The Effect of Watching English Movies with Standard Subtitles on EFL Learners' Content and Vocabulary Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper is mainly concerned on studying the impact of English movies with subtitles on content comprehension of English movies and vocabulary comprehension. Forty -four students in Arman Garayan Language Institute were selected from two intact classes of audiovisual and Films Translation course. A movie named *Dangerous knowledge* was selected based on the content and level of difficulty of the language. First, both classes watched the same movie, but class 1 watched it with English subtitles and class 2 without subtitles. After watching the movie, the participants answered the relevant multiple choice vocabulary and content comprehension questions. The data gathered were subjected to the statistical procedure of paired samples *t*-test. The results showed that subtitles had a positive impact on content comprehension of English movies. It can be concluded that the participants comprehend the subtitled movie better than the one without subtitle. However, the subtitles did not have an effect on participants' vocabulary comprehension.

Keywords: English movies, subtitles, content comprehension, vocabulary comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Captioned video is increasingly used in foreign language classes, most likely because of the recent accessibility of authentic videos which, if not already captioned, can be easily captioned by teachers and curriculum developers using software such as Adobe Premier, iMovie, or ViewPoint. Many universities, overwhelmed by increased interest in foreign language learning (Welles, 2004), are turning to online foreign language course offerings, normally by implementing hybrid or blended-instruction courses, in which part of the instruction is in the classroom and part is conducted independently online. Such classes incorporate more online and automated content, which often includes captioned videos. It is especially true for language programs such as Arabic and Chinese,

mostly because it is difficult to find enough qualified instructors and because videos are a good resource for presenting native speaker voices. Using films to teach a foreign language can help motivate students and remove some of the anxiety of

not knowing the language. However, they are not just entertainment; they are also a valuable language teaching tool. The use of movies as a teaching tool is not new in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. Movies not only allow the teacher to introduce variety and reality into the classroom, but discussions based on movie content allow students to bring their own background knowledge and experiences into the discussion. Furthermore, almost everyone finds watching films pleasurable and enjoys talking about them. From a motivational perspective, it seems that movies are a perfect choice for use in a language learning classroom. However, the burden is on the teacher to find ways to make movies an educationally valuable tool for instruction. This medium provides not only rich aural input, but also, the use of subtitles can expose learners to visual input as well. It is the latter type of input which this study will address. As Kusumaras dyati (2005) states, teachers play such movies without subtitles and ask learners to view them while attempting to comprehend the conversations spoken in the target language. However, it is also possible to present movies with subtitles in the native language. With advances in technology, options of how one can watch movies become numerous. Not only can the sound and images be adopted, but the subtitles of various languages are also called for assisting comprehension and language learning.

Subtitles in any language are wonderful tools that let people enjoy films from other cultures and countries, but for language learners, subtitles might offer a new path to language learning and comprehension. The National Center for Technology Innovative and Center for Implementing Technology in Education (2010) asserts that for students who are learning English (or another language), subtitled movies can have some potential benefits. The use of subtitled movies has been proved to be more effective at improving overall listening comprehension than non-subtitled movies.

Students who watch subtitled movies to learn a foreign language have shown improvement in reading and listening comprehension, word comprehension, decoding skills, motivation and vocabulary acquisition.

The addition of subtitled movies to classroom instruction has a further benefit of shifting watching typical classroom movies from a picture-viewing activity to a reading activity, supplying struggling readers with additional reading practice. In EFL classroom, the use of foreign language subtitles projected on the screen during viewings of English-spoken movies is common. However, DVD technology now provides the powerful function of selecting various subtitles that can facilitate the listening comprehension of learners with different levels of proficiency and enhance their motivation toward learning the target language.

Objectives and significance of the study

The present paper is aimed at investigating the effect of subtitles on content comprehension of English movies and vocabulary comprehension of Iranian EFL students. It is mainly concerned at finding answers to the following research questions:

- Do subtitles have any considerable effects on content comprehension of English movies?
- Do subtitles have any considerable effects on L2 vocabulary comprehension?

As King (2002) states "films provide more pedagogical options and are a rich resource of naturally motivating materials for learners." When learners are exposed to films, they can learn some words and phrases used in the films and ultimately improve their target language. Various types of films, such as soap operas, science-fiction, comic, horror and romantic movies, catch individuals' interests and arouse learners' motivation. Watching films is among learners' favorite activities. As learners who lack interest in learning a foreign language often fail to make progress, films of various types that arouse different individual's interests can be adopted as language learning materials. However, the way one watches movies has a particular effect on one's learning. One way is watching movies with subtitles either in L1 or L2.

