

Exploring Students' Perceptions and Learning Experiences in Vocational English Listening Through English Subtitled Anime Films

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe students' learning experiences, identify perceived benefits, and examine perceived difficulties when listening activities are conducted using English-subtitled anime films. Employing a qualitative descriptive design integrated within an instructional evaluation at SMK Negeri 1 Batam, data were gathered from eleventh-grade vocational students through an open-ended questionnaire. The thematic findings indicate that utilizing English-subtitled anime transformed conventional listening instruction into an engaging, interactive, and low-anxiety learning experience. Students perceived significant benefits, primarily regarding phonological-orthographic scaffolding, which bridged spoken audio with written text and supported contextual vocabulary enhancement. However, students also reported operational difficulties, such as handling high speech velocity, dealing with unfamiliar terminology, and managing visual attention-splitting between action and text. The study suggests that target-language subtitled anime functions as a useful pedagogical scaffold that helps convert passive media consumption into active target-language processing in vocational English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) instruction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For students in Vocational High Schools (SMK), mastering English listening skills is tightly linked to English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), preparing them to meet the communication standards demanded by modern industries (Dunia Usaha dan Dunia Industri / DUDI). Scholars like Vandergrift and Goh [12] emphasize that successful listening is not a passive activity; rather, it requires students to actively construct meaning by synthesizing linguistic cues, situational context, and prior knowledge. Simultaneously, Field [6] argues that effective listening necessitates a delicate balance between bottom-up and top-down processing a challenging feat when navigating the rapid, complex nature of natural speech [4].

Despite its critical role in career readiness, listening remains a persistent challenge for students at SMK Negeri 1 Batam. Preliminary observations and discussions with English educators reveal a recurring pattern: while many students perform adequately in reading or grammar, they often struggle significantly when attempting to comprehend spoken English. Standard audio materials frequently fail to sustain student attention, as deciphering unfamiliar vocabulary purely through auditory channels often proves to be an uphill battle. Consequently, classrooms require more robust instructional support to foster genuine engagement and deeper comprehension.

To address these challenges, this study implements an audiovisual strategy utilizing Dr. Stone anime films. Unlike traditional audio drills or static songs, anime offers a vibrant fusion of expressive characters, rich visual storytelling, and compelling narratives. Recent literature underscores that such animated media not only accelerates vocabulary acquisition but also reinvigorates classroom participation [2], [8]. Furthermore, narrative-driven videos sustain attention more effectively than isolated audio clips by anchoring spoken dialogue within a continuous visual context.

Grounded in Dual Coding Theory [9], [10], the use of English subtitles enables learners to engage two sensory channels simultaneously, effectively bridging what they hear with written text. This dual-input approach facilitates faster word recognition and smooths out the complexities of language processing. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that subtitle-assisted media is an effective tool for helping learners map sounds to orthography, identify unfamiliar terms, and verify their comprehension against spoken audio [1], [5], [7].

While previous studies have firmly established the efficacy of target-language captions in general EFL settings [1], [5], [7], the operationalization of subtitled media within vocational secondary education remains insufficiently understood. Most existing literature focuses primarily on general academic contexts or tertiary learners, leaving a critical gap regarding how vocational high school (SMK) students who require specialized, industry-oriented listening skills interact with multimodal media. Vocational learners constitute a crucial demographic because their communicative training must bridge general English proficiency with practical, technical, and applied problem-solving contexts. In this regard, Dr. Stone serves as an uniquely appropriate pedagogical instrument. The series centers on Senku Ishigami, a scientific prodigy who strives to rebuild human civilization from scratch after a mysterious phenomenon turns humanity to stone. As the characters reconstruct modern technology ranging from glass, soap, and electricity to complex machinery through empirical experimentation, the narrative naturally incorporates scientific terminology, practical problem-solving dialogues, and technical logic. This technical and inventive theme aligns seamlessly with the mindset of vocational students in technical majors, making the linguistic input both intellectually stimulating and contextualized within applied knowledge.

By focusing on this overlooked population and specialized media content, the present study offers a distinct contribution to second language pedagogy. It moves beyond general claims of media engagement to systematically examine how English-subtitled technical anime functions as an instructional scaffold in a vocational setting. Ultimately, this research aims to illuminate the cognitive mechanisms of phonological decoding, map the specific benefits and operational difficulties experienced by vocational learners, and provide empirical evidence on how target-language captions can transform authentic animated media into a powerful catalyst for vocational English listening proficiency.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the detailed learning experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges encountered by students during instructional activities. The inquiry focused on eleventh-grade vocational students at SMK Negeri 1 Batam (totaling 81 participants across comparative intact classes, with a qualitative focus on individual perspectives) selected via cluster sampling. Data were gathered through an online, open-ended questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, incorporating four core prompts designed to capture students' holistic experiences, the perceived benefits of subtitles, personal difficulties, and future

learning intentions. Following the thematic analysis guidelines established by Braun and Clarke [3], the qualitative data were processed through repeated readings, initial code generation, category grouping, theme mapping, and final interpretation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the students' open-ended responses revealed clear, recurring patterns regarding their daily learning experiences, perceived benefits, and the primary obstacles encountered when engaged with English-subtitled anime.

