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Saudi Students' Attitudes to the Use of Subtitles to Improve Their Listening Skills

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Abstract

The role of subtitles in improving listening skills is a controversial issue in the literature of second language (L2) learning. This study attempted to investigate L2 learners' attitudes to the use of subtitles when watching English audio-visual materials. Investigating L2 learners' attitudes to the use of subtitles may have implications for designing listening courses in education organisations around the world. The study recruited 63 Saudi third-year students from an English department at a Saudi university. The data was collected by means of a closed-ended questionnaire containing 23 Likert-scale items. The results indicated that most participants: a) agreed that listening skills are important; b) had more positive attitudes to the use of English subtitles (captions) than to Arabic subtitles; c) expressed positive attitudes to people who use articles; and d) acknowledged that the use of captions had a greater positive impact on L2 learning than either Arabic subtitles or no subtitles at all.

Keywords: attitudes, EFL learners, listening skills, subtitles

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Introduction

There is no method that is guaranteed to be effective for teaching or learning English (Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2021; Rokni & Atae, 2014). For both teachers and learners, the primary objective is to improve the four key skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking (Metruk, 2018). Of these, according to Peters et al. (2016), listening has received the least attention from researchers. Peters et al (2016) also state that audio-visual materials that reflect everyday English have been found to be beneficial for listening comprehension. Students should therefore watch films and other materials that include clear and authentic input. Films that have first language (L1) and/or L2 subtitles or captions can promote listening comprehension by helping L2 learners associate gestural with spoken language (Faqe, 2020; Richards, 2002). To date, there have been no studies that examine Saudi L2 learners' attitudes to English subtitles. This study addresses that gap by investigating the following research question:

1. What are L2 learners' views about:
 - a) Listening skills;
 - b) Personal use of subtitles;
 - c) People who use subtitles;
 - d) The benefits and drawbacks of subtitles;
 - e) The potential impact of subtitles on L2 learning of English?

Listening comprehension

Listening better is crucial for L2 acquisition (Masrai, 2019; Metruk, 2019; Rokni & Atae, 2014). L2 learners listen twice as much as they speak in the L2 (Ghoneam, 2015). Listening is not only about hearing spoken language but also about making sense of it (Alabsi, 2020). Intelligent guessing is more important for listening comprehension than understanding the literal meaning of each word (Ellis, 1994). Listening comprehension seems to be an easy task for L1 speakers of a given language but not for L2 learners (Graham, 2006).

Listening to L2 input is essential for the success of L2 language acquisition. Krashen's (1985) influential comprehensible input hypothesis proposes that for L2 language acquisition to be successful, L2 learners need to be exposed only to comprehensible input that is slightly above their current proficiency level.

Subtitles and captions

Much of the research on improving L2 learners' English proficiency levels has addressed the role of reading rather than listening (Masrai, 2019). L2 learners in the classroom are not exposed to enough listening input to learn English and need to find other exposure opportunities, one of which is watching audio-visual materials (Masrai, 2019). Moreover, many countries around the world do not dub foreign films and video materials in their official languages, but use subtitles instead (Masrai, 2019; Peters et al., 2016; Talaván Zanón, 2006), which can also cover some of a video's visuals. Although Talaván Zanón (2006) has suggested that many viewers dislike subtitles, which they find distracting, bothering and a nuisance, Vanderplank (1988, p.272) argues that subtitles may be useful in L2 acquisition, and not just a distraction or route to laziness, which is why some countries prefer to use subtitles over dubbing for educational reasons. Peters et al. (2016) state that both L1 subtitles and L1 captions are beneficial for L2 learning because they link visuals to text to language (Faqe, 2020; King, 2002; Richards, 2002;

Talaván Zanón, 2006). However, both captions and subtitles can make L2 learners dependent on them (Danan, 2004; Talaván Zanón, 2006).

Literature review

There is no consensus in the literature of language learning regarding whether L1 subtitles and captions hinder or benefit listening comprehension in L2 (Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2021; Latifi et al., 2011; Robin, 2007). This section briefly discusses a number of studies that have examined the potential roles of L1 subtitles and captions.

