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Animated Films as a Tool for Vocabulary Acquisition in Vocational Education

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Abstract: Vocabulary mastery is a crucial aspect of language learning, but it poses a challenge for vocational high school (SMK) students due to limited learning media. Previous studies have mostly used non-animated films as learning media, while animated films are still rarely explored. This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of using animated films as a vocabulary learning medium. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method, involving 20 participants from Grade X at SMK Al-Huda Turalak. Data collection techniques include observation and semi-structured interviews. The results of the study indicate that animated films can increase students' interest, engagement, and confidence in learning and using new vocabulary directly. Students can understand and remember new vocabulary through animated films, which are visual and contextual in nature and have proven to be effective. Therefore, animated films can be an attractive and effective alternative learning medium in the context of vocational schools.

Keywords: animated films; English vocabulary; language learning; vocational education; learning media.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning plays a crucial role in second language acquisition, particularly for Indonesian students learning English as a foreign language. Without adequate vocabulary knowledge, students face difficulties in expressing ideas, understanding messages, and engaging in effective communication. Even strong grammar skills cannot compensate for limited vocabulary. As noted by Nation and Waring (2019), vocabulary forms the foundation of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Similarly, Richards and Renandya (2002) emphasize that vocabulary is not merely a component of language but the core of communicative competence that supports all these skills. For students in vocational schools,

possessing practical communication tools is essential to support their future careers. This aligns with Alqahtani (2015) who views that vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in enabling learners to function effectively in real-world interactions.

Despite its importance, vocational high school students in Indonesia encounter significant challenges in acquiring English vocabulary. Teaching practices in many schools still rely on memorization and teacher-centered methods, often reducing student motivation and creating passive classroom environments. Field observations at SMK Al-Huda Turalak revealed that vocabulary instruction primarily involves writing words on the blackboard, with minimal use of audiovisual materials. Aisyah et al. (n.d.) observe that such instructional approaches fail to engage students, mainly due to the lack of contextual learning and technological integration. Additionally, limited access to smartphones and digital tools further hinders students' ability to use and retain new vocabulary effectively.

To address these challenges, the integration of animation as a learning medium offers a promising alternative. Animated films combine visual and auditory elements to create rich contextual support for vocabulary learning. Canning-Wilson & Wallace (2000) argue that the multimodal nature of video content enhances vocabulary acquisition through simultaneous visual and auditory input. Rather than relying on mechanical memorization, animated films foster meaningful learning through storylines, character interactions, and symbolic representations. Ismaili (2013) supports this by showing that exposure to animated videos improves learner motivation and vocabulary retention among EFL students.

Although the use of films in language learning is well-established, existing research tends to focus on live-action films and documentaries, with limited attention to animated media. In fact, animated films offer specific advantages for beginner and intermediate learners due to their simplified language and strong visual narratives. Kusnierek (2015) notes that this combination makes animated films particularly suitable for vocabulary instruction. The use of Same Language Subtitles (SLS), which synchronizes audio and text, has also proven effective in enhancing lexical retention. Dzulfahmi and Nikmah (2020) found that SLS helps students associate sounds with spelling, thereby improving word recognition and retention.

In addition to subtitles, animated films typically feature synchronized visual storytelling, gestures, and sound effects, which reinforce vocabulary through contextual cues. This multimodal exposure not only enhances learner engagement but also reduces cognitive load when processing new terms. These findings align with Winke et al. (2010), who demonstrated that captions support listening comprehension and vocabulary learning by drawing learners' attention to word forms. Teng (2019) adds that using advance organizers and subtitles helps learners focus and process vocabulary more effectively.

Vocational students have distinct learning characteristics compared to those in academic tracks. They benefit from engaging and practical learning materials that connect classroom knowledge with real-life applications. This emotional connection is particularly important for students with low intrinsic motivation. Richards and Renandya (2002) highlight the importance of motivation in task-based learning environments, which is critical for achieving positive learning outcomes in vocational settings.

Despite the potential benefits, there remains a lack of research on the use of animated films in vocational education, especially from a qualitative perspective. Most existing studies rely on quantitative measures such as test scores, often overlooking learners' emotional responses and learning experiences. Therefore, this study aims not only to examine the impact of animated films on vocabulary learning but also to explore students' perceptions and engagement during the learning process to address this research gap.

The objective of this research is to investigate how animated films support vocabulary acquisition in English classes and to analyze students' responses to this medium. This study was conducted in the context of vocational high schools, where multimedia resources are typically limited. Through classroom observation and interviews, the research offers a comprehensive

understanding of how animated films can improve vocabulary instruction and make language learning more effective and enjoyable. Furthermore, this study contributes to expanding the literature on media-assisted vocabulary learning in vocational education.

