

Using English sitcoms to promote students' vocabulary learning: a study at Nguyen Tat Thanh University

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Abstract

This study explored the effectiveness of using English sitcoms to enhance vocabulary learning among non-English major university students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, including a pre-test and post-test, questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, the research involved 220 participants at B1 level. The test results revealed significant vocabulary gains in the experimental group compared to the control group, with a mean of 74.2 compared to the control group's mean of 63.1. Questionnaires also showed that students responded positively to the use of sitcoms in the classroom. Interviews provided a deep insight into teachers' perceptions on using films as teaching tools and discovered limitations of sitcom-based vocabulary instructions. The study concludes that sitcoms are highly effective and engaging resources for vocabulary instruction when thoughtfully integrated into language curricula.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Vocabulary Acquisition in Second Language Learning

Vocabulary has been considered as a core element in any language, as “lexical problems affect communication and communication breaks down when people do not use the right words” [1]. The critical importance of vocabulary has been emphasized as in the classroom, “the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary” [2]. There are two main approaches to vocabulary acquisition: intentional and incidental. Intentional learning involves direct study, such as memorizing word lists or using vocabulary exercises, which can accelerate learning but may not always lead to long-term retention unless reinforced by meaningful use. Incidental learning occurs when

learners acquire new words spontaneously while focusing on communication, such as through reading a material, watching a video, or involving in a conversation. This process mirrors first-language acquisition and fosters deeper retention, though it may be slower and less predictable. In other words, contextualized encounters are likely to enhance the chances of retention, as “words and expressions are used in meaningful, and therefore more memorable, ways” [3]. Meanwhile, the role of media has been widely proven to be effective in language learning and teaching, as audiovisual programs play a positive role in second language acquisition and “learners' higher motivation through multimedia can contribute to a better lexical acquisition” [4].

1.2 English Sitcoms as a Language Learning Tool

A sitcom, or a situation comedy, is a genre of television comedy series that focuses on a particular set of characters and depicts their interactions based on their characteristics in specific daily-life scenarios. Using English-spoken sitcoms as a tool to enhance students' language acquisition both in and out of the classroom has been proven to be effective as through watching television and short movies in the language, viewers can incidentally learn L1 and L2 vocabulary [5]. More importantly, the sense of enjoyment and motivation that sitcoms and other forms of multimedia offer learners is tremendous as they find it easier and more interesting to learn an L2 by watching films [6, 7]. However, observations during teaching at Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) revealed that most students were not familiar with English-language sitcoms, even with widely popular ones like *Friends* or *How I met Your Mother*. Through this research, the findings are expected to propose practical teaching strategies that integrate sitcoms into vocabulary instruction, enabling both educators and students to maximize the potential of this tool in language learning.

2 Literature Review

In the context of research in Viet Nam there was a limited number of studies on the use of English sitcoms, especially regarding their application and integration in language teaching. A study conducted in 2022 to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by 100 first-year English majors at the University of Foreign Languages, Hue University [8]. Using an adapted version of Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire to explore students' perceptions and engagement with different strategies, the results showed that the popularity of metacognitive strategies is attributed to students' increased exposure to English through modern media. Many students reported learning vocabulary through engaging activities such as listening to English songs, watching movies with subtitles, associating new words with previously learned words, and doing supplementary exercises from various sources. These findings suggest that students are generally motivated and proactive in

learning vocabulary, especially through exposure to English media, but there is still a gap in their knowledge of strategies and applications.

Another research conducted in the same year studied the impact of movies on Chinese language learning of NTTU students [9]. Surveying 210 students, the study found that using movies as a learning tool improved listening comprehension, vocabulary, and cultural understanding. The main findings showed that 50% of students enjoyed learning Chinese through movies, 32.3% improved their listening skills, and 30.5% gained cultural insights. Moreover, learning through films significantly improved listening skills (35.3%), vocabulary (16.7%), natural expression (12.9%), and cultural knowledge (30.5%). Students found this method less stressful and more flexible than classroom learning. The study concluded that learning through movies is an effective and engaging method for improving language proficiency. Overall, research on the use of movies, films, or media in language teaching and learning has yielded many promising and positive results. However, the topic of using sitcoms in vocabulary instruction remains relatively new and has not been widely implemented in tertiary education.

