

Film Subtitles as a Successful Vocabulary Learning Tool

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Abstract

Films are a valuable source of authentic language material, but what makes them superior to other types of authentic materials is the existence of a full storyline which leads to the increased engagement of the viewer. Despite the fact that teachers intuitively know this particular activity which may enhance language learning there is little research that has sought to thoroughly examine its potential impact on vocabulary acquisition and retention. While most studies conclude that the type of subtitling is an important factor influencing vocabulary learning; defining which particular type of subtitling is most effective seems difficult to determine and results in this area are somewhat inconclusive. Further research is, therefore, necessary to determine which type of subtitling would lead to optimum results in vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Keywords

Authentic Materials, Film, Subtitling, Vocabulary Retention, Vocabulary Acquisition, Engagement, Subtitling Types

1. Authenticity in the Language Classroom

The success of a training program, in the case of learning a foreign language, depends on the classroom atmosphere and the pedagogical materials used. As an educator, over years of student training, the need for materials that would attract students' attention has become clear to me; as well as the need to create an engaging environment for my class. In my experience, authentic materials, and films in particular, have had the best results in language teaching, and more particularly vocabulary long term acquisition. This triggered my interest in films and subtitling is as a vocabulary learning/teaching tool.

Nunan (1999) emphasizes that authentic linguistic material, whether spoken or written, is the one not created for the purpose of teaching, and further em-

phasizes that sources of spoken authentic linguistic material can include television programs such as news, talks, songs, cartoons and films (Miller, 2003). In this paper, I have adopted Nunan's definition of authenticity, although the notion of authenticity is somewhat more complex and would require further investigation.

Apart from the authenticity of the linguistic materials, Taylor (1994) identified another two types of authenticity: authenticity of task and of authenticity of situation and he argues that these three types are not clearly distinguished.

Task authenticity reflects the purpose which language input serves; meaning that the chosen tasks should involve the learners not only in authentic communication with texts and others in the classroom, but also in the purpose of learning (Breen, 1985).

Authenticity of situation, on the other hand, is among the most challenging aspects of authenticity for classroom teachers to provide to their students (Beatty, 2015). Taking the example of a visit to a science museum where students would walk around the rooms, explore and often perform hands-on tasks relevant to the museum exhibits, and then report back in class on their experience, students learn by actively engaging themselves in a real life task. In this case, students would also learn related skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, scientific observation, note taking, writing, presentation techniques, and public speaking (Beatty, 2015). This can be contrasted to an online search of the museum web pages in the language classroom or at home, where the approach is more theoretical, even though it does have an aspect of authenticity from the perspective of using the internet for gathering information.

Authentic tasks are not the norm in schools and classrooms, but research and contemporary perspectives on how students learn suggest that these types of tasks are powerfully effective for learning (Harris & Marx, 2009). Requiring students simply to carry out a task will not ensure learning. Classroom tasks result in the acquisition of information that is not very meaningful, memorable, or usable. Psychologist David Perkins (1993) calls such information, which often results from rote memorizing and is not easily transferred to other situations, inert knowledge. For meaningful learning to occur, students need to be cognitively engaged, or intellectually invested, and active in applying ideas (Harris & Marx, 2009).

As expected, there is controversy over the issue of the level at which authentic materials should be introduced in the classroom. Some researchers claim that authentic materials can be used with intermediate and advanced level students only (Kim, 2000; Kilickaya, 2004), whereas others believe that all ability levels of students, even lower levels, are able to manage using authentic materials (McNeill, 1994; Miller, 2005). What is of the essence is that authentic materials must be used in accordance with students' ability (Baird & Redmond, 2004).

2. Film Extracts Used in the Language Classroom as Source of Authentic Material

Films are a valuable source of authentic material and belong to a vast array of

similarly featured materials such as TV ads, news items, weather forecasts, radio talks, etc. (Hedge, 2000; Baird & Redmond, 2004). What makes films superior to those other types of authentic materials is the existence of a full storyline that is non-existence, for example, in a weather forecast, or very limited in a news item. A storyline most often leads to the engagement of the viewer as they indirectly participate in the action of what they are watching. Another significant factor is the enjoyment of the viewer/student which plays a major role.

Then, what are the advantages or disadvantages of using films in the EFL classroom? Most of the following for and against arguments are true for all authentic materials, but I will focus on films. Films first and foremost offer authentic language input and cultural information in an easily digestible manner. They have a positive effect on learner motivation as the visual input enhances learners' understanding. They support a more creative approach to teaching and offer a huge variety of situations which inevitably leads to a higher chance that those situations will relate more closely to learners' needs and interests. Language styles are also varied and in general language and cultural input is continuously updated. Last but not least, the learner's satisfaction is a strong component which has a positive effect on comprehension (Kilickaya, 2004; Mcknight, 1995; Berardo, 2006; Wong et al., 1995).

On the other hand, there are some strong arguments against the use of films in the classroom, at least where these are used as a significant part of the language course. Films may be too culturally biased, to begin with. They often contain difficult language, vocabulary items that are beyond the scope of a particular lesson and complex language structures, which may cause a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes and might demotivate weaker students. Many structures are mixed and students might have a hard time decoding them and time is limited for this decoding as the film rolls on. Preparing such materials for the classroom can also be quite time consuming for teachers, who might need to present their students with pre-activities, especially in lower level classes. Authentic materials, including films, may not expose students to comprehensible input at the earliest stages of acquisition (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Martinez, 2002; Kim, 2000).

