



## **The Impact of the Subtitling Task on Vocabulary Learning of Iranian EFL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This study reports on the effectiveness of the subtitling task as a tool for increasing the vocabulary knowledge in Iranian EFL learners carried out at Shamim Arghavan Language Academy in Shiraz, Iran. The participants were 40 low intermediate EFL students between the ages of 20 and 25 both male and female (Level B1 of CEFR). They were assigned either subtitling practice (experimental group) or writing and oral comprehension tasks (control group). Both groups practiced for a total of thirty two hours (8 weeks, 4 hours each). All the participants took a pre-test to ensure the target words were unknown. After the experiment, immediate and delayed post-tests were administered. As the results showed, the subtitling condition caused a more significant L2 vocabulary retention compared to the non-subtitling condition. The findings contribute to teachers of language skills and syllabus designers.

**Key words:** vocabulary learning, subtitling task, oral comprehension task, writing task

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there has been an increasing research interest in the field of Audiovisual Translation (AVT) and its many applications: subtitling, audio description, live-subtitling and dubbing. Subtitling is definitely one of the most studied AVT modes from theory to practice, not only for the professional practice and training but also for literacy and language learning (Lertola, 2010).

Research on the creation of subtitles by FL learners and its use as a teaching tool is still restricted but recent studies show encouraging results on the use of intra-lingual and inter-lingual subtitling practice and its pedagogical benefits (Williams and Thorne 2000; Sokoli 2006; Bravo 2008; Talaván 2010). The benefits of the subtitling practice have been also recognized to be effective in translator training (Neves 2004; Incalcaterra McLoughlin 2009).

The current study investigates the impact of the subtitling task on vocabulary acquisition in Iranian EFL learners. This study can be defined as quasi-experimental, due to the presence of both experimental and control groups carried out at Shamim Arghavan Language Academy in Shiraz, Iran during 2014-2015.

The result of this study will be primarily helpful for EFL learners who are into finding different ways of learning vocabulary, particularly those who can take advantage of subtitling task which is done through authentic videos.

EFL teachers who are after various novel ways of teaching vocabulary to their students can also benefit from subtitling task. Thus, studying this variable with regard to vocabulary teaching and learning strategies would yield beneficial results to both learners and teachers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The theoretical basis of this study is inspired by Cognitive Theory and its integration with Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Two important hypotheses are taken into account in this framework: first, learners must be regarded as active participants in the learning process; second, methods of information processing and factors such as, memory, intelligence and cognitive styles all contribute to successful learning of a second language.

Benavent and Peñemaría (2011, p. 89) argue that authentic material is material produced by native speakers for native speakers and not with pedagogical matters in mind and that it presents the target language in a naturalistic environment, while Tomlinson (2012) defines authentic material as something that is “produced in order to communicate rather than to teach” (p. 162).

According to Krashen’s input hypothesis, people can acquire a second language “only if they obtain comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985, p. 4). In fact, “authentic videos can be difficult for the average student, but they can understand the language with the help of subtitles, either by creating them or by having them already visible on the screen” (Talaván, 2010, p. 295).

Translation being beneficial as a language learning technique has been the topic of several discussions over the years (Cook, 2001) but now it is considered a valuable resource. The present study is designed according to the Translation phases theorized by Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) which are considered regarding the subtitling practice. The two researchers note that natural translation goes through four phases: understanding the vocabulary in the original text, understanding the message in the original language, reformulating the message in the target language, and evaluating the adequacy of the produced text.

Taking a couple of empirical backgrounds, Lertola (2010) conducted a study on the effects of the subtitling task on incidental vocabulary acquisition. The study applied

both qualitative and quantitative methods. The population in her study included sixteen students (Level A2 of CEFR) of Italian as a foreign language. She made two hypotheses. The results of her analysis confirmed the first hypothesis: both conditions i.e. subtitling and non-subtitling resulted in retention of new L2 vocabulary compared to the pre-task performance. Regarding the second hypothesis, it was confirmed that the *subtitling condition* led to a more significant L2 incidental vocabulary acquisition compared to the *non-subtitling condition*.

Raine (2012) sought to evaluate the effectiveness of subtitled authentic videos as means of increasing depth of vocabulary knowledge. Low intermediate level Japanese learners of English were shown an authentic video subtitled in four different modes (intra-lingual, inter-lingual, dual and no subtitles) to see if they were able to incidentally learn the meanings of six target words appearing in the video. A questionnaire was also administered to determine whether the students felt they were able to improve their knowledge of English Vocabulary from watching the video, whether the content of the video was interesting, and whether the Subtitles were easy to read. Although the majority of students were not able to learn the meanings of the target words from watching the video, two exceptional cases showed that doing so was not impossible. Additionally, members of the inter-lingual group felt most able to learn vocabulary from watching the video, and also found the subtitles easier to read than any other group. The intra-lingual subtitle group was the only group not to find the content of the video interesting.