Meanwhile, foreign studies on the use of films in English language teaching demonstrate considerable diversity in scope and approach. A researcher analyzed the sitcom *Friends* to determine its vocabulary input value for Chinese EAL learners using a corpus-based approach [4]. With only 10 episodes, running for about (200-220) minutes, the sitcom covered a large portion of colloquial and academic vocabulary, showing its great potential as an effective aid in learning English vocabulary. Results showed that the sitcom contained a significant proportion of common and academic vocabulary, making it a valuable resource for intermediate and advanced learners. Another study, conducted at Teknokrat Indonesia University, explored students' perceptions of using English films to improve vocabulary proficiency, which is relatively similar to the field of this particular research [10]. With 31 participants, the study found that 61.3% agreed that English films helped them learn vocabulary, while

67.7% believed films enhanced their vocabulary acquisition.

A study in 2021 aimed to examine the effectiveness of using English films to enhance vocabulary proficiency among ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Purwosari, Indonesia [11]. Using a qualitative descriptive method with 20 students and an English teacher, the research found overwhelmingly positive feedback from the questionnaire results. Observations showed that students were enthusiastic and proactive in learning new words through films. The study concluded that students at SMPN 2 Purwosari were genuinely enthusiastic about learning vocabulary through English films. According to the teaching plan, the use of movies aimed to help students expand their vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and use newly learned words accurately. Observations conducted over two days revealed that students were assigned to identify 20 new vocabulary items from each film. Their responses were positive, showing active participation and high levels of motivation in learning vocabulary through film-based activities.

Netflix films were investigated in a study to find out the impact on language acquisition among teenagers using questionnaires and interviews [12]. The findings revealed that Netflix films positively influenced language learning, particularly in listening skills (37%), speaking (21%), and pronunciation (15%), along with other language aspects. A similar study, which also aimed to assess Netflix's role in vocabulary acquisition, conducted at Guelma University with third-year students [13]. Results showed that 74% of students used Netflix as a vocabulary-learning tool and had a positive attitude toward its effectiveness.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study was conducted using mixed methods: quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative phase involved a vocabulary pre-test and post-test. Both tests were designed with a mix of multiple-choice, gap-filling, and definition matching questions, which were parallel in format and difficulty. In addition, a 5-point

Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to gather students' perceptions of using sitcoms in terms of interests and engagement, motivation, vocabulary enhancement, and skills improvement. The qualitative component included open-ended survey responses from students and semi-structured interviews with lecturers, which provided deeper insights into students' attitudes toward learning vocabulary through sitcoms, as well as the lecturers' opinions on using this source of materials as a teaching method.

3.2 Participants

The population of this study consisted of 220 non-English major students and 5 full-time English lecturers at NTTU. The student participants were drawn from two English 4 classes, both equivalent to B1 level in the CEFR framework. The students were mostly junior-year undergraduates majoring in healthcare-related fields, namely Medicine, Nursing, and Medical Laboratory Technology. The participants were engaged in an 8-week English course with the instruction provided by the author, who was also the teacher of the two sampling classes, under the same learning conditions and environment. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling (also known as accidental sampling), as the researcher selected participants based on geographical proximity and teaching assignment, aiming to investigate the effects of sitcom-based vocabulary learning in her own classes.

3.3 Materials and Tools

The sitcom *Modern Family* was selected for this study due to its popularity and wide appeal, as well as its representation of diverse social and cultural contexts. One of the unique aspects of *Modern Family* is its "mockumentary" style, which offers several additional pedagogical benefits. The characters often speak directly to the camera in short monologues (called "talking heads"), facing the audience, which creates a sense of intimacy and clarity. These parts are generally slower, more expressive, and emotionally transparent, making it easier for students to understand vocabulary in context. The average duration of *Modern Family* sitcom episodes is approximately 22 minutes, which makes it an ideal option for classroom use.

