

How to Use L2 Movies Effectively to Learn New Vocabulary: A New Theoretical Perspective

Abdulrahman Abdullah Alharthi

JCC, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of first language (L1) and second language (L2) subtitles in films. From a new perspective, the paper looks at the role of repetition as a separate entity that influences vocabulary learning despite subtitle types. To maximise vocabulary acquisition, the paper recommends that learners should be exposed to repeated input. The repetition should be comprehensible and to reach a comprehensible input, subtitles could be then considered. Overall, L1 subtitles are preferred for low proficiency learners whilst L2 subtitles could be geared towards high proficiency learners since the aim behind watching movies in the target language is to have a comprehensible input. Nonetheless, different subtitles should be used to facilitate the meaning and not as a final tool of acquiring new vocabulary as this acquisition will take place with repetition. Thus, the current paper could form a starting point in an approach that lays emphasis on repetition in movies watching rather than using a particular type of subtitle.

Keywords: comprehensible input, netflix, subtitles to learn the second language, visual materials, word repetition

Cite as: Alharthi, A.A. (2018). How to Use L2 Movies Effectively to Learn New Vocabulary: A New Theoretical Perspective. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL (4)*
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call4.14>

Introduction

Many researchers consider that learning vocabulary provides a strong base for a successful L2 acquisition (Schmitt, 2010). Using visual material such as movies, cartoons, flash stories, etc. to learn new vocabulary seems to be an effective learning tool: such stimuli provide a full context of the vocabulary (Nasab & Motlagh, 2017). Thus, linguistic materials accompanied by visual representation are more effective for language learning. This is consistent with Mayer's (2009) multimedia learning theory stating that learners acquire more from pictures and words than from words alone. This new way of learning L2 vocabulary is preferred by the majority of learners studying English as a foreign language: it gives them the chance to see how native speakers use the language in context (Aloqaili, 2014; Safranji, 2015).

Recently, in the English language teaching field, subtitled movies have been used to facilitate vocabulary learning by combining visual representation of the new words with the written form (Aloqaili, 2014). However, there are different styles of using subtitles (L1 subtitles, L2 subtitles, dual subtitles, captions, etc.) and the advantages and disadvantages of each version have long caused debate amongst researchers. Yet, beyond this argument, someone could place much of the emphasis on the repetition of the vocabulary in movies and how that could have a greater impact on learners, more than a particular type of subtitle.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore different methods of enhancing vocabulary learning when learners watch visual material in the target language. The benefit of L1 subtitles will be discussed first, followed by L2 subtitles. Then, I will evaluate the importance of another feature that enhances learners' vocabulary acquisition: word repetition. This element will be compared as a separate factor against L1 subtitles and L2 subtitles. After analysing the three different components, recommendations will be proposed which could be practical to language classes.

Focusing on L1 subtitle

Earlier movies were silent. Subtitles were first used in 1903 to bridge this gap and introduce the spoken dialogue from the scene to the viewers. They took the form of "title cards" and were inserted between scenes in the film, providing the only way in which to share the spoken word from the film with the audience before inventing the soundtrack. Thus, producers would translate these "title cards" to suit viewers in foreign countries who spoke different languages. After the invention of the soundtrack in movies, producers faced a costly challenge in changing the language every time they sold their product abroad. Hence, at this point L1 subtitle was introduced in its current form to tackle this problem. Its place on the screen has changed a few times but nonetheless, the translation of the audio is presented simultaneously with the performance (Foster, 2014; Ivarsson, 2009). Since then, L1 subtitles have been used to enhance language learning, especially for those who are studying the second language in a foreign context.

Simply, L1 subtitles, also known as "interlingual" subtitles, can be defined as the translation of the film's language into the viewer's L1 language (Aloqaili, 2014). One of the advantages for using L1 subtitles is the translation of the target words (Tsai, 2009). Additionally, the importance of translation in learning the target language is highly crucial: it has long been used as a learning strategy, especially for beginners (Schmitt, 2000). Moreover, some researchers have found that L1 subtitles are more effective for learners who have experienced difficulty in reading

or listening skills in the target language; i.e. low proficiency learners (Vanderplank, 2010). However, Bairstow and Lavaur (2012) find that learners experience better comprehension using L1 subtitles across different proficiency levels, whereas L2 subtitles seemed to foster vocabulary acquisition.

