

MOVIES IN EFL CLASSROOMS: WITH OR WITHOUT SUBTITLES

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempted to investigate the possible effect of the use of English movie subtitles on the improvement of listening comprehension in EFL intermediate students at Golestan University, Iran. To achieve this goal, 45 Iranian intermediate learners from two classes were assigned into two groups of Bimodal-Subtitles and No-Subtitles. The material consisted of an authentic English movie with 10 episodes. Each episode was about 15 minutes. The participants in each group were exposed to only one of the two treatment conditions, English subtitles and no subtitles. After ten sessions a post-test was given to the learners in order to evaluate their improvement in listening comprehension. The results showed that the English subtitle group performed better than the no subtitle group on the listening test.

Keywords: movies, subtitles, listening comprehension, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly evident to EFL teachers and researchers that there is no one guaranteed teaching method and that a variety of technical and methodological resources are needed in the classroom. It is now commonplace to say that audiovisual material with its rich context is a powerful instructional tool known to have a motivational, attentional, and affective impact on viewers, which in turn facilitates auditory processing (Baltova, 1994).

Some researchers (e.g., Al-Seghayer, 2005; Brett, 1995; Egbert & Jessup, 1996) have presented strong evidence that multimedia have useful effects on language learning because of their rich and authentic comprehensible input. One way of helping EFL learners to comprehend authentic video programs while maintaining a target language learning environment is by adding English text subtitles to English videos (Vanderplank, 1988). Although all kinds of authentic materials are commonly accepted as helpful for learners, watching captioned films in English might be one of the richest ways of presenting authentic input since it is the combination of these three mediums: aural, visual and textual.

Researchers have indicated that students need to receive a great quantity of comprehensible input so as to achieve the objective of language learning when they learn a foreign or second language (Krashen, 1985). When students watch videos in a foreign language, the contribution of comprehending and connecting the foreign language and its meaning is limited if they cannot understand what they have heard. Therefore, using captions and subtitles is useful in enhancing the effectiveness of listening comprehension.

Subtitles are defined as the printed translation or the textual versions of the dialogue in films and television programs that you can read at the bottom of the screen when you are watching a foreign film (Canning-Wilson & Wallace, 2000). Zanon (2006) claims that through using subtitled films a triple connection between image, sound in one language and text which is provided normally in another sound and text are linked by translation. Subtitled films are traditionally used in beginning and intermediate classes to provide cultural information about the foreign country where the film was produced and to provide a minimal insight into the language in more advanced classes. These films are used to study both the culture and the language of the foreign country.

Zanon (2006) distinguishes three types of subtitling as follows: (1) Bimodal subtitling: from English dialogues to English subtitles; (2) Standard subtitling: from English dialogues to subtitles in the learners' mother tongue, and (3) Reversed subtitling: from dialogues in the learners' mother tongue to English subtitles.

Obviously, using subtitling from a pedagogical perspective would require accompanying tasks focused in the precise skill or issue that occupies the focal point of the lesson. In particular, subtitling as a pedagogical resource can efficiently enhance comprehension of idea units (Buck, 2001). An efficient tool to reinforce the connection between the sound and written form of the language and to build vocabulary is reading and listening at the same time.

On the other hand, listening is not considered as a word-by-word deciphering enterprise but a search for meaning. All listening involves a bit of intelligent guessing and occasionally dealing with the unforeseen (Ellis, 1994). The main goal of listening is to prepare students to understand actual speech in order to communicate in English. L2 listeners must learn to cope with *genuine* speech and *authentic* listening situation. That is, listeners must be able to understand natural English speech to meet their own needs as members of the English-speaking community (Rocque, 2008).

Listening comprehension may seem relatively straightforward to native language (L1) speakers but it is often a source of frustration for second and foreign language (L2) learners (Graham, 2006).