3.4 Procedures

The participants were divided into two groups: the experimental and the control group. In the experimental group, the teacher incorporated a series of episodes from the English sitcom “Modern Family” during classroom instruction and also provided additional video resources for students to watch at home. Specifically, 19 different video clips were shown throughout the course with the purpose of introducing new vocabulary. These videos were used alongside conventional vocabulary teaching methods, such as word lists, L1 translation, repetition, and flashcards. To enhance engagement and contextual understanding, interactive techniques like role-playing or shadowing activities were integrated into some sessions. The control group, in contrast, was taught vocabulary exclusively through traditional methods, including textbook-based instruction, note-taking, and memorization techniques. Students in this group practiced using the words in simple example sentences without exposure to real-life contexts or media-based input.

3.5 Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to summarize students’ responses to the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare students’ vocabulary scores before and after the intervention, identifying any statistically significant improvement. For the qualitative data, responses to open-ended questions and teacher interviews were analyzed to explore recurring patterns, perceptions, and suggestions concerning the use of sitcoms in vocabulary teaching. The mixed-methods approach provided both measurable outcomes and in-depth insights into students’ learning experiences. The semi-structured interviews were implemented during the course one-by-one with each lecturer.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Vocabulary Learning Outcomes

There was a notable improvement in the experimental group’s post-test scores compared to their pre-test scores. The mean score increased from 58.4 to 74.2, indicating a significant gain in vocabulary knowledge. A paired sample t-test confirmed that this improvement was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, the participants in the control group showed a smaller gain, with a mean increase from 57.9 to 63.1. This difference between the two groups supports the effectiveness of the use of sitcoms in vocabulary enrichment. The observation also concluded that students showed improvements in guessing meanings from contexts. Particularly, at first, students found it difficult to follow the plot and storyline at a fast pace. The researcher then tried to scaffold the students’ comprehension by providing pre-viewing vocabulary lists, guided questions, and scene summaries. In the subsequent sessions, she also paused the video at certain moments to check comprehension, clarify unfamiliar expressions, and ask students to predict what might happen next. By the end of the experiment, many students were able to laugh at jokes and react appropriately to character interactions.

The questionnaire indicated that students perceived strong vocabulary benefits from watching the sitcom (see Table 1). In particular, 87 out of 110 participants reported learning new English words; while 72 participants stated they could understand new words better in sitcom scenes. High scores in items Q25, Q27, and Q28 demonstrated that the sitcom helped students see vocabulary in practical use and authentic contexts, and reinforce their vocabulary learning.

Table 1 Students’ responses on Vocabulary Enhancement Subscale (Q21-Q30).

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q21: Watching the sitcom helps me learn new English words.	110	4.22	0.71
Q22: I understand new vocabulary better when it is used in sitcom scenes.	110	4.11	0.72
Q23: I can remember new vocabulary more	110	4.20	0.75

easily after watching the sitcom.			
Q24: The sitcom introduces me to useful, everyday English expressions.	110	4.18	0.73
Q25: Watching the sitcom helps me see how new vocabulary is used naturally.	110	4.25	0.75
Q26: The use of the sitcom makes it easier for me to use new words in speaking.	110	4.16	0.76
Q27: Watching the sitcom helps me review vocabulary I already know.	110	4.25	0.79
Q28: I can recognize vocabulary from the sitcom when I hear English elsewhere.	110	4.27	0.72
Q29: I have expanded my vocabulary thanks to the sitcom activities in class.	110	4.11	0.83
Q30: I am able to guess some meanings of unknown words from context.	110	4.21	0.69

In question 2, the majority of students (92 out of 110) agreed that Modern Family is a meaningful learning tool for them to expand their vocabulary, especially words and expressions in everyday life that they can actually use to communicate. Some of the common responses were “Yes, because I can hear the words in real-life situations” and “The words and expressions are useful and common”. It can be inferred that the repetition of key phrases and the visual reinforcement of meaning helped them achieve better retention and understanding of vocabulary. One participant noted, “*It was truly satisfying when I looked the words up in the dictionary, they matched my previous guesses from watching the scenes! I felt like I achieved something meaningful myself*”. The word “siblings”, for instance, initially posed challenges to students to get its meaning. However, after it was repeated six times in one episode by character Hayley to refer to her brother Luke and her sister Alex in different scenarios, the students gradually figured it out. After the episode, the teacher tried to check the word definition with the students and confirmed they understood it correctly. Their answers on the posttest after the course revealed they could memorize that particular word and use it in a meaningful sentence.

