

<https://jurnal.unigal.ac.id/index.php/jeep>

P-ISSN: 2460-4046 E-ISSN: 2830-0327

Journal of English Education Program (JEEP), Vol. 13 No. 2, July 2026

An Exploration of Students' Autonomous Vocabulary Learning through Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) Movies

Rohmat Hidayat

English Education Program, FKIP, Universitas Galuh, Ciamis, Indonesia

rohmat2310@gmail.com

Rina Herlina

English Education Program, FKIP, Universitas Galuh, Ciamis, Indonesia

rina_herlina@unigal.ac.id

Wawan Tarwana

E English Education Program, FKIP, Universitas Galuh, Ciamis, Indonesia

wtarwana@unigal.ac.id

APA Citation: Hidayat, R., Herlina, R., & Tarwana, W. (2026). An exploration of students' autonomous vocabulary learning through Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) movies. *Journal of English Education Program (JEEP)*, 13(2), 152-162. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.25157/\(jeep\).v13i2.20851](http://dx.doi.org/10.25157/(jeep).v13i2.20851)

Received: 10-08-2025

Accepted: 30-06-2026

Published: 02-07-2026

Abstract: Vocabulary acquisition is central to language learning, and in recent years, movies have become popular tools for supporting learner independence. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) offers engaging and authentic content, making it a compelling medium for vocabulary development. While many studies emphasize the value of authentic materials in theory, fewer have examined how students actually experience autonomous vocabulary learning through entertainment media such as MCU films. This study aims to explore senior high school students' experiences in independently learning English vocabulary through MCU movies, including the strategies they use, challenges they face, and the outcomes they achieve. A qualitative descriptive design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six students, indirect observation via reflective journals, and documentation of students' vocabulary results. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Students reported high motivation and enjoyment while learning through MCU content. The findings of this research showed that students employed various strategies such as pausing, using subtitles, repeating scenes, and maintaining vocabulary journals. Challenges included fast speech, slang, and distractions from action scenes, which students overcame through self-adjusted learning strategies. Thus, it is concluded that MCU movies are effective and enjoyable tools for supporting autonomous vocabulary learning. They enhance learner motivation, contextual understanding, and promote independent language acquisition.

Keywords: *authentic audiovisual materials in EFL; autonomous vocabulary learning; Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) movies.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in mastering a foreign language. It is the foundation upon which language skills, listening, speaking, Reading, and writing are developed and refined. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners often struggle to express themselves clearly, comprehend spoken and written input, and participate in meaningful communication. Fauzi et al., (2021) noted,

vocabulary is the core component enabling learners to convey ideas and understand meaning effectively in both oral and written contexts. This challenge is particularly evident in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, such as Indonesia, where learners have limited access to authentic English input outside the classroom.

In response to these challenges, educators and researchers have explored innovative strategies to enhance vocabulary learning. One such approach involves using multimedia materials, especially movies, to provide rich, contextualized language exposure. According to Garner and Hadingham (2018), movies serve as a source of authentic and engaging input that reflects natural language use in diverse settings. Audiovisual materials have been found to significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition, particularly when students are exposed to subtitles and encouraged to reflect on language usage (Permata, 2022). These benefits highlight the pedagogical value of incorporating films into language education.

A key concept in this area is incidental vocabulary learning, which occurs when learners acquire new words unintentionally while engaging in activities like watching movies. Khotimah et al., (2019), emphasized that incidental learning can be particularly effective due to repeated exposure to vocabulary in meaningful, contextual scenarios. Supporting this, Alnan and Halim (2024), demonstrated that even a single viewing of a captioned film could lead to measurable vocabulary gains among EFL learners. This method offers an engaging alternative to rote memorization and textbook-based instruction.

Among the various genres of films, pop culture movies have emerged as particularly beneficial for vocabulary. Irmanda et al., (2021) argued that such films provide exposure to contemporary expressions, idiomatic language, and cultural references often absent from conventional learning materials. These elements help bridge the gap between formal textbook English and real-world usage, enhancing learners' ability to understand and use language in authentic situations. Furthermore, students often find pop culture movies enjoyable and motivating, which can lower their affective filters and encourage sustained engagement with the language (Hariri & Surabaya, 2023).

