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## The Role of Subtitled Movies on Students' Vocabulary Development

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### Abstract

Learning new vocabulary comprises a significant factor for success within language learning since without the adequate knowledge of words and their meaning, learners are not able to use the target language efficiently. Moreover, vocabulary tends to be forgotten if it is not acquired and used through the right methods that will provide learners with language inputs in genuine target language environment. In this regard, the increasing access to different multimedia and technology resources facilitate spontaneous vocabulary acquisition for the contemporary age learners. In particular, movies with subtitles can be a great tool in bringing students closer to authentic real life communication vocabulary. Previous studies have found several benefits of using subtitled movies by confirming that subtitles indeed improve vocabulary learning. The present research had the aim to confirm these findings by examining the usefulness of subtitles in different settings. Specifically, to investigate the usefulness of subtitled movies in vocabulary gains, three groups of students were observed in three different conditions, one exposed to movies with interlingual (Albanian) subtitles, one with intralingual (English) subtitles and the third one without any subtitles, to determine which type of subtitles renders the best results. To collect the data, several instruments were administered such as: questionnaires, English proficiency test, direct observation, vocabulary knowledge scale test (VKS) and two movies. The results of this study indicate that interlingual subtitles facilitate better vocabulary acquisition for short and long term memory, specifically when they are shown to students in intentional learning environment, i.e. with the assistance and instructions from the teacher.

**Keywords:** Movies; Subtitles; Vocabulary; Incidental acquisition.

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## **1. Introduction**

One of the crucial linguistic features in language learning is learning vocabulary. It comprises a significant factor for success within language learning since without the adequate knowledge of words and their meaning, learners are not able to use the target language efficiently. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of the target language are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in the target language just cannot happen in any meaningful way [1]. As most language learners aim to develop successful communication and literacy skills, they have to first learn enough words and to know how to use these words appropriately as very little can be said with grammar, but almost anything can be said with words [2]. Moreover, learners' vocabulary size can most of the time determine their language proficiency since they are very often required to achieve a threshold level of target vocabulary in order to communicate fluently or understand authentic texts [3]. However, new vocabulary learned through textbooks and the audio CDs tends to be forgotten if it is not acquired and used through the right methods. In this regards, [4] states that "students have changed radically and that today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach". He also adds that these young people, the digital natives, are growing up in an environment surrounded by multimedia, thus they prefer learning vocabulary in rich and natural experiences. Since it is quite challenging for teachers to provide learners such opportunities, the educational system is demanding for innovative teaching tools and strategies that will provide learners with large amounts of inputs in genuine target language environment. As a result of the fast development of technology, language learning, specifically vocabulary acquisition, has vastly improved in the recent years. In this regard, the advent of technology, in particular multimedia technology (such as TV, Computers, DVDs, MP3s, mobile phones, video sites etc.) has played a great role in providing learners authentic materials with a range of vocabulary exposure. As a result, the audio-visualized materials, particularly movies are one of the best tools in facilitating spontaneous vocabulary acquisition for the contemporary age learners.

However, depending on the learners' level of language proficiency and vocabulary content of the movie, learners might sometimes face difficulties in understanding video materials without being provided with subtitles in the mother tongue or the target language. Hence, watching foreign language movies with subtitles is a significant educational component that has shown a great contribution in facilitating various language properties, especially vocabulary acquisition. In such conditions, the vocabulary acquisition occurs spontaneously since the learners try to understand the content of the material by accessing spoken language that they are not fully acquainted with. In particular, movies with subtitles can be a great tool in bringing students closer to authentic real life communication vocabulary.