In 2015, Ghoneam recruited a total of 104 participants whose L1 was Egyptian I to investigate the impacts of L1 subtitles and captions on listening comprehension. He created three groups for his longitudinal study, each of which was assigned a different task. One group watched films with I subtitles (captions); a second group watched films with I subtitles; and a third group watched films with no subtitles. The participants were pre-tested on their listening comprehension. They then watched seven films over four weeks. Six weeks after their pre-test, participants were given a multiple-choice listening comprehension test. This demonstrated, first of all, that the groups that had watched films with subtitles in either language had learned more than the group that watched films with no subtitles at all. Secondly, the group that watched films with I (L1) subtitles outperformed the group that had watched them with I (L2) subtitles. The researcher did not indicate whether the participants had access to other audio-visual materials that could account for their improvement between the pre- and post-tests.

Metruk (2018) recruited 30 university-level L1 Slovak learners of I for his study of the impact of subtitles on listening and reading comprehension. He first administered a questionnaire on participants' use of subtitles, and then divided them into three groups based on their subtitle language preferences. One group used I subtitles when watching films; another used Slovak subtitles; and a third used no subtitles. He then administered a variety of written tests. The findings showed that the group that watched films with Slovak (L1) subtitles outperformed both the other groups and that there were no significant differences between the other two groups. This study was limited by Metruk's failure to ascertain whether the group that usually watched material subtitled in I also watched other material with Slovak subtitles or none.

Faqe (2020) recruited 31 L1 Kurdish learners of I from the I department of an Iraqi university. The participants watched a 21-minute film without subtitles; they then completed a questionnaire to find out whether their vocabulary had improved. They then watched the film a second time with I subtitles and completed the same questionnaire. They were found to have positive attitudes to subtitles in relation to the question of vocabulary improvement. However, the researcher overlooked the potential role of priming, given that the subtitles accompanied a film they had already seen once. That is, it is not clear whether the repetition of the film or the presence of the subtitles was the reason for their positive attitudes.

Alabsi (2020) studied the impact of subtitles on L2 learning of I. She recruited 76 first-year female university level students whose L1 was Saudi Arabic. The participants were divided into two groups of 38 (experimental and control). Both groups watched the same video. The experimental group was asked to write text subtitles for the video. The participants were pre- and post-tested on their listening comprehension. It was found that the group that wrote subtitles

outperformed the control group. However, Alabsi did not ask participants about their attitudes to the experience; she went on to suggest that future research should explore students' attitudes to subtitles.

Andriani & Angelina (2020) carried out a study with 31 undergraduate students who were L1 Indonesian learners of I. The study aimed to find out how they perceived I subtitles and their benefits for learning I. Based on the administration of a questionnaire as well as on interviews, the researchers discovered that participants had positive feelings about subtitles. Notably, all the studies above indicate that participants find subtitles beneficial for L2 learning of I (i.e., Alabsi, 2020; Andriani & Angelina, 2020; Faqe, 2020; Ghoneam, 2015). This study further investigates this by seeking I students' attitudes to the use of subtitles, since Alabsi's (2020) study with female Saudi students, discussed above, did not examine their attitudes.

Methodology

The study was conducted with 63 Saudi university-level students (29 female and 34 male, whose mean age was 20.9). They were third-year students in the English department of a Saudi university. Participants who were bilingual or who had started acquiring English at a young age in an English-speaking country were screened out.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that contained 23 closed-ended questions and used a Likert-scale to address five constructs: a) listening skills; b) personal use of subtitles; c) attitudes to people who use subtitles; d) the benefits and drawbacks of subtitles; and e) the potential impact of subtitles on L2 learning of the English language.

The questionnaire was administered online due to the Covid-19 restrictions. A link was sent to participants, who were told that they could complete the questionnaire at any time they wanted over the following month. This was done so that they did not feel pressured to finish it quickly, which may have affected the quality of their answers. Participants were informed about the nature of the questionnaire and the study and their consent was obtained.

Results

The results for each of the five constructs are reported below: a) listening skills; b) personal use of subtitles; c) attitudes to people who use subtitles; d) the benefits and drawbacks of using subtitles; and e) the potential impact of subtitles on L2 learning of the English language.

Table 1. *Participants' attitudes to listening skills*

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
1. Improving my listening skills makes me proficient in English.	n=	1	1	1	29	31	4.4	.75
	%	1.6%	1.6%	1.6%	46%	49.2%		
2. It is important to improve my listening skills in English.	n=	1	0	0	22	40	4.6	.66
	%	1.6%	0%	0%	34.9%	63.5%		
3. Improving my listening skills is not important.	n=	44	12	2	4	1	4.5	.94
	%	69.8%	19%	3.2%	6.3%	1.6%		
4. My teacher should not focus on improving my listening skills.	n=	29	23	5	6	0	4.2	.94
	%	46%	36.5%	7.9%	9.5%	0%		

5. I like my teacher to focus on improving my listening skills.	n=	2	2	6	28	25	4.1	1.24
	%	3.2%	3.2%	9.5%	44.4%	39.7%		

The participants agreed that improving their listening skills is important. They also had positive attitudes to teachers' help with improving their listening skills.

