

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING VOCABULARY FROM CARTOON FILM: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

This study investigates the methods used by students to understand and remember new language through the use of animated films. Cartoons are becoming increasingly popular as an acceptable and engaging language-learning tool, making them a compelling setting for vocabulary development. Cartoons create a multimodal environment that facilitates contextual learning by combining narrative, visual, and aural components. This research studied the experiences of three college students who frequently watch cartoons to enhance their English vocabulary using a qualitative approach and narrative inquiry design. In-depth interviews were used to gather data, which was then subjected to thematic analysis. According to the research, cartoons help students expand their vocabulary by providing emotionally charged situations, visual clues, character interactions, gestures, and tone of voice, all of which improve understanding and memory. A variety of techniques were described by the participants, including taking notes, watching with subtitles, repeating phrases, utilizing vocabulary applications, and identifying terms in everyday contexts. Cartoons were chosen because of their comprehensibility, visual attractiveness, and engaging content, all of which increased students' motivation and decreased their apprehension. According to the study's findings, cartoons are a fun and helpful tool for promoting independent learning and vocabulary acquisition. Repetition, emotional involvement, and multimodal input were found to be essential components that improve learning motivation and vocabulary retention.

Keywords: Audiovisual Media; Cartoons; Learning Strategies; Vocabulary Learning.

INTRODUCTION

A key component of language learning, vocabulary has a profound impact on students' ability to communicate clearly and comprehend texts effectively. The four main language skills, speaking, listening, reading, and writing, are all supported in their development (Jiang, 2020). Reading comprehension and general language skills are strongly correlated with vocabulary knowledge (Ghalebi et al., 2021). Views of vocabulary learning have evolved, shifting from behaviorist perspectives that prioritize reward and repetition. According Trota et al. (2022) to constructivist and cognitive approaches. Gaining metacognitive abilities helps learners comprehend when and how to use new words in suitable situations (Özcurkudis & Bümen, 2021).

Language learning has evolved in response to the development of digital technology, which has made new resources, such as animated movies and cartoons, available that support multimodal learning. Cartoons offer a captivating medium for learning contextual vocabulary by combining visual, aural, and narrative components. They enhance understanding and retention by helping students make connections between words and characters, gestures, emotions, and dialogues (Teng & Zhang, 2023). Cartoons and animated films are examples of educational media that are successful in reducing stress and increasing learners' motivation and self-esteem (Puspitasari et al., 2024; Suprpto et al., 2024). Additionally, by allowing students to watch repeatedly, take notes, and interact with subtitles, all of which aid in vocabulary development, cartoons facilitate independent learning.

Although a lot of earlier research has looked into how audiovisual media affects learning vocabulary, most of these studies have relied on quantitative techniques like tests and surveys. The way that students interact with cartoons in their daily lives and how their vocabulary grows through repeated, incidental exposure are frequently overlooked by these methods. Understanding learners' lived, personal experiences is still lacking, especially concerning how they naturally acquire language and how they engage with cartoon content over time. Unlike test-based research, this study uses narrative inquiry to capture the richness and depth of learners' strategies and perspectives in authentic learning environments.

To better understand the lived experiences of college students who regularly watched English cartoon films during their university years, this study will explore their experiences. It explores how they expanded their vocabulary through cartoons, as well as the methods they used to comprehend and retain new terms. The accidental expansion of lexical information through exposure is referred to here as vocabulary development, and the consciously employed methods that students use to support this expansion are known as vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000; Cohen, 2014). The study sheds light on these two aspects, showing how cartoons serve as valuable resources for vocabulary learning in addition to being entertaining media. The following questions guide the research: (1) How did the students develop their English vocabulary through cartoons? and (2) What vocabulary learning strategies did the students use to understand the meanings and uses of vocabulary?