Learning vocabulary is a fundamental component of mastering a foreign language. However, relying solely on formal classroom instruction often proves insufficient: time constraints, curriculum demands, and limited exposure outside class can hinder substantial vocabulary growth. In response, autonomous vocabulary learning is defined as the learner's ability to take initiative, assume responsibility, and actively control their own vocabulary acquisition. This approach has gained increasing attention in language education. Autonomous vocabulary learning empowers learners to transcend classroom boundaries, enabling continuous and self-regulated vocabulary growth even outside formal lessons. Autonomous vocabulary learning aligns with broader pedagogical shifts emphasizing learner autonomy, self-regulation, metacognition, and lifelong learning. As language learning becomes more flexible and learner-cantered, vocabulary acquisition, too, must adapt by leveraging learners' intrinsic motivation, personal interests, and varied resources. Recent empirical and conceptual studies offer strong evidence for the effectiveness of autonomous vocabulary learning.

Lam (2025) pronounced some key factors and enablers of Autonomous Vocabulary Learning, as follows: 1) Metacognitive and self-regulated strategies: As shown in the study on metacognitive learning strategies, learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning affects vocabulary acquisition under autonomy; 2) Task-based integration, especially reading and comprehension tasks: Embedding autonomous vocabulary learning within reading tasks helps students apply new words in context, reinforcing retention and improving reading skills; 3) Learner motivation and personal interest: When students are free to select materials (e.g., reading content that matches their interests), their engagement and vocabulary gains improve. This autonomy over content seems crucial; and 4) Interactive and engaging tools/media (e.g., word walls, digital

applications): Tools like word walls and other interactive media help maintain motivation, make learning enjoyable, and support regular review and application of vocabulary.

To support this research, there are two related studies. The first is written by Dhaifi et al., (2024), which explores how to enhance Autonomous Learning and Vocabulary Mastery through the Effective Utilization of Online Resources and Word Wall Activities. This study explored how EFL students independently use vocabulary learning strategies outside the classroom. Based on data from questionnaires and interviews with high school learners, the authors concluded that autonomous vocabulary learning is not only feasible but is already practiced by many learners, underscoring its real-world applicability. However, this research explores students' autonomous learning through MCU.

Second, the research written by Talok et al., (2023), stated that Metacognitive Learning Strategies for EFL Autonomous Learning found that metacognitive strategies (such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning) support autonomous learning among EFL learners. The results emphasize that vocabulary learning under autonomy benefits significantly when learners employ metacognitive awareness: they become more strategic about how, when, and what vocabulary they learn. However, this research on autonomous learning was blended into vocabulary learning. Together, these studies reflect a growing body of evidence that autonomous vocabulary learning, when supported by strategy awareness, appropriate tasks, and digital or interactive tools, can significantly improve vocabulary acquisition and related language skills.

In the Indonesian context, MCU is a widely consumed, culturally relevant media source among teenagers and young adults. These films are known not only for their entertainment value and production quality but also for their diverse linguistic content. The dialogues in MCU movies feature everyday vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and colloquial phrases, offering learners abundant opportunities to expand their lexical repertoire. Given the popularity of these films among Indonesian students, exploring their use as tools for autonomous vocabulary learning is both timely and pedagogically significant.

While a growing body of research has investigated the role of movies in classroom-based language learning, Fitriyah et al., (2022) relatively little attention has been paid to how students independently engage with films for vocabulary acquisition. Most existing studies have focused on university students or formal instructional contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how high school students experience and navigate autonomous learning. Independent learning is a critical 21st-century skill, as it empowers students to take responsibility for their education, apply personalized strategies, and adapt to various learning contexts.

Moreover, research suggests that learners' strategies significantly influence the effectiveness of movie-based vocabulary learning. According to Kord, (2022), techniques such as pausing and replaying scenes, taking notes, using English subtitles, and discussing content with peers can facilitate deeper processing and retention of vocabulary. However, students may also encounter obstacles such as rapid speech, unfamiliar slang, and cultural references that are difficult to interpret without guidance. Understanding these challenges is essential to providing targeted support and to designing materials or frameworks that help learners overcome them.