By using L2 subtitled movies, students can learn how to pronounce many words. Moreover, subtitles can strengthen the understanding of English context-bound expressions and help learners acquire new vocabulary and idioms. Furthermore, subtitles can motivate learners to study English outside the classroom context by watching English movies, listening to the original dialogues. Finally, it allows learners to follow the story and events easily; in other words, to develop comprehension. Some researchers compared the presence and absence of subtitles. One study revealed that the learners interacted more frequently when the subtitles were provided in the listening class (Grgurovic & Hegelheimer, 2007). Few empirical studies have been conducted to test the effectiveness of subtitles on content comprehension of movies in Iran. However, the case of vocabulary is different;

There are a number of studies that investigated the effectiveness of subtitles on vocabulary comprehension. Therefore, this study could have significant implications for both teachers and students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The effect of subtitles on language learning

Subtitles allow an accented language to become more intelligible for any viewer. But when those subtitles are in your native language, your understanding is purely meaning-based if you don't understand the word, you read and process the subtitles in your native language. But when the subtitles are in the language of the film, you are able to hear the new accent while reading the text.

Simultaneously hearing and reading foreign words helps incorporate what you hear into your phonetic understanding of the language, so you can understand future words as they come up and familiarize yourself with the sounds of your new language.

There are significant numbers of research publications on the efficacy of subtitles and captions; nevertheless, to be concise, examples discussed will be limited. In a study conducted by Neuman and Koskinen (1992), the theory of "comprehensible input" was investigated.

129 seventh and eighth graders, who were mostly advanced learners, were assigned into different groups. The study was conducted in 12 weeks with the students watching nine 5 to 8 minute segments of a science production. The result of the study revealed a significant gain for the captioned group compared with the traditional watching TV group, and the reading while listening group. To obtain the optimal results, a set of gradually more complex tests was used. The outcome of the study showed that the captioned TV group performed consistently better than the non-captioned group. Various studies have investigated the different aspects of the effect of subtitling on second/foreign language learning. Zanon (2006) investigated the contribution of computer-based subtitling to language learning and concluded that subtitling could motivate learners to appreciate the huge amount of content of the film that does not reach the audience when it is presented to them dubbed. In the same vein, Kusumaras dyati (2005) studied the effect of subtitled movie DVDs and found them an effective teaching device to develop the EFL learners' listening skills.

Hegelheimer (2007) used a multimedia listening activity containing a video of an academic lecture to compare the effect of second language subtitles and lecture transcripts on the comprehension of the lecture. It turned out that students preferred subtitles and used them more than the transcript. Moreover, to study the effect of subtitles on film understanding, Grignon, Lavaur, & Blanc (2005) compared three versions of a film sequence (that is, dubbed, subtitled, and original versions). They found that the dubbed and subtitled versions lead to better performance than the original version.

Effect of subtitles on vocabulary learning and comprehension

It is now commonplace to say that audiovisual material, with its rich context, is a powerful instructional tool known to have a motivational and affective impact on viewers, which in turn facilitates auditory processing (Baltova, 1994: 510-1). In addition, film, television, video, and now digitized images usually expose students to larger amounts of authentic oral language input, which in the long run should improve listening comprehension in face-to-face interaction with native speakers.

A number of studies have more specifically focused on the effect of subtitles on vocabulary learning. Bird and Williams (2002) conducted two studies examining the effect of single modality (sound or text) and bi-modal (sound and text) presentation on

word learning. Both experiments led to the conclusion that subtitling can improve the learning of novel words.

Indeed, audiovisual media are closer to real life because visual clues and context make it possible to "view" the message as much as listen to it (Baltova, 1994: 508). As a number of researchers have shown, listening comprehension is an "active cognitive process" involving "speculating and predicting" rather than individual sound deciphering because incomplete acoustic input often necessitates filling in missing information (Noblitt, 1995). Comprehension is also influenced by visual information and cultural knowledge (for example interpreting facial expressions), as lip-reading research has demonstrated (Baltova, 1994).

In a study, Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) investigated whether children in two primary school grades in the Netherlands would learn English vocabulary through watching a television program with an English soundtrack and Dutch subtitles. They concluded that vocabulary acquisition was highest in the subtitled condition. Two hundred and forty-six Dutch children in Grades 4 and 6 (aged 9+ and 11+) watched a 15-minute documentary having been assigned to one of three experimental conditions: (i) program about grizzly bears with an English soundtrack and Dutch subtitles, (ii) the same program with an English soundtrack but without subtitles, and (iii) a Dutch language television program about prairie dogs (a control condition to establish a baseline of English vocabulary knowledge). These grades were chosen as English classes start in Grade 5, so in Grade 4, they would have had no formal English lessons, while in Grade 6, they would have already had English on a regular basis.