In contrast, Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) conduct a longitudinal study regarding the effectiveness of using different subtitles on vocabulary acquisition for younger learners (12 years or less). After running the experiment on 246 Dutch children, Koolstra and Beentjes find that using L1 subtitles had a significant effect on their participants, resulting in higher vocabulary recognition and acquisition. In the same vein, Bianchi and Ciabattoni (2008) study the influence of L1 subtitles on 85 adult Italian participants. A post-test was carried out one week after the experiment had finished and they find that vocabulary recall ability developed with both L1 and L2 subtitle groups, yet the L1 subtitle group scored higher.

One of the crucial elements in L1 subtitles is that learners would have more comprehensible input: they process the meaning of the word in context as well as having the translation of the word into their native language. Thus, the writer argues here that this type of exposure will push the input increasingly towards “i+1” theory (Krashen, 1985). Hence, learners will have higher input coverage, with the help of the translation, and there will be a slight moderate chance left for development; i.e. acquisition. Another key advantage in using L1 subtitles is to prevent inaccurate translation of the new words in the target language and as such, learners will be more engaged with the material and will not lose interest because of a lack of comprehension (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009). Yet, L2 subtitles do have some strengths and weaknesses. Hence, I will focus on these in more detail in the following section.

Focusing on L2 subtitle

L2 subtitles, also known as “intralingual” subtitles, display the transcription of the film’s dialogue on the screen, in writing. Originally, the intralingual subtitle is intended as a service for deaf native speakers and that is why it is an available option in the vast majority of movies and films today (Rodgers, 2013). Yet, it has long been used as a language-learning tool in language classes. Thus, one of the advantages in using L2 subtitles is helping learners to link the spoken word with its written form, working as “hearing aid” (Danan, 2004). Additionally, Danan, as well as Markham and Peter (2003), affirm that L2 subtitles are more effective for language learners with a high proficiency level in the second language. Furthermore, they claim that for the successful use of L2 subtitles, learners need sharper listening skills and faster reading ability.

However, Baltova’s (1999) finding refutes this claim. He conducted an experiment on 93 French speakers studying English as a foreign language at beginners’ level. Baltova finds that learners who were exposed to L2 subtitles performed better than those who were exposed to L1 subtitles in the comprehension questions and gap-fill test, indicating a better vocabulary recall rate. As both groups were at the same language level, there is not any effect of language proficiency on learners’ performance.

Nevertheless, the influence of the language proficiency factor fluctuates between different studies. For instance, Guichon and McLornan (2008) study 40 intermediate French learners of

English. Participants were tasked to write a summary in English, along with their notes, after viewing a recording of BBC news. The group who had L2 subtitles as part of the treatment scored higher, whereas the L1 group reported that they were distracted because of the interference of meanings when they read the translation; i.e. the L1 subtitle. However, this type of distractions while using L1 subtitle, to the writer's knowledge, have not been discussed before. Hence, this raises a robust topic for further analysis, turning the focus not on the positive side of translation, as mentioned in the previous section, but on possible negative consequences of using translation in learning vocabulary through watching movies.

Another longitudinal study conducted by Hayati and Mohamadi (2011) investigates the effect of using subtitled video in three different situations amongst 90 Iranian English language learners. After six weeks of exposure to video clips, the first group, who used English subtitles, achieved the highest marks in a comprehension test, followed by the Persian subtitle group; the group who used no subtitles achieved the lowest marks. Another scientific study by Frumuselu, Maeyer, Donche and Plana (2015), tested 40 university undergraduates from different ethnicities and different proficiency levels studying for an English degree in Spain. In this study, participants were assigned randomly to L1 or L2 subtitle groups and the experiment lasted for 7 weeks. The authors conclude that intralingual subtitles are more beneficial and learners acquire more vocabulary.

In addition, Stewart and Pertusa (2004) point out that participants were more confident in recalling new vocabulary after exposure to L2 subtitles because they were able to hear the spoken words and read it in written form. With this point in mind, we could claim that vocabulary pronunciation may be better developed using L2 subtitles. Further, learners will therefore have more confidence in using new vocabulary in their interlanguage. Moreover, d'Ydewalle and De Bruyker (2007) state that reading the subtitles does not interfere with paying attention while watching visual performance on the screen since reading is a compulsory behaviour. This finding is in line with Borrás and Lafayette (1994) and Vanderplank's (1988) studies which show that reading and listening co-occur as the viewer processes the subtitle. Consequently, Bird and Williams (2002) expand on this theory, emphasising that not only is the reading processed automatically but also the listening. However, we could look at this automatic processing of simultaneous listening and reading as a type of repetition. Based on this, someone may claim that learners have used two channels to process the word or that they process the word twice: hence, repetition does influence word recognition and this angle will be discussed next. Focusing on vocabulary repetition

