped me understand clauses." "I can now see how grammar works in real life."
Engagement and Motivation	"Using songs made it more fun and easier to follow." "Lyrics helped me stay focused."
Growing Confidence	"I feel more confident applying what I've learned." "Now I know I can find clauses even in songs."

As depicted in Table 3, many students expressed that the activity helped them better understand clauses by providing real-life context. Others found that the use of music increased their motivation and made grammar more enjoyable. Several also noted a sense of progress and growing confidence, even when the grammar was challenging.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that students were able to recognize independent and dependent clauses with reasonable success but encountered difficulties in distinguishing the specific functions of dependent clauses, whether noun, adjective, or adverbial. Students performed best with adverbial clauses, often aided by familiar subordinators such as *because* or *if*. This suggests that input saliency and frequency effects shaped their recognition (Frizelle et al., 2018; Hao, 2018; Hsiao & Li, 2024; Thompson, 2019). In contrast, noun and adjective clauses were less successfully identified, as their functions are less explicitly marked and require a deeper understanding of syntax and semantics. This gap between clause recognition and clause classification reflects Pawlak's (2023) observation that functional grammar is challenging for EFL learners and supports Jung's (2024) claim that current instructional materials often fail to adequately address such distinctions.

Students encountered several obstacles in applying their knowledge of clause structures to authentic texts. Linguistically, the poetic nature of lyrics, including fragmented syntax, omitted subjects or verbs, and the absence of punctuation, made it difficult to determine clause boundaries. This finding echoes Werner (2020) and Dja'far (2023), who caution that while authentic texts enrich instruction, they deviate from canonical grammar rules and may confuse learners without proper mediation. Cognitively, students displayed uncertainty in parsing subject–predicate structures, which highlights a foundational weakness in their grammatical development (Owens et al., 2024). Affective challenges also emerged: in the focus group, students admitted to “guessing” or feeling “unsure,” indicating low confidence. While these insights come from only five volunteers, they nevertheless illustrate how both linguistic irregularities and cognitive limitations interact to create barriers in grammar learning (Kuntso, 2024).

Despite these challenges, focus group participants described the activity as engaging, enjoyable, and relevant to real-life communication. They noted that songs made grammar “feel real,” supporting earlier research by Mamba (2024), who emphasizes that authentic materials improve learner engagement by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice. These perceptions also align with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (Ferreri & Verga, 2016; Macrides & Angeli, 2018), which posits that positive emotions reduce anxiety and enhance language acquisition. However, given the small sample size, these reflections should be viewed as illustrative rather than representative of all participants. Even so, the responses highlight the potential for authentic materials to complement traditional grammar lessons by promoting motivation, contextual awareness, and learner autonomy.

The findings suggest a dual role of authentic materials in grammar instruction. On one hand, songs provided cultural familiarity, emotional engagement, and exposure to

rich clause structures (McIntire, 2020; Rohrmeier et al., 2015), which increased motivation and created opportunities for collaborative learning. On the other hand, their non-standard syntax complicated analysis, underscoring that the authentic texts cannot replace traditional rule-based teaching but should instead be combined with explicit scaffolding such as mini-lessons, visual diagrams, and reflective activities (Alqahtani, 2022; Ghafar & Sawalmeh, 2024). This balance prevents over-reliance on either decontextualized drills or purely authentic input, aligning with calls for a more functional, student-centered grammar pedagogy (Shofiyah & Armanda, 2024).

Additionally, this study contributes to the field by focusing on clause-level grammar learning through songs in an Indonesian EFL context, an area that has received little attention compared to prior work emphasizing vocabulary, pronunciation, or listening (Akbar et al., 2018; Popova, 2019; Rahmah & Siswana, 2025). By integrating both performance data and student reflections, the study highlights the pedagogical potential and limits of songs as authentic input for grammar learning. Importantly, the findings suggest that scaffolding authentic materials can support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) by promoting inclusive, relevant, and student-centered education (Ananda & Sardi, 2024; Elfalih, 2024).

This study offers valuable insights into the use of song lyrics for clause-level grammar learning; however, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the participant pool was limited to a single university class of forty students, with only five volunteering for the focus group discussion. While their reflections provided illustrative insights, they may not fully capture the range of perspectives within the larger group or across different learner populations. Second, the instructional period was relatively short, involving a single session of analysis. This makes it difficult to determine whether improvements in clause identification would persist over time or transfer to productive skills such as writing and speaking. Third, the dual role of the first author as both instructor and facilitator may have influenced students' responses despite efforts to minimize bias through reassurance, anonymity, and open-ended questioning.

Future research could address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in assessing the sustained effects of integrating songs into grammar pedagogy and in tracing whether learners transfer clause awareness into their written and spoken performance. Additionally, comparing the effectiveness of song lyrics with other types of authentic materials, such as social media posts, advertisements, or spoken discourse, would help determine whether certain genres are more conducive to teaching specific grammatical features. Further investigation could also explore how different music genres, levels of syntactic complexity, or student-chosen versus teacher-assigned texts shape learning outcomes. Such

extensions would provide a fuller picture of how authentic materials can be systematically integrated into grammar instruction in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how EFL students engaged with clause-level grammar through the analysis of English song lyrics, focusing specifically on their ability to identify noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses. The findings revealed that while students were generally successful in recognizing adverbial clauses, they experienced persistent challenges in distinguishing noun and adjective clauses due to ambiguities in grammatical structure and the poetic style of lyrics. Despite these difficulties, students perceived the activity as engaging, relevant, and supportive of their grammatical awareness, highlighting the value of integrating authentic, affectively rich materials into grammar instruction.

The unique contribution of this study lies in its focus on clause-level grammar learning through song lyrics within an Indonesian EFL context, an area that has received limited attention in existing research. While prior studies have largely emphasized vocabulary development or listening skills, this research demonstrates that song lyrics can also serve as a vehicle for fostering syntactic awareness when paired with appropriate scaffolding. By situating grammar in meaningful and culturally familiar texts, this approach not only promotes student motivation but also bridges the gap between formal rule-based instruction and real-life language use.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the pedagogical potential of song lyrics as a tool for contextualized grammar instruction that aligns with the principles of communicative language teaching and the broader goals of Sustainable Development Goal 4. When designed with both functional accuracy and learner engagement in mind, such activities can transform grammar learning into a more inclusive, motivating, and student-centered experience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

AUTHOR (S) CONTRIBUTION

Agustina, S.: Conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), data collection (lead), analysis and interpretation (lead), writing – original draft (lead), review and editing (supporting), final approval of the manuscript. Megawati, F.: Conceptualization (supporting), theoretical framework (lead), supervision (lead), review (lead), editing

(supporting), final approval of the manuscript. Liansari, V.: Literature review (lead), methodology (supporting), editing (lead), review (supporting), final approval of the manuscript. Mu'Minin, S.: Data collection (supporting), transcription (supporting), qualitative coding (supporting), learner insights (lead), final approval of the manuscript. Ulya, S.H.: Data collection (supporting), transcription (supporting), qualitative coding (supporting), learner insights (lead), final approval of the manuscript.

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