Despite the increasing recognition of multimedia as a valuable educational tool, there remains a paucity of research on how Indonesian senior high school students utilize MCU movies for independent vocabulary learning. This study addresses that gap by exploring students' experiences, strategies, and challenges in this context. The aim is not only to assess the effectiveness of this approach but also to understand its implications for promoting learner autonomy and enriching vocabulary acquisition through authentic media.

METHOD

This qualitative case study aimed to explore the experiences of senior high school students in independently learning English vocabulary through Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) movies. The method section outlines the respondents, instruments, procedures, and data analysis employed to ensure the study's validity and reproducibility.

The study involved six students from SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti, a public senior high school in West Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience using MCU movies as a medium for autonomous vocabulary learning. They were aged 16-18 and had varying levels of English proficiency. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each student prior to data collection. To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned a code (e.g., Student 1, Student 2). All respondents had been engaged in vocabulary learning through MCU content for at least 3 to 6 months.

Two data collection instruments were employed: semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The interview protocol consisted of ten open-ended questions developed to examine students' learning processes, strategies, and difficulties encountered. These questions were adapted from prior research on vocabulary learning and multimedia use in language education. (Fathoni et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language to facilitate participant comprehension and encourage detailed responses, then transcribed and translated for analysis. In addition, participants were asked to complete reflective journals while watching *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. These reflective journals required students to document new vocabulary they encountered, the contexts in which it appeared, the strategies they used to teach it, and reflections on their engagement and understanding. The reflective journal served as a tool for indirect observation and data triangulation (Rachmawati et al., 2023).

Following approval from the school and research supervisor, data collection proceeded in three stages. First, students were recruited according to inclusion criteria and informed about the research goals and ethical considerations. Second, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes and was recorded with prior consent. Third, participants were instructed to watch *Spider-Man: Homecoming* over three weeks and to submit weekly reflective journal entries. Each student followed a standardized template for consistent documentation. All collected data were stored securely and maintained in strict confidence throughout the research.

Thematic analysis was used to examine both interview transcripts and reflective journal entries that followed the six-step process outlined by Wallen & Fraenkel (2013) as follows: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading; (2) initial coding of significant statements and ideas; (3) identification of patterns and formation of preliminary themes; (4) review and refinement of themes to ensure coherence; (5) definition and naming of final themes; and (6) integration of themes into a narrative aligned with the research questions. Coding was performed manually, and both semantic and latent meanings were considered. To enhance credibility, triangulation was achieved by comparing data from two sources, namely, interviews and journals. Additionally, member checking was conducted by summarizing interpretations to participants to confirm their accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to answer the first, second, and third research questions. The first research question is: What are senior high school students' experiences with autonomous vocabulary learning of English through MCU movies? What learning strategies do students use to comprehend vocabulary in MCU movies? What are the challenges that students face in the process of learning vocabulary from MCU movies? All of those answers is elaborated in the following organization:

Students' Experiences in Autonomous Vocabulary Learning Through MCU Movies

To answer the first research question regarding senior high school students' experiences in autonomous vocabulary learning through MCU movies, the researcher applied the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and students' reflective journals and systematically analysed using this method. Through this process, the researcher identified and constructed four main themes that emerged from the students' responses. These themes offer meaningful insights into how students engage in independent vocabulary learning when exposed to authentic and enjoyable language input from MCU films. The findings reflect not only the learners' motivation and initiative but also the cognitive and emotional depth associated with learning vocabulary through popular media.

Furthermore, the thematic findings reveal that students' experiences were shaped by both internal and external factors that support autonomous learning. Internally, students expressed heightened curiosity when encountering unfamiliar words in the films. Many learners reported pausing scenes, replaying dialogues, or checking online dictionaries to clarify meanings, demonstrating self-regulated strategies aligned with autonomous learning principles. Externally, the engaging nature of MCU movies, characterized by fast-paced dialogues, action-driven narratives, and context-rich situations, provided meaningful linguistic input that facilitated the retention and contextual understanding of new vocabulary. The authenticity of the language used in these films also allowed students to observe how words and expressions function in real or near-real conversational settings, which further enhanced their comprehension.

