



Enhancing Narrative and Visual Literacy of EFL Students through Bilingual Subtitled Historical Docudrama

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Article Info**Abstract**

Received: 2026-02-11
Revised: 2026-03-01
Accepted: 2026-05-08

Keywords:

bilingual subtitles;
docudrama;
EFL,
narrative literacy;
visual literacy;

DOI:

10.24256/ideasv14i1.9668

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Many EFL learners have trouble understanding narrative structure and interpreting visual elements when exposed to authentic audiovisual materials. This study investigates the effect of bilingual-subtitled historical docudrama on students' narrative and visual literacy. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design, 60 undergraduate EFL students (A2 level, CEFR) were divided into an experimental group (n=30) and a control group (n=30). The experimental group viewed a WR Soepratman historical docudrama with Indonesian-English subtitles, while the control group viewed the same video without subtitles. Results showed statistically significant improvements in both narrative and visual literacy in the experimental group compared to the control group ($p < .001$), with large effect sizes. The findings suggest that bilingual subtitles function as instructional scaffolding that supports dual literacy development. This study offers a novel contribution by integrating culturally grounded historical audiovisual media with bilingual subtitling to enhance narrative and visual literacy in EFL contexts.

1. Introduction

Understanding narrative meaning and interpreting visual symbolism are essential competencies in contemporary EFL classrooms, particularly when learning increasingly involves multimedia materials. However, many EFL learners struggle to comprehend narrative structures and decode visual elements when engaging with authentic audiovisual texts. These difficulties are often related to limited linguistic proficiency, insufficient visual literacy skills, and the absence of effective instructional scaffolding. In this study, narrative literacy refers to learners' ability to understand storyline development, character motivation, and thematic meaning, while visual literacy refers to the ability to interpret images, symbols, settings, and cinematic cues within audiovisual texts. Consequently, instructional media that can simultaneously support language comprehension, narrative understanding, and visual interpretation are needed in EFL learning environments.

Audiovisual media, particularly docudramas, have been shown to enhance learner engagement by combining factual accuracy with emotional storytelling (Black, 2021; Perez, 2022). Such media promote contextualized language exposure and cultural awareness, making them pedagogically relevant. However, their effectiveness depends largely on the availability of appropriate linguistic support. Research on subtitling consistently demonstrates that bilingual subtitles can improve comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and learner engagement without increasing cognitive load (Liao et al., 2020; Wang & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2022). Subtitle-assisted viewing also supports listening and reading development across proficiency levels (Hsieh, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2022). Furthermore, well-designed audiovisual materials can enhance narrative literacy by supporting understanding of story structure and thematic messages, and visual literacy by guiding the interpretation of images and cinematic elements (Perez, 2022).

Despite these documented benefits, most existing research focuses on general audiovisual materials or entertainment media. Empirical studies that simultaneously examine narrative literacy and visual literacy development remain limited. More specifically, little research investigates how bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas can facilitate learners' ability to comprehend narrative sequences and interpret visual symbolism at the same time. Moreover, locally grounded historical content is rarely integrated into EFL audiovisual instruction. This reveals a gap between the theoretical potential of culturally contextualized docudramas and their systematic implementation in EFL classrooms.

To address this gap, the present study examines the use of a bilingual-subtitled historical docudrama featuring Wage Rudolf Soepratman, a significant Indonesian historical figure associated with national identity and cultural heritage. Rather than emphasizing historical background, this study focuses on the pedagogical function of such culturally meaningful media in supporting dual literacy development.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas on EFL students' narrative literacy?
2. What is the effect of bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas on EFL students' visual literacy?
3. How can bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas be integrated into EFL learning strategies?

The objectives are to examine the impact of bilingual subtitles on narrative literacy, analyze their influence on visual literacy, and explore their pedagogical integration in EFL instruction. The novelty of this research lies in integrating bilingual subtitling, historical docudrama, and dual literacy assessment within a culturally grounded EFL context. By bridging language learning, cultural education, and audiovisual literacy, this study contributes a localized yet transferable instructional model for multimedia-based EFL pedagogy.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design to examine the effect of bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas on EFL students' narrative and visual literacy. This design enabled comparison between an experimental and a control group within an authentic classroom setting where random assignment was not feasible (Creswell, 2009; Putri et al., 2025). Although quasi-experimental designs may involve limitations such as potential baseline differences, they are widely applied in educational research to balance feasibility and causal inference (Fa'iqoh et al., 2025; Handley et al., 2018).