Vocabulary scores for those watching with subtitles were higher than for those watching without subtitles and scores in this latter group were higher than those in the control group. Grade 6 children performed better than those in Grade 4. More words were recognized after watching the subtitled documentary than the non-subtitled version, and, again, Grade 6 children

Outperformed Grade 4. Children with a high frequency of watching subtitled programs at home had significantly higher English vocabulary scores than children with a low frequency and medium frequency of watching subtitled programs. The findings confirm the many anecdotal accounts that children can acquire elements of a foreign language through watching subtitled television programs. Vocabulary acquisition was also found in children who watched the condition without Dutch subtitles. The findings provided further evidence that the subtitles do not distract from hearing the words.

Effect of subtitles on movie comprehension

Some may still argue that the improved listening comprehension resulting from the specific context of a captioned audiovisual program does not necessarily prove students' ability to better comprehend new scenes without captions. To test how subtitling affected listening ability regardless of semantic information, so as to assess recognition memory in relation to sound alone, Bird and Williams focused on the

implicit and explicit learning of spoken words and non-words. Implicit learning pertained to auditory word recognition, while explicit learning referred to the intentional recollection and conscious retention of aural stimuli. A first experiment with 16 English native and 16 advanced nonnative speakers demonstrated that subjects in the captioned condition were better able to implicitly retain the phonological information they had just processed. They also showed superior explicit recognition memory when asked to aurally identify words that had been presented in a previous phase. A second experiment with 24 advanced ESL students found that captioning had a beneficial effect on word recognition and implicit learning of non-word targets paired with two rhyming and two non-rhyming aural cues, especially in the rhyme condition. Thus, captioning clearly aids with the phonological visualization of aural cues in the minds of listeners, who become more certain of ambiguous input, can more accurately form a memory trace of the words, and can later more easily identify identical sounds without textual support (Bird & Williams, 2002).

Hinkin, Michael (2009) Performed Two studies to investigate the effects of subtitled movies on the comprehension of movie content. Both investigations involved the presentation of 10-minute movie clips from A Few Good Men and See No Evil, Hear No Evil. Participants completed three types of multiple-choice comprehension questions for each movie, including: pictorial-only questions, verbal-only questions and combined-information

questions. Experiment 1 was designed to investigate the difference between levels of comprehension, when verbal information was presented only in the participants' native language (i.e. English soundtrack and/or subtitles). Results of Experiment 1 indicate that participants performed significantly better on verbal-only and combined-information questions when their native language was present in the subtitles as opposed to the soundtrack. These findings confirm previous findings that reading verbal information in subtitles is more efficient than listening to the soundtrack.

Comparison of performance on the pictorial-only questions across presentation formats in Experiment 1 showed participants in the English soundtrack with no subtitles condition performed significantly better than all other conditions. Although Experiment 1 provides a basic understanding of how native language soundtracks and subtitles influence comprehension of movies, subtitled media are primarily used when viewing a movie with verbal information from a foreign language. Experiment 2 built on the results of Experiment 1 by incorporating an unfamiliar language (i.e. French). The question sets used in Experiment 1 were also used in Experiment 2; however, two French vocabulary tests were also used in Experiment 2 to measure incidental foreign language acquisition. Consistent with the results of Experiment 1, participants performed significantly better on verbal-only and combined-information questions when their native language was in the subtitles. This finding extended the conclusion that native language verbal information presented visually (i.e. subtitles) yields better performance on questions requiring verbal cues than native language verbal information presented orally (i.e. soundtrack) to foreign language material. Comparison

of performance on the pictorial-only questions across presentation formats in Experiment 2 showed no significant differences. Comparison across the two experiments reflected a distraction effect associated with the presence of a foreign language. Performance on the French vocabulary tests was very poor across all conditions and yielded no significant differences, suggesting that the tasks may have been too difficult.

A study by Hayati and Mohmedi (2009) represented a preliminary effort to empirically examine the efficacy of subtitled movie on listening comprehension of intermediate English as Foreign Language students. To achieve this purpose, out of a total of 200 intermediate students, 90 were picked based on a proficiency test. The material consisted of six episodes (approximately 5 minutes each) of a DVD entitled *Wild Weather*. The students viewed only one of the three treatment conditions: English subtitles, Persian subtitles, no subtitles. After each viewing session, six sets of multiple-choice tests were administered to examine listening comprehension rates. The results revealed that the English subtitles group performed at a considerably higher level than the Persian subtitles group, which in turn performed at a substantially higher level than the no subtitle group on the listening test.