In addition, the emotional engagement elicited by MCU characters and storylines played a significant role in sustaining learners' motivation. Students indicated that their interest in the plot and admiration for certain characters encouraged them to persist in learning new vocabulary even when the linguistic input was challenging. This suggests that affective factors, such as enjoyment and personal attachment to the media, can strongly influence the depth of vocabulary processing. Several students also shared that discussing movie scenes with peers or searching for fan-made summaries online expanded their vocabulary, highlighting how autonomous learning may extend beyond the viewing experience into self-initiated learning behaviours.

Overall, the thematic analysis demonstrates that MCU movies serve as an effective medium for fostering autonomous vocabulary learning by providing learners with motivating, contextually rich, and cognitively stimulating input. The four themes identified collectively illustrate how enjoyment, context, strategy use, and emotional engagement interact to shape students' autonomous learning experiences. Through these insights, the study underscores the potential of integrating popular media into language learning environments to promote greater learner autonomy and sustained vocabulary development.

Students frequently reported that watching MCU movies was enjoyable and a significant motivator for their independent vocabulary learning. Their emotional connection to the characters and plotlines encouraged repeated watching and exploration of unfamiliar words. As said by S1, "I love Marvel movies. I feel more motivated to learn English when I watch them because the stories are fun and the characters are cool." Meanwhile, S4 states: "Because I really like Marvel, I want to understand what they are talking about. If I do not know the words, I will find out myself." This shows that intrinsic motivation plays a key role in students' willingness to engage with English outside of formal instruction, especially when paired with media they already enjoy.

Students reported watching the same movies multiple times to deepen their vocabulary understanding. This repetition, driven by their own initiative, allowed for deeper language processing and self-directed reinforcement of learning. "I watched Spider-Man: Homecoming three times. The first time just for fun, the second time with subtitles, and the third time to catch new words," stated by Student 2 in Reflective Journal. This pattern of autonomous learning, fueled

by personal interest, indicates the students' ability to regulate their learning process through repeated engagement with authentic content.

Students frequently highlighted how learning vocabulary from context within scenes helped them remember word meanings and usage more effectively than rote memorization. "When I saw the scene where Peter said 'You are the Liz to my MJ,' I learned what it means emotionally and culturally, not just from a dictionary," said Student 5. "If I hear a word in a sad or exciting scene, it is easier to remember," Student 3 added. This supports the value of contextualized learning, where vocabulary is linked to memorable emotions or narrative events.

Many students reported feeling more confident and independent in their vocabulary learning because they could manage their own process using movies. "Now I can learn by myself. I don't wait for the teacher to give vocabulary lists," is said by Student 6. Also, student 2 stated: "Sometimes I use subtitles, sometimes I try to guess the meaning. I feel more in control." (S2) This self-efficacy and sense of ownership align with the principles of autonomous learning, where learners take charge of their progress.

From the thematic analysis, it can be concluded that students' experiences in autonomous vocabulary learning through MCU movies are mainly positive and self-motivated. The four emerging themes, motivation triggered by enjoyment, repetition, and personal initiative, contextual vocabulary learning, and growing confidence, demonstrate that students not only engage in independent learning but also find it enjoyable and effective. These experiences highlight the value of integrating popular media into autonomous language-learning practices.

These findings align with the principles of autonomous learning as defined by Little (1991), in which learners take responsibility for their own learning process. The students' high levels of motivation, enjoyment, and repeated engagement with MCU content mirror the concept of intrinsic motivation described by Deci and Ryan (2000), in which learning is driven by interest and internal satisfaction. Moreover, the use of contextual cues to infer meaning supports Nation's (2022) emphasis on the importance of incidental vocabulary learning through meaningful exposure. The emotional connection to scenes also aligns with Krashen's (1992) affective filter hypothesis, which states that positive emotional states can enhance language acquisition. Overall, the students' experiences demonstrate that pop culture media, when chosen for personal interest, can serve as powerful tools for language development.

