EXPLORING ENGLISH VOCABULARY ENHANCEMENT IN INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS: CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF MASTERY OF SUBTITLE FILM IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the impact of subtitles in movies on English vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners at a secondary school in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach and a case study design, this study examined the vocabulary learning experiences of sixth-grade X1 students in one high school in East Java. The data collected over one semester included vocabulary test observations, semi-structured interviews using ten directed essay questions, and reflection notes to capture students' perceptions and learning strategies. Thematic data analysis showed that the use of movie subtitles is in both English and Bahasa Indonesia. Significantly facilitated vocabulary acquisition through simultaneous exposure to audio and text, contextualized word meanings, and natural repetition of language input. The findings of this study highlight several important aspects: (1) English subtitles help students recognize word forms and spelling, while Indonesian subtitles support the understanding of the overall meaning. (2) Students develop self-learning strategies such as pausing, repeating parts of the film, switching subtitle modes, and taking notes on new vocabulary. (3) Learning motivation and engagement are enhanced when the films viewed match students' interests and are accompanied by interaction with peers. However, they have encountered challenges, including dialogue that is too fast, a mismatch of subtitles with audio, and difficulty understanding idioms or indirect expressions. The study concludes that movie subtitles are an effective and engaging medium for vocabulary development, provided they are supported by proper scaffolding, learner awareness, and access to quality audiovisual materials. *This is an open-access article under the CC BY-SA license.*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery greatly influences a learner's ability to understand and communicate in English. Good vocabulary mastery will enable students to understand texts more comprehensively and express their thoughts more effectively (Pesiwarissa et al., 2024). However, the majority of high school students in Indonesia still experience difficulties in mastering adequate English vocabulary to support their language skills (Mann et al., 2018). According to Eniati & Numertayasa (2023), the difficulty of mastering English vocabulary among students can be seen from several interrelated factors. Students struggle with English vocabulary due to low basic skills, making it hard to recognize and remember new words. Additionally, their lack of practice with English, as it is not their first language, combined with low motivation, worsens their challenges.

The vocabulary acquisition gap is further worsened by a learning environment that does not support active and contextualized English language interaction (Irsani et al., 2023). Students struggle with low learning outcomes and poor English vocabulary, which affects their speaking, reading, and comprehension skills. An engaging learning approach is needed to improve this. One of the learning media with great potential for vocabulary development is English-language animated films equipped with subtitles (Bakar, 2023). Subtitles, in particular, provide a written language representation that can help students associate the meaning of words with their use in sentences, as well as reinforce understanding of language structure (Vanderplank, 2016).

Previous studies also support the effectiveness of cartoons as a tool for learning English. For example, (Vitasmoro et al., 2019) showed that the use of animated cartoons can improve vocabulary acquisition in students, while (Özkurkudis & Bumen, 2021) found that dialogues in animated films can strengthen contextual language comprehension in elementary-level students. English films motivate students to show their friends the ongoing process of searching for words in the film's text related to the learning material; students do not find it difficult to understand the meaning of a word because it has been visualized in a concrete form (Septina et al., 2017).

This research is important because there has been limited exploration of Indonesian high school students' learning experiences in understanding English vocabulary through movie subtitles. In fact, this age group has great potential to develop independent learning strategies through media that is familiar to them. This research is also relevant to national education policy, which encourages learning autonomy, the use of technology, and a contextual approach to English language learning. This study examines how subtitles in English cartoon films affect vocabulary understanding for high school EFL students. Cartoon films are chosen for their visual appeal and relatable stories.

This research contributes to the novelty of exploring high school students' learning experiences in developing English vocabulary through the medium of movie subtitles, an approach that is still rarely used in the EFL context in Indonesia. This context is important, considering that high school students are a group that is very active in accessing digital media and films, but has not been widely explored as a subject in qualitative studies. Unlike previous

studies that focused on the effectiveness of subtitles quantitatively, this research uses a qualitative case study approach with thematic analysis to uncover how subtitles encourage students' self-learning strategies, active engagement, and metacognitive awareness. In addition to providing new insights into the use of subtitles as a reflective tool in vocabulary learning, this study is also practically relevant as it matches the learning style of the current generation, who are familiar with audiovisual media, and can be adapted by teachers to create more contextualized, fun, and meaningful learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Previous Research

Some previous studies have shown that movie subtitles are important in assisting vocabulary learning in foreign language learning environments. Rulina, Harefa, and Syahputra (2025) found that by using subtitles in the movie Frozen II, students' vocabulary test scores increased significantly, from an average of 66.7 to 86.9. Sadiku et al. (2018) stated that subtitles using the mother tongue are more effective in improving both short-term and long-term vocabulary recall, while subtitles in English help students understand pronunciation and word forms. Lestari and Yosintha's (2023) research also shows that videos with English subtitles help students connect the way words are pronounced and written, and improve their memory of new vocabulary.