To summarize, most of the studies mentioned so far, seem to confirm that subtitles can improve language learning, vocabulary acquisition and content comprehension.

METHOD

Participants

This study involved 44 students aged between 20-27 selected from higher level students in Arman Garayan Language Institute. They were both male and female. Common to all of the participants was at least six years of exposure to EFL instruction during which they had learned English. With regard to nationality and language background, no difference existed among the participants; all were Iranians and their mother tongue was Persian. Furthermore, none of the participants had lived in any English speaking countries.

Materials

A movie named *Dangerous knowledge* was selected for this investigation. This movie was selected based on the content to be interesting, the level of difficulty of the language to be appropriate for the participants. This movie is about four of the most brilliant mathematicians of all time, Georg Cantor, Ludwig Boltzmann, Kurt Gödel and Alan Turing, their genius, their tragic madness and their ultimate suicides. It wants to show Knowledge is not dangerous unless you have some reasons to hide it or hide from it which is perhaps an appropriate mode and epitaph of our 'modern' time. There are certainties to knowledge... you need only change your perspective.

Instruments

Two different tests were used for each movie to collect the data. A set of ten multiple choice comprehension questions and another ten multiple choice vocabulary questions were developed. These are four-choice questions and were extracted from the movie . For the comprehension questions, first the researcher had to watch the whole movies to comprehend the theme and the subject. Then, she watched them carefully part by part to pose the comprehension four-choice questions. The advanced vocabulary was chosen from the movies for the vocabulary questions. Some of the sentences for the related vocabulary were extracted from Cambridge and Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary. To estimate the reliability of the tests, SPSS was used. The reliability for the comprehension and vocabulary items (subtitle and without) was calculated as .756 which is acceptable for a test of this kind.

Procedure

Data Collection

The participants were informed about the research project before the administration so as to stir motivation and interest. First, both classes watched the same movie, but group 1 first watched it with English subtitles and the second group without subtitles. The movie was presented in one session. Then, after watching the movie, the participants of both classes received tests of vocabulary and content comprehension. After the movie was played, students received a set of twenty multiple choice comprehension and vocabulary questions related to the movie, they had 15 minutes to answer the questions.

Scoring and Data analysis

Data in this study consisted of the answers to the multiple choice comprehension and vocabulary comprehension questions. The participants received one point for each item answered correctly. The data gathered were subjected to the statistical procedures of SPSS. First the scores were computed. Each participant had two scores, one for the movie with subtitle, and the other for the one without subtitle. Then, these two scores were categorized into four groups, including comprehension / vocabulary, and subtitle / without subtitle. In order to compare each participant's grade in one subcategory to their grade in another subcategory paired samples *t-test* was run to calculate the significance of the difference between the means of the two sets of scores. The four categories were total scores, comprehension with subtitle scores and comprehension without subtitle scores, vocabulary with subtitle scores and vocabulary without subtitle scores. In the following chapter the results of the analysis will be presented and discussed.

Design of the Study

The design of this research is one-shot case study; since, there was only one group without control one and also no pretest was run.

RESULTS

To understand the participants' performance on the experimental task of the study, the statistical program of SPSS was used. Paired samples *t-test* was run to calculate the significance of the difference between the means of two sets of scores among three categories as presented below:

Table 1. *t* values for the difference between the means of participants' two sets of scores

	Mean difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 total	1.02273	2.475	43	.017
Pair 2 comp (+sub)- comp (-sub)	1.47727	4.650	43	.000
Pair 3 vocab (+sub)- vocab (-sub)	-.45455	-1.690	43	.098

According to Table 1 the value of *t* for total vocabulary and comprehension questions was statistically significant (*t* = 2.475, *p*< .017). It means that there is a significant difference between the two means. In other words, participants answered the subtitled movie questions better than the questions of the movie without subtitle. Based on this table the value of *t* for comprehension was more statistically significant than total (*t* = 4.650, *p*< .000). These results showed that participants comprehended the subtitled movie better than the one without subtitle. However, there isn't any significant difference between the two means for vocabulary.

Subtitle and without subtitle scores, comprehension with subtitle scores and comprehension without subtitle scores, vocabulary with subtitle scores and vocabulary without subtitle scores.

DISCUSSION

The functional-notional and communicative approaches most widely used today in language teaching fit into the comprehensible input model since they encourage active understanding and help students organize new information into meaningful units. Current methodology, however, tends to discourage any use of the first language, although recent research in language and memory processing shows that selective recourse to translation can also lead to cognitive benefits. In particular, the effort of establishing paired equivalents through translation and the use of a redundant and interconnected network of encoded propositions lead to greater elaborateness of processing, which usually results in better recognition and recall.

