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Explainer Videos for Language Learning: A Comparative Study on Student Engagement and Skill Development between UiTM and UT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Universitas Terbuka (UT) engage with explainer videos and compares their effectiveness in enhancing language proficiency. Addressing a gap in comparative research on video-based instruction in traditional versus open university settings, the study employed a mixed-methods design involving 139 students. Data were collected through questionnaires and open-ended responses to explore engagement levels, perceived effectiveness, and learner preferences. Findings indicate that explainer videos significantly support vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence, with UT students showing higher engagement due to their self-paced learning environment. Challenges such as limited interactivity and pacing issues were also identified. Insights from this research contribute to the development of more effective video-based instructional strategies for language learning, catering to diverse student needs across different educational contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lecturing remains the dominant instructional method in higher education, despite longstanding critiques of its teacher-centered and passive nature (Behr, 1988; Mustapha et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2021). As digital technologies continue to transform educational delivery, institutions are increasingly adopting multimedia formats to enhance learning experiences. Among these, explainer videos have emerged as a powerful tool to simplify complex concepts through short, visually engaging content that combines narration, animation, and text (Krämer & Böhrs, 2017; Adnan et al., 2021).

Explainer videos are particularly effective in language learning, where continuous exposure and multimodal input are essential for skill development (Yusuf et al., 2024; Minalla, 2024). Brief and clear videos are suitable for maintaining learner attention and promoting comprehension. Research by Salim et al. (2023) and Ginting et al. (2024) shows that students interact more thoroughly with videos that are brief, conversational, and include visual cues. Guo et al. (2014), analyzing over 6.9 million MOOC video sessions, found that median engagement time is at most six minutes, regardless of total video length. They recommend segmenting videos into chunks under six minutes to optimize attention and retention, a strategy known as the Segmenting Principle (Seidel, 2024).

The effectiveness of explainer videos is further enhanced by interactive features such as embedded quizzes or pause-and-reflect prompts, which foster active learning, and clickable annotations and self-assessment questions, which led to significantly better outcomes (Chi & Wylie, 2014; Noetel et al., 2021). Additionally, platform choice plays a critical role. For instance, YouTube's structured content supports sustained learning (Albahlal, 2019), while platforms like TikTok, though engaging, may fragment complex language concepts due to their brevity and novelty-driven design (Al-Maroof et al., 2021).

The Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML) provides the theoretical foundation for this study. CTML posits that learners process information more effectively when verbal and visual elements are integrated, reducing cognitive overload and enhancing retention (Mayer, 2024). For example, Mayer & Anderson (1991) demonstrated that narrated animations led to better problem-solving outcomes than narration alone. Similarly, Mayer & Gallini (1990) found that labeled pictures alongside key words improved transfer performance by nearly 65%. CTML also aligns with Cognitive Load Theory, which emphasizes the need to manage information complexity to avoid overwhelming learners (Asma & Dallel, 2021; Shah et al., 2025).

In language learning, the effectiveness of explainer videos in skill development varies across linguistic domains. Receptive skills like listening and vocabulary acquisition benefit most from multimodal input. For example, subtitled videos improve listening accuracy by allowing learners to cross-reference spoken and written forms (Suvorov & He, 2021). It is aligned with Nelson et al. (2005) who found that learners formed stronger memory traces through written forms, especially when visual and verbal modalities were combined. However, productive skills like speaking and writing often lag, as videos typically emphasize input over output. Structured, step-by-step explanations benefit rule-based skills like grammar (Kalyuga, 2007; Tahir et al., 2020), while pragmatic competencies require contextualized examples (Taguchi, 2015).

Explainer videos also enhance motivation and engagement through entertaining elements such as animations, illustrations, and informal storytelling (Akib & Syatriyana, 2019; Schorn, 2022). These features improve processing fluency and create positive learning experiences. While previous studies have explored explainer videos in blended learning environments (Kulgemeyer & Wittwer, 2022; Sofia & Riyana, 2025), none have examined their application across two distinct institutional contexts and delivery modes, which is the focus of this study.

This study compares student experiences with explainer videos at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a conventional university using face-to-face and blended learning, and Universitas Terbuka (UT), an open university operating fully online. Although both institutions integrate explainer videos into their language instruction, their pedagogical environments differ significantly. UiTM students typically use videos as classroom supplements, while UT students rely on them as primary learning tools in self-directed settings (Shah et al., 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its comparative approach to exploring how institutional context influences student engagement, perceived effectiveness, and preferences in using explainer

videos for language learning. Grounded in the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML), which emphasizes dual-channel processing and cognitive load management, the study investigates how explainer videos support comprehension and retention across diverse learning environments. Using a mixed-methods design with 139 participants (112 from UiTM and 27 from UT), the research aims to (1) examine student engagement with explainer videos, (2) evaluate their effectiveness in improving language skills, and (3) identify learner challenges and preferences. The findings contribute to theory by contextualizing CTML in varied educational settings and offer practical insights for designing inclusive, effective multimedia instructional strategies.

2. METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to explore students' engagement, perceptions, and challenges in using explainer videos for language learning. A total of 139 participants were involved, comprising 112 students from UiTM and 27 from UT. The higher number of respondents from UiTM is due to the researchers' direct teaching access to these students, allowing for convenient data collection. In contrast, UT operates primarily through a fully online learning system, which poses limitations in reaching a broader pool of its students within the given timeframe. The survey approach was chosen to collect data at a single point in time, enabling the researchers to gain insights into current attitudes and experiences related to explainer video usage across two distinct higher education settings.

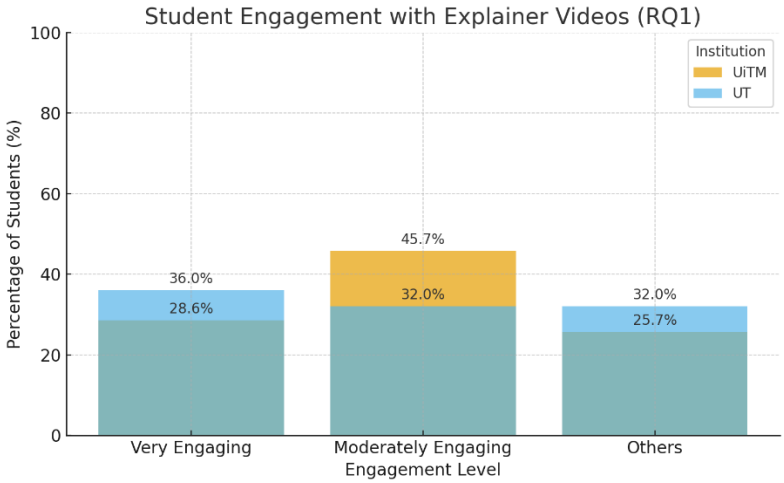
The instrument used for data collection was a self-administered online questionnaire developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to gather information aligned with three research questions: (1) what is the level of student engagement when using explainer videos for language learning, (2) how effective are explainer videos in improving various language skills among students and (3) what are the students' preferences and challenges in using explainer videos for language learning. The items were adapted from prior validated instruments in multimedia learning and language education research with minor modifications to suit the study context. All attitudinal and perception-based items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) to summarize students' engagement levels and perceptions, while open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and contextual insights.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal significant differences in how students at UiTM and UT engage with and benefit from explainer videos for language learning. These variations stem from distinct platform preferences, institutional resources, and pedagogical approaches while highlighting universal challenges in video-based language education.

RQ1: What is the level of student engagement when using explainer videos for language learning?

For RQ1, which looked at engagement, the findings suggest that most students felt positively about using explainer videos. Among UiTM students, 45.7% described the videos as moderately engaging, while 28.6% found them very engaging. UT students showed a slightly higher level of enthusiasm, with 36% rating the videos as very engaging and 32% as moderately engaging. This points to a trend where explainer videos may be particularly engaging for learners in self-directed, online learning environments like those at UT.



Students characterised explainer videos as captivating, easy to follow, and visually appealing. As emphasised by UT students, they often referred to YouTube and stressed that videos helped maintain their attention because of visuals, storytelling, and real-life examples. One student recalled, "A helpful video was one with simple conversations and visual cues that made it easy to repeat and remember expressions." Similarly, UiTM students noted they felt more engaged during lessons that included video content, particularly those featuring interactive elements or clear animations. A number of students also stated that explainers alleviated learning stress far more than traditional resources, supporting the quantitative results, especially those from UT undergraduates, indicating higher levels of engagement.