### ***1.1. Subtitled movies in the context of Republic of Kosovo***

In a multi-cultural country like Republic Kosovo, people are usually expected to be highly enthusiastic to learn languages. Apart from learning the mother tongue, as well as the state official language, English is also taught as compulsory course in elementary, middle and high school where high-school students are required to pass English SAT entrance exam. Learners that need additional assistance usually enroll to English extra-curricular courses offered by private institutions outside their schools. Moreover, in the majority of universities and

colleges students are also required to learn English as a mandatory subject in their undergraduate studies. In addition, they are required to have a proof of good English proficiency, examined by standardized tests in order to be admitted in graduate studies. On the other hand with companies having businesses internationally, most of job openings require for their candidates to have a solid English language proficiency. In addition, studying English is also essential for Kosovar students who wish to study or work abroad where they are usually required to pass English proficiency test as a prerequisite for an interview. Most of learners in Kosovo study English for at least 10 years before they enroll their university studies. However, a large number of students still don't have sufficient knowledge of English and using the language properly. There are a lot of reasons behind this, one of which is that too much attention is being devoted to vocabulary drilling and rote memorization which is dull and unstimulating. Another reason is that teachers depend heavily on textbooks as the only medium for teaching and the language exposure for communicative purposes outside the classroom is quite limited. Similarly, due to the sub-skills such as vocabulary being rarely emphasized and mostly decontextualized, the majority of students have limited communication resources when they are provided with native-like situations. Moreover, with the teacher-centered teaching techniques which are still quite present in the country, learners generally focus on theoretical knowledge of the language without much practical application.

In the context of the Republic of Kosovo, the curriculum structure is mostly focused on teaching reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. However, the learners are exposed to vocabulary in a passive manner as they rarely use the learnt vocabulary for production but rather rely on reading wordlists presented from the textbooks. Moreover, they are focused on defining, and explaining grammar functions of words by being receptive rather than productive participants in the language learning process. In addition, as teachers are mostly non-native language speakers they translate the words into the learners' L1, as a result of sharing the same mother tongue. On the other hand, the evolution of technology has provided a vast number of opportunities to learn vocabulary into the everyday vernacular of Kosovo, especially youngsters that are becoming more and more technologically literate. They are surrounded by English on daily basis, through internet and technologies such as smartphones, tablets, media-players, TVs and computers. In addition these appliances offer learners a vast number of online apps and platforms where they can watch a great number of foreign subtitled movies, thus being exposed to language content other than their native. With a few exceptions, language teaching in the country is not really on the cutting edge of technology and very little attention has been paid in taking initiative to change the current situation. Specifically, engaging learners into watching movies is generally neglected and not quite popular as a language learning resource. Not all public or even private schools have TVs or projectors to show movies in class thus students are taught to mostly rely on textbooks rather than screens. The very few projectors in some schools are usually used to show movies at the end of the term as a reward for the students, playing the movie from the beginning to the end of the class without the aim to challenge students linguistically. According to my personal observation, even though the conditions for implementing language teaching methodologies with high technological standards are provided, there is still a lack of teacher training in using the same for teaching vocabulary through watching subtitled movies. The reasons why some of the teachers are constrained to do this is lack of time and confidence in using technologies and the fear of technology replacing the teacher. Thus, this research is important to note that the role of movies in ELT is nothing more than to assist the learning/teaching process.

## **2. Theories in support of vocabulary development through watching subtitled movies**

In addition to the recent studies, many learning theories, among which is Mayer's cognitive theory, support the usage of subtitled movies in improving learners' vocabulary. Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning assumes that "there are two separate channels (auditory and visual) for processing information; there is limited channel capacity; and learning is an active process of filtering, selecting, organizing, and integrating information" [5]. Movies, as one example of such audio-visual channels, with the assistance of subtitles provide learners a vast number of vocabulary which first needs to be noticed by the learners and then processed. In this regard, movies with subtitles stimulate learners to notice the unknown vocabulary which is the first step in the acquisition process [6]. Reference [7] adds that most of the times new vocabulary is noticed when it is needed for text comprehension but also point out that vocabulary can be fully acquired if the words are encountered frequently and in different forms. As mentioned by [7] in order for vocabulary acquisition to be successful, learners need to be given texts with approximately 98% known words and less unknown words which need to be repeated in various contexts.

