


## RETHINKING VOCABULARY LEARNING: THE POWER OF ENGLISH MOVIE SUBTITLES

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b> Received: January 29, 2026 Revised: February 09, 2026 Accepted: March 29, 2026 Published: April 30, 2026</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> English Movie Subtitles Vocabulary Learning Vocabulary Mastery</p>	<p>Vocabulary mastery remains a persistent barrier in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among senior high school students in East Kalimantan, particularly amid uneven educational resources. This study addresses the urgent need for accessible and context-sensitive strategies by examining the pedagogical potential of English movie subtitles. Employing a qualitative library research design, it synthesizes findings from academic literature, theses, and policy documents focusing on both urban and remote school contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its contextualized analysis of subtitle use across proficiency levels and infrastructural conditions. Findings indicate that subtitles enhance vocabulary acquisition through improved comprehension and lexical recognition. Intralingual subtitles benefit intermediate learners, while interlingual subtitles reduce anxiety among beginners. The study contributes practical insights into integrating audiovisual media in EFL instruction, highlighting the role of technological readiness and curriculum adaptability in optimizing learning outcomes.</p> <p><i>This is an open access article under the <a href="#">CC BY-SA</a> license.</i></p> 
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### INTRODUCTION

In the 21st-century global education landscape, English proficiency has transformed from a supplementary skill to a core competency, a prerequisite for economic and academic participation. For Indonesia, the challenge of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) remains a central issue in the national education discourse. This is even more pressing in the province of East Kalimantan (Kaltim), a region now at the epicenter of national transformation with the development of the Indonesian Capital City (IKN)

The relocation of the center of government has massive sociological and educational implications: high school students in East Kalimantan now do not only competing with fellow countrymen, but also being prepared to host the global community that will flood the region.

However, the reality on the ground shows a significant competency gap. The foundation of all language proficiency is vocabulary. Without grammar, little can be conveyed; but without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Diagnostic research conducted on university students in Kutai Kartanegara

Indicates that learners' vocabulary size is often below the threshold required for both independent text comprehension and fluid conversation. (Sudarman & Chinokul, 2018). This lexical deficit creates a domino effect: students have difficulty comprehending reading texts, experience listening anxiety, and ultimately lose motivation to produce language (speaking/writing). (Nurkhamidah, 2020)

Conventional teaching methods centered on rote memorization and direct translation (grammar-translation method) have proven ineffective in fostering long-term retention. High school students, who are psychologically developmentally in the adolescent phase, require relevant, authentic, and cognitively and affectively stimulating materials. This is where technology and popular culture intersect. The phenomenon of high digital media consumption among adolescents in East Kalimantan, from smartphone use in the remote area of Long Bagun to fiber-optic internet access in Balikpapan, opens up new pedagogical opportunities. (Lim, 2024)

The use of English-language films with subtitles (caparirs) has emerged as a promising intervention. Films offer a rich semantic context, where word meanings are derived not only from dictionary definitions but also from gestures, intonation, and visual social situations. However, the effectiveness of this method is not uniform. Variables such as the type of subtitles (Indonesian vs. English), the condition of school infrastructure, and teacher teaching strategies play a vital role in determining whether the activity of "watching a film" becomes merely passive entertainment or an active learning tool.

This research is important as it addresses an urgent educational challenge in East Kalimantan, a region undergoing rapid transformation due to the development of Indonesia's new capital city (IKN). In this evolving global context, English proficiency is no longer optional but essential, yet students' limited vocabulary remains a critical barrier to meaningful language use. This gap not only hinders comprehension and communication but also increases learning anxiety and reduces motivation. Conventional methods have proven insufficient, highlighting the need for more engaging, context-rich approaches. By examining the use of subtitled English films, this study responds directly to the realities of students' digital media habits and the limited exposure to authentic English input, particularly in non-urban areas.

The novelty of this study lies in its localized and multidimensional analysis of subtitle use, considering learner proficiency, infrastructure disparities, and pedagogical practices within the East Kalimantan context. Unlike generalized studies, it identifies how different subtitle types function under varying educational conditions. The research contributes both theoretically

and practically: it enriches EFL literature on audiovisual learning and offers actionable guidance for teachers and policymakers. Specifically, it proposes strategic subtitle use and emphasizes the importance of technological readiness and metacognitive support to transform film viewing into an effective vocabulary learning tool.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research is alibrary research. The data analyzed are sourced from secondary documents, including accredited journal articles, conference proceedings, thesis reports, and government policy documents published between 2018 and 2026. The geographic focus of this study is East Kalimantan, with in-depth analysis of case studies in Samarinda, Balikpapan, Tenggarong, Bontang, and Mahakam Ulu. Although the main focus is East Kalimantan, global SLA (Second Language Acquisition) theories are still used as analytical tools to validate local findings.