Table 2. Participants' attitudes to the personal use of subtitles

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
6. I prefer to watch English audio-visual materials with Arabic subtitles.	n=	7	24	8	17	7	2.9	1.24
	%	11.1%	38.1%	12.7%	27%	11.1%		
7. I prefer to watch English audio-visual materials with English subtitles.	n=	2	1	7	29	24	4.1	.91
	%	3.2%	1.6%	11.1%	46%	38.1%		
8. I prefer to watch English audio-visual materials without subtitles.	n=	1	16	14	24	8	3.3	1.04
	%	1.6%	25.4%	22.2%	38.1%	12.7%		
9. I cannot watch English audio-visual materials without subtitles.	n=	23	21	17	2	0	2	.87
	%	36.5%	33.3%	27%	3.2%	0%		
10. I prefer not to watch audio-visual materials that have subtitles.	n=	13	30	7	8	5	2.4	1.18
	%	20.6%	47.6%	11.1%	12.7%	7.9%		
11. Using or not using subtitles depends on the type of audio-visual materials (e.g., movies, documentaries, TV shows, news).	n=	1	4	7	33	18	4	.89
	%	1.6%	6.3%	11.1%	52.4%	28.6%		
12. I feel uncomfortable when I do not understand the English dialogue in audio-visual materials.	n=	5	2	8	32	16	3.8	1.09
	%	7.9%	3.2%	12.7%	50.8%	25.4%		

The participants had positive attitudes to the personal use of English subtitles but not to the personal use of Arabic subtitles. In general, they had positive attitudes toward subtitles. They agreed that not understanding spoken English made them uncomfortable.

Table 3. Participants' attitudes to people who use subtitles

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
13. I don't want other people to know that I watch movies with subtitles.	n=	34	21	2	6	0	1.7	.92
	%	54%	33.3%	3.2%	9.5%	0%		
14. I think that people who watch audio-visual materials with subtitles are no good at English.	n=	28	24	5	4	2	1.9	1.02
	%	44.4%	38.1%	7.9%	6.3%	3.2%		

The participants felt confident using subtitles. Their attitudes suggested that they did not link English language proficiency with understanding English audio-visual materials.

Table 4. Participants' attitudes to the benefits and drawbacks of subtitles

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
15. Subtitles distract me from enjoying audio-visual materials.	n=	13	24	9	14	3	2.5	1.18
	%	20.6%	38.1%	14.3%	22.2%	4.8%		
16. Subtitles help me enjoy watching audio-	n=	4	8	11	31	9	3.5	1.08
	%	6.3%	12.7%	17.1%	50.8%	13.6%		

visual materials.	%	6.3%	12.7%	17.5%	49.2%	14.3%		
17. I like using subtitles because I don't have to worry about not understanding dialogue.	n=	5	9	11	25	13	3.5	1.19
	%	7.9%	14.3%	17.5%	39.7%	20.6%		
18. Subtitles help me link body language, facial expressions and gestures with spoken language.	n=	3	6	16	24	14	3.6	1.43
	%	4.8%	9.5%	25.4%	38.1%	22.2%		
19. I cannot concentrate on video visuals while reading subtitles.	n=	24	18	0	15	6	3.6	1.15
	%	38.1%	28.6%	0%	23.8%	9.5%		
20. Reading subtitles makes me tired.	n=	17	20	13	11	2	3.6	1.10
	%	27%	31.7%	20.6%	17.5%	3.2%		

They linked their enjoyment of audio-visual materials with their ability to understand them, which was facilitated by the use of subtitles. They generally did not express any concern regarding the drawbacks of subtitles. In fact, they acknowledged their benefits.

Table 5. Participants' attitudes to the potential impact of subtitles on L2 learning of English.

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
21. Watching audio-visual materials with Arabic subtitles improves my English.	n=	9	25	13	13	3	2.6	1.10
	%	14.3%	39.7%	20.6%	20.6%	4.8%		
22. Watching audio-visual materials with English subtitles improves my English.	n=	1	0	4	33	25	4.3	0.72
	%	1.6%	0%	6.3%	52.4%	39.7%		
23. Watching audio-visual materials without subtitles improves my English.	n=	2	7	14	25	15	3.7	1.05
	%	3.2%	11.1%	22.2%	39.7%	23.8%		

The participants expressed positive attitudes to the use of both English subtitles and no subtitles in terms of improving their English proficiency. This was not the case with the use of Arabic subtitles.

