

## Does Watching Netflix Teach Better English Than Textbooks?

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| Keywords                                                               | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| Netflix<br>English language learning<br>textbooks<br>audiovisual media | This article examines whether watching Netflix can teach English more effectively than traditional textbooks. It compares the pedagogical strengths of textbooks with the authentic and immersive qualities of audiovisual media in English language learning. Textbooks provide structured grammar instruction, organized vocabulary development, and systematic practice of the four main language skills. By contrast, Netflix exposes learners to real-life dialogues, natural pronunciation, idiomatic expressions, diverse accents, and culturally meaningful contexts. The article also discusses the role of subtitles, learner motivation, active versus passive viewing, and the challenges of unsystematic media-based learning. It argues that although Netflix offers valuable support for listening comprehension, vocabulary growth, and socio-cultural competence, it cannot fully replace textbooks because it lacks clear progression, explicit explanation, and corrective feedback. The study concludes that the most effective model of English language learning is a balanced approach that combines textbook-based instruction with purposeful audiovisual exposure. Such integration can improve both linguistic accuracy and communicative competence in contemporary language education. |

### 1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, English language learning is no longer confined to traditional classroom materials. For decades, textbooks have served as the principal medium for teaching English in formal educational contexts, offering learners carefully structured grammar

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instruction, controlled vocabulary input, and sequenced practice tasks. However, the rapid development of digital technologies and streaming platforms has introduced new forms of language exposure that increasingly influence how learners acquire linguistic knowledge. Among these, Netflix has emerged as one of the most widely used sources of informal English input, especially among younger learners and independent language users (Alm, 2021; Dizon, 2018; Topal, 2024).

Unlike textbooks, which are intentionally designed to simplify and organize linguistic material, Netflix presents English as it is used in authentic communicative situations. Through films, series, and documentaries, learners are exposed to natural pronunciation, spontaneous dialogues, idiomatic expressions, colloquial structures, and diverse cultural contexts. This type of audiovisual input creates a more immersive learning environment and may support listening comprehension, vocabulary growth, and pragmatic awareness in ways that conventional materials often cannot fully provide (Muñoz, 2020; Vanderplank, 2016).

At the same time, the educational value of Netflix remains a subject of debate. While audiovisual media may increase learner motivation and provide access to real-life language use, they do not always guarantee systematic progression, grammatical accuracy, or measurable language development. Passive viewing, for example, may result in entertainment rather than effective learning. For this reason, it is necessary to evaluate both the opportunities and the limitations of entertainment-based language exposure.

The present article examines whether watching Netflix can teach English better than textbooks. It compares the pedagogical role of textbooks with the immersive and authentic nature of audiovisual media, with particular attention to vocabulary acquisition, listening development, pronunciation awareness, and learner engagement. The article argues that Netflix should not be regarded as a full replacement for textbooks, but rather as a valuable complementary tool within a balanced and pedagogically informed approach to English language learning.

## 2. Textbooks as the Structural Foundation of English Learning

Textbooks have traditionally occupied a central position in English language teaching because they provide a structured, systematic, and pedagogically guided framework for language learning. In formal educational settings, textbooks function not only as sources of content but also as instruments of curricular organization. They introduce grammar points in a logical sequence, present vocabulary in controlled thematic units, and offer exercises designed to reinforce comprehension, accuracy, and retention. This makes them especially valuable for learners who require a clear and progressive pathway from basic to more advanced levels of proficiency.

One of the major strengths of textbooks lies in their methodological design. Grammar is usually taught step by step, allowing learners to understand core structures such as verb tenses, sentence patterns, articles, modals, and prepositions in an organized way. Vocabulary is often selected according to frequency, communicative function, or topic, making it easier for students to



acquire lexical items gradually and use them in context. In addition, textbooks typically include reading texts, writing activities, listening tasks, and speaking exercises that ensure balanced development of the four major language skills. In this sense, textbooks support not only knowledge acquisition but also skill integration.

Another important advantage of textbooks is their reliability and pedagogical consistency. Since they are commonly produced by educational specialists and aligned with specific learning outcomes, textbooks help teachers maintain coherence in instruction and assessment. They are particularly effective in classrooms where learners need explicit explanations, controlled practice, and feedback-based correction. As Alisoy and Sadiqzade (2024) emphasize in their discussion of technology and language education, even when digital tools are introduced into teaching, structured pedagogical guidance remains essential for meaningful learning. Similarly, Sadiqzade (2024) notes that alternative language-learning media may enrich learning, but they are most effective when integrated into an instructional framework rather than used in isolation.