In addition, other researchers also add that the frequent reoccurrence of written words help vocabulary acquisition but express their uncertainty on what is the approximate number of required word encounters and that most language learners decipher these unknown words from the context. Reference [8] also points out that same word repetition presented by the subtitles also benefits vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, [9] highlights that "unlike learning grammar which is a system with many rules, vocabulary is a subject of recalling", thus regularly presenting learners with the same words leads to incidental vocabulary gains without the learners' conscious effort to do so. Furthermore, Pavio's dual-coding theory states that, "when pictures are associated with the meaning, the number of signals connected to the message increases" [10] as a result of which learners are more likely to keep the message in mind. So, when learners watch subtitled movies they are exposed to three independent systems with tight linkage between them, the image, the sound and the text. This information is then classified in more than one way in the brain but still help the retention and the recall of the new vocabulary since the words are learned in different modes.

Moreover, since movies present an environment with rich and authentic input, which in turns helps language acquisition, this study can also be supported by Krashen's input hypothesis, according to which "learners can learn a large amount of language unconsciously through ample comprehensible input" [11]. He refers to comprehensible input as an input that is slightly more difficult than learners' current language proficiency level. However, this theory also suggests that this input needs to be delivered with suitable techniques and needs to be "interesting and relevant, not form-focused, and quantitative" [12], conditions that can be easily found in subtitled movies. On the other hand, subtitled movies promote visual information in real context with realistic and natural language which is "spoken at a normal conversational speed as well as varieties of language from various ages, genders, and socio-cultural backgrounds" [13]. The authentic environment presented by the movies gives the opportunity to learners to grasp wide range of vocabulary and the clues from the text help learners understand the meaning of the unknown words which leads to incidental vocabulary acquisition [14].

In addition, Reference [15] suggests that words need to be faced in different semantic and syntactic contexts and

that as such movies having the audio-visual components offer a rich source for incidental vocabulary learning which helps learners retain vocabulary for a longer period of time. As a valuable teaching material subtitled movies have the advantage of providing real context, as well as repetitive chances of words, with language of normal speed and a combination of audio and visual stimulation, verbal and nonverbal communication, which surely benefit the learner's vocabulary acquisition [16]. Considering their huge importance in ELT, the effectiveness of subtitled movies in fostering vocabulary acquisition are the features that still need to be examined in more details.

### **3. Methods**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Does watching subtitled movies help learners acquire more words than watching movies without subtitles?
2. Is there a difference in the amount of vocabulary acquisition in incidental and intentional language learning through watching movies based on the presence/ absence of subtitles?
3. Which type of movie watching mode leads to a more successful vocabulary acquisition for long term retention?

For this research, groups that were homogenous regarding their level of English language proficiency were chosen. The groups were not entirely homogenous since they were mixed gender groups where the participants were of different age, thus different year of university studies and different study departments at University for Business and Technology (UBT) in Prishtina, Republic of Kosovo.

The study was conducted under two different conditions, in formal/ institutional settings, where participants were exposed to intentional learning (watching the movie "Bruce Almighty") and simulated informal/ natural settings (movie "Click"), where the same participants were exposed to incidental learning. Participants were randomly assigned to three equal groups under three different conditions. During the treatments, in both formal and simulated informal settings, the acquisition of 12 words were measured. In order to come up with a list of target vocabulary terms that were likely to be unfamiliar to the participants, the movie script was carefully studied.

The target words were chosen according to vocabulary database provided by English Vocabulary Profile for the students of the pre-intermediate (B1) and intermediate (B2) proficiency level. Vocabulary acquisition was measured through pre, post and delayed tests designed according to Wesche & Paribakht's (1996) Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) [17].