Table 1: Summary of Qualitative Open-Ended Questionnaire Findings

Focus Area / Research Issue	Control Group (Indonesian Sub)	Experimental Group (English Sub)
Overall perception of learning via anime	Fun, entertaining, enjoyable (48.9%); Creative alternative (24.4%)	Engaging, interactive, low anxiety (26.3%); Fun and enjoyable (57.9%)
How subtitles helped comprehension	Plot comprehension & flow (22.2%); Vocabulary enhancement (37.8%)	Plot comprehension (42.1%); Phonological-orthographic bridging (21.1%)
Challenges encountered during tasks	Fast speech (31.1%); Over-reliance / auditory bypass (22.2%)	Fast speech velocity (39.5%); Unfamiliar terminology/slang (44.7%)
Willingness to continue	General positive acceptance (97.8%); Skill improvement focus (40.0%)	General positive acceptance (100.0%); High entertainment value (55.3%)

A closer examination of the qualitative findings, as detailed in Table 1, reveals distinct patterns in how students from both cohorts experienced and interacted with the learning medium. While both groups overwhelmingly welcomed anime into the classroom, their underlying engagement mechanisms diverged. In terms of overall perceptions, the experimental group who worked with English subtitles frequently described an interactive, low-anxiety environment that transformed the activity into an engaging learning space. Conversely, the control group leaned more toward viewing the medium as a form of light entertainment.

Regarding comprehension strategies, a clear functional difference emerged: students relying on Indonesian subtitles focused primarily on following the storyline and incidental vocabulary, whereas those using English subtitles identified "phonological-orthographic bridging" as a crucial tool for linking spoken audio to written text. Naturally, these differences shaped the challenges they encountered. The experimental group wrestled with cognitive demands such as rapid speech velocity and specialized terminology, whereas the control group faced a different kind of barrier an "auditory bypass," where an over-reliance on native translations frequently caused them to tune out the English audio altogether. Despite these distinct hurdles, both groups demonstrated a near-universal willingness to continue using anime for language learning, reflecting a shared appreciation for its dual value as an enjoyable and effective media.

3.1. Students' Overall Learning Experiences

Students in the experimental group reported that the combination of anime storytelling and English subtitles created an immersive, low-anxiety environment that lowered their affective filter. They found that tracking visual context alongside target-language text transformed passive listening into an engaging, manageable process that supported both cognitive processing and emotional engagement.

3.2. Perceived Benefits of English-Subtitled Anime Films

Students in the experimental group frequently highlighted that English subtitles functioned as a vital bridge between auditory and visual input. They reported that synchronizing text with audio helped them identify word boundaries in rapid speech and verify auditory perceptions that might have otherwise been missed. Conversely, students using Indonesian subtitles perceived the primary benefit as effortless plot comprehension, though they noted that this approach offered fewer opportunities to actively develop their English decoding skills.

3.3. Perceived Difficulties Encountered

For the experimental group, challenges were primarily centered around dialogue velocity, the specialized scientific terminology featured in *Dr. Stone*, and the cognitive load required to simultaneously process screen visuals and text. While the control group also struggled with rapid speech, they faced an additional hurdle: an over-reliance on native-language translations. These students frequently admitted to disengaging from the English audio entirely, a phenomenon that led to what can be described as an "auditory bypass."

3.4. Discussion

The qualitative findings suggest that English-subtitled anime may serve as more than just an entertainment medium, functioning as a potential catalyst that encourages vocational students to move beyond passive viewing toward active language processing. The observed feedback regarding phonological-orthographic links is consistent with the principles of Dual Coding Theory [9], [10], indicating that synchronizing visual text with spoken audio can help reduce working memory strain and clarify phonetic boundaries in connected speech. By displaying spoken dialogue simultaneously, English subtitles appear to assist learners in segmenting rapid speech, identifying vocabulary, and verifying uncertain auditory input in real time. Although rapid speech velocity and domain-specific vocabulary presented initial hurdles, students' responses suggest that they may have adapted to the cognitive demands of the material, aligning with cognitive load management principles described by Sweller et al. [11].

Conversely, the contrasting patterns between the two groups highlight the distinct operational roles of target-language and native-language subtitles. While students in the control group reported that Indonesian subtitles facilitated immediate plot comprehension, their responses also revealed a recurring tendency toward an "auditory bypass" unconsciously ignoring the English audio track. This indicates that local-language subtitles might inadvertently impede the development of active listening skills by shifting focus toward reading translation. In contrast, target-language subtitles appear to provide useful structural scaffolding that maintains both visual and auditory engagement with English. Overall, integrating English-subtitled anime into vocational classrooms seems to offer a balanced approach that combines high affective engagement with active cognitive language processing.

4. CONCLUSION

Integrating English-subtitled anime films offers an engaging pedagogical approach that directly supports vocational learners through orthographic scaffolding and contextual vocabulary enrichment. Despite operational challenges like high speech velocity and specialized terminology, target-language captioned media appears to help convert passive viewing into active linguistic effort

while maintaining low listening anxiety. These findings highlight the practical value of authentic animated media as a supplementary tool in English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) instruction. Future research should explore longer-term, longitudinal implementations to examine how overcoming these initial cognitive roadblocks translates into sustained, measurable gains in listening proficiency.

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