Despite these strengths, textbooks also reveal certain limitations. Their language is often simplified and pedagogically adapted, which may result in dialogues and examples that do not fully reflect the spontaneity and unpredictability of real-life communication. Learners who rely heavily on textbooks may develop grammatical competence yet still struggle to understand fast, informal, or culturally embedded speech outside the classroom. In many cases, textbook conversations sound artificial when compared with authentic spoken English in films, interviews, or casual social interaction. This gap between instructional language and living language has encouraged educators and researchers to explore the role of audiovisual media as a complementary resource for second language acquisition (Muñoz, 2020).

Therefore, textbooks should be seen as the structural foundation of English learning rather than as a complete solution to all linguistic needs. They are highly effective in building accuracy, organization, and progression, but they may need to be supplemented by more authentic forms of language exposure in order to prepare learners for real communicative situations.

### **3. Netflix and Audiovisual Media as Sources of Authentic Language**

In contrast to textbooks, Netflix and other audiovisual platforms expose learners to English in its natural, socially embedded, and communicative form. This is one of the main reasons why audiovisual media have attracted increasing attention in language education research. Through films, television series, documentaries, and other streaming content, learners encounter real-life dialogues, conversational rhythm, pronunciation variation, emotional tone, and culturally meaningful language use. Rather than studying isolated sentences or controlled exercises, they observe how language functions in dynamic interaction, which can make learning more realistic and memorable (Alm, 2021; Dizon, 2018).

A major benefit of Netflix-based learning is exposure to authentic spoken English. In many classroom textbooks, spoken language is simplified to suit learners' levels, but Netflix provides access to spontaneous speech that includes hesitation, interruption, humor, slang, idiomatic



expressions, and natural intonation. This kind of input helps learners become familiar with the rhythm and texture of real communication. It also allows them to hear different accents and speech styles, including British, American, Australian, and other English varieties. As a result, learners may develop greater listening flexibility and phonological awareness than they would through textbook recordings alone (Topal, 2024; Vanderplank, 2016).

Another important feature of audiovisual media is the contextual support they provide. In audiovisual input, meaning is conveyed not only through words but also through facial expressions, gestures, setting, action, and emotional context. This multimodal environment can make unfamiliar language easier to understand and may help learners infer meaning without relying entirely on direct translation. Muñoz (2020) points out that audiovisual input offers a rich field for second language acquisition because it combines verbal and non-verbal cues, creating a more holistic language experience. This can be particularly beneficial for vocabulary learning, since new words are often remembered more effectively when linked to visual situations and narrative contexts.

Subtitles also play a significant role in making Netflix a useful learning tool. English subtitles, in particular, can help learners connect spoken and written forms of language, notice pronunciation patterns, and recognize vocabulary more easily. Research has shown that captioned viewing may improve listening comprehension and support incidental vocabulary acquisition (Rodgers & Webb, 2017; Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2021; Vanderplank, 1988). When learners hear a phrase and simultaneously see it in written form, they are better able to process fast speech, segment connected sounds, and retain lexical items. This makes subtitles an important bridge between passive viewing and active language learning.

Furthermore, Netflix often increases learner motivation. Many learners are more willing to spend time engaging with films or series than with traditional exercises, and this increased exposure can produce meaningful language gains over time. Shahril and Abdullah (2022) found that learners generally perceive Netflix and subtitles positively as tools for English improvement, especially in relation to listening and vocabulary. Dizon (2018) similarly observed that using Netflix as a language-learning resource can enhance learner engagement and promote autonomous study habits.

Nevertheless, the benefits of Netflix depend largely on how it is used. Simply watching content for entertainment may not lead to substantial language development unless learners interact with the material in a more conscious and reflective way. Even so, as a source of authentic input, audiovisual media clearly offer dimensions of pronunciation, contextual meaning, cultural exposure, and communicative realism that textbooks alone often cannot provide. For this reason, Netflix represents not a rival to language education, but a powerful extension of it.