Listening is a key language skill, it has a crucial role in the language acquisition process, and its development is of prime concern to language teachers (Rubin, 1994). Consequently, it has been a cornerstone of many theories of second language acquisition (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Briefly, these theories posit that exposure to authentic listening and reading texts facilitates an implicit process through which new language and linguistic rules become internalized and can then be automatically reproduced (Brett, 1997).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Using videos or films as a learning resource has received a great deal of attention from researchers and has been successfully applied to various educational applications (Yang et al., 2009). Researchers (e.g., Mackey & Ho, 2008; Mayer & Moreno, 2002; Rose, 2003) have indicated that multimedia learning materials are more useful than traditional paper-based instruction. Videos which provide visual, contextual, and non-verbal input provide foreign language learners with simultaneous visual and aural stimuli which can make up for any lack of comprehension resulting from listening alone (Brett, 1995). Several previous studies (e.g., Choi & Johnson, 2007; Mackey & Ho, 2008) have also shown that such videos are highly accepted by learners during the learning process. Moreover, captions have been perceived as the most useful and efficient auxiliary for watching videos (Hsu, 1994), while videos with authentic accents have been recognized as being a good learning resource for language learners (Dahbi, 2004).

Captions and subtitles were initially used in foreign language instruction in the 1980s, and some studies (Borras & Lafayette, 1994; Danan, 2004; Garza, 1991) have confirmed that combining captions with audio-visual materials is an effective instructional method to enhance the listening and reading comprehension of a second language as learners can confirm the information they hear by way of the support provided by the captions. In other words, captions visualize the auditory information of the foreign language which the learners hear in the video (Danan, 2004). Because of such additional cognitive processing, captions and subtitles promote language comprehension (Bird & Williams, 2002).

Researchers have further indicated that videos with captions facilitate vocabulary acquisition (Plass, et al. 1998), reading (Chun & Plass, 1997), and listening comprehension (Markham & McCarthy, 2001). Opponents of the use of subtitled video in foreign/second language teaching argue that the presence of subtitles is distracting and that they slow down the development of learners' listening abilities. Proponents of subtitles, on the other hand, contend that subtitles may help develop language proficiency by enabling learners to be conscious of language that they might not otherwise understand (

Borras & Lafayette, 1994).

The first large-scale study to investigate the potential of subtitling as a pedagogical tool was conducted by Price (1983). Approximately 500 participants watched four clips with or without subtitles. Findings showed that subtitling resulted in superior comprehension independent of background, linguistic, and social variables.

Several studies concerning film subtitles have demonstrated support to the use of subtitles; however, whether to apply the first language (L1) or the target language (L2) subtitles as a better option remain unclear. Some studies (Guichon & McLornan, 2008; Stewart & Pertusa, 2004) suggested the presence of (L1) subtitles assisted learners' understanding of the target language films, while others found the (L2) subtitles more beneficial. To this end, Snyder and Colon (1988) found that foreign language students exposed to audiovisual aids performed significantly better in vocabulary and listening comprehension than students not exposed to them.

Various studies (e.g., Borrás & Lafayette, 1994; Garza, 1991) have demonstrated the positive effects of subtitling on productive skills such as a verbatim recall and retention reuse of vocabulary in the proper context, as well as communicative performance in specific oral and written communication tasks. Thus, Canning-Wilson and Wallace (2000) suggest that subtitled movies encourage learners to consciously notice new vocabulary and idioms, and as such, may have potential to facilitate vocabulary acquisition without being a distraction for learners.

When investigating learners' attitudes towards multimedia, Brett (1997) found that 86.9% of students believed that a multimedia application they were introduced to would improve their listening skills. Also, in questionnaires, participants preferred multimedia for listening over media such as video and audio (Brett, 1997). Finally, learners had better listening comprehension scores on a multimedia task than on a paper and pencil task in which the input was delivered via video and audio tapes (Brett, 1997).