Moreover, Kurniawan and Purwati's (2023) research confirmed that in addition to academic benefits, subtitles also form a fun and more interactive learning atmosphere. On the other hand, Ashshiddiq, Al-Baekani, and Kamil (2024) provided a qualitative view by exploring how actively junior high school students engage in vocabulary learning through subtitles and vocabulary collection methods. They found that students were highly engaged in discussion and comprehending meaning, despite barriers such as the speed of subtitles. From these various findings, Subtitle films can greatly improve vocabulary skills in both formal and informal settings. Most research focuses on quantitative results, not personal learning experiences or independent study strategies, especially in high school.

Teaching vocabulary in Indonesian high school contexts

In Indonesia, mastering vocabulary is essential to studying English as a foreign language (EFL). According to (Damanik et al., 2023), the mastery of vocabulary is something that is very vital in mastering foreign languages, including English. Over the years, several conventional methods have been employed in Indonesian secondary schools to teach English vocabulary. (Arifuddin Fathoni et al., 2024) found that the direct-translation approach, Code-mixing, and active classroom involvement are some of the strategies that have been successful in enhancing vocabulary learning in Indonesian secondary schools. Many Indonesian secondary schools use technology-based techniques for vocabulary instruction. In addition to making studying more engaging, this technology-based method boosts pupils' enthusiasm for picking up new words.

Harris (2022) stated that the application of Active Learning methods in vocabulary teaching increased student participation. The method promotes student involvement in learning, enhancing their vocabulary comprehension and memory retention, as evidenced by research findings. In addition, Otoluwa et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of utilizing interactive media, such as mobile apps and educational games, which can increase students' motivation in learning vocabulary. This study found that students who used interactive media scored higher on vocabulary tests compared to those who learned through traditional methods. Integrating technology, active techniques, interactive media, and corpus-based learning in Indonesian secondary schools can create a lively environment that enhances vocabulary learning and overall English proficiency. This method helps students engage in learning, improving their vocabulary comprehension significantly.

The Effectiveness of Subtitles in English Language Skills Enhancement and Vocabulary Acquisition

Movie subtitles add another dimension of complexity that enhances the impact of films as a language-learning tool. According to Vandergrift & Goh (2015), Subtitles aid students in comprehending linguistic input by comparing spoken language with written language in movies, enabling them to clarify unclear words or phrases. Additionally, Subtitles enhance memory and future recall by linking spoken and written word forms, leading to numerous studies on the best subtitles for language learning. (Gesa Vidal, 2019) Examined the differences in the effects of native language (L1) and target language (L2). Their results demonstrate that while L1 subtitles can enhance general material comprehension, L2 subtitles are superior for enhancing vocabulary learning and listening comprehension. (Suryani & Amalia, 2018) suggested that Indonesian students who enjoyed movies accompanied by English subtitles showed more striking progress in listening skills compared to their peers who watched with Indonesian subtitles.

The study found that using English subtitles in a movie improved comprehension and listening skills, with a significant difference between the two groups, highlighting the importance of English subtitles. Vanderplank (2016) argues that Subtitles can enhance learning by providing active aids, enabling students to identify new terms, grammatical structures, and compare translations with the original text. The study reveals that subtitles significantly enhance students' English language skills by providing access to both spoken and textual forms, aiding in understanding and remembering words and structures, and encouraging self-learning practices, making subtitles an effective teaching tool in various educational settings.