While previous research has explored the use of video in EFL settings, few have focused on the integration of animated narratives, learner motivation, and vocabulary internalization in low-resource environments. This research addresses that gap and highlights how pedagogical innovation is possible even in under-resourced schools through the strategic use of appropriate digital content. Ultimately, this study seeks to offer practical guidance for educators exploring alternative and impactful learning media. Given that animated films are often accessible and easy to implement with minimal technological support, they present a viable solution for schools with limited resources. More importantly, aligning instructional media with students' interests and cognitive preferences can foster a more inclusive and responsive learning environment—enhancing both vocabulary mastery and overall language confidence.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative descriptive approach to thoroughly explain the use of animated film media in English vocabulary learning at the vocational high school (SMK) level and to examine students' perceptions of their learning process. This approach was appropriate because the research aimed to provide detailed descriptions of real-world educational practices without manipulating variables. As Creswell (2009) states, qualitative descriptive research focuses on portraying how individuals experience a particular phenomenon in its natural setting.

This method enabled the researcher to directly observe the learning process, including student participation, responses, and experiences during learning activities. It also allowed for a deeper exploration of students' reactions through observation and interviews, in line with Tisdell et al. (2025), who describe this process as one that values participants' lived experiences and personal perspectives. The research was conducted at a vocational school located in Ciamis Regency, West Java. The participants were 20 students from the 10th-grade *Manajemen Perkantoran dan Layanan Bisnis (MPLB)* class. These participants were selected based on their active involvement in learning English through animated films. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the selected students had meaningful experiences with the learning media, following Patton (2015) recommendation that qualitative research should focus on information-rich cases that offer deep insights. Data collection was conducted using two primary techniques: direct observation and semi-structured interviews, both of which are considered essential tools in qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997).

The instruments were used to collect the data such as observation and semi-structured interview. The observation sheet was designed to record student behavior during the vocabulary learning process using animated films. According to Gay et al. (1976), systematic observation is useful for identifying behavioral patterns in classroom interactions. The observation focused on student engagement, verbal responses to the material, attention during film viewing, and participation in group discussions. Observations were conducted directly in the classroom using a structured checklist format that captured student behaviors in alignment with the learning objectives. To supplement the observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students based on their levels of engagement. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) explain that semi-structured interviews enable guided yet open-ended discussions that uncover detailed individual experiences. The interview guide included questions designed to explore vocabulary comprehension, students' perspectives on animated films as learning aids, and their personal experiences throughout the learning activities. This technique provided in-depth qualitative data on both the process and the impact of the learning approach on students' language development.

The animated short film *Taking Flight* was selected as the primary teaching material due to its short duration (5–6 minutes), simple yet meaningful storyline, and language that matched the students' proficiency level. The film's visual storytelling and clear dialogue supported comprehension, aligning with multimedia learning principles that stress the importance of meaningful interaction between verbal and visual elements.

The researcher also ensured that the learning environment remained structured and supportive throughout the activities. Consistent classroom routines, clear instructional guidance, and the teacher's scaffolding played essential roles in maintaining student focus and participation. The selection of the animated film, accompanying vocabulary list, and post-viewing tasks were all carefully adjusted to the students' abilities to prevent cognitive overload. By managing the learning environment effectively, the researcher was able to optimize the educational potential of the animated media and foster a positive atmosphere that encouraged engagement and curiosity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate students' vocabulary development through the use of animated films. The data were obtained through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. An observation sheet was used as the primary instrument during the teaching sessions. The participants consisted of 20 tenth-grade students from the MPLB class at a vocational high school. We present the findings in two main parts: the classroom implementation process and the students' perceptions based on interviews.

Classroom Observation: The Process of Using Animated Films to Support Vocabulary Learning

The vocabulary learning activities involving animated films were implemented in three structured stages: pre-viewing vocabulary introduction, film screening, and post-viewing group tasks. During the first stage, approximately 10–12 target words were introduced using PowerPoint slides with visual aids, pronunciation modelling, and example sentences. The integration of images and verbal explanations aligns with Clark and Mayer (2023) findings, which emphasize that multimodal input enhances vocabulary comprehension, particularly for low-proficiency learners.