This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method, as the primary aim of the study is to interpret, synthesize, and contextualize existing research findings rather than to test hypotheses through numerical measurement. A qualitative design is considered appropriate because the effectiveness of English movie subtitles in vocabulary learning is strongly influenced by contextual and pedagogical factors, such as students' proficiency levels, learning environments, technological infrastructure, and curriculum flexibility, which cannot be fully explained through quantitative data alone. The library research method was chosen to synthesize findings scattered across various academic journals, theses, and educational reports into a comprehensive framework for understanding the phenomenon of subtitle use in East Kalimantan. Unlike field research, which is limited to a single location or participant group, library research allows for broader generalization by comparing documented practices and outcomes from various schools and demographic contexts across the province.

Data was collected from various credible primary and secondary sources, including:

1. Regional Scientific Journals: Articles from local university repositories such as Unmul e-journals (Mulawarman University), Jurnal Tarbiyawat dan Dinamika Ilmu (UINSI Samarinda), and Journal Acitya (UMKT).
2. Classroom Action Research (CAR) Report: Theses and dissertations of teaching students in East Kalimantan documenting direct interventions in the classroom.
3. Policy Document: Guidelines for the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and the Pancasila Student Profile from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which are implemented in driving schools in Samarinda and Balikpapan.

4. Conference Publication: Proceedings of a national seminar discussing learning innovation in the digital era in the Kalimantan region.

The data collection process was carried out through specific keyword searches: "movie subtitle vocabulary", "EFL East Kalimantan", "high school learning media", and "English Independent Curriculum". The data analysis technique used is Content Analysis, with the following stages:

1. Data Reduction: Sorting information that is specifically relevant to the context of high schools in East Kalimantan and subtitle variables.
2. Data Presentation: Grouping findings by theme (cognitive effectiveness, infrastructure challenges, pedagogical strategies).
3. Verification/Drawing Conclusions: Synthesize findings to answer the problem formulation and provide practical recommendations.

To understand the effectiveness of this method, we must examine the ecosystem in which it is implemented. East Kalimantan is not a monolithic entity; there are various facilities and learning cultures that influence the implementation of subtitles in learning.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, it is explained the results of research and at the same time is given the comprehensive discussion. Results can be presented in figures, graphs, tables and others that make the reader understand easily. The discussion can be made in several sub-chapters.

### Digital Infrastructure Disparity

The availability of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities is an absolute prerequisite for Media Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Document analysis reveals a clear digital divide:

Table 1: Map of Infrastructure and Media Access in Secondary Schools in East Kalimantan

Regional Category	Example of Study Location	School Facilities Status	Student Device Access	Main Challenges
Urban (City Center)	Samarinda (SMAN 11), Balikpapan	Language Laboratory, LCD Projector, School WiFi	High-End Laptops & Smartphones	Social media distraction, large class management
Sub-Urban/Industrial	Bontang (Vocational High School), Tenggarong Seberang	Limited (Computer Lab takes turns), simple Sound System	Personal Smartphone (Dominant)	Classroom audio quality is poor, teaching materials are less relevant
Remote/Border	Mahakam Ulu (SMAN 1 Long Bagun)	Minimal/No Stable Internet Access	Smartphone (Penetration ~90%)	Fluctuating internet signal, dependence on offline files

The findings from SMAN 1 Long Bagun are very interesting: despite being located in a border area with limited internet access, 90% of students own smartphones. This shifts the learning paradigm from classroom-based streaming to mobile-based offline learning. Students download materials (films/clips) when there is a signal or share them via Bluetooth/ShareIt, then watch them independently. This strategy has been shown to improve vocabulary mastery because students can repeat the show at their own pace (self-paced learning). (Lim, 2024) In contrast, in Samarinda, the challenge arose from the poor quality of the classroom sound system, which prevented students from hearing articulation clearly, making subtitles the only source of input. (Lestari, 2019)

### **Dynamics of the Independent Curriculum in East Kalimantan**

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in East Kalimantan has provided a breath of fresh air for the use of film in the classroom. Unlike the previous, more rigid curriculum, the Independent Curriculum emphasizes:

1. **Flexibility of Teaching Materials:** Teachers have the autonomy to develop teaching modules tailored to students' interests. At the Bunga Bangsa Islamic Kindergarten in Samarinda, for example, teachers created independent guidebooks. A similar spirit at the high school level allows English teachers to replace boring textbooks with relevant analyses of popular films. (Rustandi, 2023)
2. **Pancasila Student Profile:** A project to strengthen the Pancasila student profile (P5) at SMAN 11 Samarinda, with themes such as "Voices of Democracy" or "Sustainable Lifestyles," can be integrated with the screening of English-language documentaries. This not only teaches vocabulary but also the dimensions of "Global Diversity."
3. **Differentiated Learning:** Recognizing that students have different levels of ability ("Unusual language abilities"), (Iskandar et al., 2023) the use of subtitles allows for differentiation. Advanced students can watch without subtitles, intermediate students with English subtitles, and students who need assistance (inclusive) with Indonesian subtitles.