Focusing on vocabulary repetition

Clearly, the superiority of visual materials has inspired many researchers, as discussed in the previous two sections, to investigate how to make L2 movies more beneficial for language learners. However, this debate between the two perspectives has made me believe that the emphasis should not be on the L1 subtitles nor the L2 subtitles, but on the repetition of new vocabulary. The comparison between L1 and L2 subtitles and the role of repetition has not been discussed together, as in this article. Hence, due to the lack of resources concerning this particular perspective, I will discuss studies that use vocabulary repetition as part of their subtitle experiments

and will try to dig deeply to explore the influence of repetition on participants watching visual materials.

Frankly, for incidental vocabulary acquisition, learners need a large amount of enjoyable input that provides repeated encounters over time (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). Thus, we could apply this principle to watching movies and claim that repeating the exposure would help learners to understand the input more deeply and will result in better vocabulary acquisition. Rodgers (2013) rightly points out that lengthier visual material, such as TV episodes that last for months, usually have related storylines, repeated scenes and recurring characters, could lead to better vocabulary acquisition. The more learners see episodes of a particular programme, the more vocabulary they gain (Webb & Rodgers, 2009a). Although Webb and Rodgers did not highlight the role of repeating the exact material to the learner, they valued learners' familiarity with the input for better vocabulary learning. Moreover, Webb (2008) states that unknown words with repeated encounters in context are more likely to be learned. From this particular point, repeating the film is really more crucial than providing the subtitle.

However, over the years no definite amount of vocabulary repetition has been agreed upon to guarantee a full acquisition of different vocabulary knowledge (Rodgers, 2013). Also, the vast majority of studies that look at the role of vocabulary repetition were conducted based on reading activities. For instance, Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998) state that at least eight or more repetitions of a target vocabulary in a written text are essential for incidental acquisition. Rott (1999) states six times, Waring and Takaki (2003) 20 to 30 times, Webb (2007) 10 times, Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) five to eight times when learning begins and 10 to 17 to strengthen this learning.

This will lead us to interpret the variations in numbers due to the fact that the required repetition of different vocabulary knowledge in different modes of input may vary (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). Although these results may or may not be applicable for vocabulary acquisition through watching movies, they give us a general idea regarding the amount of repetition needed for vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, my claim is to take the analysis a step further and look at subtitles as a form of repetition. Garza (1991), for instance, divided his participants into two groups: one used captions; i.e. L2 subtitles and one employed no captions. The video in each group was played twice. The result revealed that the captions group scored significantly higher in the comprehension test than the group without captions. Thus, I would argue that, after playing the video twice, the caption group benefited more from the repetition because they also encountered the subtitles.

To clarify, the caption group encountered the new vocabulary 4 times: 2 from hearing the soundtrack and 2 from reading the subtitle, while the no-caption group processed the vocabulary only twice from hearing the soundtrack. This result is in line with those discovered in Yoshino, Kano and Akahori's (2000) experiment: their groups were divided in a similar way to Garza's experiment (1991) and they also find the same result. Winke, Gass and Sydorenko (2010) reach the same conclusion, reporting the superiority of using subtitles in watching movies. On the other hand this repetition has some negative consequences: students might lose their interest and as a result, the activity becomes boring and time consuming (Goh, 2008). Thus, recommendation for

language teachers on how to effectively use repetition when learners watch L2 movies, as well as the role of L1 and L2 subtitles, will be proposed in the following section.

Recommendation

After evaluating the effectiveness of implementing different methods to enhance vocabulary learning while watching visual material, a general recommendation could be proposed in order to improve the situation for L2 learners. The recommendation will address Arab L2 learners of English, in particular, yet it could also be used elsewhere since learning through movies is a common practice worldwide (Aloqaili, 2014). During the writer's experience as an English language learner for seven years, in Saudi Arabia, and as an English instructor for another four years, he has encountered English language learners who were successful in their learning and others who were not. Referring those successful learners to this paper's earlier discussion, the writer could depict a map that may significantly optimise the process of vocabulary acquisition through watching movies.