The experimental group viewed a bilingual-subtitled version of a historical docudrama, while the control group viewed the same docudrama without subtitles under comparable instructional conditions. The study was situated within English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly media-assisted instruction for basic-level EFL learners. The instructional material consisted of a historical docudrama featuring WR Soepratman, selected to support comprehension of narrative structure and interpretation of visual elements, consistent with research highlighting the pedagogical value of subtitle-assisted audiovisual media (Talaván et al., 2017; Wang & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2022).

Participants

The research was conducted at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang and involved 60 undergraduate students enrolled in an English for Conversation course. All participants were at pre-intermediate proficiency (A2 level, CEFR).

Intact class sampling was applied, as the existing classroom groups were maintained without random reassignment. The participants were divided into:

- a. Experimental group (n = 30)
- b. Control group (n = 30)

The students were aged between 18 and 21 years and came from Management and Accounting programs. The sample consisted of 38 female and 22 male students. This grouping allowed direct comparison between subtitle-assisted and non-subtitle-assisted instruction.

Instruments

Data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative instruments.

1. Narrative Literacy Test

The narrative literacy test consisted of 10 items combining multiple-choice and short-answer questions. The test measured students' ability to:

- a. Identify storyline sequence
- b. Interpret character motivation
- c. Recognize historical context
- d. Understand thematic meaning

2. Visual Literacy Test

The visual literacy test also consisted of 10 items. It assessed students' ability to interpret:

- a. Characters' expressions
- b. Settings and scenes
- c. Symbols and visual cues
- d. Cinematic elements

Narrative literacy was operationally defined as the ability to understand and interpret storyline and historical context, while visual literacy referred to the ability to critically analyze visual elements such as characters, symbols, and scenes (Black, 2021; Yawiloeng, 2022).

Instrument Validation and Reliability

Both instruments were validated through expert review by two ELT lecturers to ensure content relevance and clarity. A pilot test was conducted prior to the main study, and internal consistency reliability was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha (Narrative Literacy $\alpha = .82$; Visual Literacy $\alpha = .79$), indicating acceptable reliability.

Survey and Observation

A 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to gather students' perceptions of clarity, engagement, and instructional usefulness (Roselidyawaty & Mohd Rokeman, 2024).

Classroom observation followed a structured observation protocol focusing on student attention, participation, note-taking behavior, and interaction during viewing sessions.

Procedure

The study was conducted over three instructional meetings (90 minutes each).

1. Pretest Stage

Both groups completed narrative and visual literacy pretests to establish baseline equivalence.

2. Treatment Stage

The experimental group viewed the WR Soepratman docudrama with bilingual subtitles presented simultaneously (Indonesian subtitles at the top and English subtitles at the bottom of the screen).

The control group viewed the same docudrama without subtitles under identical classroom conditions.

3. Posttest Stage

Both groups completed the same narrative and visual literacy tests to measure learning gains.

During the treatment sessions, classroom observations were conducted to document student engagement and viewing behavior.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to compare pretest and posttest scores within each group, and independent-sample t-tests to compare gain scores between the experimental and control groups (Diari & Winantaka, 2025; Erwanto et al., 2025).

Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* to determine practical significance and interpreted based on established educational benchmarks (Evans & Yuan, 2022; Wolf & Harbatkin, 2023).

Qualitative data from survey responses and observational notes were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to engagement, comprehension, and perceived benefits of bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas (Alsagoor, 2025).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings ensured methodological triangulation and strengthened the validity of the conclusions.

3. Results

The quasi-experimental study involved two groups of EFL students: an experimental group (n = 30) that viewed the WR Soepratman historical docudrama with bilingual subtitles (Indonesian English) and a control group (n = 30) that viewed the same docudrama without subtitles. Both groups completed pretests and posttests measuring narrative literacy and visual literacy.