Students' Learning Strategies in Comprehending Vocabulary from MCU Movies

The findings for the second research question, "What learning strategies do students use to comprehend vocabulary in MCU movies?" were obtained from reflective journals, which served as a form of indirect observation. These journals captured students' personal reflections on their vocabulary learning as they engaged with MCU movies. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, the researcher systematically analysed the entries. This process identified four main themes related to students' strategies.

Furthermore, the reflective journals yielded rich qualitative data, revealing how students independently employed cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies to comprehend unfamiliar vocabulary. Students frequently documented the specific steps they took when encountering new words, illustrating the complexity of their autonomous learning processes. Several entries showed that learners relied on contextual inference, drawing meaning from visual cues, character interactions, and situational contexts presented in the films. This aligns with established theories of incidental vocabulary acquisition, which emphasize the role of contextualized input in supporting comprehension.

Additionally, the journals highlighted students' extensive use of digital tools, including online dictionaries, translation apps, and subtitle toggling features. These resources enabled learners to verify meanings, compare usage, and cross-check nuances, demonstrating a high level of strategic awareness. Some students also described engaging in repeated viewing and note-

taking, which helped deepen their understanding and reinforce retention of new vocabulary. Affective strategies were also evident, as students noted that their enjoyment of the movies helped reduce anxiety and maintain motivation, enabling them to persist in deciphering challenging terms. Taken together, the thematic patterns derived from the reflective journals provide a comprehensive picture of how learners employed diverse and self-directed strategies to make sense of vocabulary encountered in MCU movies.

Most students mentioned watching with English or bilingual subtitles, switching between subtitle modes to support understanding. “First, I watch with Bahasa subtitles, then I rewatch with English subtitles, then no subtitles,” Students 1 informed. “Sometimes, I pause and rewind to understand the meaning. I use subtitles to help me learn new words.” is said by Student 4. This strategy supports both comprehension and vocabulary acquisition through gradual immersion. Students often tried to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words based on the situation, body language, or the characters' tone. “When I do not understand a word, I guess from the situation or how the character reacts,” said Student 3. “I try to understand the meaning of what is happening in the scene.” is stated by Student 5. This reflects the strategy of contextual guessing, which fosters deeper processing of new vocabulary.

Several students reported actively taking notes and reviewing new vocabulary after watching MCU movies. These actions indicate the use of metacognitive strategies, where learners monitor and regulate their own learning. “I write down new words and look them up later.” is stated by Students 2. “After watching, I check the meaning and try to use the words again.” is said by Student 6. These behaviors reflect self-directed learning traits, particularly those associated with metacognition, including Planning (deciding which words to note), Monitoring (realizing what they do not understand), and Evaluating (revisiting and using the words to test understanding). The combination of watching enjoyment and structured follow-up enables vocabulary acquisition to be both engaging and effective.

Some students reported using digital tools such as online dictionaries, translation platforms, and mobile learning applications to aid their understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary encountered while watching MCU movies. This reflects a conscious, strategic approach to autonomous learning, in which learners seek external resources beyond the movie itself to clarify meaning and reinforce comprehension. “If I don’t understand a word, I search it on Google Translate or YouTube explanation.” is said by Student 4. “I use English learning apps to find meaning and usage examples.” is stated by Student 5. The students’ initiative to access these resources demonstrates technological literacy and a proactive learning mindset. This aligns with characteristics of autonomous and strategic learners, who identify their vocabulary needs, select appropriate tools or resources, and apply digital solutions independently to solve learning problems.

Students used various learning strategies to comprehend vocabulary in MCU movies, including subtitle switching, contextual inference, note-taking, repetition, and the use of digital tools. These strategies highlight their ability to adapt multiple approaches to aid in understanding and acquiring new words. Their choices reflect increasing independence in language learning and strategic behavior to tackle unfamiliar vocabulary effectively.

These findings demonstrate the diverse strategies learners employ when engaging with authentic input. The strategy of contextual guessing aligns with the theory from Dhaifi et al., (2024), relating to meaning from context, which is critical for incidental vocabulary learning. Note-taking and digital tool use reflect metacognitive strategies that support autonomy, as discussed by Talok et al., (2023). The learners’ ability to choose and combine strategies as needed indicates that they are developing into strategic learners, capable of managing their language input effectively. The interplay of entertainment and strategy suggests that enjoyment can coexist with deliberate learning when supported by conscious effort.