First and foremost, learners must aim to watch what is appropriate for their interlanguage level. Teachers should be aware that the aim behind watching movies in the target language is to have a comprehensible input that offers a chance for learning "i+1" (Krashen, 1985). Moreover, learners should be encouraged to use a subtitle despite their level in the language, as this will provide extra repetition to the process. However, any type of subtitle is beneficial, yet their most crucial aspect is to support the input: thus, L1 subtitles are preferred for low proficiency since they explain the input by using the translation. L1 subtitles aim to facilitate learners' understanding by preventing inaccurate meaning of the new vocabulary. Thus, learners will be more engaged with what they watch and as a result, they will immerse themselves into further watching (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009). For advanced learners, however, the L2 subtitles are recommended, as the learners already understand most of the input (Danan, 2004).

Moreover, the bedrock in learning from visual material, I would argue, is to encounter regular repetition of the target words. Hence, teachers should aim to select movies that come in series or chapters because many scenes and words will reoccur throughout the movie (Rodgers, 2013). However, the short cut to improve learners' familiarity with visual material is not only through watching episodes of a particular programme for a long time, but to repeat the same material multiple times so learners will definitely be more familiar with the input. This repetition of movies would have a significant impact on learners, more than consulting a particular type of subtitle. The more a teacher replays the movie, the better for vocabulary acquisition: this repetition should be accompanied with subtitles to suit learners' levels, although the aim here is also to provide extra repetition.

However, playing the same movie several times can be an obstacle in language classes because students might refuse to repeatedly watch the same film (Goh, 2008). Thus, teachers could improve the situation by introducing different activities for each repetition (e.g. the first time should be watching only; the second time, students need to write all the sentences in the movie that start with "He"; for the third time the students' task is to count how many sentences are mentioned in the past perfect tense; the fourth time could be a competition between students regarding who can write more vocabulary appeared in the movie, etc.). The aim is to help students

to watch the movie several times as a meaningful experience. As there are few resources concerning how many times students should watch a movie for vocabulary acquisition, the researcher concludes that the more the better, as long as the learner enjoys watching the input.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has investigated the effect of L1 subtitles, L2 subtitles and the role of repetition in film watching, reaching the notion it is not the type of subtitles that benefit learners but word repetition. To acquire new vocabulary, learners should have input that should be repeated. The repetition should be comprehensible and to reach a comprehensible input, subtitles could be then considered. Since there has been a shortage of studies looking at movies in the interests of word repetition and, to the writer's knowledge, there are not any in the Arab context, result from this paper cannot be generalised. Nonetheless, the result could form a starting point in this area and more approaches looking at the role of repetition in movies could be further discussed in the future.

About the Author: Abdulrahman Alharthi is a lecturer at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. He has MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Nottingham in the UK and a Bachelor degree in English Language from King Abdulaziz University. Abdulrahman's research interests include language assessment in ELT, ESP/EAP, vocabulary acquisition, listening skill, and SLA. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-167X>

References

- Aloqaili, G. S. (2014). *Learning Vocabulary from Subtitled Videos: An investigation into the effectiveness of using subtitled videos for intentional vocabulary learning in Saudi Arabia with an exploration of learners' perspective*. Southampton University.
- Bairstow, D., & Lavaur, J.M. (2012). Audiovisual information processing by monolinguals and bilinguals: Effects of intralingual and interlingual subtitles. In A. Remael, P. Orero, & M. Carroll (Eds.), *Audiovisual translation and media accessibility at the crossroads* (pp. 273–294). Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Baltova, I. (1999). Multisensory language teaching in a multidimensional curriculum: The use of authentic bimodal video in core French. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56(1), 31–48.
- Bianchi, F., & Ciabattini, T. (2008). Captions and subtitles in EFL learning: An investigative study in a comprehensive computer environment. In A. Baldry, M. Pavesi, C. T. Torsello & C. Taylor (eds.), *from didactas to ecolingua: An ongoing research project on translation and corpus linguistics* (pp. 69-90). Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste.
- Bird, S. A., & Williams, J. N. (2002). The effect of bimodal input on implicit and explicit memory: An investigation into the benefits of within-language subtitling. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 23(4), 509–533.
- Borrás, I., & Lafayette, R. C. (1994). Effects of multimedia courseware subtitling on the speaking performance of college students of French. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(1), 61–75.
- Danan, M. (2004). Captioning and subtitling: Undervalued language learning strategies. *Meta: Translators' Journal*, 49(1), 67–77.
- d'Ydewalle, G., & De Bruycker, W. (2007). Eye movements of children and adults while reading television subtitles. *European Psychologist*, 12, 196–205.

