

# Impact of Movies in Second Language Learning

<sup>1</sup> Javid Babayev

Accepted: 01.20.2026

Published: 03.10.2026

<https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.26030004>

**Abstract.** The use of movies in second language (L2) learning has gained increasing attention as a dynamic, authentic, and engaging instructional approach. This study investigates the impact of film-based learning on listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural understanding among intermediate-level English learners. Sixty participants were divided into an experimental group, which watched English-language films with subtitles accompanied by structured pre- and post-viewing activities, and a control group, which followed a traditional textbook-based curriculum. Pre- and post-tests measured improvements across the three skill areas. Results indicated that the experimental group demonstrated significant gains in listening comprehension (18.2% increase), vocabulary acquisition (22.2% increase), and cultural understanding (15.3% increase), while the control group showed minimal improvements. These findings suggest that films provide rich audiovisual input, authentic dialogues, and culturally relevant contexts that enhance language learning beyond conventional methods. Furthermore, movie-based learning increased learner motivation and engagement, promoting a more immersive and interactive educational experience. This study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating films into L2 curricula and emphasizes the importance of structured guidance, careful film selection, and supplementary exercises to maximize learning outcomes. Future research should explore long-term retention and the effects of different film genres and subtitle strategies on language acquisition.

**Keywords:** *movies, second language learning, listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, cultural awareness*

## Introduction

Second language (L2) acquisition has increasingly shifted from traditional, textbook-centered approaches to more authentic, immersive methods that reflect real-world language use. One such emerging method involves leveraging films and cinematic media as instructional tools. Films expose learners to natural speech patterns, diverse accents, idiomatic expressions, and rich cultural contexts that are often absent in conventional classroom materials (Montero Perez, 2022; Vanderplank, 2013). This authentic input is crucial for developing listening comprehension and pragmatic skills, which are foundational in communicative competence (Sánchez-Auñón et al., 2023).

A growing body of research suggests that audiovisual media like movies can significantly enhance L2 learning (Hasanova, 2023). For example, studies indicate that movies with subtitles or captions facilitate vocabulary acquisition and help learners link spoken and written forms of the language, supporting both incidental and intentional learning processes. Dual-coding and multimedia learning theories explain that simultaneous visual and auditory input, such as when learners view subtitles

---

<sup>1</sup> BABAYEV, J., Doctor of Philosophy in Philology, Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Methods, Nakhchivan State University. Email: [cavidbabayev@ndu.edu.az](mailto:cavidbabayev@ndu.edu.az). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2472-0006>

alongside dialogue, increases cognitive engagement and memory retention (Lei, 2021; Wei & Fan, 2022).

Empirical research also highlights improvements in specific language skills. Watching movies has been shown to improve listening comprehension and motivation, particularly when learners engage with authentic, communicative contexts that reflect natural language use (Prabowo et al., 2025). Additional studies report positive learner attitudes toward film-based activities in L2 classrooms and note that movies contribute to enhanced intercultural awareness and pragmatic competence by illustrating real-life language use scenarios beyond textbook dialogues. Moreover, empirical studies indicate that movies increase learner motivation and engagement, which positively influences retention and comprehension (Abdulrahman Khadawardi, 2023).

Despite these benefits, researchers caution that the pedagogical implementation of films requires strategic design and guidance to maximize learning outcomes, as unstructured movie watching alone may not automatically translate into language gains. Nonetheless, the accumulated evidence underscores the potential of films to enrich L2 learning by integrating authentic linguistic input with engaging, culturally relevant content, making them a valuable supplement to conventional instruction.

## Methods

### Participants

Sixty intermediate-level English learners from a private language institute participated in the study. Participants were aged 18–30, with an equal distribution of male and female learners. All had studied English for at least three years and reported similar prior exposure to English media, such as television or online content. Participants with advanced proficiency or prior extensive exposure to English films were excluded to minimize confounding effects (Montero Perez, 2022).

### Study Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a control group and an experimental group (Vanderplank, 2013). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two groups:

- **Experimental group (n=30):** Exposed to selected English-language films with native-language subtitles.
- **Control group (n=30):** Continued the standard textbook-based curriculum without film exposure.