The Implementation of Teaching English Language Using Film Subtitles

Movie subtitles are becoming a popular means of teaching English as a foreign language. They help learners understand the dialogue in English films. There are three types of subtitles: Bimodal subtitling, which includes English dialogue and English subtitles; Standard subtitling, with English dialogue and subtitles in the learner's native language; and

Reverse subtitling, which features dialogue in the learner's native language with English subtitles that (Talaván Zanón, 2020) lists as applying to language learning. Bimodal subtitling, which enables EFL learners to see and hear each word concurrently, is thought to be the most appropriate of these three varieties.

Mann et al. (2018) explored the effectiveness of movie subtitles in improving reading comprehension, showing a significant increase from pre-test (43.40%) to post-test (72.19%) scores. In addition, 69.2% of students gave positive responses, stating that the movie subtitling technique helped them in understanding the reading and gaining new knowledge. These results show that movie subtitles are not only beneficial for listening skills but can also improve reading comprehension. (English & Yes, 1988) noted that using subtitles can help when learning a language in two main ways. First, they provide learners with real and clear examples of the language, supporting how they learn. Second, subtitles help learners spot new or unfamiliar words that might be missed during conversation, which helps improve their language skills. Meanwhile, in the Indonesian context, the use of movie subtitles has also begun to be integrated into language learning practices, especially at the high school level. For example, in a study by Rulina, Harefa, & Syahputra (2025), the use of Frozen II movie subtitles significantly improved students' vocabulary acquisition from an average score of 66.7 to 86.9. Students responded positively to this method because it is considered fun and brings language learning closer to real experiences that they like, such as watching movies. By choosing appropriate types of subtitles and applying them systematically in learning activities, English teachers in Indonesia can facilitate contextualized, engaging, and effective learning in improving students' language skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research case study approach to explore students' understanding of English vocabulary through the analysis of film subtitle mastery as the research design. The researcher chose this case study because it allowed me to examine the phenomenon of vocabulary learning in depth within the real context of using movie media as a learning resource. The research subjects were six students of class X1 at SMA Negeri 1 Banyuwangi, East Java, who were selected based on teacher recommendation and the highest vocabulary test result. Purposive sampling was conducted to select relevant participants, namely students who have experience learning vocabulary through subtitled films. Data were collected over one semester through: 1. A multiple-choice vocabulary test after watching a short English movie with subtitles. 2.) Structured interviews using ten essay questions to explore students' experiences, strategies, and challenges. 3.) Reflective notes to record students' perceptions and learning process in more depth. Data analysis was conducted using Byrne, D (2022) in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic technique, starting from familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this study, the researcher observed the Exploration of Learning Experiences through English Subtitle Movies (ELEENSM) from the students' point of view. In the process of determining the research object, the researcher selected class X1 from 35 students who had taken the vocabulary test for three meetings, and the researcher had selected 6 students with the minimum score that must be achieved in that class. Therefore, a structured interview was conducted. The six selected students were given pseudonyms: AHP, DAN, SA, RDA, ADK, and FA. The respondents consisted of males and females, aged around 16 to 18 years, who were studying at SMA Negeri Banyuwangi, East Java. The results of the analysis of the interview data obtained are grouped into five main learning experiences, which include (1) Subtitle Facilitates Student Quick Grasp of Meaning Easier (SFSQGME, (2) Subtitle Supports Vocabulary (SSV), (3) Learning Challenges through Movies (LCM, (4) Strategies to Overcome Challenges (SOC), and (5) Engagement & Motivation in Learning (EML).

Subtitle Facilitates Student Quick Grasp Meaning Easier or SFSQGME

In the process of watching English movies, subtitles play an important role as an aid to comprehension. Students showed varying preferences between using Indonesian (L1) and English (L2) subtitles, depending on their learning goals and needs.

Participant 1 as RDA

"So, I prefer to use English subtitles because I can hone my skills in translating them. Because for me it's easy to understand English. Yes, that's it. That's how it is." (ELEENSM/SFSQGME/RDA)

Participant 2 as ADK

"Yes, of course, English subtitles help when I meet a new word. If I just listen to it, sometimes it's hard to grasp the pronunciation, so subtitles make me know the writing too." (ELEENSM/SFSQGME/ADK)

Both participants agree that the choice of subtitle type depends on the viewer's purpose for watching a movie. Participant 1 prefers Indonesian subtitles to quickly understand the movie's meaning, while Participant 2 prefers English subtitles to learn new words. This shows that Indonesian subtitles help with comprehension, while English subtitles aid vocabulary learning.

