

CHAPTER

7

ENGLISH SUBTITLES FOR VOCABULARY ENHANCEMENT

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary proficiency is a cornerstone of effective communication, especially for learners of English as a second language (ESL). A strong vocabulary underpins all language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and is essential for academic success and fluent expression. Scholars from education, psychology, and linguistics have long emphasised its importance, each offering unique definitions. Vocabulary can be defined as the complexity of language found in both spoken and written forms, while some might also view it as a knowledge base emphasising word meaning.

For ESL learners, developing vocabulary is critical to achieving communicative competence (Alqahtani, 2015). Vocabulary and language usage are mutually reinforcing where vocabulary supports language use, and language use enhances vocabulary. Study by Rohmatillah (2017) warns that limited vocabulary severely restricts communication. Effective verbal and written communication rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge.

Traditional vocabulary instruction methods in ESL classrooms often fall short in engaging learners. In response, recent studies highlight a

promising alternative: The use of English subtitled videos. This approach aligns with the communicative language teaching (CLT) framework and has garnered strong empirical support. Study by Vanderplank (2010) emphasises that subtitles offer contextual and multimodal cues that enhance comprehension. Additionally, study by Akpınar and Ercetin (2017) found that subtitles aid vocabulary retention by reinforcing learning through both visual and auditory channels. Other researchers (Harji et al., 2010) argue that English subtitled videos provide authentic, comprehensible input that is crucial for second language development.

This strategy is also supported by Paivio (1971) dual coding theory, which posits that information processed both verbally and visually is more likely to be remembered. When learners watch subtitled videos, they simultaneously receive spoken language and text, reinforcing memory and comprehension. Visual and verbal cues work in tandem to strengthen cognitive engagement and facilitate deeper vocabulary acquisition (Kanellopoulou et al., 2019).

Despite widespread use, there is limited research on ESL learners' perceptions of subtitled videos as vocabulary learning tools. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how ESL learners perceive the effectiveness of English subtitled videos in expanding vocabulary. The findings will provide insights for educators and curriculum designers seeking innovative, technology based strategies to enhance vocabulary instruction in ESL contexts.

7.2 CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL OF ENGLISH SUBTITLED VIDEOS

Vocabulary acquisition is essential for ESL learners to build linguistic competence and improve overall English proficiency. However, many struggles due to the complexity of words, limited background knowledge, overreliance on traditional methods, and minimal exposure to digital tools. These challenges hinder learners in understanding word meanings, pronunciation, and spelling, thus affecting their communication skills.

To address these issues, digital tools, particularly English subtitled videos, have emerged as promising alternatives. Study by Nguyen (2021) highlights how subtitles support incidental learning by exposing learners to authentic language in context. Subtitled videos reduce cognitive load and foster repeated exposure, making them especially beneficial for students who struggle with traditional memorisation.

Despite the global recognition of subtitles as effective learning aids, many educators remain unaware or sceptical of their potential. Traditional vocabulary instruction methods introduced decades ago still dominate classrooms, limiting innovation. Some teachers perceive subtitles as distractions or fear they encourage dependency (Zanón, 2006). Critics argue that subtitles may reduce attention to spoken language and hinder the development of listening and inferencing skills. Learners may also struggle with timing mismatches between speech and text, leading to confusion (Andriani & Angelina, 2020).

Nevertheless, multiple studies affirm the pedagogical value of English subtitled videos. Study by Yaacob et al. (2021) found that subtitles significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition. Subtitles deliver rich, multisensory input—combining audio, text, and visuals—which accelerates vocabulary retention and comprehension.

In line with the CLT approach, English subtitled videos offer a dynamic, engaging, and contextual strategy for vocabulary development. However, limited awareness among Malaysian educators highlights a gap between research and practice. Thus, this study aims to explore ESL learners' perceptions of using English subtitled videos for vocabulary enhancement, addressing this gap and promoting more effective, technology integrated vocabulary instruction. Such insights are expected to inform future pedagogical practices and support the wider integration of digital media to enrich language learning environments.