### **Student Psychographics: Anxiety vs. Motivation**

High school students in East Kalimantan exhibit complex psychological profiles. Research at UMKT noted that 11 out of 20 respondents experienced high levels of anxiety during listening activities. This anxiety stems from a fear of not understanding foreign words. (Nurkhamidah, 2020) However, on the other hand, students demonstrate high enthusiasm for global pop culture (films, YouTube). A study at UINSI (Indonesian Islamic University) showed that although students struggled to grasp new vocabulary, they exhibited "good enthusiasm in paying attention" when the material was presented in the form of vlogs or films. (Lestari, 2019) This paradox—*anxiety about the lesson but enthusiasm for the medium*—is a strategic entry point for subtitling methods.

Findings regarding the effectiveness of subtitle use are based on empirical data from various case studies in East Kalimantan. The strongest evidence for the method's effectiveness

comes from an experimental study at SMA Negeri 2 Tenggarong Seberang. This study used a rigorous within-subjects design, in which the same students were tested under different conditions (with and without subtitles).

Quantitative Data Analysis (Tenggarong Seberang Case Study):

1. Pre-test Mean Score: 69.86
2. Post-test (Without Subtitles): 78.11
3. Post-test (With Subtitles): 79.00

While both conditions showed improvement (indicating that simply watching the movie was beneficial), the subtitled condition produced higher mean scores. Statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) confirmed that subtitles provided added value. Subtitles help students visualize grammatical structures (such as the Simple Past Tense and Present Continuous) that are often lost in rapid-fire speech (linked speech). By viewing the text of "He walked away," students become consciously aware of the "-ed" endings that may not be clearly audible in the audio, thus strengthening both grammar and vocabulary mastery.

At SMAN 1 Long Bagun, a qualitative approach supports these findings. Reports indicate that 90% of students were able to improve their vocabulary practice through the use of smartphones as a learning medium. Observations and interviews revealed that visualizing words on the smartphone screen helped students recall terms that were previously difficult to memorize from textbooks. (Lim, 2024)

In addition to test scores, effectiveness is also measured by the ease with which students process information.

1. Articulation-Orthography Bridge: Students in Samarinda often complain of not being able to hear the pronunciation of words clearly due to limited audio equipment or classroom noise. Subtitles solve this problem by providing an instant visual reference. When students hear the faint sound and read the text simultaneously, a synchronization process occurs that strengthens phonological memory. (Lestari, 2019)
2. significant cognitive effort, which can lead to cognitive overload. Indonesian subtitles act as a scaffold that reduces this burden, allowing students to enjoy the storyline while incidentally absorbing new vocabulary. College and university students in East Kalimantan reported that subtitles helped them "understand the spoken dialogue" and reduced confusion caused by actors' accents or speaking speed. (Fitriah & Wahyuningsih, 2023)
3. Learning Autonomy: Studies of students' viewing habits indicate sophisticated self-directed learning behaviors. Some students employ a switching strategy: using Indonesian subtitles to understand the initial plot, then switching to English subtitles to focus on vocabulary, or turning them off altogether to test their listening

skills. This flexibility empowers students to be active agents in their own learning. (Yanti et al., 2025)

Subtitle language is more effective is answered through a synthesis of field data. There is no single "best" type; effectiveness depends on the learning objectives and the students' proficiency levels.

Table 2. Subtitle Type Effectiveness Matrix in the Context of High Schools in East Kalimantan

Subtitle Types	Ideal Target Audience	Key Benefits (Cognitive)	Risks/Weaknesses	Recommended Use
<b>Interlingual (B. Indo)</b>	Grade X Students / Beginners / <i>Low Vocabulary</i>	Instant content understanding, reducing anxiety ( <i>Affective filter</i> low)	The effect of passive reading, ignoring English audio	The introductory stage of material or films with complicated plots
<b>Intralingual (English)</b>	Students of Grades XI-XII / Middle School	Word form recognition ( <i>Orthographic mapping</i> ), Long-term vocabulary retention	vocabulary is below <i>threshold</i>	Core activities of vocabulary learning, sentence structure analysis
<b>No Subtitles</b>	<i>Advanced</i> Students / Language Class	Practicing pure <i>listening</i>	<i>Blank out</i> (don't understand at all)	Final evaluation or <i>post-test</i>

## DISCUSSION

Findings from a study of the translation of the film *Enola Holmes* (Yuwono et al., 2018) also remind us that when using Indonesian subtitles, teachers must ensure the translation is dynamically accurate. Poor or overly literal translations can mislead students about the true meaning of words in the cultural context of the target language.

