



# Learning vocabulary through audiovisual input: The differential effect of L1 subtitles and captions

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that learners can learn new words while watching TV programs. However, the number of words learned tends to be low. Several studies have demonstrated that first language (L1) subtitles as well as captions (= subtitles in the foreign language) have the potential to increase learning gains compared to when no on-screen text aids are provided. However, the evidence regarding the differential effect of both types of subtitles is still inconclusive. This paper reports on two exploratory studies investigating the effect of L1 subtitles and captions on different aspects of word knowledge among English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) learners in Flanders (Belgium). Data were collected in two different educational settings: intermediate EFL learners from a general school and low-proficiency EFL learners from a vocational school. Although learning gains were generally low, results indicated that captions have the potential to increase form learning. However, learners who were exposed to the audiovisual input with L1 subtitles did not perform better than the captions group in the tests focusing on the meaning of the target items. Additionally, findings also suggested that learners' vocabulary size and an item's frequency of occurrence in the video clip correlated positively with word learning.

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## 1. Introduction

Most research into incidental foreign language vocabulary acquisition has been conducted in the field of reading. Recently, more studies have started to explore the effects of audiovisual input on learning foreign language vocabulary (Lin, 2014; Montero Perez, Peters, Clarebout, & Desmet, 2014; Rodgers, 2013; Sydorenko, 2010; Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko, 2010, 2013). Audiovisual input provides foreign language learners with authentic input and rich contexts. That is why it has been argued that audiovisual input can have a similar, positive effect on vocabulary acquisition as reading (Lin, 2014; Lin & Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015; Webb, 2015). However, only a handful of studies have explored these benefits empirically with (young) adult learners (Montero Perez et al., 2014; Rodgers, 2013; Sydorenko, 2010; Winke et al., 2010, 2013). Generally, these studies have reported low learning gains (Montero Perez et al., 2014; Rodgers, 2013), which might be explained by the fact that vocabulary learning through audiovisual input is challenging because of online processing demands. Unlike in reading, learners cannot go back to a previous word or sentence making guessing more difficult.

There are however a number of factors that might foster learning gains through audiovisual input. Studies have shown that word learning through audiovisual input can be boosted by providing on-screen text such as captions (= L2 subtitles) (Montero Perez et al., 2014; Montero Perez, Van Den Noortgate, & Desmet, 2013) or L1 subtitles (Danan, 1992; d'Ydewalle &

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Pavakanun, 1997, 1995; Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999). Yet, only a few studies have investigated the differential effect of L1 subtitles and captions on vocabulary learning (Bianchi & Ciabattini, 2008; Bisson, Van Heuven, Conklin, & Tunney, 2014; Frumuselu, De Maeyer, Donche, & Colon Plana, 2015; Vulchanova, Aurstad, Kvitnes, & Eshuis, 2015). In addition, none of these looked at different aspects of word knowledge and they did not take learners' vocabulary size and an item's frequency of occurrence in the input into account; two factors that seem to play a facilitative role in learning words through audiovisual input (Montero Perez et al., 2014; Peters & Webb, submitted for publication; Rodgers, 2013). Therefore, this paper reports on two studies investigating the effect of L1 subtitles and captions on word learning by English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) learners. In addition, these studies also take the item's frequency of occurrence and learners' vocabulary size into account.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. L1 subtitles

L1 subtitles or interlingual subtitles provide viewers with authentic foreign language input and the input's (condensed) translation into the national language (Almeida & Costa, 2014; Koolstra, Peeters, & Spinhof, 2002). The use of L1 subtitles is the preferred way of making foreign language movies and TV programs available in most European countries, especially in smaller countries such as The Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders). Dubbing, on the other hand, is more common in larger countries such as Germany, France and Spain (Almeida & Costa, 2014; Koolstra et al., 2002). A recent study on the use of subtitling, requested by the European Commission (Safar et al., 2011), suggests that subtitles can foster language learning, awareness and motivation. Additionally, the European Survey on Language Competences (European Commission, 2012) also showed that there is a positive relationship between foreign language proficiency and learners' exposure to foreign language input (via TV and movies). These survey studies show the beneficial role of L1 subtitles for informal language learning.

Empirical evidence for the beneficial effect of L1 subtitles mainly stems from research carried out in the 1990s (Danan, 1992: pilot study; d'Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1995, 1997; d'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1999; Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999). Overall, these studies suggest that L1 subtitles might be beneficial for vocabulary learning. The positive findings of these studies can (in part) be explained by the automatic reading of the subtitles, which was demonstrated in a number of eye-tracking studies (e.g. d'Ydewalle, Praet, Verfaillie, & Van Rensbergen, 1991). Consequently, both L1 subtitles and sound seem to be processed in parallel (Danan, 2004). In spite of the L1 subtitles' condensed form,<sup>1</sup> Koolstra et al. (2002) argue that this does not lead to information loss nor does it seem to distract from the picture.

### 2.2. Captions

Although Danan (2004) argues that L1 subtitles are a powerful pedagogical tool, recent research has tended to focus on captions rather than L1 subtitles (see e.g. Montero Perez et al., 2014; Montero Perez, Peters, & Desmet, 2015; Sydorenko, 2010; Winke et al., 2010, 2013). Unlike L1 subtitles, captions are intralingual subtitles, providing the viewers with aural as well as written input in the foreign language (L2 audio + L2 subtitles). Captions are primarily used for the deaf and hard-of-hearing.

Most studies focusing on the use of captions have explored its effects on listening comprehension, whereas fewer studies have looked at its effect on vocabulary acquisition (Montero Perez et al., 2013). A recent meta-analysis of the effectiveness of captioned video for listening comprehension and vocabulary learning (Montero Perez et al., 2013) showed that although the effect was sometimes moderated by test type, there was generally a clear and large effect of captions on both listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

The positive effects of captions can be explained by the fact that they help learners segment the speech stream and distinguish separate words (Danan, 2004). Additionally, captions help learners pay (more) attention to words in the captions, as was also shown in two eye-tracking studies (Montero Perez et al., 2015; Winke et al., 2013). By providing learners with the correct word form, captions thus help to develop learners' word recognition.

Both Danan (2004) and Vanderplank (2010) stress that captions can indeed lead to vocabulary learning provided that the audiovisual input is not above the learners' proficiency. Webb and Rodgers (2009a) hypothesize that knowledge of the most frequent 3000 word families should be "the minimum vocabulary size necessary in order to watch movies for language learning" (p. 420). They demonstrated that knowledge of the most frequent 3000–4000 word families corresponds to 95% text coverage in American and British movies and knowledge of the most frequent 2000–4000 words corresponds to 95% text coverage in TV programs (Webb & Rodgers, 2009b).

### 2.3. L1 subtitles versus captions

Both L1 subtitles and captions result in more lexical learning compared to no on-screen text. However, as far we know, only four studies have compared the effect of captions and L1 subtitles. Bianchi and Ciabattini's (2008) study focused on L1 (= Italian) subtitles, captions and audio only (= control group). One week after the treatment, learners (18–45 years old) were tested on their knowledge of words that had occurred in the clips, which was either an excerpt from a movie with a strong

<sup>1</sup> L1 subtitles are characterized by space restrictions and omissions, as a result of which literal translations are not possible (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2014).

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