- Foster, D. (2014). The History of Silent Movies and Subtitles | Video Caption Corporation.
- Frumuselu, D., Maeyer, S., Donche, V., & Plana, M. (2015). Television series inside the EFL classroom: Bridging the gap between teaching and learning informal language through subtitles. *Linguistics and Education*, 32, 107–117.
- Garza, T. (1991). Evaluating the use of captioned video materials in advanced foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24, 239–58.
- Goh, C. (2008). Metacognitive instruction for second language listening development: Theory, practice and research implications. *RELC Journal*, 39(2), 188–213.
- Guichon, N., & McLornan, S. (2008). The effects of multimodality on L2 learners: Implications for CALL resource design. *System*, 36(1), 85–93.
- Hayati, M., & Mohmedi, F. (2011). The effects of films with and without subtitles on listening comprehension of EFL learners. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 42(1), 181–192.
- Horst, M., Cobb, T., & Meara, P. (1998). Beyond A Clockwork Orange: Acquiring second language vocabulary through reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 11(2), 207–223.
- Ivarsson, J. (2009). The history of subtitles in Europe. In Dubbing and subtitling, in a world context, eds. Gilbert C.F. Fong & Kenneth K.L. Au, 3–12. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Koolstra, C. M., & Beentjes, J. W. (1999). Children's vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language through watching subtitled television programs at home. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 47 (1), 51–60.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman Group United Kingdom.
- Laufer, B., & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, G. C. (2010). Lexical threshold revisited: Lexical text coverage, learners' vocabulary size and reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 22(1), 15–30.
- Markham, P., & Peter, L. (2003). The influence of English language and Spanish language captions on foreign language listening/reading comprehension. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 31(3), 331–341.
- Mayer, R. E. (2009). *Multimedia learning (2nd ed)*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitterer, H., & McQueen, J. M. (2009). Foreign subtitles help but native-language subtitles harm foreign speech perception. *PLoS ONE*, 4(11), 1–5.
- Nasab, M., & Motlagh, S. (2017). Vocabulary Learning Promotion through English Subtitled Cartoons. *Communication and Linguistics Studies*, 3(2009), 1–7.
- Nation, I. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Pellicer-Sánchez, A., & Schmitt, N. (2010). Incidental vocabulary acquisition from an authentic novel: Do Things Fall Apart? *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 22(1), 31–55.
- Rodgers, M. P. (2013). *English language learning through viewing television: An investigation of comprehension, incidental vocabulary acquisition, lexical coverage, attitudes, and captions*. Victoria University of Wellington.
- Rott, S. (1999). The effect of exposure frequency on intermediate language learner's incidental vocabulary acquisition and retention through reading. *Studies of Second Language Acquisition* 21, 589–619.
- Safran, J. (2015). Advancing Listening Comprehension Through Movies. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 169–173.

- Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2008). Instructed Second Language Vocabulary Learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 12 (3), 329–363.
- Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching vocabulary: A vocabulary research manual*. Springer.
- Stewart, M., & Pertusa, I. (2004). Gains to foreign language while viewing target language closed-caption films. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37 (3), 438–443.
- Tsai, Ch.-J. (2009). Insight into learners' perspectives on watching movies with L1 vs. L2 subtitles: Focusing on language.
- Vanderplank, R. (1988). The value of teletext subtitles in language learning. *ELT Journal*, 42 (4), 272 - 281.
- Vanderplank, R. (2010). Déjà vu? A decade of research on language laboratories, television, and video in language learning. *Language Teaching*, 43(1), 1–37.
- Waring, R., & Takaki, M. (2003). At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from reading a graded reader. *Reading in a Foreign language*, 15(2), 130–163.
- Webb, S. (2007). The effects of repetition on vocabulary knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(1), 46–65.
- Webb, S. (2008). The effects of context on incidental vocabulary learning. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 20(2), 232–245.
- Webb, S., & Rodgers, M. P. (2009a). Vocabulary demands of television programs. *Language Learning*, 59(2), 335–366.
- Winke, P., Gass, S., & Sydorenko, T. (2010). The effects of captioning videos used for foreign language listening activities. *Language Learning & Technology*, 14, 65–86.
- Yoshino, S., Kano, N., & Akahori, K. (2000). The effects of English and Japanese captions on the listening comprehension of Japanese EFL students. *Language Laboratory*, 37, 111-130.