

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE  
IETC2012

## The Effects of Using English Captions on Iranian EFL Students' Listening Comprehension

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of the presence or absence of English captions with an English-language sound track on the university-level Iranian EFL students' listening comprehension of video passage material. A total of 60 homogenized students of English literature at the second-year of university participated in the study. The students were randomly assigned to two groups to receive different treatments. Both groups watched a short episode (20 minutes) of an English film and they were required to take a 20-item multiple choice (MC) teacher-made listening-comprehension test while they were watching the film. The difference between these groups was in the presence of the caption of the film; that is, the experimental group watched the film with English captions and the control group watched the film without captions. The results of the post-test MC exam revealed that using captions had a significant effect on students' listening comprehension and those who received the English captions outperformed the other group. Based on the obtained results, it was concluded that providing captions for Iranian university-level EFL students could be helpful in overcoming some of their listening comprehension difficulties.

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*Key words:* Foreign language learning; English captions; listening comprehension; Dual-coding theory

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## 1. Introduction

Listening is a vital skill in the language acquisition process. Listening comprehension is a complex cognitive process that, although in terms of the mother tongue seems easily acquired, needs a great deal of effort in a second and specifically foreign language learning process. Besides, being in constant exposure to television, radio, and satellite broadcasts has increased the necessity to be prepared to receive and process information gained through the aural channel more than before.

Research in second language acquisition (SLA) has shown that if learning is to be effective and permanent it must be meaningful, involve active mental processes, and be reliable with the existing knowledge in the learner's mind (Hanley, Herron, & Cole, 1995).

In this regard, Dual-coding theory - a theory of cognition - first advanced by Allan Paivio (1971, 1986) proposes that memory consists of two separate but interrelated coding systems for processing information - one verbal and the other visual. The verbal and visual systems can be activated independently, but there are interconnections between the two systems that allow dual coding of information. If information is coded in both systems (as with captions and verbal language), the learner retains and recalls it more easily, because associations will be formed between the two systems.

This theory was supported by Paivio's own research (1971) in first language setting. The value of dual coding theory in increasing our understanding of comprehension processes has been confirmed by subsequent studies. Paivio and Lambert (1981) extended the dual coding inquiry into bilingual context and found similar positive evidence. Captions provide additional reading input to the already existing pictorial and audio input provided by various forms of commonly used video technology.

Nowadays DVD options with their flexible dimensions are particularly useful in the second and specifically foreign language settings. Offering both multilingual captions and multilingual soundtracks, DVD technology allows for various combinations of oral and written language through different sensory channels.

Meanwhile, it is necessary to distinguish subtitles from captions. Subtitles refer to on-screen text in the students' native language combined with a second language soundtrack while captions refer to on-screen text in a given language combined with a soundtrack in the same language. In this study, the term "captions" will be used throughout to avoid repeated, confusing label changes.

In order to examine the effect of film captions on EFL learners' listening comprehension, the following research questions were proposed for this study:

1. Does providing captions for films have any significant impact on Iranian university-level EFL students' listening comprehension?
2. Is the presence of English captions with an English language soundtrack more effective in improving EFL learners' listening comprehension as compared to the absence of captions?

Based on the above research questions the following null hypotheses were investigated.

HO1: Providing captions has no significant impact on Iranian university-level EFL students' listening comprehension.

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