Several spontaneous classroom interactions were observed, indicating active student engagement. For instance, when the word *explore* was displayed, a student inquired, "*Does that mean to go for a walk, Miss?*" This question demonstrated an effort to infer meaning based on prior knowledge and context. The teacher responded with contextual explanations and additional examples, supporting students' understanding of semantic nuances.

The class then watched the animated short film *Taking Flight*. The first screening, shown with Indonesian subtitles, aimed to support overall comprehension of the storyline. The second viewing used English subtitles to reinforce vocabulary recognition. Students were instructed to note as many English words as they recognized. Observations showed that most students recorded between 30 and 35 words, while some listed up to 45. Frequently noted words included *adventure*, *cloud*, *grandpa*, *sky*, and *journey*. This dual-subtitle method aligns with Peters and Webb (2018), who argued that repeated exposure through audio-visual input enhances vocabulary retention.

Brief peer interactions also emerged organically during the viewing. For example, one student whispered to a classmate, *“What does journey mean? Is it like a trip?”* This interaction led to a clarification from the teacher, who explained the subtle difference: a journey usually refers to a longer experience-focused travel, whereas a trip is often shorter and goal-oriented. This exchange reflects what S. D. Krashen (1985) termed comprehensible input, where learners encounter slightly above-level language within contextual support.

After viewing, students participated in group-based vocabulary categorization and sentence construction tasks. These collaborative discussions were lively and inclusive. Even students with lower English proficiency actively contributed, indicating a supportive classroom climate. The learning environment fostered interactive engagement consistent with Vygotsky and Cole (1978) sociocultural theory, which highlights the significance of social interaction and scaffolding in language development.

Additionally, the researcher noted that animated films contributed to a more stimulating and student-centred atmosphere. Students who were usually passive displayed increased interest when engaging with visual media. Their active responses during question-and-answer sessions and peer discussions suggest that the use of media aligned with their interests positively impacted their learning motivation. This finding supports Teng (2019) research, which found that multimedia input, particularly animated visuals, enhances learner involvement and vocabulary retention without increasing cognitive load.

Furthermore, the integration of animated films encouraged spontaneous peer-to-peer learning. Confident students often explained unfamiliar words to classmates, creating micro-scaffolding moments that reinforced understanding. These informal interactions exemplified peer support and contributed to a collaborative culture. Such experiences help lower learners' anxiety and foster a secure environment conducive to language experimentation, an essential condition for language development, especially among students with lower confidence or proficiency.

Student Interviews: Perceptions of Animated Films in Vocabulary Learning

To complement the observational data and explore student experiences further, interviews were conducted with four selected students. Three key themes emerged: enjoyment and engagement, ease of remembering vocabulary, and increased confidence in vocabulary use.

Perceptions of Enjoyment and Engagement

Students viewed learning with animated films as more engaging and less stressful than conventional methods. S2 shared: *“I like learning vocabulary from animated films because it is more fun than learning from books. Therefore, I am more motivated.”* Another student, S3, added: *“Learning through animated films is fun and not boring, Miss. Because the way of communication is interactive and suits my learning style.”* These responses highlight how animated films create a supportive emotional atmosphere that sustains attention and motivation, factors considered essential in second language acquisition. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) positive emotional engagement and learner autonomy are key contributors to sustained language learning motivation.

Ease of Remembering Vocabulary through Visual Support

Students also recognized the effectiveness of visual context in helping them remember new words. As S4 described:

“When I watched the movie Taking Flight last week, there were words like ‘imagination,’ ‘jungle,’ and ‘space’ that kept appearing. Because I saw directly how the character spoke and the situation, I can really picture the meaning, and I still remember it until now.”

S2 echoed a similar view: *“Animated films help me remember new words because there are visuals and stories that support them, although I sometimes still forget if I don’t repeat them often.”* These reflections support Paivio (1990a) Dual Coding Theory, which posits that information processed through both verbal and visual channels enhances memory and comprehension. This is also in line with findings from Sadoski and Paivio (2013), who emphasize that concrete visuals in narratives significantly aid retention for language learners.

Increased Confidence in Using Vocabulary

The final theme observed was an increase in students’ self-confidence in using newly learned vocabulary. S3 remarked: *“Because I heard and saw it directly in the movie, I feel confident using that new vocabulary. So, I feel ready to use it in conversation.”* Meanwhile, S4 expressed: *“I am very confident. Because I often hear that phrase in movies, I feel, ‘Oh, this is really used in everyday life.’ Therefore, when speaking or writing, I no longer hesitate to use it.”* Even students with lower proficiency, such as S1, showed gradual improvement: *“Yes, Miss, I often hear that word in movies, so I feel more confident, but sometimes I still hesitate to use it myself.”* This feedback is consistent with Schmitt (2010) theory of vocabulary acquisition, which highlights repeated and contextualized input as critical to developing productive vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the emotional safety provided by narrative media, as proposed by S. D. Krashen (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, allows learners to take risks in language use.

