

## **The Impact of English and Persian Movie Subtitle on the Listening Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners**

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## **Abstract**

Listening has long been the neglected skill in second language acquisition. However, over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of attention devoted to the listening comprehension ability. One of the effective technological tools in English language learning and teaching in general and consequently in listening skill, in specific, is taken advantages movie subtitles through using DVDs, since DVDs provide subtitling options and they are counted as one of the best available input for EFL learners and teachers. To conduct the study, 90 female subjects, age group 20-30 were selected randomly among 135 intermediate students of EFL at Parsa Language School at Qom, Iran. They were randomly assigned to three groups of 30 students, with the same proficiency level. Two experimental groups receiving their appropriate treatment i.e. one group watching 3 English movies with English subtitle, and the other group watched the same 3 English movies with Persian subtitle and one control group that watched the movies with no subtitle at all. The results of the reported study revealed that using DVD movie with L2 subtitle was the most effective way to help students to improve their listening comprehension. The English subtitle group (ESG) outperformed tow other groups ( $P < .05$ ) i.e. The Persian subtitle group (PSG) and no subtitle group (NSG/CG). The within changes in all groups were observed, however, the change in Persian subtitle showed no significance.

## **Introduction**

Listening has long been the neglected skill in second language acquisition. According to David Nunan listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister-speaking. For most people, being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language. Listening and reading are therefore secondary skills- means to other ends, rather than in themselves. (Kaplan, 2002)

Over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of attention devoted to the teaching, learning, and testing of second language (L2) listening ability. This increased attention is due (at least in part) to the realization of the importance of listening in language learning (Buck, 2001). Second language instruction in a classroom is by nature primarily visual and auditory. One language is used to teach another language, either through use of the first language or by simplified explanations of concepts in the second language. (Munoz, 2000).

The development of listening skills in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) at tertiary level has gained momentum for the last few decades. It is estimated that learners listen to the foreign language they are

studying approximately twice as much as they speak it ( Nunan, 1998); consequently, educators realize they should not downplay this receptive language skill to ascertain the learners' good oral language production. To promote the learners' mastery of listening skills, lecturers need to carefully select and present a variety of quality materials and appropriate teaching aids to be used in a language laboratory, ensuring that the learners will attain optimum results from the lessons.

Harmer (2003) indicates that students are involved in listening exercises for a number of reasons. Each of these highlights *why* activities focused on improving listening skills are of importance, and need to be integrated into the classroom.

- Listening is an essential skill.
- The more a language is listened to the better students become at listening to it.
- Listening to a language improves a student's speaking ability. In particular, pronunciation is seen to improve.
- Pre-recorded material exposes students to a large variety of voices.
- All listening, if understood, gives students the chance to notice language and to acquire it.
- Listening material, especially pre-recorded material, gives students the opportunity to study aspects of spoken English.

### **Listening in Iran Neglected**

When asked which of the four skills they feel weakest in, students in Iran most often say listening. Indeed, while reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary are often tested, there are no sections on listening. Yet even those students who have already achieved a relatively high level of fluency in English still lament their poor listening skills. In teaching, listening is often the neglected skill, presumed to improve along with work on the other skills.

Iranian EFL learners may feel their listening is poor, yet their concept of what good listening is and the purpose of listening may be inadequate. Listening is not a word-by-word deciphering enterprise but a search for meaning. Detailed analysis of listening texts will not be of much use to students who have been trained to read the text first and then listen. All listening involves a bit of intelligent guessing and occasionally dealing with the unexpected.

### **Input and its Role in listening**

Input is defined as the language that is addressed to the L2 learners either by a native speaker or by another L2 learner and his interlocutors" (Ellis, 1994).

No one can deny the importance of input in language learning since one can not acquire a language without it. As a matter of fact input is an indispensable component in second language (L2) learning. It can be either written or oral and obtained in natural settings or in classroom. (Yang, 2007)

In the foreign language classroom, input can appear in many forms, such as materials, teachers, and other students (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Oura, 2001). Even talking about language, which can be teacher centered or student centered, can be seen as input (Bacon, 1989).

Teachers need to consider how the learners' listening comprehension ability will be affected by adjusting the types of input the students are receiving (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

### **DVD Movie as an Audio-visual Input**

A DVD (Digital Versatile Disc or Digital Video Disc) has many advantages over the traditional VHS format. Because it can store far more information, sound and picture quality are much higher. Most DVDs come with a lot of extra information, for example, subtitles/captions in several languages, sometimes two or more extra sound tracks, and added video material, such as interviews with the actors. For language learners the added subtitles are of even greater interest because they allow the learner to read in English what the actors are saying and also to read in the L1 (first language). Teachers can also make use of the added interviews or other material. (Katchen, 2003)

DVDs, unlike videos, have an array of subtitling and audio options that allow teachers the freedom and scope to plan and make well-informed sequencing decisions. It came to my mind that DVDs along with its optional availability of L1 subtitle, L2 subtitle, and no subtitle could be teaching tools that assisted me in creating a more motivating learning atmosphere to boost listening comprehension in my lab (movie) class.