Some students, however, mentioned the difficulty with the speed of speech and idiomatic language. In question

3, the fast-paced dialogues, cultural references, and humor were significant elements that posed challenges for students, particularly in early sessions. One student wrote, “*The characters speak too fast. It was so difficult for me to hear what they were saying, especially also because there were too many of them.*” Another student commented that “*Sometimes I can’t get the jokes. I didn’t understand why other students laughed at the scenes until the teacher explained after that.*”

The responses from the interviews showed that all teachers admitted the benefits that sitcoms, or films in general, can bring students in terms of language acquisition and motivation. There were 3 out of 5 interviewed lecturers stating they had shown films in the classroom to teach students communicative skills like listening and speaking. Overall, the authentic language input can provide students with the cultural background and contextual use of the words. In terms of vocabulary enhancement, all teachers agreed that watching films, or sitcoms, offers ESL learners opportunities to know how vocabulary is used in tone, gesture, and interaction. Furthermore, when vocabulary is embedded in funny or emotional scenes, students remember it longer.

“When students see sitcoms, they don’t just see isolated word items; they see how words function in real-life conversations, which makes meaning clearer and

retention stronger. They can pick up how native speakers group words together and enhance their communicative competence.” (Teacher H.)

The teachers, moreover, generally agreed that English sitcoms offer several advantages over traditional methods, in which sitcoms offer contexts and bring life

into the classroom. The real usage and practical examples from sitcoms break the monotony and deepen language learners’ understanding. While students are watching for entertainment, they naturally pick up new vocabulary without conscious effort.

Table 2 Students’ Responses on English Skills Improvement Subscale (Q31-Q37).

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q31: Watching the sitcom improves my listening comprehension skills.	110	3.92	1.09
Q32: I can understand native speakers better after watching the sitcom.	110	3.72	1.22
Q33: The sitcom helps me practice speaking English in a more natural way.	110	3.52	1.04
Q34: Watching the sitcom improves my pronunciation.	110	3.96	1.01
Q35: Watching the sitcom improves my ability to form sentences more naturally.	110	3.88	1.11
Q36: The sitcom improves my ability to understand different accents.	110	3.07	1.04
Q37: The sitcom helps me better understand cultural references in English.	110	3.35	1.09

Similarly, the responses from the students’ questionnaire suggest a neutral to moderate perception of skills improvement from watching the sitcom. Students may require more structured or targeted speaking/ listening practice linked to sitcom content to feel the benefits more clearly. The two lowest aspects, which are “accents” and “cultural references”, indicated that using sitcoms in language teaching requires teacher’s additional guidance and scaffolding.

4.2 Student Perceptions and Engagement

Analysis of the background section responses revealed that a significant proportion of students had limited exposure to English sitcoms prior to the study. In particular, over 70% reported that they had only “occasionally” or “rarely” watched English-language TV shows or movies in their daily routines (see Table 3). This suggests that consistent exposure to English audiovisual media was limited among most participants.

Table 3 Students’ Frequency of Watching English-language TV Shows and Movies.

Options	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Everyday	8	7
A few times a week	12	11
Occasionally	31	28
Rarely	50	45
Never	10	9
Total	110	100

Table 4 Students’ prior exposure to English-language sitcoms and their use in English classes.

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Have you ever watched any English-sitcoms before?	83	17
Have you ever watched an English sitcom as part of an English class?	91	9

More than 80% of the participants had never experienced an English sitcom before (see Table 4), which demonstrates that sitcoms were a new and unfamiliar genre to most participants. An even larger majority, around 90%, reported that they had never experienced an English sitcom as part of an English class, showing that the incorporation of sitcoms into formal instruction was a novel and previously unexplored method for them. However, after the intervention, the responses indicated students' positive perceptions towards watching *Modern Family* in their classroom, particularly in the areas of vocabulary development and classroom engagement (see Graph 1). The highest mean score was recorded for "Interest and Engagement" ($M = 4.5$), indicating that sitcom-based instruction significantly increased students' attentiveness and enjoyment during lessons.