Challenges Faced by Students in Learning Vocabulary from MCU Movies

The findings for the third research question, “What are the challenges that students face in the process of learning vocabulary from MCU movies?” were gathered from semi-structured interviews and supported by insights from students’ reflective journals. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, the data were systematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns in students’ responses. This process identified four main themes: Fast-paced Dialogue and Accent Difficulty, Slang and Idiomatic Expressions, Over-reliance on Subtitles, and Distraction from Entertainment Value.

One of the most commonly reported difficulties was understanding vocabulary in the context of rapid, native-like speech. Students frequently expressed frustration over how quickly characters in MCU movies speak, especially during action scenes or emotionally intense dialogue. This speed made it difficult for learners to catch unfamiliar words, even when using English subtitles. “They talk too fast sometimes. I cannot catch the words,” Student 1 said. “Some words are pronounced differently from what I expected.” is said by Student 3. In addition to the fast delivery, pronunciation also posed a challenge. Many students noted that native-speaker pronunciation often differed significantly from how they expected the words to sound based on classroom exposure or textbook learning. This mismatch made it harder for students to recognize or remember new vocabulary. This reflects common listening comprehension barriers and highlights the need for learners to develop phonological awareness and become more accustomed to real-world speech patterns.

Students often reported difficulty in understanding informal, idiomatic, and culturally specific expressions frequently used in MCU movies. These types of language features, such as slang, phrasal verbs, and jokes based on American culture, posed a significant challenge. “There are so many slang words. I don’t know what they mean.” is stated by student 5. “Sometimes they use idioms or American jokes I don’t understand,” said Student 4. Authentic materials like films expose learners to un-simplified English, which includes linguistic elements rarely covered in formal education. Without cultural background knowledge or prior exposure, students struggled to interpret the intended meaning. Despite the difficulty, students occasionally reported moments of curiosity and satisfaction when they successfully uncovered or guessed the meaning.

A recurring challenge was feeling overwhelmed when exposed to many unfamiliar words in a single viewing session. MCU movies, known for their fast-paced, content-rich dialogue, often introduced a flood of new terms that exceeded learners’ processing capacity. “It is hard when there are too many new words. I cannot remember all,” said Student 2. “I get overwhelmed when I do not understand a lot of the dialogue.” is said by Student 6. In such cases, students may lose focus or motivation, leading to reduced engagement with the learning material. Without proper scaffolding or strategic support, the overload of unfamiliar terms can hinder comprehension and discourage continued autonomous learning.

Another notable challenge faced by students was over-reliance on subtitles. While subtitles can support vocabulary acquisition and comprehension, students reported that depending too much on them sometimes limited their listening development and made them passive learners. Instead of trying to infer meaning from context or sound, they defaulted to reading. “If I keep using Bahasa subtitles, I do not improve my listening.” is said by Student 2. “Sometimes I read too much and forget to listen,” said Student 4. This suggests a need for more balanced strategies, where subtitles serve as a transitional aid rather than a constant crutch. The overuse of subtitles, particularly in the learner’s native language, can inhibit the development of listening skills and reduce exposure to natural English input, ultimately affecting long-term vocabulary retention and comprehension abilities.

The challenges students face reflect broader issues in listening comprehension and cultural understanding during authentic language exposure. The fast-paced dialogue and unfamiliar pronunciation patterns encountered in MCU movies highlight the gap between textbook English

and real-world spoken language. Purwaningrum and Yusuf, (2020) emphasizes, authentic audiovisual materials often contain reduced forms, rapid speech, and informal language that can impede learners' ability to decode and comprehend vocabulary effectively.

Moreover, the difficulty students experienced with slang, idioms, and cultural references underlines the necessity of cultural competence in language learning. Kramsch (1998) argues that language learning is not limited to grammatical or lexical knowledge but also involves understanding the cultural context in which language is used. Without this competence, students may struggle to interpret meaning, primarily when expressions are deeply rooted in a specific cultural setting.