Opposing this idea, Zanon (2006) argues that many viewers consider subtitles a nuisance because they cover visual information and so lessen the credibility of the film. Bird and William (2002) claim that it remains unclear whether subtitles lead to better or worse listening comprehension. They argue that although some studies suggest that subtitles have some beneficial effects, it may be that text presents the easiest path to comprehension. In other words, the improved comprehension of a video plot and a better retention of phrases and vocabulary could be due only to good reading, not improved listening comprehension.

Reese (1984) believes that subtitles either impede or have no effect on learning from new stories. He believes that the reason maybe the limitations of single-channel processing, according to which humans can attend to only one channel at a time. Switching attention from spoken text to written text impairs performance when processing demands are heavy because some information lost in the process.

To resolve the issue of the positive and negative effects of movie subtitles, the present study was conducted to answer the following research questions.

1. Do movies with English subtitles have any effect on EFL learners' listening comprehension?
2. Is there any significant difference between the experimental group watching English bimodal movies and the control group watching no subtitle movies in listening comprehension?

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Markham (1989) investigated the effects of subtitled TV upon the listening comprehension of beginner, intermediate and advanced learners of English. He used two subtitled videos on topics not known to the learners. Each group viewed both with and without Subtitle movies. He measured the participants' comprehension through multiple-choice questions based on the language of the video. Markham's data clearly showed that all three groups using the subtitles performed significantly better, he considered that ESL (English as a Second Language) students might be able to improve their listening and reading comprehension at the same time.

Hsu (1994) examined ESL students' use of help options (audio repetition, textual repetition, and the dictionary) while listening to a story delivered on the computer. Textual repetition was in the form of a transcript, which was displayed on the screen when students requested help after being unable to comprehend the spoken input. Frequencies of help function use showed that the transcript was the most often used tool followed by aural repetition and the dictionary. The participants also mentioned in questionnaires that the transcript was the most effective tool. The results showed that the amount of requests for textual help positively correlated with participants' listening comprehension scores.

Huang and Eskey (2000) investigated the effects of subtitles on the listening comprehension. They used thirty intermediate learners trained by *Family Album, USA* series. The findings revealed that the subtitled group outperformed the no-subtitled group.

Grgurovic and 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 resulted that students preferred subtitles and used them more than the transcript.

Yuksel and Tanriverdi (2009) studied listening learning through watching a video clip with and without captions. 120 intermediate-level language learners were randomly divided into the captions or no-captions group. The findings demonstrated a significant gain for both groups, but the group who watched the video clip with the captions outperformed the no-caption group.

Hayati and Mohmedi (2011) studied the effect of subtitle on listening comprehension of EFL students in Iran. The material consisted of 6 episodes of a DVD entitled "Wild Weather". The participants for this study were 90 students among 200 in intermediate level. They were divided into three groups. They viewed only one of the three treatments: English subtitles, Persian subtitles, and no subtitles. According to the result, English subtitles group showed higher level than Persian subtitles group which in turn performed at a higher level than the no subtitle group on the listening test.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effects of different types of subtitling on listening comprehension of Iranian university students. It aimed at finding answers to the following research questions:

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 45 students at Golestan University in fall 2013. Students were divided into two different groups (Bimodal and No subtitle groups), where they had to watch the same film but each one with a different subtitling option. The sample groups were male and female students ranging in age from 20 to 26 years old with the same proficiency level determined by a proficiency test.

INSTRUMENTATION

The instruments used in the research were as follows:

Proficiency Test

In order to be assured of the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups in terms of English language proficiency, a test of NELSON, series 300B, was administered before the pretest. It proved to have a reliability of 0.74. It consisted of 40 multiple-choice items consisting of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and reading. The time allotted was 40 minutes.

Listening Comprehension Pretest/Posttest

A set of 30 multiple choice listening comprehension questions in three parts which was adopted from the listening comprehension section of Barron's TOEFL (Sharpe, 2004). The reliability of the test

was 0.84 based on the Cronbach's Alpha formula.

MATERIALS

The material used in the research was one original American English DVD film. It was a kind of movie holding the capacity of showing English subtitles or none.