DVD has vastly replaced traditional VHS as the movie medium of the new millennium. In addition to its compactness, duality and availability, there are a variety of special features offered on DVD, including interactive menus, theatrical trailer, behind the scenes commentary, language and subtitles and immediate scene access. With these special features, DVD films provide more pedagogical options and are a rich resource of intrinsically motivating materials for learners. (Jane King, 2002)

### **Using DVD subtitles**

The subtitle features on DVDs open up new techniques for exploiting film and other foreign language material. It is sometimes possible to find films where both audio and subtitles are available in the same target language. Reading and listening at the same time can help to reinforce the connection

between the sound and written form of the language and to build vocabulary. Be aware that subtitles can sometimes be an abbreviated form of the audio, however. An effective self-access activity for vocabulary building is to watch a film in English with subtitles in the target language. (*National Centre for Languages, 2008*)

Now the digital versatile disc or DVD has replaced the laser disc as the preferred format for interactive video (e.g. Bush, 2000; King, 2002). Films shown in the DVD format are helpful because they incorporate “interactive menus, theatrical trailers, behind-the-scenes commentary, foreign languages, captions or subtitles, and immediate scene access . . . [providing] a rich resource of intrinsically motivating material for learners” (King, p. 509).

### **Subtitle and its Role**

Subtitles can be used together with authentic video to improve word recognition and vocabulary acquisition skills in the EFL class. This atmosphere provides authentic input through three different channels (written text, oral text and images) that contribute to offer a better and potentially longer-lasting mental representation of new and old lexical items. ([www.tesol-spain.org](http://www.tesol-spain.org),2008)

Depending on the video clip used and the goal of the lesson, authentic input of this kind can still be very demanding on students. In fact, badly handled video activities can be just as de-motivating. Here is where the use of subtitles can play a key role in the foreign language class, to help overcome this problem. Although subtitles have sometimes been considered as distracting or as a source of laziness in students, nowadays we should realize that ‘far from being a distraction and a source of laziness, subtitles might have a potential value in helping the learning acquisition process by providing learners with the key to massive quantities of authentic and comprehensible language input’ (Vanderplank, 1988: 272-273). Indeed, 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 that can help them feel ready and motivated to watch foreign television, films, etc., with or without the support of subtitles in the near future.

### **Different Types of Subtitles**

There are different types of possible combinations between audio and subtitles. The main ones are typically known as standard subtitles (foreign language audio with mother tongue captions), bimodal subtitles (foreign language audio with foreign language subtitles), and reversed subtitles (mother tongue audio with foreign captions). The most commonly used combination is

the standard one, also called interlingual. The bimodal variety, also called intralingual, is also commonly used in classroom activities; the use of one or another in class will depend on the goal of the lesson and on the students' level.

Research has been conducted to investigate which combination of sound and subtitles in L1/L2 most effectively helps L2 learners understand the movies. The findings, however, are inconclusive: Holobow et al. (1984) found bi-modal (L2 sound + L2 subtitles) better suits advanced learners and Danan (1992) suggested bi-modal arid reversed mode (L2 subtitles + L1 sound) enhance learners' comprehension more than standard (L1 subtitles + L2 sound) mode. (TAURA Hideyuki & [TAURA Amanda, 2001](#)).

### **Subtitles as Advance Organizers**

There are many types of advance organizers available, such as pictures, gestures, summaries, and pantomime. Based on the type of advance organizer used, the teacher can provide them as handouts, write them on the board, or act them out for the students.

Based On the findings of the present research and those of the similar researches (*Rocque,2008*) we come to realize that subtitles facilitate comprehension by creating a bridge between what the learner knows and the new language structures that appear in the input. As an advance organizer, therefore, it serves an important role in helping learners overcome their lack of essential schemata that would otherwise limit the amount of intake that could occur.

In a word, the use of advance organizers is an effective teaching strategy, because AOs enhance listening recall by activating prior knowledge or schema. Not all advance organizers, however, are equal. The kinds of advance organizers that have been studied in this study were DVDs along with optional subtitles: English, Persian, and without subtitle.

### **Method**

#### **Population and sampling**

90 female subjects participating in this research were selected randomly from among 135 Intermediate students of EFL at Parsa Language School (P.L.S.), Qom, Iran. The subjects did not have any other English class but this course. They were randomly assigned to three groups of 30 students. The decision as to which group is experimental or control was made also randomly. To control the initial differences between and within groups an attempt was made to choose the sample groups from one sex (female), age group 18-26, and with the same proficiency level(homogenized by OPT just before the program starts).

#### **Instrumentation**

The listening subtest of OPT was used as placement test to homogenize the participants. The pretest and posttest were both adopted from the book "TOEFL, CBT." Lab equipments such as TV set and DVD player were used. Three randomly chosen original American English DVD films, holding the capacity of showing English subtitle, Persian subtitle, or none (for the control group), was the content material of the course.