Table 1. Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores

Literacy Type	Group	Pretest Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	Interpretation
Narrative Literacy	Experimental	62.4 (5.98)	84.2 (6.12)	+21.8	High Increase
Narrative Literacy	Control	63.1 (6.10)	72.3 (6.45)	+9.2	Moderate Increase
Visual Literacy	Experimental	60.7 (6.15)	80.5 (7.05)	+19.8	High Increase
Visual Literacy	Control	61.5 (6.21)	69.2 (6.88)	+7.7	Low-Moderate Increase

As shown in Table 1, both groups demonstrated comparable pretest means in narrative and visual literacy, indicating baseline equivalence. After the treatment, the experimental group exhibited substantially larger mean gains than the control group in both literacy domains.

Paired-sample t-tests indicated statistically significant improvements in the experimental group for narrative literacy, $t(29) = 18.42, p < .001$, and visual literacy, $t(29) = 16.27, p < .001$. The control group also showed pretest–posttest improvements, although with smaller gain scores.

Independent-sample t-tests conducted on gain scores revealed significant differences between the two groups for narrative literacy, $t(58) = 7.85, p < .001$, and visual literacy, $t(58) = 7.12, p < .001$. These results indicate that the subtitle-assisted group achieved significantly greater improvements than the non-subtitle group.

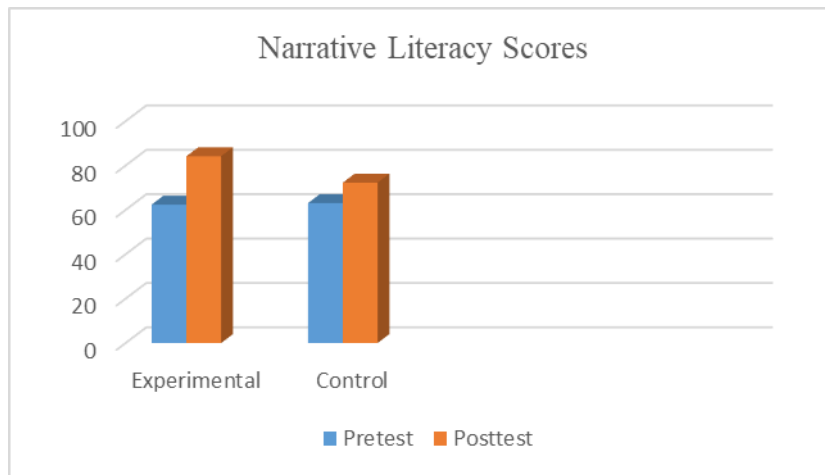


Figure 1. Narrative Literacy Scores

Figure 1 displays the pretest and posttest comparison for narrative literacy. While both groups improved after the intervention, the experimental group demonstrated a markedly larger increase relative to the control group.

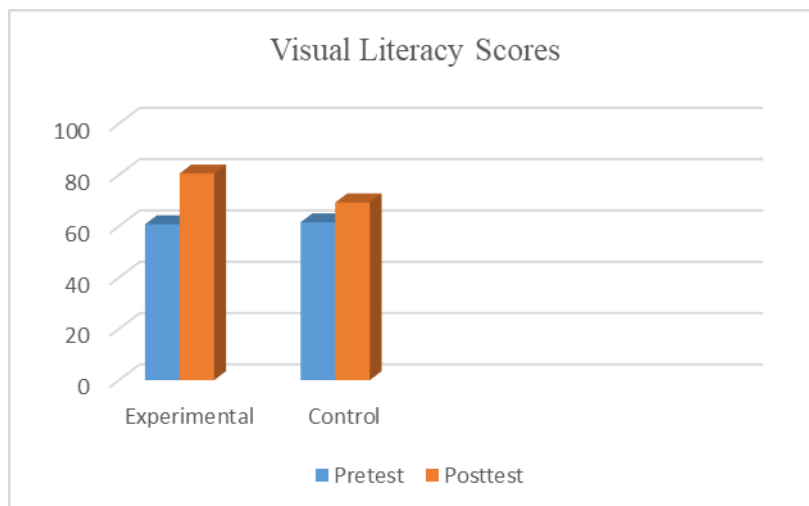


Figure 2. Visual Literacy Score

Figure 2 presents the visual literacy results. A similar pattern is observed: the experimental group showed a substantially greater posttest gain compared to the control group.

