



Exploring EFL Students' Vocabulary Acquisition Strategies through English Movies

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Abstract

This study explores the vocabulary acquisition strategies used by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students through English movies. Grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, the research investigates how learners engage with movie content to enhance their vocabulary. Using a qualitative method, the study involved two sixth-semester English Department students at a public university in Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interview sessions and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that students employ several strategies, including using English subtitles, noticing and repeating unfamiliar words, choosing genre-specific content, applying new vocabulary in writing and speaking, and rewinding scenes for better comprehension. In total, five key strategies were identified. These approaches helped learners connect vocabulary with context, improve pronunciation, and promote long-term retention. The use of multimedia, particularly movies, created an engaging and low-anxiety environment that supported incidental learning and increased motivation. The study concludes that learner-driven strategies supported by multimedia input significantly contribute to vocabulary development and suggests that educators integrate movie-based activities in language learning environments to enhance students' vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, and motivation.

Keywords: EFL Students, English Movies, Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Acquisition

Introduction

Vocabulary is very important for good communication and understanding in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). If students don't have enough vocabulary, it is hard for them to share ideas, understand other people, and improve skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020, as cited in Aziz et al., 2024). But sometimes, the usual way of teaching vocabulary can be boring and not interesting. Because of this, educators and researchers

continuously seek engaging and innovative ways to teach language, such as incorporating English movies into lessons. Studies have shown that films provide authentic language exposure, making learning more interactive and enjoyable (Mrissa & Anasse, 2024).

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which highlights the importance of comprehensible input in a low-stress environment (Krashen, 1985), English movies provide rich language input through context, visual clues, and natural conversations. These features help learners acquire vocabulary by exposing them to new words in meaningful and authentic situations. Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning suggests that combining auditory and visual information improves understanding and memory, especially when both types of input are well-coordinated (Mayer, 2002). English movies illustrate this theory by engaging learners' listening and visual senses at the same time, which supports deeper learning and better retention.

The integration of English subtitles in movies has been shown to support learners in understanding meaning and spelling, as well as in linking auditory and visual input to internalize vocabulary more effectively (Dwi Hana Nurfauziah et al., 2023; Khadawardi, 2022). In addition, studies have indicated that students who frequently watch English movies with subtitles tend to have higher vocabulary mastery compared to those who do not (Fikriyah et al., 2021). Specifically, Kusumarajni (2022) found significant improvement in students' vocabulary after learning with movies, with nouns being the most improved vocabulary type.

These findings are closely related to the concept of vocabulary acquisition strategies, which refer to techniques that learners use to effectively understand, memorize, and retrieve new words, such as guessing meaning from context, using subtitles, noting new words, repetition, and integrating vocabulary into speaking and writing (Khadawardi, 2022). Moreover, a growing body of research has highlighted the effectiveness of English movies in vocabulary development. For instance, studies by Maulida and Warni (2024), Juhansar et al. (2024), and Sari and Aminatun (2021) consistently show that students view movies as enjoyable and beneficial for learning new words, improving pronunciation, and boosting overall language skills.

Furthermore, Maulida and Warni (2024) found that high school students in Jakarta use various strategies—such as enabling subtitles, note-taking, and rewatching favorite scenes—to overcome challenges like fast speech or unfamiliar accents. These active learning techniques, when paired with engaging movie content, not only enhance comprehension but also make vocabulary acquisition both effective and enjoyable. Similarly, Juhansar et al. (2024) emphasized that subtitles, especially in English, are crucial in helping learners connect spoken and written forms of language. As a result, students reported increased motivation, better listening and speaking skills, and greater cultural understanding. In line with these findings, Harefa et al. (2025) reported substantial improvements in

vocabulary test scores after learners watched movies with English subtitles. This suggests that the dual-channel input of sound and text not only facilitates comprehension but also supports vocabulary retention and long-term recall. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of English movies with subtitles, combined with effective vocabulary acquisition strategies, provides a powerful and enjoyable approach for EFL students to develop their vocabulary knowledge.