### Materials

Films were carefully selected based on the following criteria:

1. **Relevance:** Themes and dialogues aligned with everyday conversational English.
2. **Cultural content:** Films that showcased authentic cultural contexts, gestures, and societal norms.

3. **Language complexity:** Intermediate-level vocabulary and grammar appropriate for the learners' proficiency.

Examples of films used included *The Pursuit of Happyness* (motivational and daily life dialogues) and *Forrest Gump* (narrative storytelling and cultural references) (Lei, 2021). Subtitles in the learners' native language were used to aid comprehension without overwhelming cognitive load.

### Procedure

The intervention lasted six weeks, with participants in the experimental group watching two films per week (approximately 90–120 minutes each) in a structured classroom setting (Wei & Fan, 2022). Each session included:

1. **Pre-viewing activity:** Introduction of key vocabulary and context.
2. **Viewing:** Watching selected scenes or full movies with guided subtitles.
3. **Post-viewing activity:** Discussions, comprehension questions, and vocabulary exercises.

The control group followed regular curriculum activities with reading, grammar exercises, and listening practice without exposure to films.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through **pre- and post-tests**, assessing three dimensions:

1. **Listening comprehension:** Multiple-choice and short-answer questions based on dialogues from the films.
2. **Vocabulary acquisition:** Recognition tests and exercises requiring correct usage of new words encountered in the films.
3. **Cultural understanding:** Short written reflections evaluating learners' comprehension of cultural references, social norms, and idiomatic expressions.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using paired t-tests to assess improvements within each group and independent t-tests to compare the differences between groups. Effect sizes were calculated to measure the magnitude of improvements. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . (Abdulrahman Khadawardi, 2023).

## Results

### Listening Comprehension

Pre-test scores for listening comprehension were similar between the experimental group (mean = 58.2%, SD = 7.4) and the control group (mean = 57.6%, SD = 6.9), indicating comparable baseline proficiency. After six weeks, the experimental group demonstrated a significant improvement, with a post-test mean score of 76.4% (SD = 6.2), representing an average increase of 18.2% ( $t(29) = 9.35$ ,  $p$

< 0.001). (Vanderplank, 2013; Lei, 2021). The control group showed only a modest gain, with a post-test mean of 62.4% (SD = 7.0), an increase of 4.8% ( $t(29) = 2.1, p = 0.043$ ). The difference in improvement between groups was statistically significant ( $t(58) = 7.11, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that movie-based interventions substantially enhanced listening skills.

### Vocabulary Acquisition

For vocabulary, the experimental group improved from a pre-test mean of 52.7% (SD = 8.1) to a post-test mean of 74.9% (SD = 7.0), a 22.2% increase ( $t(29) = 10.21, p < 0.001$ ). The control group's vocabulary scores increased only marginally, from 53.4% (SD = 7.5) to 58.6% (SD = 6.8), a 5.2% increase ( $t(29) = 2.6, p = 0.014$ ). The between-group difference in vocabulary gains was highly significant ( $t(58) = 8.05, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that exposure to films, combined with subtitles and guided exercises, effectively reinforced vocabulary learning.

### Cultural Understanding

Cultural understanding was evaluated through written reflections and comprehension of cultural norms presented in films. Experimental group participants scored an average of 68.3% (SD = 9.2) on the post-test, up from 53.0% (SD = 8.5) on the pre-test, yielding a 15.3% improvement ( $t(29) = 7.12, p < 0.001$ ). The control group showed a negligible increase of 3.9% (from 52.4% to 56.3%,  $t(29) = 1.85, p = 0.074$ ). The improvement difference between groups was statistically significant ( $t(58) = 6.03, p < 0.001$ ).