In view of the above, careful selection and preparation of film extracts for classroom use is required. Most important factors in this selection are the suitability of the content, depending on the learners, the compatibility with the course objectives at each time and how easily the content can be exploited by the teacher to offer maximum learning results (Lee, 1995). Recent research supports the effectiveness of combining audio and visual aids in language classrooms. Visual input combined with other technology tools stimulates deeper comprehension of the texts and enhances the interaction between the target language and learners' mind which in turn, allows learners to predict the target language more easily and to recall more fully (Stevens, 1989; Underwood, 1990). One important feature of films that has emerged because of the advancements in video

technology, and is a critical factor towards optimum exploitability of the material, is subtitling. A feature very little utilised in the classroom so far, which however could become a successful tool to combat some of the difficulties in adopting films as study material.

3. Subtitling in Films and Its Effectiveness in Language Learning

Watching films with subtitles is popular among language learners; however, this does not often constitute part of a language course. Despite the fact that teachers intuitively know this particular activity may enhance language learning, especially direct or incidental vocabulary acquisition, there is little research that has sought to thoroughly examine its potential impact on vocabulary uptake and retention (Garnier, 2014). Subtitled films can ensure a rich comprehensible input because of providing aural, visual and textual input (Zanon, 2006). In vocabulary learning, visual information can be crucial as it serves body language, gestures, facial expressions that accompany the meaning, intonation and stress of the vocabulary, as well as the culture and authentic language of the speakers (Aydin Yildiz, 2017). It should be noted here that subtitles added to a visual channel will neither distract nor interfere with the oral and pictorial information. Multiple resources of message can expand the capacity of working memory and effectively promote learning achievements.

Turning to the available types of subtitling, Zanon (2007) categorizes it into three types:

- 1) standard subtitling (L2 audio and L1 captions),
- 2) bimodal subtitling (L2 audio with L2 captions), and
- 3) reversed subtitling (L1 audio with L2 captions).

Whereas Katchen, Fox, Lin and Chun (2001) identify three more types of subtitling:

- 4) bilingual subtitling (L2 audio with L2 and L1 subtitles simultaneously),
- 5) bilingual reversed subtitling (L1 audio with L1 and L2 subtitles simultaneously),
- 6) no subtitling (L2 audio with no subtitles at all).

Most research to date has looked into the first three types of subtitling for establishing its effectiveness in language learning. While most studies conclude that the type of subtitling is an important factor influencing vocabulary learning (Gorjian, 2014) and developing listening skills (Kusumarasyati, 2005), defining which particular type of subtitling is most effective seems difficult to determine and results in this area are somewhat inconclusive.

Among the different types of subtitling, most research points to the bimodal one, also called intra-lingual, as more common (Zanon, 2007) in classroom activities and more effective than the other types. Zanon (2007) also contends that text in the form of subtitles helps learners monitor a speech that would probably be lost otherwise. In fact, while TV programs and films that are not subtitled can

create a high level of insecurity and anxiety in students, the incorporation of subtitles provides instant feedback and a positive reinforcement that contributes to create a feeling of confidence in learners and can help them feel ready and motivated to watch foreign films. It can also make tasks more manageable and user-friendly for weaker students. Baltova (2006) argued, on the basis of empirical evidence, that bimodal video which is subtitled in L2 is an effective way of enhancing L2 learners' understanding of authentic texts and learning of vocabulary because of the simultaneous exposure of the learner to spoken language, printed text, and visual information, all conveying the same message. Borrás and Lafayette (1994) state that bimodal subtitling may help the second language learner associate the aural and written forms of words more easily and quickly than video without subtitles. In the same vein, Guichon and McLornan (2008) found that L2 subtitling (bimodal subtitling) was more beneficial than L1 because it caused less lexical interference. Zarei's (2009) result analysis showed that bimodal subtitling was significantly more effective than standard subtitling, which in turn, was significantly more effective than reversed subtitling. Similarly, the study of Fazilatfar, Ghorbani and Samavarchi (2011) as well as that of Zarei (2009) indicate bimodal subtitling as the most effective when regarding vocabulary recall, while reversed subtitling the least effective of the three. In Aydin Yildiz's (2017) experiment with 60 Turkish EFL intermediate students, the bimodal subtitling group performed better in the acquisition of vocabulary.

There is, however, a limited number of studies that favour reversed subtitling for the language classroom. Danan's study found that reversed subtitling was the most beneficial method for enhancing foreign language learning when compared to no-subtitling and standard subtitling (Danan, 2006) but in this case bimodal subtitling was not studied. In Gorjian's study, the participants in the reversed subtitling group performed significantly different and learned more new vocabulary items. Standard subtitling was found to be the second type of subtitling which revealed to be more effective than bimodal subtitling (Gorjian, 2014). And some studies (Karakaş & Sariçoban, 2012; Yüksel & Tanrıverdi, 2009), including the Turkish L2 learners of English as the participant group, did not reveal any significant difference between the groups, so those concluded that watching the movie clips facilitated the development of the vocabulary knowledge of the students regardless of the captions.

While Bird and Williams (2002) experiments led to the conclusion that subtitling can improve the learning of novel words, it seems that a crucial factor in the effectiveness of subtitling as a language teaching tool is repetition. Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) claimed that 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 recognition 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 (Etemadi, 2012).

In Garnier's empirical study, the relationship between repetition and word acquisition/retention was not straightforward, and was probably overshadowed by word-based (e.g. word class) and affective (e.g. motivation) factors (Garnier, 2014). Nevertheless, as learners seem to enjoy watching subtitled films anyway, enough vocabulary acquisition accrues from one or two viewings to recommend this activity as a useful supplement to formal instruction.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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