### **4. Results**

The analysis of the difference between the averages of the level of acquisition of words according to the test criteria with English, Albanian or no subtitles, was one of the main goals of this research. Thus, in the tables below (Table 1 and 2) the fourth column sets the averages of acquisition and attitude towards vocabulary

according to the two movie treatments and according to the criteria with English, Albanian or no subtitles:

**Table 1:** Analysis of word acquisition based on three treatments: with Albanian Subtitles, English Subtitles and no subtitles.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Total Points "Click"	English s.	8	39.635	.630	1.990	34.92	44.33	32	47
	Albanian s.	8	47.637	.855	2.777	41.06	54.19	38	64
	No sub.	8	35.006	.325	2.236	29.71	40.29	25	44
	Total	24	40.758	.305	1.695	37.24	44.26	25	64
Total Points "Bruce Almighty"	English s.	8	50.256	.431	2.274	44.87	55.63	43	60
	Albanian s.	8	62.635	.069	1.792	58.39	66.86	54	69
	No sub.	8	45.635	.181	1.832	41.29	49.96	37	53
	Total	24	52.839	.073	1.852	49.00	56.66	37	69

**Table 2:** ANOVA Analysis of word acquisition based on three treatments: with Albanian Subtitles, English Subtitles and no subtitles.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total Points in "Click"	Between Groups	652.750	2	326.375	7.340	.004
	Within Groups	933.750	21	44.464		
	Total	1586.500	23			
Total Points in "Bruce Almighty"	Between Groups	1236.083	2	618.042	19.747	.000
	Within Groups	657.250	21	31.298		
	Total	1893.333	23			

Thus, based on the significance (0.004 0.000 <0.01) that are statistically relevant for the first level of reliability of 0.01 (this occurs in 99% of sample cases), it can be estimated that there is a statistically significant difference in the level of vocabulary acquisition depending on the different subtitle treatments, i.e.

using English, Albanian or no subtitles.

Thus, the highest average of the acquisition results in the Albanian subtitles (47.63 and 62.63) versus English translation (39.63 and 50.25) and without translation (35 and 45.63).

In the movie "Click", Table 3 shows that the frequency of students in "improvement to the level of recognition", is above 54%, while 41% of the students are in "improving to the level of production".

However, over 4% of students showed negative results or did not have any improvement and success in word acquisition. So generally speaking, the results are positive in the acquisition of words in the movie "Click".

On the other hand, in the movie "Bruce Almighty" (Table 4) students have scored 8.3% in "improvement to the recognition level" and 91.7% in "improvement to production level". So, the results in the movie "Bruce Almighty" are even more positive in regards to student acquisition of words when watching movies in intentional learning settings. In Table 5 are given the averages of the scores in the delayed test in both, formal and informal settings which determine the number of words retained in students' long term memory.

**Table 3:** Frequency of word acquisition in the movie “Click” according to the levels

	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent Cumulative
No Improvement	1	4.2	4.2
Improvement to recognition level	13	54.2	58.3
Improvement to production level	10	41.7	100.0
Total	24	100.0	100.0

**Table 4:** Frequency of word acquisition in the movie “Bruce Almighty” according to the levels

	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent Cumulative
Improvement to recognition level	2	8.3	8.3
Improvement to production level	22	91.7	100.0
Total	24	100.0	100.0

**Table 5:** T-test Delayed test results based on the movie type – Group statistics

	Movie	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Delayed Test	Click	12	33.75	16.371	4.726
	Bruce Almighty	12	44.67	20.033	5.783

**5. Discussions**

The present research provided solid empirical evidence to support the claim that subtitled movies have a great impact on learners’ vocabulary acquisition. The averages of the scores gained in the posttests in both movies, “Click” and “Bruce Almighty” (Table 1 and 2) signify that students performed better when they were exposed to movies with subtitles. Furthermore, based on these results, the students in both subtitles and no subtitles group performed better in the word recognition level (Level 2 and 3) rather than production level (Level 5). However, the subtitled group had slightly better performance when it comes to acquiring productive knowledge of the word (Level 5), i.e. they outperformed the no subtitles group, for a difference of 2.80% in the movie “Click” and 6.30% in the movie “Bruce Almighty”. This shows that students are more familiar with watching movies with subtitles and see them as assistive tool when it comes to understanding the plot of the movies. One of the reasons why the subtitles groups performed better than the no subtitles group is that subtitles make a connection between auditory and visual input and thus students are able to perceive the target language speech easily.