### Summary of Findings

Overall, the experimental group exhibited substantial gains in listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural understanding after the movie-based intervention (Huseyn & Babayev, 2025). These improvements were consistently greater than those observed in the control group, suggesting a strong positive impact of using films in second language learning. Table 1 summarizes the pre- and post-test results and the percentage gains for both groups:

**Table 1.** Pre and post test results and gain percentage of 3 relevant skills

Skill	Group	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Gain (%)
Listening Comprehension	Experimental	58.2	76.4	18.2
	Control	57.6	62.4	4.8
Vocabulary Acquisition	Experimental	52.7	74.9	22.2
	Control	53.4	58.6	5.2
Cultural Understanding	Experimental	53.0	68.3	15.3
	Control	52.4	56.3	3.9

These results indicate that structured movie-based learning can accelerate language acquisition and improve cultural awareness more effectively than traditional classroom methods alone.

### Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that structured exposure to movies significantly enhances listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural understanding in second language learners compared to traditional textbook-only instruction. These results align with a substantial body of research demonstrating the pedagogical value of cinema in L2 classrooms (Sánchez-Auñón et al., 2023; Montero Perez, 2022). For instance, film viewing has been shown to positively affect learners' listening skills and attitudes toward language learning, with learners reporting improved comprehension of authentic spoken language and positive perceptions of movies as pedagogical tools.

### **Enhancing Listening and Vocabulary Skills**

The marked gains in listening comprehension observed in the experimental group reflect findings from previous studies showing that movies provide rich audiovisual input that better approximates natural speech than many classroom listening activities (Babayev, 2023). Authentic dialogues in films, which include varied accents, colloquial expressions, and speech rhythms, have been found to help learners overcome common listening challenges. Moreover, research shows that movies can significantly enrich vocabulary learning, particularly when learners combine film viewing with effective strategies such as note-taking, subtitles, and guided exercises. This supports our results, which showed a statistically significant gain in vocabulary scores for learners exposed to films.

The role of subtitles has also been highlighted in the literature as a key mediator of vocabulary and comprehension gains. Subtitles provide concurrent visual and auditory language input, a mechanism that supports deeper cognitive processing and memory retention (Alisoy, 2025). The dual-coding and multimedia learning theories explain that simultaneous exposure to written and spoken forms can enhance recall and incidental acquisition of new words.

### **Cultural Awareness and Motivation**

Beyond linguistic skills, movie-based learning fosters cultural awareness and motivation, which are critical components of communicative competence in a second language (Aslanova, 2025). Exposure to culturally rich content allows learners to interpret social norms, idiomatic expressions, and pragmatic cues embedded in real-world interactions — aspects often missing from textbook dialogues. Students' increased cultural understanding in this study parallels other research suggesting that film viewing supports intercultural competence and helps bridge the gap between language learning and cultural context (Javid & Sadikhova, 2025).

Motivation is another factor frequently documented in film-based language learning research. Films can break the monotony of traditional language drills, offering engaging, emotionally resonant content that keeps learners attentive and invested in the learning process (Sadikhova, 2025). This heightened engagement may partly explain the larger improvements seen in the experimental group, as motivated learners tend to process input more deeply and persist longer in complex tasks.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Challenges**

While the positive outcomes in this study support the integration of films into language curricula, the literature also emphasizes the importance of pedagogical guidance in maximizing effectiveness. Simply

watching movies without structured activities may not yield significant learning gains. Teachers need to design pre-viewing, during-viewing, and post-viewing tasks (such as vocabulary preview, guided listening activities, and discussion prompts) to scaffold learners' attention toward relevant linguistic features. Additionally, careful selection of film content — including genre, linguistic level, and cultural relevance — is essential to align authentic media with learners' proficiencies and learning objectives.

Despite these overall benefits, some researchers note challenges such as varying effects of subtitle types (e.g., native vs. target language subtitles) and potential cognitive overload if materials are not appropriately selected (Babayev, 2021). These considerations highlight the need for future research to refine instructional design principles and explore long-term outcomes of film-based language learning interventions.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that movies can serve as an effective tool in second language (L2) learning, significantly enhancing listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural understanding. Learners exposed to structured film-based activities showed greater improvements than peers following traditional textbook-based curricula, highlighting the pedagogical value of audiovisual media (Babayev, 2025). The combination of authentic dialogues, varied accents, and cultural context provides learners with rich input that is often absent in conventional classroom settings. Subtitles, guided pre-viewing and post-viewing activities, and reflective exercises further reinforce comprehension and vocabulary retention, aligning with dual-coding and multimedia learning theories.