The genre of the movies also plays a role. Ritonga and Hz (2024) discovered that students responded positively to Disney movies, which provided accessible language, colorful visuals, and relatable storylines. Such movies not only increased vocabulary acquisition but also boosted learners' motivation and engagement, especially among those less interested in traditional classroom activities. Short films have also proven effective in structured classroom settings. Setyani et al. (2023) reported that students found short movies time-efficient, engaging, and useful for vocabulary practice.

Additionally, research by Adrefiza et al. (2024) showed that university students perceived English movies as helpful for acquiring informal vocabulary, idioms, and slang, thereby suggesting movies as a beneficial complement to textbook learning. Despite the evident benefits, the effectiveness of learning through movies greatly depends on learners' strategies and interactions with the content. Factors such as genre preference, language proficiency, learning motivation, and viewing strategies significantly influence outcomes.

Active strategies like pausing, guessing from context, repeating scenes, and mimicking dialogue are linked to deeper vocabulary learning and greater autonomy. Aziz et al. (2024) confirmed that repeated exposure to new words, especially through English subtitles, can aid in long-term vocabulary retention. However, while many studies have explored learners' attitudes and general habits, fewer have investigated the specific strategies students use during movie-based learning and how these techniques contribute to vocabulary development.

There remains a lack of detailed understanding of how such strategies differ across proficiency levels, or how external factors like motivation and genre preference affect their success. This gap needs to be addressed to develop more effective multimedia-based learning interventions.

To that end, this study aims to explore:

1. What strategies EFL students use to acquire new vocabulary through English movies?
2. How those strategies support their vocabulary acquisition?

By examining learners' actual techniques, such as inferring meaning from context, using subtitles, or rewatching scenes, this research seeks to identify which methods are most effective. The findings are expected to inform pedagogical practices by highlighting how movie-based strategies can be integrated into EFL instruction to enhance vocabulary learning. This will not only add to the growing literature on multimedia-assisted language learning but also offer practical insights

for educators striving to create more dynamic and learner-centered environments.

Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how EFL students acquire vocabulary through English movies and how their strategies support learning. A qualitative method was chosen because it captures students' personal experiences and perspectives, which cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measures alone. The descriptive design was deemed suitable as it allows the researcher to describe real-life situations based on students' actual experiences without manipulation.

The participants were two sixth-semester students from the English Department at a public university in Indonesia, one female (AN) and one male (EGA). They were selected through purposive sampling based on inclusion criteria: currently enrolled English Department students, self-reported frequent use of English movies for vocabulary learning (at least twice per week), and willingness to participate in the interview. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview session for each participant. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved reading the transcripts multiple times, coding significant statements, identifying common patterns and themes, and interpreting how these strategies facilitated vocabulary acquisition. Thematic analysis was chosen for its strength in organizing and deeply interpreting qualitative data. To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted by returning the preliminary findings to participants for confirmation and clarification.

The researcher maintains reflexivity by critically acknowledging personal positionality as an English Education Department student with similar experiences of learning vocabulary through movies, which could potentially influence data interpretation. To mitigate this risk, an audit trail was systematically maintained to document all research decisions and analytic processes, thereby enhancing transparency and dependability. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted with the supervisor to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Informed consent was also secured from both participants, ensuring that their participation was voluntary and that their anonymity, confidentiality, and right to withdraw from the study at any stage were fully upheld.

Results

RQ 1: What strategies do EFL students use to acquire new vocabulary through English movies?

1. Noticing and Repeating New Vocabulary

Both participants demonstrated active noticing of unfamiliar or frequently repeated vocabulary while watching movies. AN described how encountering the word “fasis” multiple times sparked her curiosity, explaining, “*The vocabulary ‘fasis’ often mentioned so I was intrigued... I noted it, then I sent to my own number... then I searched it on Google.*” This reflects a systematic approach in which she first noticed the new word, then recorded it for later, and finally searched for its meaning online to deepen her understanding.