Discussion

This section discusses the results in the light of the research question, which was:

1. What are L2 learners' views about:
 - a) Listening skills;
 - b) Personal use of subtitles;
 - c) People who use subtitles;
 - d) The benefits and drawbacks of using subtitles;
 - e) The potential impact of using subtitles on L2 learning of English.

Concerning their attitudes to listening skills, more than 90% of the participants agreed that listening skills are important, with more than 80% agreeing that teachers should help them improve their listening skills. These findings were in line with Ghoneam's (2015) and Metruk's (2018) findings regarding the importance of improving listening skills.

With regard to the use of subtitles, more than 84% of the participants had positive attitudes to the use of English subtitles compared with 50.8% who were positive about the use of no subtitles and 28.1% about the use of Arabic subtitles. This shows that the participants would rather watch audio-materials with no subtitles than with Arabic. This can be seen in the 69.8% of

participants who expressed disagreement with statement 9, 'I cannot watch English audio-visual materials without subtitles.' Apart from this, 68.2% disagreed with statement 10, 'I prefer not to watch audio-visual materials that have subtitles.' This shows that they can watch audio-visual materials in English whether they have subtitles or not. However, more than 80% felt that whether or not they would use subtitles depended on the type of audio-visual material (statement 11), as more than 75% would not feel comfortable if they did not understand English dialogue. These findings support Andriani & Angelina (2020). However, Andriani & Angelina (2020) found that their participants had positive attitudes to subtitles in general, where this study found that they favoured English subtitles in particular.

Among those who used subtitles, participants seemed indifferent about whether others knew that they use subtitles when watching English films. Most expressed disagreement (82.2%) with the statement that using subtitles indicates low proficiency levels. These findings are interesting as other studies reviewed in the literature did not look at whether L2 learners care about others' impressions of them or whether the use of subtitles indicates incompetence. It seems that L2 learners tend to use subtitles confidently, and they acknowledge the fact that not understanding spoken English does not always reflect English proficiency.

Concerning the benefits and drawbacks of using subtitles, most participants indicated that using subtitles helped them enjoy watching English audio-visual materials. This is because using subtitles makes them comfortable that they understand English audio-visual materials. This is due to the fact that using subtitles helps them link body language with spoken language. In general, participants saw no drawbacks to the use of subtitles and most found them easy to read. With regard to the relationship between the use of subtitles and improvement in English proficiency, almost all participants (92.1%) thought that watching English audio-visual materials with English subtitles leads to an improvement in their English. Moreover, 63.5% linked not using subtitles with language improvement compared with only 25.4% who linked the use of Arabic subtitles to improvement in English. This finding contrasts with the studies of both Ghoneam (2015) and Metruk (2018), who found that their participants benefited more from using L1 subtitles. This study did not conduct an experiment to address this.

The findings of this study have implications for L2 learners in Saudi Arabia. Participants showed positive attitudes to: a) the importance of listening skills; b) the use of English subtitles; and c) the potentially positive impact of English subtitles. These results indicate that curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia and around the world should take into consideration that L2 learners link their use of subtitles to improvements in English in general and listening skills in particular. This is supported by the findings of the other studies discussed here, which found that subtitles improve learners' L2 English (i.e., Alabsi, 2020; Andriani & Angelina, 2020; Faqe, 2020; Ghoneam, 2015). This means that viewing audio-visual materials with subtitles in schools can have a positive impact on their English proficiency levels.

Conclusion

The study investigated L2 learners' attitudes to the use of subtitles and captions. It was found that most had more positive attitudes to the use of captions than to Arabic subtitles or to not using subtitles at all. Most of them did not think that those who used subtitles and captions had

poor proficiency in English. They also deemed the use of captions beneficial for L2 language improvement.

Limitations and future research

The study would have benefited from carrying out an experiment to examine the potential effects of subtitles. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this was not possible. According to Latifi et al (2011), studies that have investigated the potential effects of subtitles on listening comprehension have looked only at short-term effects. This emphasises the need for a longitudinal study that follows L2 learners over a long period of time to assess the potential effects of subtitles on L2 English learning.

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