Overall, the results demonstrate that bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas were associated with significantly higher improvements in both narrative and visual literacy compared to viewing the same material without subtitles. The statistical significance and magnitude of the gain differences support the effectiveness of subtitle-assisted instruction in enhancing dual literacy outcomes.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that bilingual subtitles function not merely as comprehension aids but as structured multimodal scaffolding that supports dual literacy development in EFL contexts. While previous subtitle research has primarily emphasized listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Reynolds et al., 2022; Wang & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2022), the present study extends this perspective by showing that subtitle-assisted viewing can also enhance higher-order narrative and visual interpretation skills.

From a narrative literacy perspective, bilingual subtitles strengthened learners' ability to follow storyline progression, interpret character motivation, and identify thematic meaning. By linking spoken discourse with written text, subtitles reduced linguistic ambiguity and allowed students to focus on narrative sequencing rather than decoding isolated lexical items. This scaffolding effect is consistent with findings that subtitle-supported tasks enhance written production and comprehension processes (Talaván et al., 2017). In line with Krashen's Comprehensible Input framework, learning becomes more effective when input is both meaningful and accessible (Luo, 2024). In this study, subtitles increased input accessibility without simplifying content, thereby supporting deeper narrative processing.

More importantly, the results provide insight into how subtitles contribute to visual literacy development. Unlike concerns that subtitles may distract viewers, the findings suggest that synchronized bilingual text can guide visual attention toward salient cinematic elements. According to Dual Coding Theory, learning is strengthened when verbal and visual information are processed through interconnected channels (Mir et al., 2024). Subtitles appear to anchor verbal meaning, enabling learners to allocate greater cognitive resources to interpreting facial expressions, historical settings, and symbolic imagery. In this sense, subtitles did not compete with visual information but instead stabilized comprehension, allowing more effective multimodal integration. This interpretation aligns with research highlighting the impact of multimodal visual methodologies on audiovisual comprehension (Al-Jumaily & Alazzawi, 2025; Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024), as well as discussions of subtitle modalities in audiovisual translation (Nesirli, 2025).

Compared to prior subtitle studies that focus predominantly on incidental vocabulary learning or listening gains (Reynolds et al., 2022; Wang & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2022), this study suggests that subtitle-assisted viewing can extend beyond receptive skills toward interpretive literacy. The integration of historical docudrama further adds a contextual dimension. Digital storytelling principles emphasize emotional engagement and contextualized meaning-making (Lanszki, 2022; Santoso et al., 2023). In the present study, the historical narrative provided cultural grounding, which likely enhanced cognitive engagement and supported the interpretation of visual symbolism. This aligns with perspectives on content

and language integration in multilingual and EMI contexts, where language development occurs alongside disciplinary or cultural learning (Ahmed, 2025; Santoso et al., 2024; Zarobe, 2025).

Although the control group demonstrated improvement, the absence of subtitles may have limited their ability to fully decode narrative meaning and symbolic visual cues. This is consistent with findings that subtitle configuration influences cognitive load and comprehension efficiency (Liao et al., 2020). The comparatively larger effect sizes in the experimental group indicate that bilingual subtitling did not merely accelerate comprehension but facilitated deeper integration of narrative and visual elements.

Theoretical Contribution

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in positioning bilingual subtitles as a mechanism for dual literacy development in EFL, rather than solely as a tool for listening comprehension. By empirically examining both narrative and visual literacy, this research expands subtitle-assisted learning theory into multimodal literacy domains, emphasizing interpretive and analytical competencies within culturally contextualized media.

Practical Implications

For classroom implementation, teachers may:

- a. Pre-teach key vocabulary before viewing.
- b. Segment the docudrama into short clips with guided questions.
- c. Encourage students to identify narrative sequence and thematic elements.
- d. Use visual prompts to discuss symbols, gestures, and settings.
- e. Facilitate reflective discussion linking language use with cultural meaning.

Such structured integration can maximize the scaffolding function of bilingual subtitles while maintaining student engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted in a single institution with a relatively short intervention period, which may limit generalizability. The use of one historical docudrama also restricts broader genre comparison. Future research may examine longer-term retention effects, different subtitle configurations, and diverse proficiency levels to further explore the instructional potential of bilingual subtitling in language education (Sánchez-Auñón et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings suggest that bilingual-subtitled historical docudramas represent a pedagogically meaningful approach to integrating language learning, cultural education, and multimodal literacy development in EFL classrooms.