Similarly, EGA employed a comparable strategy, stating, “First I will search it on Google... then after that elaborate with the dialogue,” indicating that he combined dictionary searches with contextual cues from the movie dialogue to clarify meaning. In addition to these strategies, both participants emphasized that watching movies repeatedly enriched their vocabulary knowledge. EGA noted, “Biography movies have various vocabularies... a lot of vocabularies are explored,” while AN reflected, “My vocabulary now is richer than when I’m in the first semester.” These statements highlight that consistent exposure to movie language over time contributed significantly to their vocabulary growth.

2. Using English Subtitles

English subtitles played an important role in supporting learners’ comprehension by linking spoken words to their written forms, which was particularly beneficial when encountering idioms, metaphors, fast speech, or unfamiliar accents. AN highlighted this benefit, stating, “I use English subtitle so I know what they are talking about... especially for metaphor,” indicating that subtitles helped her grasp figurative language used in movies. Similarly, EGA shared, “Subtitle is such a helpful way, we know what they are saying... after that we can search it,” suggesting that subtitles facilitated initial understanding, enabling him to later search for meanings if needed.

Both participants also emphasized the role of subtitles in understanding pronunciation and diverse accents. AN noted, “Metaphorical vocabulary... so I know like, oh this is how they use it,” which shows her awareness of authentic language use, while EGA stated, “I really need English subtitle... especially when they have a strong accent,” highlighting how subtitles supported his comprehension when faced with unfamiliar speech patterns. Overall, these reflections demonstrate that subtitles served as an effective scaffold for vocabulary learning and listening comprehension in movie-based learning.

3. Genre-Based Learning

The participants used different film genres as a way to improve their vocabulary learning. AN prefers genres she already knew well, which helped her understand

vocabulary better. She said, *"I mostly understand the vocabulary in my favorite genre."* This shows that knowing the genre well can make learning easier and understanding better. Meanwhile, EGA showed specific preference to mystery films and explained, *"I got many new vocabularies because the genre is mystery."* This means that choosing a challenging genre can encourage learners to pay more attention and learn more new words.

Both participants understood that the type of movie genre affects how much vocabulary they learn and how easy it is for them to learn.

4. Applying Vocabulary Through Language Output

Another important strategy was using new vocabulary in speaking and writing activities. Participants reinforced their newly learned vocabulary by actively applying it in both speaking and writing activities. AN shared, *"I use the vocabulary that I got in Twitter, journal, so that I won't forget it,"* demonstrating how she integrated new words into her personal writing to strengthen retention. Similarly, EGA explained, *"The intense dialogues can be repeated, then I can remember it after that,"* suggesting that practicing the vocabulary aloud, especially after hearing it in dialogues, helped him internalize and remember the words more effectively. These reflections indicate that using new vocabulary productively in real communication contexts supported their transition from passive recognition to active mastery.

5. Rewinding

Rewinding or watching some movie scenes again was a common way to understand difficult parts, especially about pronunciation and different accents. This helped learners review hard vocabulary and improve how they say the words. Both participants used the strategy of rewinding movie scenes to enhance their understanding of challenging vocabulary, pronunciation, and accents. AN shared, *"I need to listen to it again and again, so that I can be familiar with the vocabulary,"* indicating that repeated listening helped her internalize new words more effectively. Similarly, EGA stated, *"Rewinding is very helpful especially if there's unique accent that I rarely heard,"* highlighting that replaying scene allowed him to become familiar with unfamiliar pronunciations and accents. These reflections demonstrate that rewinding served as an effective technique for reinforcing vocabulary learning and improving listening comprehension through repeated and focused exposure.

RQ 2: How do those strategies support their vocabulary acquisition?

The strategies identified in this study supported learners' vocabulary acquisition in several interconnected ways. Firstly, they promoted active engagement and deeper processing, as learners did not merely encounter new words passively but instead noticed, recorded, and searched for their meanings,

leading to stronger understanding and retention. Secondly, these strategies provided multimodal input that enhanced comprehension; the use of English subtitles allowed learners to link auditory input from spoken language with visual input from written subtitles, which facilitated meaning-making and internalization, particularly for complex vocabulary such as idioms and metaphors.