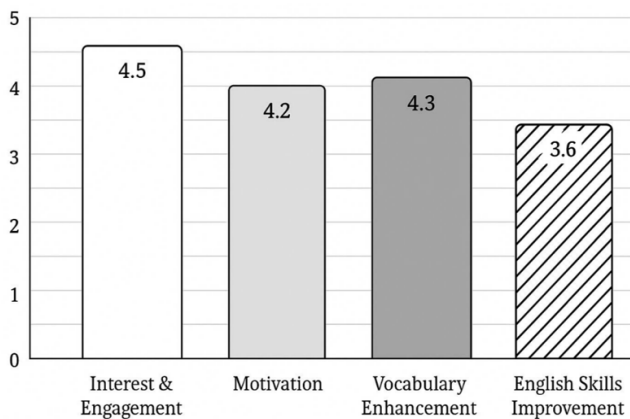


Figure 1 Bar chart showing the average mean scores across four subscales from students' questionnaire

Many students appreciated the humor, relatability, and realistic dialogues, while the addictive storyline and engaging format helped them "reduce stress" and created a "positive classroom atmosphere". Some students even admitted watching extra episodes at home out of curiosity and enjoyment, which suggests that sitcoms can also foster autonomous learning behaviors. One of the participants noted, *"I like the different family characters and their personalities. They make me want to improve my English so I won't miss anything in the dialogues,"* and *"The emotional connection with characters makes it easier for me to stay focused. I wasn't just learning English - I was following lives and stories. It gives me a reason to learn outside the class too."*

"Motivation" also scored relatively high ($M = 4.2$), suggesting that the use of entertaining and relatable videos fosters a more stimulating learning environment. Observations from the researcher also concluded that students were excited and more involved in discussions and activities such as vocabulary guessing, role-playing or shadowing. In other words, using sitcoms can be valuable in cultivating a more dynamic learning environment.

"Sitcoms make vocabulary and language learning in general more dynamic. They really boost students' motivation and engagement, as students tend to be more interested and attentive when watching entertaining contents." (Teacher A.)

One teacher stated that sitcoms "humanize" language learning, as some collocations, phrasal verbs, slangs, informal contractions and other pragmatic aspects of English are rarely covered in textbooks. They agreed that using sitcoms, or films in general, encourages students to pay attention and engage even less motivated students in the classroom. Observations from the classroom revealed that students were more actively engaged in the activities when the teacher showed them the videos of entertaining instead of traditional textbook audios. The students expressed excitement when asked to look for new vocabulary while watching the sitcom and displayed a high level of enthusiasm and concentration during the class.

4.3 Pedagogical Implications

The main findings of this study suggest several pedagogical implications for English language teaching, particularly in vocabulary development. Firstly, integrating sitcoms into classroom practice encourages more contextualized and meaningful vocabulary learning. Teachers can leverage this by designing previewing, while-viewing, and post-viewing activities that focus on vocabulary noticing, inference from context, and productive use. Sitcoms enhance learners' motivation and engagement, which are critical factors in sustained language learning. Teachers should take advantage of students' emotional involvement with the content by incorporating creative tasks such as role-plays, scene reenactments, or