In Neuman and Koskinen's (1992) study, it was found that young learners of English could incidentally learn vocabulary from watching subtitled English language videos. Similarly, in d'Ydewalle & Van de Poel's (1999) study, young learners of French and Danish were able to learn vocabulary from captioned videos, however they didn't pay any attention to the language before or during the video viewing. In a study conducted by Koolstra & Beentjes (1999), even when the videos weren't captioned, children told to 'just watch' authentic videos were still able to acquire new foreign language vocabulary.

Another study by Bisson et al. (2014) suggests that participants spend time considering both the visual images and the subtitles, make use of both channels. Subtitles, whether in the L1 (also called inter-lingual) or in the L2 (intra-lingual subtitles), in an auditory context are more facilitative, with experiments showing controversial results depending on the aspect of language being tested and the age and level of proficiency of the subjects.

In Aurstad's (2013) study, which provided information about the role of subtitled audiovisual material in second language acquisition, it was found that only short term effects of the subtitles predicted better performance in the comprehension questionnaire. No effects of the subtitles were found in the word definition task and the lexical decision task, indicating that there were no long term effects of the subtitles in the experiment.

Furthermore, Zarei and Rashvand (2011) differentiating between verbatim and non-verbatim subtitles as well as between native and target language subtitles, found that native language subtitles, whether verbatim or non-verbatim, were mainly applicable in terms of vocabulary production. They also argued that non-verbatim subtitles were more facilitating in terms of vocabulary comprehension regardless of whether they were in the native or target language.

More particularly, the present research will answer the following research question:

How will exposure to new words through authentic video material and its translation for subtitling, i.e. the subtitling and non-subtitling conditions, affect FL vocabulary learning?

## METHOD

### Participants

The subjects were 40 low intermediate EFL students between the ages of 20 and 25 both male and female (Level B1 of CEFR) who enrolled in the sixth-level of English conversation at Shamim Arghavan Language Academy. Students were assigned to two groups according to their class schedule; this resulted in 20 students in the experimental group (EG) and 20 in the control Group (CG). At the beginning of the term in October 2014, students took the Oxford Placement Test, which showed that they were at CEFR Level B1. An initial questionnaire was also given to find out the students' background as well as TV-watching habits, in terms of subtitled or dubbed material and their previous learning experiences; the questionnaire contained eight closed-ended questions. The questionnaire shows that 85% of the participants studied a third language; 86% of the students watched FL movies, 52% of those frequently watched subtitled movies and 24% frequently watched both dubbed and subtitled movies. Moreover, 58% of the participants had previous translation experience and 87% of them believed that translation helps language learning. Finally, 54% had experienced audiovisual material in the FL class and most of them (94%) believed that audiovisual material helps language learning.

The questionnaire of students' background and TV-watching habits was expert validated by 2 university instructors. Table 1 shows the reliability of the questionnaire which was checked through Cronbach's alpha.

**Table 1.** Reliability estimate for the questionnaire of students' background and TV-watching habits

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.952	8

As can be seen in Table 1, the reliability of the questionnaire of students' background and TV-watching habits equals .952 which was a satisfactory value.

## Instruction

The EG performed a subtitling task from English (L2) into Persian (L1) of a short video clip from a contemporary English movie, while the CG did task-based activities (oral comprehension and L2 writing) on the same video clip. The experiment was conducted over eight weeks, 4 hours per week (see Table 2 for the experimental design).

The pre-viewing activity was common for both groups; during the first and second weeks, in order to have a brief conversation, the video clip was presented to the students using images and the movie title. Then students perceived situations as a whole. The video clip was watched three times: after the first showing of the video clip with no audio, students were asked to say what was happening in the video. They paid attention to extra-linguistic elements which allowed them to predict what could happen next in terms of language used; that was followed by the second watching of the video clip with audio, and group discussion was encouraged in order to test the previous hypotheses.

In the third and fourth weeks, the EG watched the movie scene again with the transcription, and concentrated on understanding the message in the original language. Then, during the last 4 weeks (last 16 hours), the EG students translated the transcript from English into Persian. Finally, the translated text was imported in a subtitling software along with the video clip, and students matched their individual subtitles with the video.

During their second 8 hours, the CG watched the scene of the movie again without the transcription, then performed task-based activities aimed at oral comprehension. In the last eight hours, students conducted task-based activities focusing on oral comprehension and writing. All the task-based activities required students to watch the video clip.

**Table 2.** Experiment design

<b>Weeks/Hours</b>	<b>Experimental Group</b>	<b>Control Group</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> &amp; 2<sup>nd</sup> weeks (1<sup>st</sup> 8 hours)</b>	Pre-viewing activity; Watch the video the first time with no audio, hypothesis; Watch the video the second time with audio, confirmation of hypothesis.	
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> &amp; 4<sup>th</sup> weeks (2<sup>nd</sup> 8 hours)</b>	Watch the video a third time with dialogue transcript; Comprehension.	Watch the video again; Task based activities (Oral comprehension).
<b>5<sup>th</sup> &amp; 6<sup>th</sup> weeks (3<sup>rd</sup> 8 hours)</b>	Translation/Subtitling.	Task based activities (Oral comprehension & Writing).
<b>7<sup>th</sup> &amp; 8<sup>th</sup> weeks (4<sup>th</sup> 8 hours)</b>	Subtitling	Task based activities (Writing)

As Table 2 shows, the experiment was conducted over eight weeks, 4 hours per week. The activities assigned to both experimental and control groups are briefly shown during the eight weeks (32 hours).