Thirdly, by contextualizing vocabulary within authentic use, learners who selected movie genres of personal interest were exposed to vocabulary in meaningful and realistic contexts, making comprehension easier and the vocabulary more applicable to real-life situations. Additionally, the strategies facilitated repetition for memory reinforcement, as rewinding scenes enabled repeated exposure to target vocabulary and various pronunciations, strengthening both recall and familiarity with different accents or speech speeds.

Finally, the strategies encouraged productive use for consolidation, where learners applied newly learned words in speaking and writing activities such as journaling or tweeting, allowing them to transition vocabulary from mere recognition to active and confident use in communication.

Discussion

This study explored EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition strategies through English movies and revealed several key findings. Overall, participants adopted a range of strategies that facilitated vocabulary noticing, understanding, and retention, including noticing and repeating unfamiliar words, using English subtitles, genre selection for motivation, rewinding for repeated input, and output activities such as speaking and writing. These findings demonstrate that movie-based learning is not merely an enjoyable extracurricular activity but can serve as a structured, strategic approach to vocabulary development.

Critically, the most prominent strategy was noticing and repeating unfamiliar vocabulary, indicating a highly engaged form of input processing. Participants reported recording and investigating new words, reflecting a deep-level cognitive approach rather than passive reception. However, this strategy may require high intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy, which not all students may possess, especially in less self-directed learning cultures. Moreover, excessive reliance on noticing without systematic review could lead to incomplete retention over time.

Research has demonstrated that incorporating English subtitles into movies facilitates learners' comprehension of both meaning and spelling while also connecting auditory and visual inputs to enhance vocabulary internalization (Dwi Hana Nurfauziah et al., 2023; Khadawardi, 2022). Moreover, evidence suggests that learners who regularly engage with English movies accompanied by subtitles achieve greater vocabulary mastery than those who do not (Fikriyah et al., 2021). Kusumarajni (2022), for example, reported a notable increase in students' vocabulary acquisition following movie-based learning, particularly in their understanding of nouns.

These outcomes are consistent with Mayer's (2002) Cognitive Theory of

Multimedia Learning, which posits that the use of dual-channel input optimizes information processing and integration. By combining spoken dialogue, visual imagery, and subtitles, movies provide learners with multiple channels for processing and storing new vocabulary, thereby promoting deeper and more effective learning (Khadawardi, 2022).

Moreover, this evidence resonates with Aziz et al. (2024) and Harefa et al. (2025), who reported that English subtitles, as a form of bimodal input, significantly improve vocabulary recognition, recall, and retention, especially for mid-frequency vocabulary, which is crucial for academic and communicative competence. In this study, subtitles enabled learners to decode idiomatic expressions, diverse accents, and metaphorical language—elements that are often difficult to grasp through classroom instruction alone.

This effectiveness of English subtitles over native-language subtitles is further supported by Juhansar et al. (2024) and Nussy & Tiven (2024), who found that subtitles in the target language encourage learners to process vocabulary in context rather than relying on direct translation, leading to better internalization and active usage. Nonetheless, subtitle-based strategies have limitations. Subtitle quality, such as accuracy, timing, and language register, significantly affects learning outcomes.

Technological barriers, including limited access to high-quality subtitled movies or stable internet connections, can constrain learners in under-resourced contexts. Furthermore, cognitive overload may occur if subtitles are too fast or complex, especially for lower-proficiency learners, potentially reducing comprehension and discouraging their use (Khadawardi, 2022; Dwi Hana Nurfauziah et al., 2023). Genre-based learning was also effective in increasing motivation and exposing learners to diverse vocabulary.

Participants reported greater engagement when watching the genres they enjoyed, supporting Ritonga & Hz (2024), who found that animated films enhanced motivation and language engagement. This aligns with Mayer's notion that familiar contexts reduce extraneous cognitive load, allowing greater focus on content learning. However, genres such as science fiction or historical drama, while linguistically rich, may overwhelm learners with specialized vocabulary that is less transferable to daily communication, potentially limiting their pragmatic vocabulary development.

The transition from passive to active vocabulary usage was evident through strategies such as writing tweets, journaling, and speaking activities. These output practices reinforced new vocabulary in productive contexts, aligning with Adrefiza et al. (2024) and Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), who emphasized that active use is crucial for vocabulary mastery. Nonetheless, these strategies require confidence, time, and opportunities to practice, which may not be feasible for all learners, especially those lacking supportive speaking environments or institutional encouragement for creative output.