Students also reported cognitive strain when exposed to dense, unfamiliar vocabulary, which affected their motivation and retention. While subtitles can support comprehension, several students noted an over-reliance on native-language subtitles, which at times distracted them from focusing on the spoken language itself. This suggests the need for scaffolded learning strategies that gradually shift learners toward greater independence in listening. Although MCU movies offer valuable input for autonomous vocabulary learning, these findings indicate that learners may benefit from structured support to optimize their engagement and comprehension.

Furthermore, some students mentioned being distracted by the entertainment aspect of MCU movies. Because these films are primarily designed for enjoyment, the primary focus may shift from language learning to plot immersion. Students admitted that while watching for entertainment, they sometimes forgot their learning goals or ignored unfamiliar words. "I get too into the movie and forget to learn." is stated by student 5. "I'm watching for fun, so I skip checking new words," said Student 3. This highlights a common issue in using entertainment media for educational purposes, maintaining a balance between enjoyment and intentional learning. Although the affective filter may be lowered through enjoyment (Krashen, 1985), the lack of active learning strategies during viewing can limit vocabulary acquisition. The dual role of movies as both entertainment and learning tools can either enhance or hinder learning, depending on the learner's focus and intention. While autonomous vocabulary learning shows many benefits, this research also highlights several challenges: 1) Not all learners may have sufficient self-regulation skills. Without metacognitive awareness or motivation, autonomous learning can be ineffective or inconsistent; 2) Digital resources and interactive tools often require access to technology and the Internet, which might not be equally available to all learners; and 3) Without integration into a broader language-learning framework (Reading, writing, speaking), vocabulary learning may become decontextualized and superficial. Autonomy does not mean absence of guidance: learners benefit when instructors provide scaffolding, strategy training, and periodic monitoring (Fajriati et al., n.d.).

This research suggests that educators and language programs should: 1) Encourage and teach autonomous vocabulary learning strategies, including metacognitive planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation; 2) Provide access to digital and interactive resources (online reading materials, word walls, quizzes) to support autonomous learning outside classroom hours; 3) Embed vocabulary learning within meaningful tasks, e.g., reading, writing, comprehension — rather than treating it as isolated word lists; 4) Foster learner motivation and ownership, allowing learners to choose materials relevant to their interests, which can sustain long-term engagement; and 4) Act as scaffolding facilitators: initial guidance, training in strategies, and occasional check-ins can help learners maximize the benefits of autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore the experiences of senior high school students in learning English vocabulary autonomously through Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) movies. The findings contribute to the current understanding of how authentic audiovisual materials can be integrated into language learning to promote learner autonomy, engagement, and vocabulary development.

The results reveal that students were highly engaged in using MCU movies as a learning resource, utilizing strategies such as pausing scenes, using subtitles, repeating dialogue, and recording new vocabulary. These strategies enabled students to learn in a self-directed manner while enjoying the films' entertainment value. The study also uncovered several challenges, including difficulties in processing fast-paced speech, unfamiliar accents, and culturally embedded expressions. These difficulties highlight the gap between formal language instruction and real-life language use, reinforcing the importance of exposing learners to authentic input.

By focusing on students' actual learning behaviors and reflections, this research adds to the growing body of evidence supporting the use of entertainment media in language education. It advances the field by showing that, when appropriately guided, autonomous engagement with popular media can complement formal instruction and enhance vocabulary retention. Future studies could examine the long-term effects of media-based learning on vocabulary acquisition and explore how scaffolded instruction or digital tools could further support students in managing comprehension difficulties. Additionally, comparative studies between different genres of audiovisual content may provide insight into the most effective formats for vocabulary learning.

This research suggests that educators and language programs should encourage and teach autonomous vocabulary learning strategies, including metacognitive planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. They should also provide access to digital and interactive resources, such as online reading materials, word walls, and quizzes, to support autonomous learning outside classroom hours. Embedding vocabulary learning through meaningful tasks like reading, writing, and comprehension, rather than treating it as isolated word lists, is important. Additionally, fostering learner motivation and ownership by allowing learners to select materials relevant to their interests can sustain long-term engagement. Acting as scaffolding facilitators offering initial guidance, training in strategies, and occasional check-ins can help learners maximize the benefits of autonomy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am genuinely appreciative of all individuals and institutions who contributed to the completion of this research. My heartfelt thanks go to the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Galuh University. I am especially grateful to my supervisors, Rina Herlina, M.Pd, and Wawan Tarwana, S.Pd., M.Hum., for their invaluable guidance and consistent encouragement throughout this journey. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the English teacher and students who participated in this study. My appreciation extends to everyone who assisted with proofreading and formatting. Lastly, I am deeply thankful to my family and friends for their unwavering support and motivation. This research would not have been possible without their help and dedication.