## **Procedures**

Because of the nature of the thesis, the most appropriate design to run the study is one of the subsets of true experimental design known as pre-test post-test control group design. Basic characteristics of the design i.e. control group, randomization and pre-test, allows the researcher to avoid almost many of the problems associated with internal and external validities.

In this design, there are three groups, two experimental groups that receive their appropriate treatment, i.e. one experimental group that watch 3 English movies with English subtitle. I call them English subtitle group; henceforth abbreviated as ESG. The other experimental group watches the same 3 English movies with Persian subtitle, called Persian subtitle group, abbreviated as PSG. And one control group that watch the movies with no subtitle at all, abbreviated as NSG.

According to the requirements of the design, the pretest of TOEFL, listening section (part A), was administered in order to measure the level of listening comprehension of the subjects.

The subjects were required to participate in the lab class for 15 sessions as a requirement of Parsa Language School. Each session will be held every other day, i.e. 3 days a week. Subjects of the study will watch each one of 3 randomly-selected movies in its entirety in every 3 sessions.

After treatment, the post-test of TOEFL, listening section (Part B) was administered to both experimental groups as well as control group to judge whether listening comprehension has been empowered. Both pre- and post-test examined the listening comprehension of the subjects.

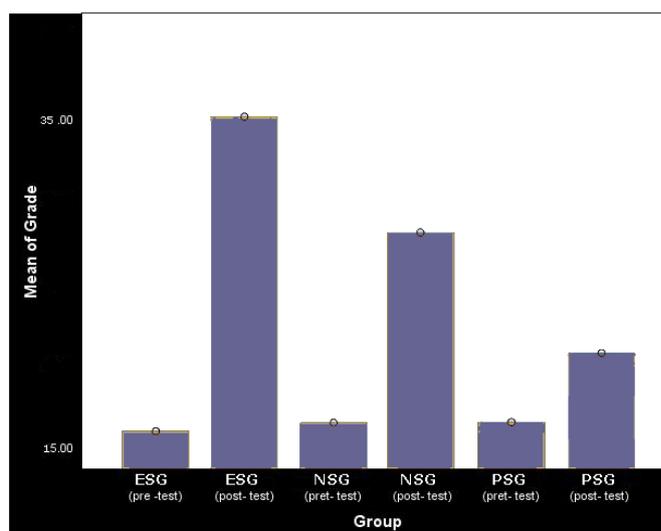
## **Results and Discussion**

By means of SPSS package, the received scores were exposed to a number of analyses. A condscriptive task was used to compute group means and standard deviation for the test scores. Since we wanted to compare more than two sample groups, ANOVA was used to measure the between-group mean differences.

In order to do paired comparisons among the three groups, namely English subtitle group (ESG), Persian subtitle group (PSG), and control group (CG/NSG), the SPSS post hoc test was used to indicate where the significant differences lie. All the statistical procedures mentioned were conducted through SPSS package.

The results of the reported study revealed that using DVD movie with L2 subtitle was the most effective way to help students to improve their listening comprehension. The English subtitle group (ESG) outperformed two other groups ( $P < .05$ ) i.e. The Persian subtitle group (PSG) and no subtitle group (NSG/CG). The within changes in all groups were observed, however, the change in Persian subtitle showed no significance.

Table 1. Pre-test, Post-test Results



## Conclusion

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 situations. 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)

One of the best ways to achieve the mentioned goal is to take advantages of audiovisual aids, especially authentic movies. DVD as a technological tool is helpful and provides a good input for the listening class.

A DVD (Digital Versatile Disc or Digital Video Disc) has many advantages over the traditional VHS format. Because it can store far more information, sound and picture quality are much higher. Most DVDs come with a lot of extra information, for example, subtitles/captions in several languages, sometimes two or more extra sound tracks, and added video material, such as interviews with the actors. For language learners the added subtitles are of even greater interest because they allow the learner to read in English what the actors are saying and also to read in the L1 (first language). Teachers can also make use of the added interviews or other material. (Katchen, 2003)

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decisions. With these special features, DVD films provide more pedagogical options and are a rich resource of intrinsically motivating materials for learners. (Jane King, 2002)

Based on the previous researches and the present study we come to conclusion that the role of subtitles in boosting listening comprehension especially bimodal subtitling, that is, L2 audio with L2 subtitle is crucial and not to be neglected. Other types of subtitles should be researched as well. We were introduced to the fact subtitles play the role of an advance organizer.

In view of the above remarks and the findings of the present survey, it can be concluded that DVDs with the technology of optional subtitles can be a very good source of research as well as instruction in the realm of EFL learning. However, some points should be considered. For instance, we should maximize the utility of DVDs in language classes, and we should also make students acquainted with the privileges of L2 subtitles rather than L1 subtitles, and the last but not the least, we should encourage and train the English teachers to use DVDs more efficiently and effectively in their classes.

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