#### **4. Active vs. Passive Learning: The Cognitive Issue**

One of the most important questions in evaluating Netflix as a language-learning tool is whether learners engage with it actively or passively. Although audiovisual media provide rich and



authentic input, exposure alone does not automatically lead to effective language acquisition. In many cases, learners watch films or series for entertainment without consciously focusing on vocabulary, sentence structure, pronunciation, or discourse patterns. As a result, the learning process may remain superficial, and the potential pedagogical value of the material may not be fully realized.

In contrast, textbooks are generally associated with active learning. They require learners to complete exercises, answer questions, analyze grammar, and produce written or spoken output. This type of engagement supports attention, repetition, and conscious processing, all of which are essential for long-term retention. Learners working with textbooks are more likely to notice formal language patterns and practice them systematically. Because of this, textbook-based learning often leads to stronger explicit knowledge of grammar and usage.

Netflix, however, can also become an effective educational resource when learners interact with it actively rather than passively. Active viewing may include pausing to repeat expressions, writing down unfamiliar words, comparing spoken language with subtitles, imitating pronunciation, and reviewing selected scenes more than once. These strategies help transform entertainment into language practice and encourage deeper cognitive involvement. Alm (2021) notes that streaming media can move from casual exposure to more focused learning when learners intentionally engage with the content. Similarly, Dizon and Thanyawatpokin (2021) demonstrate that subtitle-supported viewing can improve vocabulary learning and listening comprehension when learners process the material attentively.

Another important issue is output. Watching Netflix may strengthen comprehension, but it does not automatically develop productive skills such as speaking and writing. Without follow-up activities, learners may recognize many expressions yet remain unable to use them independently. This limitation is particularly significant in formal educational contexts, where measurable performance and communicative production are important goals. Therefore, Netflix is most effective when combined with tasks such as summarizing scenes, discussing characters, retelling dialogues, shadowing speech, or writing vocabulary journals.

From a cognitive perspective, then, the problem is not Netflix itself but the mode of learner engagement. Passive watching may produce limited gains, whereas active, reflective, and repeated interaction with audiovisual content can contribute meaningfully to language development. This distinction suggests that the success of Netflix-based learning depends less on the platform and more on the strategies that learners apply while using it.

## 5. The Role of Subtitles in Language Learning

Subtitles are among the most significant features that make Netflix and other streaming platforms pedagogically useful for language learners. They create a bridge between spoken and written language, enabling learners to connect pronunciation, spelling, word boundaries, and meaning more effectively. In language-learning contexts, subtitles are not simply a technical aid



for understanding content; they can also function as a powerful support for listening development, vocabulary acquisition, and language awareness.

When learners watch English-language content with English subtitles, they receive the same linguistic message through two channels at once: auditory and visual. This dual input helps them notice how words sound in connected speech and how they appear in written form. Such exposure is especially useful because natural spoken English often differs from the slow, clearly articulated pronunciation found in textbooks or classroom recordings. Learners frequently struggle with fast speech, reductions, linking, and informal pronunciation. Subtitles reduce this difficulty by allowing them to follow the dialogue more accurately and identify words they might otherwise miss (Rodgers & Webb, 2017; Vanderplank, 1988).

Research has shown that captioned or subtitled viewing can support incidental vocabulary learning. Learners often remember words more successfully when they hear them in context while simultaneously seeing them written on screen. Dizon and Thanyawatpokin (2021) found that subtitle-supported viewing can positively influence both vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Likewise, Vanderplank (2016) emphasizes that captioned media provide learners with repeated and meaningful exposure to language forms in a natural communicative setting. This is particularly beneficial when learners encounter high-frequency vocabulary, common phrases, and conversational patterns across multiple episodes or films.

However, the use of subtitles also raises some pedagogical concerns. If learners rely too heavily on subtitles in their first language, their attention may shift away from the English audio itself. In such cases, the activity may become closer to reading translation than listening to English. Even English subtitles, while useful, can sometimes become a crutch if learners focus only on the written text and do not train their ears to process speech independently. Therefore, subtitles should be used strategically. For lower-level learners, subtitles may provide necessary support, while more advanced learners may gradually reduce subtitle dependence in order to strengthen direct listening skills.

Subtitles are thus neither inherently beneficial nor harmful; their value depends on how they are used. When integrated thoughtfully, they can improve comprehension, highlight language patterns, and support vocabulary growth. In this sense, subtitles represent one of the strongest pedagogical advantages of audiovisual media and one of the main reasons why Netflix can contribute meaningfully to English language learning.