The results presented in Table 1 and 2 report that in both movies, the Albanian subtitles group outperformed students who watched the movies with English subtitles. So, in interpreting the findings of the posttests, the Albanian subtitles group performed at a significantly higher level than the English subtitles group which indicates that Albanian subtitles helped learners acquire more vocabulary than the English subtitles. Also, these significant differences appoint to the fact that Albanian subtitles assist learners more in the level of production, whereas the English subtitles group are more inclined in helping learners in improvement to the recognition

level. Moreover, the averages of the scores gained in the post-tests (Table 1 and 2), indicate that the total point average gained in the movie “Bruce Almighty” (52.83%) is higher than the total point average in the movie “Click” (40.75%).

From the observations of the researcher on how students behaved and interacted with the material, peers and the teacher, there are several factors for the results being in favor for the intentional learning condition. In intentional learning conditions students were given assistance by the teacher trying to elicit from them the target vocabulary or elaborating discussions in order that the target words could be used more often. So, teacher’s frequent intervention has potentially assisted them in learning the new words. The teacher would ask students continuously and individually in order to make sure that everybody was engaged in the lesson and understood the content of the movie. Particularly, the power point presentation at the end of the movie refreshed their memories of the target words. Thus, students who seemed more passive in the first movie started to be more participative in the second one. Also, the brainstorming activities, taking notes, the teacher giving a summary of the movie, pausing and repeating the scenes are other pedagogical factors which show why intentional vocabulary learning treatment led to better results in the posttest and delayed test. Moreover, students knew they were going to be tested on the same words and were familiar with the process of the VKS testing which might be another element that contributed to the positive outcomes of the intentional learning conditions. This signifies that students need purpose when they are presented with a learning material, such as movies. The averages of the scores (Table 5) gained in the delayed tests, in both, formal and informal settings report the number of words retained in students’ long term memory. The total vocabulary gain in the movie “Click”, that is, the incidental vocabulary acquisition treatment is lower from that of the intentional learning condition, i.e. the movie Bruce Almighty for 10.92% (Click 33.75%, Bruce Almighty 44.67%). This signifies that students exposed to subtitles in intentional learning settings remembered the words for the 3 weeks’ period of time better than students exposed to movies without subtitles and incidental learning conditions.

## **6. Conclusions**

Learning new vocabulary, as a demanding task of most language learners plays a significant role in language learning and especially in improving their communication skills. On the other hand, the increasing access to different multimedia and technology resources, including subtitled movies offers learners vast number of opportunities to enrich their vocabulary. The value of subtitles in helping students’ through the process of vocabulary acquisition has been seen by a lot of scholars. Thus, a great deal of research has been conducted on exploring the effectiveness of watching subtitled movies in vocabulary acquisition. Previous studies have found out several benefits of using subtitled movies by confirming that subtitles indeed improve vocabulary learning.

As multimedia language materials, especially movies have been shown as a powerful tool in assisting language learning, investigating their benefits is a significant approach in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). There have been a lot of extensive researches that have addressed the potential of movie subtitles in enhancing students’ vocabulary acquisition. However, this study expanded the previous researches by examining different factors that may have an impact on vocabulary acquisition through watching movies. As such, this research is important, first, because it gives researchers and educators insight on how watching movies



with subtitles can have a big potential in developing learners' vocabulary acquisition. It also shows how movies can impact the understanding of the vocabulary usage in real context while providing authentic environment for vocabulary gains.

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