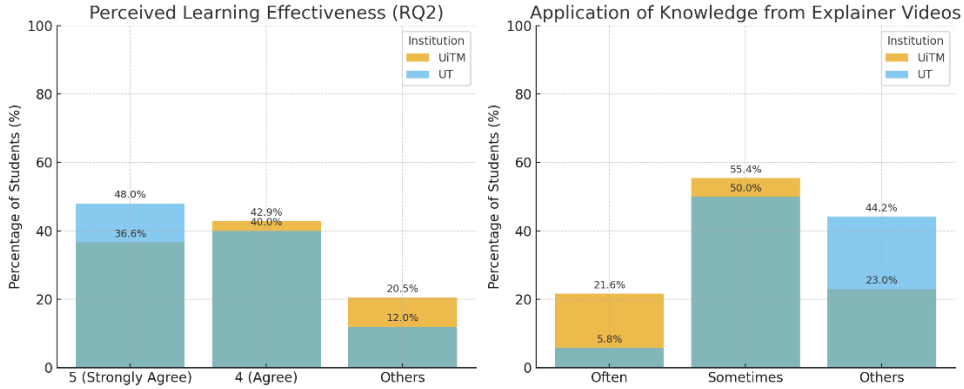
This finding supports Guo et al. (2014), who found that short videos under six minutes are more effective in maintaining learner attention, especially in online settings. The preference for brief, visually supported content among UT students aligns with Salim et al. (2023) and Ginting et al. (2024), who emphasized that conversational tone and visual cues enhance student interaction and comprehension. Moreover, the higher engagement among UT students reflects Seidel's (2024) Segmenting Principle, which advocates breaking content into digestible parts to avoid cognitive overload.

In contrast, UiTM students benefited more from interactive features embedded in classroom instruction, such as quizzes and guided discussions. This echoes findings by Chi & Wylie (2014) and Noetel et al. (2021), who demonstrated that interactive elements significantly improve active learning outcomes. These differences underscore how institutional context, blended versus fully online, shapes the way students engage with explainer videos.

RQ2: How effective are explainer videos in improving various language skills among students?

For RQ2 regarding learning effectiveness, students recognised the value of explainer videos as they enhanced their understanding of language concepts. At UT, nearly half of the respondents (48%) rated this item a 5 out of 5, with an additional 40% rating it 4 out of 5. The positivity found at UiTM was similar, where 36.6% rated 5 and 42.9% rated 4. Thus, it can be said that students from both institutions regarded explainer videos as having the potential to aid in their understanding of language concepts.

Regarding the application of knowledge, 21.6% of students from UiTM stated they often used knowledge acquired from the videos in real-life scenarios, and 55.4% said they did so occasionally. Among UT students, only 5.8% reported frequently using the knowledge, while 50% claimed to use it sometimes. These gaps may be a result of the learning environment. Students attending in-person classes at UiTM may have more opportunities to apply what they learn as compared to those at UT.



When considering how students viewed explainer videos in comparison to other resources, 66.1% of UiTM students felt they were more effective, with 25% saying they were equally effective. UT students were even more confident in their responses as 81.8% considered explainer videos more effective, suggesting a strong preference for visual self-paced materials in their learning context.

Many responses identified pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar as the primary focal areas that improved through explainer videos. Several UT students acknowledged that the ability to pause and repeat content helped them understand its pronunciation and usage much better. Phrases like “I learned how to pronounce difficult words by watching and repeating,” and “videos made grammar easier through step-by-step visuals,” were rather common.

UiTM students reported that in-class tasks and speaking activities sought the application of content learned from explainer videos. A few of them remarked that videos clarified the application of grammar, more so when examples were provided with subtitles or translations. All students across both groups emphasized that watching videos without engagement was insufficient, and students needed to do note-taking or work in active practice for any meaningful progress to be made.

These findings align with Mayer & Gallini (1990), who demonstrated that labeled visuals alongside key words significantly improve transfer performance. UT students’ appreciation for the ability to pause and repeat content reflects CTML’s principle of dual-channel processing and self-paced learning (Mayer, 2024), which enhances comprehension and retention.

The use of subtitles to support listening and vocabulary acquisition among UT students also supports Suvorov & He (2021), who found that cross-referencing spoken and written forms improves listening accuracy. Similarly, Nelson et al. (2005) emphasized that learners form stronger memory traces through written forms, especially when visual and verbal modalities are combined.

The difference in knowledge application between UiTM and UT students can be explained by the nature of their learning environments. UiTM’s structured classroom setting allows for more frequent output practice, supporting Kalyuga (2007) and Tahir et al. (2020), who found that rule-based skills like grammar benefit from step-by-step instruction. In contrast, UT’s input-heavy, self-directed model limits opportunities for immediate application, despite high engagement.

RQ3: What are the students' preferences and challenges in using explainer videos for language learning

RQ3 examined student preferences and difficulties; some defining tendencies emerged from the responses. Both UiTM and UT students appreciated brief, visually and textually supported clarifications. Among the challenges reported, UT students more frequently cited issues with rapid narration and low levels of interaction. On the other hand, UiTM students were more concerned with internet availability and the challenges of searching for credible content. Still, a notable proportion of students from both groups preferred clarifications to other learning materials, owing to their clear, accessible, and engaging nature.