## 6. Global Accents, Informal Registers, and Socio-Cultural Competence

One of the major advantages of Netflix as a language-learning resource is its exposure to the diversity of English as it is used across different regions, social groups, and communicative settings. Traditional textbooks generally present standardized and simplified forms of English, often favoring either British or American norms in carefully controlled dialogues. While this approach is useful for instructional clarity, it may not fully prepare learners for the variety and unpredictability of real-world communication. By contrast, Netflix offers access to English in



multiple accents, registers, and cultural contexts, thereby helping learners develop a more flexible and socially informed understanding of the language.

Exposure to different accents is especially valuable in contemporary English learning. Through films and series, learners may hear not only standard American or British English, but also regional, international, and socially marked varieties of pronunciation. This experience broadens listening competence and reduces dependence on one idealized form of speech. Topal (2024) and Alm (2021) suggest that such audiovisual exposure can improve learners' ability to cope with natural variation in spoken English. In practical terms, this means that students may become better prepared for communication with different speakers in academic, professional, or global contexts.

Audiovisual media also introduce learners to informal registers that textbooks often underrepresent. In real-life speech, people use contractions, idiomatic phrases, slang, fillers, hesitations, interruptions, and emotionally expressive language. Netflix presents these features within authentic communicative situations, allowing learners to see not only what is said, but also when, how, and why it is said. This contributes to pragmatic and socio-cultural competence, since learners begin to understand the relationship between language form, context, tone, and social meaning. For example, they may notice how politeness, irony, humor, disagreement, or intimacy are expressed in ways that textbooks cannot easily simulate.

At the same time, this strength may also create risks. Informal and highly contextualized language is not always appropriate in academic or professional settings. Learners who imitate expressions from films or series without understanding register differences may use slang or casual phrases in unsuitable contexts. In addition, some audiovisual content includes culturally specific references that may be difficult to interpret accurately without background knowledge. Therefore, the authenticity of Netflix is both an advantage and a challenge: it enriches language learning, but it also requires critical awareness and guidance.

For this reason, socio-cultural competence should be viewed as an important dimension of English learning alongside grammar and vocabulary. Netflix can help learners move beyond formal correctness toward a more nuanced understanding of how English functions in social life. It teaches not only language forms, but also the cultural and interpersonal meanings attached to them. When combined with structured explanation and reflection, this exposure can make learners more adaptable, culturally aware, and communicatively competent users of English.

## 7. Challenges of Netflix-Based Learning

Despite its many advantages, Netflix-based language learning also presents several important challenges that prevent it from functioning as a complete substitute for textbooks. The first and most obvious limitation is the lack of systematic structure. Unlike textbooks, which are organized according to level, topic, grammar progression, and pedagogical sequence, Netflix content is created primarily for entertainment rather than instruction. As a result, learners are exposed to language in an unplanned and uneven way. They may encounter advanced idioms



before mastering basic structures, or hear highly contextualized expressions without sufficient explanation. This can make learning fragmented and difficult to measure.

Another challenge is the absence of direct feedback. In traditional classroom learning, textbooks are typically accompanied by teacher guidance, correction, and practice tasks that help learners identify and overcome errors. When learners watch Netflix independently, however, they may misunderstand vocabulary, pronunciation, or usage without realizing it. Incorrect assumptions can become repeated and gradually fossilized, especially if learners imitate phrases without fully understanding meaning, tone, or context. In this sense, exposure alone does not guarantee accurate acquisition.

A further problem concerns learner control and discipline. Streaming platforms offer an enormous variety of content, which may motivate some learners but overwhelm others. Instead of encouraging focused learning, this abundance may lead to distraction, inconsistent habits, or purely entertainment-driven viewing. Learners may spend hours watching content without engaging deeply with the language itself. Shahril and Abdullah (2022) note that students generally view Netflix positively, but positive perception does not automatically result in effective learning outcomes. The educational value depends on intentionality, repetition, and strategy.

Moreover, not all language presented in films and series is appropriate for learners' communicative needs. Some programs contain slang, taboo expressions, sarcasm, or culturally specific humor that may be difficult to interpret or unsuitable for formal use. Without guidance, learners may absorb expressions that sound natural in fictional dialogue but inappropriate in academic, professional, or intercultural settings. This creates a gap between exposure and usable competence.