Beyond linguistic gains, films foster cultural awareness and motivation, engaging learners in ways that traditional methods may not. Exposure to real-life social interactions, idiomatic expressions, and cultural norms embedded in films strengthens intercultural competence and supports the development of communicative skills.

These findings underscore the importance of thoughtfully integrating films into L2 curricula, with careful selection of content and structured learning tasks. Future research should explore long-term retention effects, the impact of different genres or subtitle types, and strategies for optimizing learner engagement. Overall, movies represent a powerful, immersive, and culturally rich medium that complements traditional instruction, making language learning both effective and enjoyable.

## References

- Abdulrahman Khadawardi, H. (2023). *Teaching L2 vocabulary through animated movie clips with English subtitles*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*. □ meta-analysis; findings show subtitled movies support vocabulary learning and learner motivation.
- Alisoy, H. (2025). Integrating music into curriculum design: Strategies for enhancing student achievement and cognitive skills. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis Et Linguarum*, 2(4), 37-70.
- Aslanova, U. (2025). Social And Cultural Factors in the Formation of Individual Style in the German Language. *EuroGlobal Journal of Linguistics and Language Education*, 2(5), 132-143.

- Babayev, J. (2023, December). Usage of audio and video tasks in language teaching. In *Publisher. agency: Proceedings of the 5th International Scientific Conference «Modern scientific technology»(December 21-22, 2023). Stockholm, Sweden* (p. 6).
- Babayev, J. (2025). Audio-visual method versus CLT in language learning. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum*, 2(1), 10-14.
- Babayev, J. (2021). The role of instructional materials in language learning. *ELMI XƏBƏRLƏR, Humanitar elmlər seriyası*, 2, 29-35.
- Hasanova, M. (2023). Basic concepts about Audiovisual method. *The Norwegian Journal of Development of the International Science*,(119).
- HUSEYN, Z. I., & Babayev, J. (2025). Effective methods of teaching Azerbaijani to Foreign students. *Porta Universorum*, 1(9), 118-126.
- Javid, B., & Sadikhova, S. (2025, May). Culturonyms in food and drink: How language reflects cultural identity through cuisine. In *Publisher. agency: Proceedings of the 10th International Scientific Conference «Modern scientific technology»(May 29-30, 2025). Stockholm, Sweden* (p. 346).
- Montero Perez, M. (2022). *Second or foreign language learning through watching audio-visual input and the role of on-screen text. Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press. □ review of audiovisual input and subtitle effectiveness for L2 vocabulary and listening comprehension.
- Sánchez-Auñón, E., Férrez-Mora, P. A., & Monroy-Hernández, F. (2023). *The use of films in the teaching of English as a foreign language: a systematic literature review. Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 8, 10. systematic review showing pedagogical value of films in EFL contexts.
- Lei, S. (2021). *The role of videos' subtitles in second language acquisition. Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 13(7848). □ discusses how different subtitle types influence L2 learning.
- Prabowo, S., Hermansyah, S., Buhari, & Nur Hikmah. (2025). *The Effect Of English Film On Students' Listening Comprehension Skills. Macca: Journal of Linguistic Applied Research*, 2(2)
- Sadikhova, S. (2025). Culturonyms in Fashion Discourse: A Linguistic and cultural Perspective. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum*, 2(4), 319-331.
- Vanderplank, R. (2013). *Captioned video for L2 listening and vocabulary learning: A meta-analysis. System*, 41(3), 720-739. □ quantitative meta-analysis demonstrating significant benefits of captioned videos for listening and vocabulary.
- Wei, R., & Fan, L. (2022). *On-screen texts in audiovisual input for L2 vocabulary learning: A review. Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 904523. □ review article showing systematic influences of subtitles on L2 vocabulary acquisition.