5. Conclusion

This study moves beyond reporting score differences to interpret how bilingual subtitles functioned pedagogically within a multimodal learning environment. Rather than acting solely as comprehension aids, bilingual subtitles appear to have served as cognitive stabilizers that enabled learners to process narrative structure and visual symbolism more systematically.

Previous subtitle research has largely emphasized improvements in listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. While those findings remain relevant, they often frame subtitles as tools for decoding spoken language. The present study suggests a broader function. By providing simultaneous written-verbal reinforcement, bilingual subtitles reduced linguistic uncertainty and allowed learners to redirect attention toward higher-order interpretive tasks. Instead of using most of their cognitive resources to decode speech, students could engage more actively with narrative progression, character motivation, and thematic meaning.

More importantly, the findings help explain why subtitles may enhance visual literacy not merely comprehension accuracy. In audiovisual texts, visual meaning is conveyed through facial expressions, camera focus, historical settings, and symbolic imagery. Without sufficient linguistic support, learners may concentrate on decoding dialogue and overlook these visual cues. Bilingual subtitles appear to anchor verbal meaning, freeing attentional capacity for interpreting non-verbal elements. In this sense, subtitles functioned as multimodal alignment tools: they synchronized textual clarification with moving images, enabling learners to integrate visual and verbal signals more coherently. The improvement in visual literacy, therefore, is not incidental but likely emerges from more efficient cognitive distribution across channels.

This interpretation differs from earlier subtitle studies that primarily measure receptive gains. Whereas much of the literature treats subtitles as support for listening development, the current findings suggest that subtitle-assisted viewing can foster dual literacy integrating narrative interpretation and visual analysis. The use of a historical docudrama further reinforces this outcome. Historical storytelling combines linguistic narration with culturally embedded imagery. When subtitles clarify dialogue, students can focus on interpreting gestures, costumes, settings, and symbolic scenes, deepening both linguistic and contextual understanding. Thus, subtitles do not replace visual processing; they enhance it by stabilizing linguistic access.

At the same time, bilingual subtitling should not be viewed as a universal solution. The instructional value likely depends on structured integration. Subtitles alone do not guarantee interpretive growth; they become effective when embedded in guided learning activities that prompt reflection on narrative structure and visual meaning.

Theoretical Contribution

The central theoretical contribution of this study lies in reframing bilingual subtitles as instruments of dual literacy development in EFL education. Rather than positioning subtitles solely within listening comprehension theory, this research situates them within multimodal literacy development. It demonstrates that subtitle-assisted audiovisual materials can simultaneously support narrative literacy (story comprehension, thematic interpretation) and visual literacy (symbol recognition, contextual analysis). This dual-literacy framing expands existing perspectives on subtitle pedagogy in EFL contexts.

Practical Classroom Implications

To translate these findings into classroom practice, teachers may consider the following structured steps:

- a. Pre-viewing activation: Introduce key vocabulary and historical background to reduce initial cognitive load.
- b. Segmented viewing: Divide the docudrama into short clips and pause for guided discussion.
- c. Dual-focus questioning: Ask students to identify both narrative elements (conflict, motivation, theme) and visual elements (gesture, setting, symbolism).
- d. Comparative reflection: Encourage learners to reflect on how subtitles helped them interpret specific scenes.
- e. Follow-up tasks: Assign short written or oral reflections integrating narrative summary and visual analysis.

Such steps ensure that subtitles function as structured scaffolding rather than passive textual additions.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional setting, which limits generalizability. The sample size was relatively small, and the intervention period was short, measuring only immediate posttest outcomes rather than long-term retention. Additionally, the use of one historical docudrama restricts applicability across genres. Learners' prior familiarity with subtitled media was not fully controlled, which may have influenced individual gains.

Future Research Directions

Future research should involve multiple institutions, larger participant groups, and extended intervention periods to examine long-term literacy development. Comparative studies across subtitle configurations, genres, and proficiency levels would also help clarify the conditions under which bilingual subtitling most effectively supports dual literacy in EFL settings.

6. Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang for the continuous support and research facilities provided throughout the completion of this research. Special thanks are extended to the English lecturers and students who participated in the research, as well as to the media production team involved in the development of the WR Soepratman bilingual docudrama. Their valuable contributions and cooperation were essential in ensuring the success of this project.

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