Students' preferences and expectations concerning the explainer videos were very specific. They preferred short-length videos (5-10 minutes), containing subtitles, and the speech within the videos was clear and well-paced. The examples and interactive elements, such as quizzes, added further context and applicability, making the videos more relatable. However, several issues were reported. Students at UT especially highlighted fast pacing, lack of subtitles, and excessive animations. On the other hand, students at UiTM cited more practical concerns, such as having no access to the internet or problems locating high-quality and trusted content. To enhance audio clarity, learners requested that video summaries be provided at the end, accompanied by more localized or culturally pertinent illustrations.

These preferences align with Guo et al. (2014) and Seidel (2024), who advocate for segmented, concise content to maintain attention and avoid cognitive overload. The demand for subtitles and clear pacing supports Suvorov & He (2021), who found that subtitled videos improve listening accuracy and comprehension.

Challenges reported by UT students regarding fast narration and lack of interactivity reflect the findings of Noetel et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of embedded quizzes and self-assessment features in enhancing learning outcomes. Meanwhile, UiTM students' concerns about internet access and content credibility highlight the role of platform design, YouTube's structured format supports sustained learning (Albahlal, 2019), whereas TikTok's brevity and novelty-driven design may fragment complex language concepts (Al-Maroof et al., 2021)

Out of three learning resources, textbooks, educational apps, and explainer videos, students overwhelmingly chose explainer videos as their preferred resources. The majority found videos entertaining and engaging. To varying degrees, students share the view that videos make concepts easier to understand and cater well to their learning styles. Several learners remarked that they gained knowledge more rapidly from videos because they heard and saw the contextualized use of the language. A small number of learners, however, preferred language learning apps for quick grammar-focused drills and practice exercises, illustrating that replacements were best used in conjunction with other resources rather than as standalones.

The overall preference for explainer videos over textbooks and apps supports Akib & Syatriyana (2019) and Schorn (2022), who found that entertaining elements and informal storytelling improve motivation and processing fluency. These findings reinforce the importance of designing explainer videos that are not only informative but also engaging and contextually relevant to learners' needs.

Contextual Interpretation

The observed differences between UiTM and UT students can be attributed to variations in learning mode, institutional culture, and learner autonomy. UiTM operates primarily within a blended, instructor-led environment, where students receive direct guidance and immediate feedback

from lecturers. This context fosters structured engagement and practical application of video-based materials through classroom activities, which may explain UiTM students' stronger reports of applying learned knowledge. In contrast, UT's fully online, self-directed learning system encourages independent study, where students rely heavily on explainer videos as their main instructional input. Although UT students demonstrated higher enthusiasm toward explainer videos, their opportunities for active language use and peer interaction are more limited, reducing the frequency of knowledge application.

These findings are consistent with Gómez-Rey et al. (2016), who found that cultural dimensions and institutional structures significantly influence learner satisfaction and autonomy in online learning environments. Similarly, Saad & Abdullah (2025) emphasized that learner autonomy is shaped by institutional support, instructional design, and cultural expectations, particularly in transitioning from teacher-centered to student-centered models.

Cultural and contextual factors also play a role; UiTM students often learn collaboratively within a collectivist classroom culture, while UT students dispersed and asynchronous learning settings cultivate individual learning habits. These contextual contrasts highlight how institutional design and learning modality shape students' engagement, perception, and utilization of multimedia resources in language learning.

4. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to evaluate the role of explainer videos in language learning by analyzing student experiences from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Universitas Terbuka (UT). Using a blended methodological framework, the research determined that explainer videos are considered helpful and interesting instructional materials in both face-to-face and distance learning contexts. Despite the differences in delivery modes and institutional settings, both cohorts strongly favored video instruction, especially for vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar mastery. These results emphasize the value of explainer videos as core pedagogical media rather than supplementary aids.

Practically, the findings justify the use of brief, targeted, and visually engaging materials to improve language reception skills by the teachers, while institutions can develop professional training and design frameworks based on Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML) to ensure quality and consistency. Theoretically, this research extends CTML by demonstrating its relevance in hybrid and online settings, where dual-channel processing and cognitive load management remain central to effective multimedia instruction. This study contributes to the understanding of how contextual and learner autonomy factors interact with multimedia design principles, providing a theoretical and pedagogical foundation for the continued integration of explainer videos in language education.

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