The main effect obtained is that the participants performed better when the movie was played with subtitles. This includes total vocabulary and comprehension questions. The second row of this table deals with comprehension questions; in this row the results are better than the total. It can be said that the participants did actually perform better on comprehending the English movie with subtitle than the on without subtitle. However, there isn't any significant difference between watching a movie with subtitle and without for understanding the vocabulary of the movies. Therefore, our participants were more successful in comprehending the English movie with subtitles than without subtitling, since the written forms of the dialogues were presented to them. However, in

the case of vocabulary viewing, movie with subtitle had no particular effect, due to the fact that learning vocabulary from subtitled movies may need watching the film more than once.

CONCLUSION

This research on watching English movies with subtitles has shown that films are not only a means of motivation to entertain students, but also they could assist learners to comprehend the language as spoken in various accents. That is, EFL learners in general are exposed to the authentic language uttered by people with different accents in various parts of the United States and United Kingdom. Therefore, it is hard for learners to hear every single word, because they are used to the Standard English. Furthermore, this is a useful practice to get acquainted with different accents of English around the world, and subtitles are a perfect choice to assist the comprehension of the movies.

However, in this research subtitles had no effect on L2 vocabulary comprehension, due to the fact that expose to the film once had probably no effect on vocabulary learning. Since, as Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) claimed, for learning vocabulary from subtitled movies students have to watch them with high frequency. It can be assumed that subtitled movies could have an effect on vocabulary comprehension if learners watch the movie more than once. Viewing the movie twice or more may help students recognize vocabulary and they may learn new expressions and idioms.

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APPENDIX

Part A: Comprehension

1. Who was Georg Cantor?

a) A philosopher   c) A mathematician b) A physicist d) A scientist

2. Cantor started the revolution by asking the question ……. .

a) What is infinity?   c) Is there any infinity?

b) How big is infinity?   d) How can infinity be proved?

3. What is Cantor's last major publication about?

a) Set theory c) Continuum hypothesis b) Infinite theory   d) Modern mathematics

4. What did Cantor find after his first publication?

a) Infinity is a vague number without end.

b) He could not prove continuum hypothesis. c) Set theory is not true.

d) He could add and subtract infinity.

5. When was the happiest and most inspired period of Cantor's life?

When …….

a) his theory came into publication.

b) he discovered there was a vast mathematics of the infinite.

c) he came to the Alps to meet a mathematician.

d) he proved the continuum hypothesis.

6. Where did Cantor spend his entire professional life?

a) In the asylum   c) In the lecture theater in the university b) In the Alps   d) In his hometown, Hallie

7. What was Cantor's dream?

a) To prove continuum hypothesis

b) To receive an invitation to one of the great universities c) To publish his work

d) To meet his friend in the Alps

8. What did his friend and teacher, Kronecker, say about Cantor?

He said he was ……… .

a) a corrupter of youth   c) the father of mathematics b) a math sicker   d) a great scientist

9. What is the most precious possession of Cantor's?

a) His publication   c) His continuum hypothesis b) His father's letter d) His set theory

10. Which statement is not true about Cantor?

a) He proved the continuum hypothesis.

b) He worked on the continuum hypothesis for the rest of his life. c) He had the musical talent.

d) He never fully recovered.

Part B: Vocabulary

1. Most of the people are in the ………. of happiness in their lives; some will reach it but others won't. a) realm   b) tinge   c) pursuit   d) haste

2. When questioned by the police, the suspect, who had actually committed the crime, gave his questioners ………., insubstantial answer.

a) elusive   b) reticent   c) furtive   d) rudimentary

3. I think I managed to ………. the main points of the lecture.

a) detain   b) grasp   c) deter   d) glance

4. They showed obvious <u>hostility</u> towards their new neighbors.

a) hospitality b) hatred   c) havoc   d) humility

5. The government is planning to ………. a bench marking scheme to guide consumers.

a) excel   b) launch   c) abolish   d) alter

6. Most of the students living in the dormitory in Iran have many <u>adversities</u>, which they have to overcome. a) nuances   b) differences c) pretexts   d) difficulties

7. It took a lot of ……….. to stand up and criticize the chairman.

a) asperity   b) brutality   c) audacity   d) brevity

8. We are …………. affected by what happens to us in childhood.

a) interminably   b) profoundly c) indiscriminately   d) pragmatically

9. On this occasion we pay …………. to him for his achievements.

a) homicide   b) budget   c) homage   d) blunder

10. We've got a long way to go before we <u>unravel</u> the secrets of genetics.

a) abandon   b) conceal   c) reveal   d) blend