Subtitle Supports Vocabulary or SSV

All students acknowledged that subtitles helped them a lot in understanding and enriching their new vocabulary. They mentioned that seeing the subtitles while listening to the audio made it easier for them to understand the meaning of the words and recognize the written form.

Participant 1 as RDA

"Subtitles make me know the spelling of the words spoken in the movie." (ELEENSM/SSV/RDA)

Participant 2 as ADK

"I know better how to pronounce and understand the meaning because the text appears together with the sound." (ELEENSM/SSV/ADK)

Participant 3 as SA

"To understand new words because the slang language in the movie is sometimes confusing, and the subtitles help me understand it." (ELEENSM/SSV/SA)

The statements of the three participants highlight the importance of subtitles in learning new vocabulary through English films. Participant 1 noted that subtitles helped him learn spelling, connecting sounds with written forms. Participant 2 appreciated that subtitles made it easier to grasp pronunciation and meanings by showing text alongside the audio, enhancing form-meaning mapping. Participant 3 pointed out that subtitles aided in understanding slang and informal language often not covered in formal classes.

Learning Challenges through Movies or LCM

Watching subtitled movies was considered fun, but the students faced some challenges. The main problem they faced was the speed of the dialogue, and the subtitles sometimes appeared late. In addition, slang vocabulary or idioms were difficult to understand, even though subtitles were available.

Participant 1 as SA

"The movie sometimes talks too fast, so I can't read the subtitles." (ELEENSM/LCM/SA)

Participant 2 as ADK

"The most difficult thing is if the vocabulary includes slang. Sometimes it can't be translated directly" (ELEENSM/LCM/ADK)

Participant 3 as RDA

"But sometimes the challenge is that I don't like it when the subtitles are different from the original meaning or appear late, making me confused." (ELEENSM/LCM/FA)

Participant 4 as FA

"If you keep reading the subtitles, sometimes you don't focus on the movie picture." (ELEENSM/LCM/FA)

Participants highlighted several challenges students encounter when learning English through subtitled films. Participant 1 noted that the speed of dialogue often prevents students from reading

subtitles effectively, increasing their cognitive load. Participant 2 pointed out that slang in films is difficult for students to understand, as it is not directly taught and differs from standard vocabulary. Participant 3 mentioned that watching English movies with subtitles provided exposure to authentic language vocabulary used in everyday conversational contexts. However, due to the delayed appearance of subtitles, which caused a lack of synchronization between sound and text, it was confusing and distracting from the original context. Lastly, Participant 4 discussed how focusing too much on subtitles can distract from visual elements, which are essential for full understanding.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges or SOC

In the face of these challenges, the students actively developed various strategies for learning difficulties.

Participant 1 as SA

"If I don't understand, I usually pause first and rewind, so I can listen again." (ELEENSM/SOC/SA)

Participant 2 as FA

"I write down the new words in my phone's notepad so I can study them again." (ELEENSM/SOC/FA)

Participant 3 as DAN

"There are some words that I don't understand, so I pause and look them up in Google Translate." (ELEENSM/SOC/DAN)

Participant 4 as RDA

"For example, there is a new vocabulary, and the translation is sometimes inconsistent, for example, using Indonesian subtitles. And that would be, how, yes, it's a bit troublesome to have to cross-check it. Hmm, I'm a little confused about using English subtitles right away." (ELEENSM/SOC/RDA)

Participant 5 as SA

"We can utilize AI technology in learning" (ELEENSM/SOC/SA)

Participants discussed various personal strategies they use to tackle vocabulary challenges while watching English films with subtitles. Participant 1 replays parts of the movie when he doesn't understand, allowing him to review unfamiliar information. Participant 2 takes notes on new vocabulary using a phone app, which helps him retain important words for later study. Participant 3 pauses the film to look up unfamiliar words using Google Translate, indicating reliance on digital tools for immediate understanding. Participant 4 struggles with inconsistencies between Indonesian and English subtitles and finds cross-referencing meanings difficult. Participant 5 proposed using artificial intelligence as a personalized learning tool.

Engagement & Motivation in Learning or EML

One of the factors that makes learning through movies interesting is students' emotional engagement. All students stated that they were more eager to learn if the films they watched were of their interest or their favorite genre.