The strategy of rewinding scenes supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis ($i+1$), as it allows repeated exposure to language slightly above the learner's current level in a low-anxiety, self-paced setting. Harefa et al. (2025) similarly emphasized the value of repeated input for vocabulary acquisition. However, rewinding can be time-consuming and may reduce learning efficiency if not strategically targeted toward specific language goals. Additionally, individual differences were apparent in the extent to which participants applied these strategies.

For example, AN emphasized dictionary uses and note-taking, while EGA focused more on listening closely and mimicking pronunciation. This suggests that learner preferences, cognitive styles, and goals shape strategy choice and effectiveness, highlighting the need for differentiated pedagogical approaches that cater to diverse learning profiles. These findings have practical implications for teachers and curriculum developers. Integrating movie-based learning into formal curricula could enhance vocabulary acquisition if structured with guided noticing tasks, focused subtitle analysis, and integrated output activities such as reflective writing or speaking tasks based on movie content.

Teachers should provide explicit instruction on how to use subtitles strategically, select appropriate genres, and balance input with output to maximize vocabulary gains. Furthermore, schools and universities should ensure technological access to high-quality subtitled movies and provide curated lists aligned with learning goals to support such pedagogical innovations. Cultural factors may also influence strategy effectiveness. For instance, learners from high power-distance cultures may prefer teacher-led vocabulary instruction rather than autonomous movie-based learning, requiring careful scaffolding to build learner autonomy (Cheng, 2021; Özdemir, Kılınç, & Turan, 2022).

Moreover, some movie genres contain culturally specific references, humor, or sociolinguistic nuances that may be challenging for learners to comprehend without prior cultural background knowledge, potentially limiting learning outcomes or leading to misunderstandings (Roslim et al., 2021). In terms of transferability to other contexts, these strategies can be applied in various EFL and ESL settings, provided learners have access to movies and subtitles in their target language and are supported by teachers who integrate them meaningfully into lessons. However, implementing these strategies in formal education settings poses challenges, including syllabus constraints, assessment priorities, and limited class time to incorporate movie-based activities systematically.

Lastly, future research should investigate the long-term retention and productive use of vocabulary acquired through these strategies, examine their applicability to lower-proficiency learners or young learners, and explore optimal teacher scaffolding techniques to maximize learning outcomes. Comparative studies assessing the effectiveness of intralingual versus interlingual subtitles across proficiency levels and cultural contexts would further enrich understanding in this field.

Additionally, research into the development of digital literacy skills required to

use movie-based learning effectively would be beneficial in an increasingly technology-mediated educational landscape. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that English movies, when used alongside active and reflective learning strategies such as noticing, subtitle use, genre selection, output activities, and rewinding, offer a powerful, engaging, and learner-centered approach to vocabulary acquisition.

Conclusion

This study looked at how EFL students use different strategies to learn vocabulary from English movies and how these strategies help them learn better. The results show that learners use many careful and self-chosen ways to improve their vocabulary, like noticing and repeating new words, using English subtitles, picking favorite movie genre, practicing speaking or writing, and watching scenes again to understand better. English movies give real and useful language input that helps learners pick up new words by chance and in context.

English subtitles are very helpful because they show the words while learners listen, making it easier to understand and remember. Watching movies more than once and seeing words again also helps learners remember better. Choosing favorite genre of movies makes learners more interested and motivated. Using new words in speaking or writing helps learners keep and use vocabulary longer. Moreover, this study supports ideas from Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning about how people learn languages with multimedia.

It shows that active involvement and smart use of media help learners get new words. These findings can help teachers use English movies in class and encourage students to learn vocabulary on their own. Moreover, it can help to enhance students' motivation in learning English. However, for future study experimental or quasi-experimental designs could be employed to compare strategy-based movie learning with traditional vocabulary instruction. Finally, qualitative research could explore learners' metacognitive awareness and decision-making processes during movie-based learning, offering richer insights into autonomous vocabulary development.

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