In addition to these themes, interview data revealed that animated films helped students relate vocabulary to visual scenes, enhancing comprehension and internalization. Some students indicated that certain scenes were memorable due to emotional or humorous elements, making specific words easier to recall even days after viewing. Words such as cloud, journey, and grandpa were repeatedly cited as examples of vocabulary that were both seen and emotionally processed.

A cross-analysis of the classroom observations and interview transcripts confirmed that animated films support vocabulary acquisition in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways. First, they provide rich linguistic input embedded within meaningful and multimodal contexts. Vocabulary is not presented in isolation but rather situated in narrative, gesture, visual cues, and situational dialogue. This contextual richness helps students not only to remember vocabulary more effectively but also to understand how and when to use it appropriately. For instance, expressions such as “don’t give up” or “let’s explore” were better internalized due to their frequent repetition in emotionally charged scenes.

Animated films generate emotional engagement, which plays a key role in sustaining attention and motivation during language learning. As students reported during interviews, they felt more connected to the characters, and this emotional resonance made it easier for them to recall new words. Emotional memory, as suggested by Paivio’s dual coding theory, reinforces

cognitive processing through both verbal and non-verbal channels. In the classroom, students laughed at jokes, reacted to surprises, and expressed empathy for characters, all of which contributed to a richer learning environment. Observations noted an increase in student alertness and verbal participation compared to lessons without multimedia elements.

Animated films promote peer collaboration through discussion and group-based tasks. After watching the films, students were assigned to collaborative activities such as vocabulary games, sentence construction, and short storytelling using the newly learned words. These group tasks created opportunities for social interaction where students negotiated meanings, corrected each other's usage, and supported lower-proficiency peers. This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning is socially mediated. The presence of more capable peers in groups functioned as a scaffold for others, especially during post-viewing reflection and vocabulary exercises.

Animated films provide natural scaffolding opportunities, both from the teacher and through peer dynamics. Teachers were able to pause scenes, replay specific vocabulary use, and elicit comprehension questions. This guided processing helped students to focus on target language features and apply them in context. Students benefited from repeated exposure to key vocabulary, especially when it was accompanied by visuals and reinforced during classroom activities. The ability to manipulate the pacing of input (pause, rewind, slow motion) was particularly effective for less proficient learners.

Importantly, students' ability to internalize vocabulary varied based on their language proficiency levels. Higher-proficiency students tended to use new words more confidently and accurately in sentence construction tasks, while lower-proficiency students showed marked improvement in receptive skills such as recognizing word forms, identifying synonyms, and understanding meaning from context. This was clearly evident in post-viewing group tasks. For example, in a task where students had to retell parts of the story using key vocabulary, all four observed students attempted to contribute. Even Student S2, who initially displayed a medium level of vocabulary mastery, was able to use words such as "scared," "help," and "go outside" correctly with the help of peers.

These interactions demonstrate how social constructivist principles operate in language learning. The collaborative negotiation of meaning helped enhance comprehension and build confidence in learners who were previously passive or hesitant. Students who had been reluctant to speak during teacher-led instruction became more vocal during group discussions, often asking clarification questions, suggesting word alternatives, or helping with sentence formulation. This shift indicates increased language awareness and self-efficacy, which are crucial components of long-term language development.

From a pedagogical standpoint, animated films served to bridge the gap between abstract vocabulary and real-world language use. Students often struggle with words that have subtle or figurative meanings, such as "imagination," "challenge," or "friendship." In the films, these abstract terms were grounded in visual representation and contextual actions, making them easier to understand and remember. Students were able to explain the meaning of these words not just

through dictionary definitions but by referring to events or characters in the film. This level of comprehension goes beyond rote memorization and demonstrates deeper cognitive processing.

Despite these numerous benefits, several challenges were identified throughout the implementation. One key issue was the gap between receptive vocabulary (what students can understand) and productive vocabulary (what students can use). Not all students could immediately convert newly acquired words into accurate sentence production. This was particularly noticeable among students with lower proficiency, who often resorted to L1 when unable to construct sentences in English. As such, it is essential for teachers to design post-viewing activities that reinforce active vocabulary application. For instance, sentence frame exercises or guided speaking prompts can help students move from recognition to use.