Participant 1 as SA

"If the movie is about romance, action, and some Marvel comics, I get excited to watch it while studying." (ELEENSM/EML/SA)

Participant 2 as FA

"Watching movies for learning doesn't feel like learning. It's relaxing, but you get the knowledge." (ELEENSM/EML/FA)

Participant 3 as AHP

"Sometimes watching with friends makes it easier to understand, we can talk about the movie too" (ELEENSM/EML/AHP)

Participants agree that learning through English-language films with subtitles boosts students' emotional engagement and motivation, especially when connected to their interests and a pleasant setting. Participant 1 noted that they feel excited when watching films they enjoy, like romantic or action movies. Participant 2 mentions that learning through films feels relaxed and less formal, making it easier to absorb information. Participant 3 watching films with friends enhances understanding through discussion, reducing shyness and fear of mistakes.

Teacher Reflection

As an educator, the researcher sees learning English through subtitled movies as a very promising approach. Strategies such as note-taking, re-watching, and switching between subtitles are forms of learning autonomy that need to be further facilitated in the classroom. Researchers also realize that the success of learning through film is influenced by various factors, such as access to technology, choice of genres that match interests, media literacy strategies, and social support, such as group discussions. The researchers believe that if integrated appropriately, this method can create a learning experience that is not only effective but also fun and sustainable for students.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings described above, there are several things that can be noted down. It will be arranged based on the research findings of each research problem.

The Effect of Subtitled Text on Vocabulary Mastery

The results of this study show that the use of subtitles, whether in English or Bahasa Indonesia, has a different but complementary role in assisting vocabulary learning. Subtitles in English help students recognize the word form, how to write, as well as how to pronounce it, because they can see directly the appearance of writing from the sound they hear. This is in accordance with Nation's (2001) concept of explanation, which states that learners build a relationship between the word form and its

meaning in the process of learning vocabulary. Meanwhile, subtitles in Bahasa Indonesia help students understand the meaning of the sentence or the overall context, especially for those whose English proficiency is still low. This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Koolstra and Beentjes (1999), who stated that subtitles in the mother tongue help improve understanding of the content of the movie in general, although their benefits in the field of linguistics are limited when compared to subtitles in the target language.

Student Self-Study Strategies

In this study, students also demonstrate their ability to develop a self-directed learning strategy in order to overcome difficulties when watching a movie with subtitles. They use a variety of techniques, such as highlighting the temporary impressions, highlighting the relevant item, switching modes, and displaying new words on their phone's screen. This approach emphasizes learner autonomy, or the ability of students to take charge of their learning process (Little, 1991). This is also in line with Oxford's (1990) metacognitive approach to learning strategies, where students actively explain how they understand the material and calculate their learning objectives. Utilizing digital tools like Google Translate or digital content also indicates that technology is useful as a tool to enhance students' learning experiences.

Emotional Engagement and Technical Challenges

Furthermore, learning through watching movies can increase students' enthusiasm and engagement, especially if the movie genre chosen matches their interests. Movies with themes such as action, romance, or adaptations of popular comics, such as Marvel, can usually attract attention and create a fun learning atmosphere. In addition, interacting with peers while watching a movie also helps to reinforce understanding through discussion and sharing opinions. The results of this study support the Affective Filter Hypothesis theory by Krashen (1982), which states that a positive emotional atmosphere can facilitate the language learning process. Even so, students still faced some obstacles, such as dialogue that was too fast, or inappropriate subtitles, and difficulty understanding idioms or indirect expressions. These problems can cause cognitive overload, according to Sweller (1988), which refers to a heavy load of information that hinders the language comprehension process. Therefore, assistance from the teacher and appropriate movie selection are essential for effective learning through movies.

CONCLUSION

The use of subtitles in English movies is effective in improving the vocabulary acquisition of high school EFL students in Indonesia. Subtitles help to recognize word forms, understand meanings, and practice pronunciation contextually. Students tend to develop self-learning strategies such as noting new terms, utilizing technology, and discussing. Challenges related to dialog speed, translation quality, and slang can be overcome by strengthening learning strategies and selecting appropriate content. The implementation of this method is recommended to be conscious, integrated, and supported by an adaptive learning design. Teachers and parents are advised to encourage the habit of watching English movies with subtitles as part of vocabulary learning efforts in a fun and meaningful way.

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