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# The impact of subtitled movies on 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. As a result, previous studies have found out several benefits of using subtitled movies by confirming that subtitles indeed improve vocabulary development.

**Keywords:** movies, subtitles, vocabulary, incidental acquisition.

## Introduction

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 (McCarthy, 1990, p.8). 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 (Thornbury, 2002). 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 (Laufer & Ravenhorst - Kalovski, 2010 as cited in Mohebbi, 2013, p.1).

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, Prensky (2001, as cited in Beauprez, 2014) 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.

## **Subtitled movies in the context of Republic of Macedonia**

In a multi-cultural country like Republic Macedonia, 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 Macedonian 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 Macedonia 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 Macedonia, 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 Macedonians, 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.

## **Review of existing researches**

Learning vocabulary through watching subtitled movies is not a new tool in the field of foreign language learning, as numerous researchers have investigated the usefulness of subtitled videos in and outside the classroom. Many authors have focused on investigating students' vocabulary improvement when watching videos at home and have shown that those who watched movies with subtitles outperform those who watched movies without any subtitles (Kosslstra and Beentjes', as cited in Harji et. al, 2010).

Moreover, Neuman and Koskinen (1992 as cited in Mosavi, 2014) discovered that when their subjects were exposed to English videos with subtitles their vocabulary significantly improved. Furthermore, Koskinen et al. (1985 as cited in Yuksel & Tanriverdi, 2009) reported that subtitled movies do have an impact on incidental vocabulary acquisition of non-native English speakers. Yuksel and Tanriverdi (2009) also found that learners have a greater progress when exposed to subtitled movies rather than movies without subtitles. To sum up, the results from the above-mentioned studies as well as majority of recent studies have supported the usage of subtitled movies in gaining new vocabulary.

## **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" (as cited in Davey, 2015). 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 (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Hulstijn, 2001 as cited in Perez et. al 2014). Wesche and Paribakht (2010 as cited in Lévesque, 2013) add 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 Lévesque (2013), 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. Danan (1992 as cited in Melodie, 2014) also points out that same word repetition presented by the subtitles also benefits vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, Thornbury (2004 as cited in Hashemi & Pourgharib, 2014) 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" (1971 as cited in Gorijan, 2014), 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" (1985 as cited in Mardani & Najmabadi, 2016). He refers to comprehensible input as an input that is slightly more difficult than learners' current language proficiency level. However, Krashen also suggests that this input needs to be delivered with suitable techniques and needs to be "interesting and relevant, not form-focused, and quantitative" (as cited in Zarei, 2009), 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" (Lertola, 2012). 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 (Rott, 1999 as cited in Xenia, 2016).

Moreover, Read (2004, as cited in Nasab & Motlagh, 2017) 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 (Kunyun & Huayu, 2011). 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.

## Conclusion

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.

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