REFERENCES

- Alnan, A., & Halim, H. A. (2024). *Examining vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size among Syrian EFL learners*. 14(1), 12–25.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268.
- Dhaifi, I., Setyosari, P., Widiati, U., & Ulfa, S. (2024). *Enhancing Autonomous Learning and Vocabulary Mastery through the Effective Utilization of Online Resources and Word Wall Activities*. 16, 4301–4312. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i3.5690>
- Fajriati, H., Safitri, L., Inggris, W. S.-... dan S., & 2024, undefined. (n.d.). The Correlation

- Between Students' Habit in Watching English Movies and Their Listening Skill at the Second Grade of SMAN 1 IV Koto. *Ejurnal.Politeknikpratama.Ac.Id*. Retrieved June 24, 2025, from <https://ejurnal.politeknikpratama.ac.id/index.php/JUPENSI/article/view/3393>
- Fathoni, A., S. L. A., & Sumaryati, S. (2024). *The Utilization of Interactive Multimedia in Improving Vocabulary Knowledge of High School Students*. 26(August), 476–491.
- Fauzi, W. R., Muljanto, S., & Lestari, L. (2021). *College students' perceptions on using movies for vocabulary learning*. 4(1), 40–47.
- Fitriyah, I., Masitoh, F., & Widiati, U. (2022). *Classroom-based language assessment, literacy, and professional development needs between novice and experienced EFL teachers*. 12(1), 124–134.
- Garner, J., & Hadingham, O. (2018). *Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics Incidental Vocabulary Learning Through Watching Movies*. 1(3), 135–147.
- Hariri, A., & Surabaya, S. A. (2023). *The use of authentic material in English classroom teaching : Indonesian New Curriculum*. 1, 94–103.
- Irmanda, I., Ahmad, Y. B., Kodir, A., & Baekani, A. (2021). *EDUKATIF : JURNAL ILMU PENDIDIKAN Students' Perspectives towards English Short Movies as Media to Assist Their Vocabulary Mastery in Online Learning*. 3(4), 2081–2091.
- Khotimah, K., Widiati, U., Mustofa, M., & Ubaidillah, M. F. (2019). *Autonomous English learning : Teachers' and students' perceptions*. 9(2), 371–381. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v9i2.20234>
- Kord, M. A. (2022). *The Effect of English Subtitle on Vocabulary Learning : EFL Intermediate Students*. 10(1), 43–52.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). Context and culture in language teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Krashen, S. (1992). The input hypothesis: An update. *Linguistics and language pedagogy: The state of the art*, 12(3), 409–431.
- Lam, N. T. (2025). *An Investigation on the Application of Wordwall to Promote Learner Autonomy in EFL Classes at a University*. 16(1), 159–177.
- Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*, 23(2), 175–181.
- Nation, I. S. (2022). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge university press.
- Permata, E. (2022). *Investigating The Learning of Incidental Vocabulary Through Animation Movie*. 3, 1–9.
- Purwaningrum, Y., & Yusuf, F. N. (2020). *Investigating digitized authentic materials : Pre-service teachers' voice*. 5(2), 225–239.
- Rachmawati, D., Akbaria, A., Putri, A., & Wijayanti, M. A. (2023). *Journal of Linguistics, Literacy, and Pedagogy*. 2(1), 35–51.
- Talok, D., Erom, K., Djehatu, M. G., Panis, I. C., Timur, N. T., & Author, C. (2023). *Journal of Communication in Education: Metacognitive Learning Strategies for EFL Autonomous Learning*. 7(1), 1–13.
- Wallen, N. E. ., & Fraenkel, J. R. . (2013). *Introduction to Educational Research*. 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410601001-2>