TREATMENT

During ten sessions the students tried to improve their listening skills by watching English movies with different subtitles (Standard, Bimodal and No subtitle). The experimental group was exposed to English movies with subtitles, while the control group watched English movies with no subtitles. The movie came in 10 units, each unit was shown in about 15 minutes. The film was shown twice in one session, in order to draw students' attention to subtitles.

PROCEDURE

In order to conduct this research, two classes of students passing general English course at Golestan University were chosen. To begin with, the two groups were given a proficiency test. Then, in order to measure the level of listening comprehension of the subjects, they were administered the pretest. Next, as treatment an original authentic movies was shown to both groups. After the treatment, the posttest was given to two groups (Bimodal and No subtitle) to judge whether or their listening comprehension improved.

Results

The data which were collected from the two classes were analyzed by SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows. The participants' overall listening comprehension knowledge as shown by their scores from the pre and posttests is presented in Table1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Both Groups' Performances on the Pretest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t
Control	23	4.73	2.280	.096	1.702
Experimental	22	5.86	2.144		

As Table 2 reveals, the result of a t-test which was used to compare the difference between the two groups indicated that the mean score of the experimental group (20.27) is significantly higher than the mean score of the control group, $t = 9.896$, $p = 0.000$.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Both Groups' Performances on the Posttest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t
Control	23	11.52	2.677	0.000	9.896

Experimental	22	20.27	3.239		
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In other words, it can be concluded that the treatment had an effect on boosting the listening comprehension of the students. This suggests that students who had watched subtitled movies had improved their listening comprehension more effectively than the students who had watched movies without subtitles.

DISCUSSION

The study was aimed to examine whether English movies would have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. The purpose of the research was also to determine which type of movies including English movies with English subtitles (bimodal subtitles) or English movies without subtitles (no subtitles) would most positively affect the FL learners' listening comprehension. The findings of the present study revealed that watching movies with subtitles had positive effects on the learners' listening comprehension. The results showed that movies with English subtitles had a significantly positive effect on the learners' listening comprehension compared to the movies with no subtitles.

The present article is highly related to the works of researchers like (Borras & Lafayette, 1994; Danan, 2004; Garza, 1991; Huang and Eskey, 2000) who have confirmed that combining subtitles with audio-visual materials is an effective instructional method to enhance the listening comprehension of second language learners, which was approved by this article, too.

Further, this study is in congruent with the work done by Markham (1989) who concluded that the groups using subtitles performed significantly better on listening comprehension compared to the groups without subtitles. The findings of the present research is also in line with the work conducted by Hayati and Mohmedi (2011) who concluded that, English subtitles group showed higher level than Persian subtitles group which in turn performed at a higher level than the no subtitle group on the listening test.

The findings of the research done by Yuksel & Tanriverdi (2009) who studied listening learning through watching a video clip with and without captions demonstrated that the group who watched the video clip with the captions outperformed in listening comprehension compared to the no-caption group.

CONCLUSION & PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The main goal of listening as a language learning tool is to prepare students to understand actual

speech in order to communicate in English as a foreign language. For language learners adding subtitle to English movies are of even greater interest because it allows the learner to read the dialogues in English while the movie is being played. Based on the results of the previous researches and the present study we come to the conclusion that subtitles have a significant role in improving Iranian foreign language learners' listening comprehension, especially bimodal subtitling, that is, L2 audio with L2 subtitle. The research findings revealed that most of the participants had positive attitudes toward watching films with English subtitles (ES) and no significance changes in no subtitles (NS). The results indicated that using movies with English subtitles is a better way to help students to improve the listening comprehension compared to the movies with no subtitles.

As the findings suggest, learners might experience problems regarding the processing speed of auditory input, retention of the input in short-term memory, distraction in processing, interpretation in context, matching between mental representations and input. In order to diagnose these difficulties, instructors can use various segments of listening material to test learners' processing problems. Since the procedures require comments and feedback from learners while listening, instructors are advised to work with individual learners or learners in small groups.

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