Interestingly, effectiveness isn't limited to feature films. Research at UINSI highlights the use of YouTube vlogs as an effective alternative. Vlogs are often short, use more natural language, and are relevant to students' everyday lives. In situations where students have short attention spans or limited lesson time, short videos with subtitles (even those automatically generated by YouTube, provided they are curated by the teacher) have been shown to increase student engagement and facilitate understanding of grammar concepts such as *there is/there are*. (Lestari, 2019)

The implementation of this method in East Kalimantan faces a number of structural and pedagogical barriers that must be mitigated. The physical environment of the classroom is a major obstacle in densely populated urban schools like Samarinda. The UINSI report noted that poor sound systems and noise from other students make the audio components of films inaudible. This undermines the Dual Coding mechanism, as students end up simply reading the text without hearing the correct pronunciation. On the other hand, in rural areas, the main challenge is the lack of stable electricity or internet for streaming, forcing reliance on personal device batteries and pre-downloaded materials. (Lestari, 2019)

Not all subtitles are created equal. Many pirated film materials or amateur videos on the internet have subtitles that are grammatically or pragmatically inaccurate. Analysis of film translations shows that without "dynamic equivalence," cultural nuances can be lost. (Yuwono et al., 2018) If students learn from incorrect subtitles, they will also internalize incorrect vocabulary. Furthermore, teachers in East Kalimantan often struggle to validate whether a video aligns with cultural norms and character education (Pancasila Student Profile) before screening.

While students are highly adaptable to technology, not all teachers possess sufficient digital literacy to curate materials, edit clips, or synchronize subtitles. The SEAMOLEC research assistance program and the teacher-in-charge initiative in East Kalimantan have attempted to address this, but many educators still face challenges in designing interactive multimedia-based teaching materials (not simply showing films). (Rustandi, 2023)

## CONCLUSION

Based on a comprehensive synthesis of the literature and empirical data from the field, this study concludes that the use of English film subtitles is a highly effective method for improving vocabulary mastery of high school students in East Kalimantan. This effectiveness is driven by three main mechanisms: (1) the provision of comprehensible input that bridges the proficiency gap; (2) memory strengthening through dual processing of visual and verbal; and (3) the creation of a low-anxiety and highly motivated learning environment.

Specifically, the context of East Kalimantan offers unique dynamics. On the one hand, limited infrastructure in non-urban areas encourages personalized and effective mobile (smartphone)-based learning innovations. On the other hand, the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum legitimizes teachers' use of popular culture as essential teaching materials. Intralingual subtitles (English) are recommended for targeting mastery of word forms and spelling, while interlingual subtitles (Indonesian) remain relevant as a tool for early comprehension.

In order to optimize the potential of this method, the strategic recommendations are as follows:

1. For English Teachers in East Kalimantan

- a) Scaffolding Strategy: Apply the "3- Pass Viewing " technique. The first round with Indonesian subtitles for story comprehension. The second round with English subtitles to note down new vocabulary. The third round without subtitles for listening practice.
  - b) Utilizing BYOD (Bring Your Own Device): Given the high prevalence of smartphone ownership, even in remote areas (Long Bagun), teachers should distribute short film clips (5-10 minutes) to students' phones to watch with their own headphones. This addresses the issue of poor classroom sound systems and allows for independent learning.
  - c) Value-Based Content Curation: Select films that are relevant to local issues or the Pancasila Student Profile (e.g., environmental films for sustainable lifestyle themes) to increase emotional relevance.
2. For Schools and Education Offices
- a) Audio Investment: Prioritize the provision of good-quality active speakers in every language classroom. Visuals (projectors) are important, but in language, clear audio is essential.
  - b) Media Curation Training: Provide teachers with training not only on how to screen films, but also on how to select and edit film clips that contain specific target vocabulary (e.g., slang, idioms, technical terms for vocational schools).
3. For Further Research
- a) It is recommended to conduct long-term (longitudinal) experimental research to see vocabulary retention after 6 months or 1 year of using this method.
  - b) There needs to be a special study on the use of regional language subtitles (e.g., Banjar or Kutai) as a bridge for students in remote areas who may be less fluent in formal Indonesian, to see whether trilingual subtitling could be an innovative solution.

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