For these reasons, Netflix-based learning should be treated with caution. It can enrich English acquisition significantly, but it also lacks the structured sequencing, feedback, and explicit instruction that textbooks provide. Therefore, its greatest value lies not in replacing traditional learning, but in supplementing it with authentic and motivating language exposure.

## 8. Toward a Hybrid Model of English Learning

Given the strengths and weaknesses of both textbooks and Netflix, the most effective approach to English language learning appears to be a hybrid model that combines structured instruction with authentic audiovisual exposure. Rather than framing the issue as a choice between textbooks and streaming media, it is more productive to consider how the two can complement one another. Each addresses a different dimension of language acquisition, and together they offer a broader and more balanced learning experience.

Textbooks provide the essential framework for language development. They organize grammar systematically, introduce vocabulary in manageable stages, and offer exercises that encourage accuracy, repetition, and measurable progress. This structure is especially important for beginners and intermediate learners, who need clarity, guidance, and carefully sequenced input.



Without such foundations, learners may struggle to interpret authentic English or use it correctly. In this respect, textbooks remain indispensable for building formal competence and linguistic confidence.

Netflix, by contrast, contributes what textbooks often lack: immersion, realism, and emotional engagement. It helps learners hear how English sounds in everyday interaction, exposes them to diverse accents and registers, and places language within meaningful social and cultural contexts. This kind of input can strengthen listening comprehension, pronunciation awareness, vocabulary recognition, and pragmatic understanding. When learners encounter language forms in living use after studying them in textbooks, their knowledge may become more flexible, memorable, and communicatively relevant.

A hybrid model also supports different modes of learning. For example, learners may first study a grammatical structure or thematic vocabulary set through textbook exercises and then observe similar forms in a film or series episode. Likewise, they may watch a scene on Netflix, notice repeated expressions, and later analyze them through written practice. This interaction between structured study and authentic exposure helps bridge the gap between explicit knowledge and real-life use. Alm (2021) suggests that streaming media can move from extensive viewing to more focused language learning, while Dizon and Thanyawatpokin (2021) demonstrate that subtitle-assisted viewing can produce measurable linguistic benefits when used purposefully.

In practical educational settings, this hybrid model can be implemented through tasks such as scene analysis, vocabulary logs, shadowing exercises, discussion questions, listening journals, and comparison between textbook dialogues and authentic speech. Such activities transform Netflix from a passive entertainment source into a pedagogically guided resource. At the same time, they prevent textbooks from becoming too detached from natural communication.

Thus, the future of English language learning may depend not on replacing old methods with new ones, but on integrating them intelligently. A hybrid model recognizes that language learning is both a structured academic process and a social, cultural, and communicative experience. By combining textbooks and Netflix, learners can benefit from both accuracy and authenticity, both instruction and immersion.

## 9. Conclusion

The comparison between textbooks and Netflix in English language learning reveals that both approaches offer significant but different advantages. Textbooks remain essential because they provide structure, clarity, systematic progression, and opportunities for controlled practice. They help learners build grammatical knowledge, develop vocabulary step by step, and progress within an organized educational framework. For this reason, they continue to play a central role in formal language instruction.

Netflix, on the other hand, offers access to authentic spoken English, natural pronunciation, diverse accents, idiomatic expressions, and culturally rich communicative contexts. It exposes learners to the living language in ways that textbooks alone often cannot. Through subtitles,



repeated exposure, and contextualized dialogue, audiovisual media can strengthen listening comprehension, vocabulary recognition, motivation, and socio-cultural awareness. However, these benefits are most effective when learners engage actively rather than passively and when viewing is supported by reflection and follow-up practice.

Therefore, Netflix cannot fully replace textbooks as a complete tool for English learning. Its lack of systematic progression, corrective feedback, and explicit instruction limits its ability to function independently as a primary educational method. Nevertheless, it can serve as a highly valuable supplement to traditional language study. The most effective approach is a balanced one in which textbooks provide the structural foundation and Netflix supplies authentic, engaging, and immersive language input.

In contemporary English education, the question is not whether Netflix is better than textbooks, but how both can be used together to create deeper, more flexible, and more meaningful language learning.

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