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Learning vocabulary is an essential part of learning a second language, and it involves cognitive, emotional, and strategic processes in addition to exposure. Learner factors that affect vocabulary retention include self-regulation, phonological memory, and individual learning styles (Atkins et al., 1998; Service & Kohonen, 1995). While visual media, such as cartoons, support learning through collocations, contextualization, and multimodal elements (Channell, 1981; Puspitasari et al., 2024; Ridha et al., 2022). Intentional learning involves learners strategically engaging with new words through context, repetition, and meaningful connections (Elgort, 2011).

As audiovisual materials, cartoons produce multimodal settings that encourage vocabulary learning through narrative, sound, visual clues, and emotional resonance. Cartoons are characterized as simplified, symbolic representations, Pickering (1982) that provide language in an engaging and contextualized manner to enhance comprehension and recall (Keogh et al., 1998; Suprpto et al., 2024). Self-regulated learning theory, which encompasses metacognitive control, motivation maintenance, and reflection, is consistent with strategies used when watching cartoons, such as guessing word meanings, rewatching sequences, using subtitles, and taking notes (Tseng et al., 2006). According to Tseng et al. (2006), learners naturally employ these approaches depending on convenience and interest, developing habits that enhance emotional involvement and autonomy. According to Chang, (1993) and Dalacosta et al. (2009), the emotional tone, movements, and expressions of animated characters improve memory, increase input value, and reduce affective filters.

Empirical studies support the effectiveness of cartoons for vocabulary learning. Research indicates that animated content, as opposed to conventional teaching techniques, enhances motivation and language understanding (Adinda et al., 2024; Arikan & Taraf, 2010). Additionally, according to Ridgeway et al. (1985) and Alaba (2007), cartoons foster creativity, emotional literacy, and conceptualization. Although a large number of earlier studies employed experimental or quantitative designs, they often overlooked the contextual and individual experiences of students. To close that gap, this study employs a narrative inquiry methodology to investigate how students interact with cartoons to enhance their vocabulary. This study aims to understand how cartoons

facilitate vocabulary learning through learners' lived experiences, drawing on cognitive and cartoon concepts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry method to investigate how students personally watched cartoon films to learn English vocabulary. Researchers can study how people use storytelling to make sense of their learning experiences by using narrative inquiry, which has its roots in the interpretative traditions of Ricoeur (2005) and Merleau-Ponty (1961). The narrative technique enabled a deep, contextual understanding of how learners perceive, approach, and feel about language acquisition through visual media.

Through the use of purposive sampling, participants were selected via a Google Form distributed to members of the Pare English language community and English language learners at a Malang institution. Out of the 14 responders, three were selected based on their ability to express their experiences and the frequency with which they used cartoons to learn new words. Among the participants were Sisy, a 22-year-old student of English education who took notes and used repetition; Riffa, a 21-year-old student of English literature who created a customized vocabulary bank; and Iqis, a 23-year-old graduate in hospital administration who used cartoons every day to learn. These study participants contributed a variety of viewpoints and approaches.

Semi-structured interviews in Bahasa Indonesia were conducted to ensure comfort and clarity of expression. The interview questions were modified from Coryell et al. (2010, as cited in Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2013) and supplemented with items created by the researcher that focus on vocabulary acquisition through cartoons. The length of each participant's single interview ranged from 15 to 26 minutes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase paradigm was adhered to in the thematic analysis. By providing participants with transcripts and initial interpretations, the study used member checking to ensure reliability and enable them to verify the accuracy of the data and the themes identified.

FINDINGS

By offering rich, contextual responses through multimodal elements, specifically visual, aural, and gestural cues, cartoons, according to the participants, significantly improved their vocabulary acquisition. They explained how and that they were able to instinctively deduce the meaning of unknown words from gestures, voice intonation, and facial expressions. One participant clarified that, even in cases when the words were first unfamiliar, watching the characters' actions helped them understand what they meant.

Cartoons also provided an emotionally compelling setting, with relevant situations, humor, and storyline elements that helped viewers remember the language. Participants underlined that vocabulary learnt through hilarious or emotive events was easier to remember than vocabulary learned through traditional classroom instruction. Participants used cognitive, metacognitive, and social techniques to manage and retain new terminology. Taking notes, either in paper notebooks or on digital applications, and repeating things out loud or rewatching situations were standard cognitive methods.