### Testing Procedure

All participants took a pre-test 10 days before the experiment, in order to ensure the target words (TWs) were unknown; of course, students did not know they were going to be tested again on the target items. Immediate and delayed post-tests were administered after the treatment; the immediate post-test was given to both groups at the end of the activity i.e. in the eighth hour, and the delayed post-test was given 10 days after the immediate post-test. Pre-test and post-test were modeled on the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) (Wesche and Paribakht, 1996); the pre-test contained 30 TWs; the immediate and delayed post-tests were the same and the 30 TWs were included.

The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) is a 5-point self-report scale developed by Wesche & Paribakht (1996) that allows students to indicate how well they know items of vocabulary. It measures small gains in knowledge in order to compare the effectiveness of different vocabulary instructional techniques. The VKS utilizes the idea of vocabulary depth, the idea that there are many different aspects to knowing a word and that vocabulary acquisition means gradually building up more extensive knowledge of items. The VKS thus allows students to indicate partial knowledge of items, which allows a finer measurement of vocabulary gains.

As far as the validity of the scale was concerned, it was expert validated. Three university lecturers gave their feedback on the scale. The reliability of this test used for both pre-test and post-test was estimated using Cronbach's alpha (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Reliability estimate for Vocabulary Knowledge Scale

Exam Session	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
Pre	.82	30
Post	.85	30

As indicated in Table 3, the reliability of the total test was high for both pre-test and post-test administrations.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 4 the previous values for the two groups are compared. The only statistically significant difference between the groups is at the post-delayed test, where the p-value of 0.0420 is lower than 0.05, that is, the standard significance level that is being used ( $\alpha=0.05$ ). The nonparametric Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test was used because the sample was not always normally distributed. However, a student t-test confirms similar

results. Therefore, it has been confirmed that the subtitling condition leads to a more significant L2 vocabulary acquisition compared to the non-subtitling condition.

**Table 4.** Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test for Experimental Group vs. Control Group

<b>Experimental Group vs. Control Group</b>	<b>p-value (Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test)</b>
Pre-test	0.1230
Post-immediate	0.1180
Post-delayed	0.0420

As Table 4 shows, the significant difference between the groups is only at the post-delayed test, where subtitling task showed to be more significant than oral comprehension and writing tasks.

This piece of research aimed at examining the impact of the subtitling task on vocabulary learning in Iranian EFL Learners. In order to answer the question, the 40 participants (EFL students) were divided into two groups of 20, namely experimental group and control groups. The EG were assigned the subtitling practice while the CG exercised oral comprehension and writing tasks. The nonparametric Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test was used to report on the differences between the results of the three tests given to the two groups as the values for the two groups are compared.

According to Neuman and Koskinen's (1992) study, young learners of English could incidentally learn vocabulary from watching captioned English language videos which shows congruence with the findings of the present study. Another study conducted by Koolstra & Beentjes (1999) showed that children who just watched authentic videos, could still learn new FL vocabulary, even when the videos had no subtitles which is again in line with some phases of the experimental design of the present research.

In Lertola's (2010) study, where Italian and English were treated as L2 and L1 respectively, the effect of the subtitling task on incidental vocabulary acquisition outperformed the non-subtitling task which almost totally correlates with the findings of the present research except for some subtle differences. Therefore, educators really need to know that subtitling task could be used as a helpful technique in teaching vocabulary.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study may lead to some general conclusions regarding the subtitling task. The aims of this research were to uncover the participants' English language video viewing habits, establish their subtitling abilities when viewing for English vocabulary learning purposes, and determine whether the participants could incidentally learn the meanings of the target words appearing in the treatment videos by subtitling task other than oral comprehension and writing tasks.

According to the questionnaire of TV- viewing habits, it was shown that most of the participants studied a third language, watched FL movies, believed that translation helps language learning and believed that audiovisual material helps language learning. Moreover, around half of them frequently watched subtitled movies, had previous translation experience and had experienced audiovisual material in the FL class. Finally, quite a few of them frequently watched both dubbed and subtitled movies.

The results of this small study indicate that statistically significant results emerge only at the post-delayed point, i.e. the subtitling condition caused a more significant L2 vocabulary retention compared to the non-subtitling condition. In other words, the subtitling task proved to be positively influential in vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL students rather than other tasks such as oral comprehension and writing tasks.

In sum, this research supports the positive results obtained in recent studies on the use of the subtitling practice as an effective pedagogical tool in the EFL classroom context, and it greatly encourages further research on the topic.

The present study could be said to suffer from some limitations. First of all, the time constraints given in order to collect the data were very limiting, and therefore, the participants of the present study came from EFL pre-intermediate students in one academy. This brought the researcher to the limitation of using a sample of convenience. Next, the studied participants were all adults. Therefore, the impact of the same variable could be checked on other age groups such as teenagers. Finally, students were homogenized through Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Probably, other means of placing the participants at equal levels could be applied to the present design.

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