Additionally, technological limitations in the classroom posed logistical constraints. While the selected animated films were effective, they required adjustments due to limited access to projectors, poor speaker quality, or inconsistent power supply. Nevertheless, the structured implementation, which included pre-teaching key vocabulary, using printed visual aids, and guiding students through follow-up tasks, allowed the learning objectives to be met even in low-resource environments. These adaptations underscore the importance of flexible instructional design in vocational settings.

In summary, the integration of animated films into English vocabulary instruction at the vocational school level proved effective in enhancing student engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and language confidence. These findings are consistent with Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning, Paivio's dual coding theory, and Sweller's cognitive load theory. Animated films provided dual-channel input, reducing extraneous cognitive load and enhancing retention. Furthermore, the inclusion of collaborative activities supported by sociocultural learning principles (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) ensured that learning was not only individual but also socially constructed.

The approach demonstrated a high level of inclusivity, as students with varying levels of proficiency were able to participate and benefit. It was also shown to be practical, even in settings with minimal technological infrastructure. The pedagogical implications are significant: animated films can be a valuable supplement to traditional vocabulary instruction, especially when integrated into a structured, learner-centred approach that emphasizes interaction and meaning-making.

This study not only affirms the pedagogical potential of animated films in supporting vocabulary development but also highlights the need for thoughtful instructional design. Teachers should provide structured input, scaffolding practice, and reflective tasks that encourage students to transition from passive reception to active language use. Future implementations should consider including vocabulary notebooks, student self-assessment tools, and periodic formative assessments to monitor progress. Moreover, repeated exposure to vocabulary across multiple films and contexts can further solidify retention and facilitate long-term language development.

CONCLUSION

Another significant insight from this study is how animated films accommodate diverse learning styles. Students with visual and auditory preferences benefit from the dual channels of animation and sound, while kinesthetic learners show greater engagement due to the dynamic content and collaborative tasks. These activities, such as vocabulary sorting and sentence building, allow learners to process and apply new vocabulary actively, strengthening both retention and confidence in various contexts. This suggests that combining animated films with structured follow-up tasks creates a holistic learning experience suited to diverse student needs.

The study further demonstrates that animated films enhance vocabulary instruction by improving comprehension and motivation among vocational students. Nation (2022) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge underpins language proficiency, especially when learners encounter meaningful input. Animated films deliver such input through visual narratives and contextual language, supporting Clark and Mayer (2023) who argue that multimedia enhances retention through dual input channels. Learners not only access authentic vocabulary but also understand it within context-rich settings.

Classroom observations and interviews indicated increased attentiveness and learner confidence. These results align with Paivio, 1990b) dual coding theory, which suggests that combining images and words improves recall (Mayer, 2005) also supports this through the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, arguing that dual input reduces extraneous load and facilitates vocabulary processing. Additionally, S. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis explains how emotionally engaging content like films reduces anxiety, making learners more receptive to language input.

Based on these findings, teachers are encouraged to use animated films systematically within vocabulary instruction. Pre-teaching key vocabulary, providing bilingual glossaries, and using prediction tasks can support comprehension. Post-viewing activities such as scene-based quizzes, group discussions, and sentence creation promote application and critical thinking. These strategies integrate both receptive and productive vocabulary skills in meaningful ways. Moreover, animated films situate vocabulary in context, aiding comprehension through visual cues and narrative flow. This supports Nation (2022) who highlights the value of high-frequency, meaningful input. According to Clark and Mayer (2023), dual-channel learning in multimedia settings improves memory retention. For vocational students, who often face challenges with conventional instruction, animated films offer an accessible and engaging alternative.

However, the study has limitations, including a small sample size and data restricted to a single school, which limits generalizability. While qualitative data offered valuable insights, the lack of quantitative vocabulary assessments weakens the strength of the conclusions. Sweller's (1988) Cognitive load theory could inform future research that incorporates structured testing to measure vocabulary development over time.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that animated films, when integrated into vocabulary-focused instruction, effectively support vocabulary acquisition in vocational education. Their multimodal content, emotional appeal, and contextual richness engage students meaningfully. As Schmitt (2010) notes, repeated and meaningful exposure is key to vocabulary learning something animated films consistently provide. The use of collaborative tasks further strengthens learner autonomy and communicative competence. Future research could examine the long-term effects of animated film use through mixed methods and broader samples. Comparative studies with

non-animated media and investigations into film genres or cultural content may offer further insight into optimizing multimedia instruction for diverse learner needs.

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