In addition, metacognitive techniques such as organizing vocabulary learning through word classification or creating personal dictionaries have surfaced. Mobile apps and self-recorded pronunciation drills were among the self-regulation methods adopted by some participants. Participants who viewed interaction as a collaborative and inspiring way to learn demonstrated social skills by engaging in conversations with peers who shared similar interests. According to these results, watching cartoons can help people learn vocabulary intentionally and informally.

DISCUSSIONS

Cartoons offer a rich, contextual setting for vocabulary learning, according to the study. Compared to established techniques, participants reported that humor, emotional connection, and visual narrative made the terminology more memorable. The findings of Singer (2022) and Aziz et al. (2021), which suggest that emotionally and visually rich content improves retention, are supported by this. According to Alqahtani (2015), the multimodality of cartoons, which combines images, dialogue, gestures, and sounds, makes it easier to learn new words by providing context clues. Cartoons are also known to increase students' motivation and reduce their anxiety levels when learning a language. Regina & Rajasekaran (2024) stressed that engaging input promotes active participation. This aligns with Mayer's (2009) theory of multimedia learning, which posits that when spoken and visual information are combined in emotionally compelling settings, meaningful learning occurs. The participants' regular cartoon-watching habits reinforced incidental vocabulary learning by exposing them to English in a natural setting. These results support the findings of Larasati et al. (2025), who note that regular exposure to multimedia promotes long-term vocabulary expansion.

Additionally, students utilized dictionaries, reread scenes, or halted cartoons to write new word strategies that showed both immediate and reflective thinking. These approaches align with those of Ayar & Kızıltan (2020) and Alnan & Halim (2024), who emphasize the importance of self-control and metacognitive awareness in vocabulary learning. Additionally, participants used messaging platforms to reinforce their memory and rehearse pronunciation, which aligns with Moss et al. (2023) results on the role of learner agency in behavioral learning and Cohen (2014) language strategy framework. Participants described plans to use voice recordings, change subtitles, and try sleep-based listening as part of their future learning. These techniques demonstrate students' active engagement in vocabulary processing and reinforcement, corroborating Schmitt's (2008) assertions regarding the application of vocabulary strategies. According to Gallo et al. (2025) and Muryani & Yunus (2024), these forward-looking techniques show significant learner autonomy and self-directed learning. The combination of technology and the development of individual habits demonstrates how cartoons may be used as regular, structured vocabulary-building exercises. This study highlights casual, learner-driven situations as effective places for vocabulary development, in contrast to earlier studies that primarily focused on organized classroom applications of multimedia (e.g., Alemi & Lari, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the methods university students employed to expand their vocabulary in English while watching cartoons. The results showed that cartoons offered valuable information through humor, emotional context, sound, and images. According to the participants, these characteristics made terminology more straightforward to use, comprehend, and recall. They frequently guessed word meanings using gestures, aural cues, and context clues, then verified their guesses using dictionaries or internet resources.

Students employed a range of strategies, including taking notes, repeating information, self-evaluation, and incorporating vocabulary into everyday speech. Comedy cartoons were preferred because they improved motivation and helped people feel less stressed. Additionally, some participants employed innovative strategies, including digital vocabulary organization, accent imitation, and learning through short-form content on websites like YouTube or TikTok. These results demonstrate how contemporary students combine tailored learning techniques with entertainment.

In light of these findings, educators are advised to incorporate cartoons into their lessons to enhance vocabulary instruction and learning. Engagement-boosting techniques include assigning vocabulary diaries, reenacting scenarios, and utilizing subtitles. To reinforce learning, learners should utilize digital resources, employ pause-and-note strategies, and receive repeated exposure to the material.

To investigate the broader applications of multimedia in language learning, future researchers are encouraged to employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, enhance participant diversity, and compare cartoons with other media.

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