vocabulary journals to reinforce retention. The responses from teachers and students also suggest that sitcoms work best when blended with traditional teaching methods and follow-up activities, thus making them a supplementary - not standalone - tool in a well-rounded curriculum. Key recommended activities include vocabulary pre-teaching, comprehension quizzes, group discussions, scene retelling, pause-and-predict, vocabulary bingo, and intonation mimicking. Responses from students suggested that teachers should “give new words before watching”, “explain the jokes after watching” and “use subtitles at first, then without subtitles”. Moreover, conducting follow-up and reflective activities afterwards can also give teachers opportunities to get insights into students’ perceptions and improve their future lesson planning. Sitcoms were praised for providing learners with the ongoing storyline and character development, which keeps learners curious and invested and leads to higher levels of attention and focus during lessons, as well as sparking interests and encouraging them to explore English media outside the classroom. However, due to the fast-paced dialogues and overlapping speeches, it was challenging for language learners to keep up with the storyline and grasp the humor of the film. Cultural references were also another obstacle that overwhelmed learners as the jokes in sitcoms often rely on cultural background knowledge or wordplay. As a result, teachers can act as a “cultural guide” that makes proper intervention, gives explanation, provides assistance to foster learners’ contextual understanding as well as facilitating their language skill development. Another limitation is the mismatch between the language level of the material and the students’ English proficiency. Some of the teachers noted that using sitcoms might only be suitable for students who are at the level of B1 or higher because of the speed of speech and vocabulary complexity. English teachers for lower level students should consider using sitcom series *Friends*, in which there is a wide range of everyday casual conversation, common expressions and idioms, the characters speak with clear pronunciation, making it easier for ESL beginners to understand the dialogues and enhance their language skills.

Finally, a limitation was the mismatch between sitcom content and textbook lessons. The researcher found it difficult to identify sitcom series that were both engaging, relatable, and aligned with the specific language aims of the textbooks. Thus, sitcoms should be used as supplementary materials only, along with other learning tools, with careful selection and targeted lesson planning. A potential strategy for teachers, educators and course designers to incorporate sitcoms in vocabulary teaching in the foreseeable future is to create their own sitcom series, in which the storyline, characters and language use are specially designed for textbook lessons. This strategy can be implemented by several AI tools, such as InVideo or *Videogen*, which could potentially create a valuable source of material for language teaching and learning.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The implementation of the sitcom significantly enhanced students’ vocabulary acquisition, as well as having a notable impact on students’ learning motivation, interests, and engagement. The positive responses from both students and teachers indicate that incorporating English sitcoms as instructional materials not only facilitates learners’ vocabulary acquisition but also creates a dynamic and learner-centered environment. Using English sitcoms as a vocabulary teaching tool appears to be generally potential and beneficial for students at NTTU, particularly those at a B1 level of proficiency or higher. Despite some challenges, such as language difficulty, fast-paced dialogue, and occasional cultural or thematic mismatches, students’ test results showed significant vocabulary gains and improved vocabulary retention after the intervention period and increased learning motivation. It is essential for educators and course designers to carefully select the sitcom content that is appropriate with learners’ language levels, cultural references, and topics that align with their interests and needs. More importantly, to maximize student’s learning outcomes, teachers should design pre-, while and post-watching tasks and activities to assist students in their language reinforcement.

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Phương pháp sử dụng phim hài kịch tình huống để nâng cao việc học từ vựng tiếng Anh của sinh viên - nghiên cứu tại trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

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Tóm tắt Nghiên cứu này đánh giá hiệu quả của việc sử dụng phim hài kịch tình huống tiếng Anh nhằm nâng cao khả năng học từ vựng cho sinh viên không chuyên Anh tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành. Áp dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, bao gồm bài kiểm tra từ vựng trước và sau can thiệp, bảng khảo sát, quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, nghiên cứu đã tiến hành với 220 sinh viên trình độ B1. Kết quả kiểm tra cho thấy nhóm thực nghiệm có sự tiến bộ rõ rệt về từ vựng với điểm trung bình: 74.2 so với 63.1 của nhóm đối chứng. Bảng hỏi cũng cho thấy sinh viên có phản hồi tích cực đối với việc sử dụng phim sitcom trong lớp học. Kết quả phỏng vấn cũng mang lại những góc nhìn sâu sắc về quan điểm của giáo viên đối với việc sử dụng phim như công cụ giảng dạy, đồng thời chỉ ra một số hạn chế của phương pháp dạy từ vựng qua sitcom. Nghiên cứu kết luận rằng phim sitcom là công cụ dạy từ vựng hiệu quả và hấp dẫn khi được tích hợp hợp lý vào chương trình giảng dạy.

Từ khóa Phim hài kịch tình huống, Phương pháp dạy từ vựng, Học tiếng Anh, Sinh viên đại học

