

## Using Film Subtitles in FLT in Croatia

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### Abstract

It is a general belief that students need to receive substantial input of authentic materials in FLT. The combination of verbal information with full visual experiences, such as films, has been found most appealing. Not only a large amount of natural language, but also a rich variety of cultural forms and expressions are mediated by this kind of “comprehensible input” (Krashen 1985). Various studies have demonstrated the ways in which intralingual subtitled audio-visual material can improve the effectiveness of general foreign language comprehension (Caimi 2002, Vanderplank 1988) and how it can be a useful tool in foreign language teaching and foreign language acquisition (Neuman & Koskinen 1992).

Most foreign television and cinema programs distributed in Croatia have always been accompanied by interlingual subtitles; therefore the viewers are accustomed to them. Consequently, such a habit can be efficiently exploited in foreign language learning among Croatian students who will certainly more easily develop strategies to derive benefits from subtitled films.

The main aim of this study was to examine whether and to what extent film subtitles (captions) increase learners’ ability to process languages. Our hypothesis was that subtitles facilitate general comprehension of a film, provided that the linguistic difficulty of the authentic film material has been carefully selected in order to match the students’ overall competency in L2. Our research was conducted among students of B1/B2 level of English L2. Students were divided into two groups: one group watched a sequence of a feature film without subtitles, while the other was shown the same material with subtitles. Both groups were given a specially designed test to assess their general comprehension of the viewed material. The findings revealed that the group of students viewing the subtitled film showed better results than the other group.

**Keywords:** FLT, authentic audio-visual material, intralingual film subtitles, Croatian learners

## **Introduction**

Learners of a foreign language do not always have an opportunity to communicate with 'native speakers'. Therefore, it is exceptionally important that they are continually exposed to interactional and speech patterns of L2. This can easily be achieved by using audio-visual materials. The role of audio-visual materials as a stimulating and facilitating tool in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language has been widely acknowledged. "They can provide (a) the motivation achieved by basing lessons on attractively informative content material; (b) the exposure to a varied range of authentic speech, with different registers, and (c) language used in the context of real situations, which adds relevance and interest to the learning process" (Carrasquillo 1994:140). Through such materials students become acquainted with various sorts of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in L2, conversational strategies (opening and closing, turn taking) and various cultural patterns.

Among other audio-visual materials, film is probably the most authentic, that is, "authentic, in the sense that the language is not artificially constrained, and is, at the same time, amenable to exploitation for language teaching purposes" (MacWilliam 1986: 134). It is an excellent medium for introducing various aspects of the foreign language in the classroom. Furthermore, films allow teachers and learners to explore the nonverbal and cultural aspects of language as well as verbal. It can also be highly motivating since it shows real-life situations and characters, thus giving an authentic and often amusing way to get acquainted with the (extra)linguistic and cultural aspects of the target reality.

## **Subtitles in foreign language learning**

Various studies have been carried out on the ways in which intralingual<sup>1</sup> subtitled audio-visual material can improve the effectiveness of general foreign language comprehension (Caimi 2002, Markham 1993 and 1999, Vanderplank 1988) and how it can be a useful tool in foreign language teaching and foreign language acquisition. Among others, Garza (1991) studied the way in which subtitles (captions) affect the study of vocabulary at higher level learners and concluded that the use of subtitles increases the comprehension and acquisition of vocabulary. Neuman & Koskinen (1992) obtained similar results in their study with advanced EFL students and came to a conclusion that students who watched subtitled (captioned) videos demonstrate better comprehension and vocabulary acquisition results. Baltova (1999) conducted

an experiment with French students in Canada whose native language was English. The purpose of her study was to find out how the learning and retention of content and vocabulary in French were affected by different authentic video formats. She also proved that the retention of the video content was superior under the subtitled conditions. The special edition of *R.I.L.A. (Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata)*, edited by Annamaria Caimi in 2002, contains the proceedings of a scientific conference on subtitled films and several papers are focused on the role of subtitles in foreign language teaching and learning.

Most the studies have focused on short-term effects of text aids, although some authors advocate the systematic collection of long-term data (Danan 2004: 75-76). The insight into both short- and long-term effects of subtitling can be seen in the experiment done by Bianchi e Ciabatonni (2008) in a broad-range investigation among the Italian adult learners of English. There were also past experiences and projects which encouraged the use of foreign language learning methods based on the creation of subtitles by students and pupils.<sup>2</sup>

All the findings agree that subtitling can contribute to language learning and that in formal learning contexts, subtitling can reduce the anxiety experienced by foreign language learners. The use of subtitled audio-visual material has the advantages of providing simultaneous exposure to spoken language, printed text and visual information, all conveying the same message (see: Baltova 1999: 33). Moreover, subtitles can function as an important element that bridges the gap between reading and listening skills (see: Borrás & Lafayette 1994).

Most foreign programs distributed in Croatia, as in other so-called “subtitling countries”<sup>3</sup>, have always been accompanied by interlingual subtitles; therefore the viewers are exposed to subtitled foreign television and cinema programs from a very young age. As the viewers are accustomed to the logic of subtitling, they can easily switch to the use of intralingual or same-language subtitles. Consequently, such a habit can be efficiently exploited in foreign language learning among Croatian students who will certainly more easily develop strategies to derive benefits from subtitled films.<sup>4</sup> However, the integration of film subtitles into language learning and teaching practice in Croatia has so far been unsatisfactory and few studies (Strmečki Marković 2003) investigated the use of film subtitles.

## **Method of the Study**

The main objective of this study was to examine whether and to what extent film subtitles increase the language-processing ability of the learners. We wanted to determine whether watching a subtitled film facilitates general comprehension among Croatian learners. For the purpose of this study the opening sequence (7’50’’) of the feature film *About a Boy* (2002, directed by Paul Weitz) was chosen. The

actors in the sequence are native speakers and use contemporary, standard variant of the English language. The topics of their conversations and monologues are common and deal with everyday situations, well known to the learners. The vocabulary and structures used in the sequence are already familiar to upper-intermediate level students.

Our research was conducted among Croatian secondary school students of English L2 at B1/B2 level of the Common European Framework. The students were divided in two groups. The groups were homogenous in terms of the number of hours of studying English in secondary school (380), in terms of age (17-18) and accordingly, in terms of general culture and cineliteracy. The Treatment group viewed the selected sequence with subtitles, while the Control group watched the same sequence without subtitles.

The general comprehension of the viewed material was tested by a particularly designed test. The test consisted of fifteen (15) open questions that the participants had to fill in, based on the information they heard in the sequence. Some questions required several elements in the answer, so the total score was 19. For each correct answer the participants scored one point. Each test was corrected by two independent, experienced English language teachers. Synonyms were also accepted as correct answers, provided that participant's comprehension was confirmed.

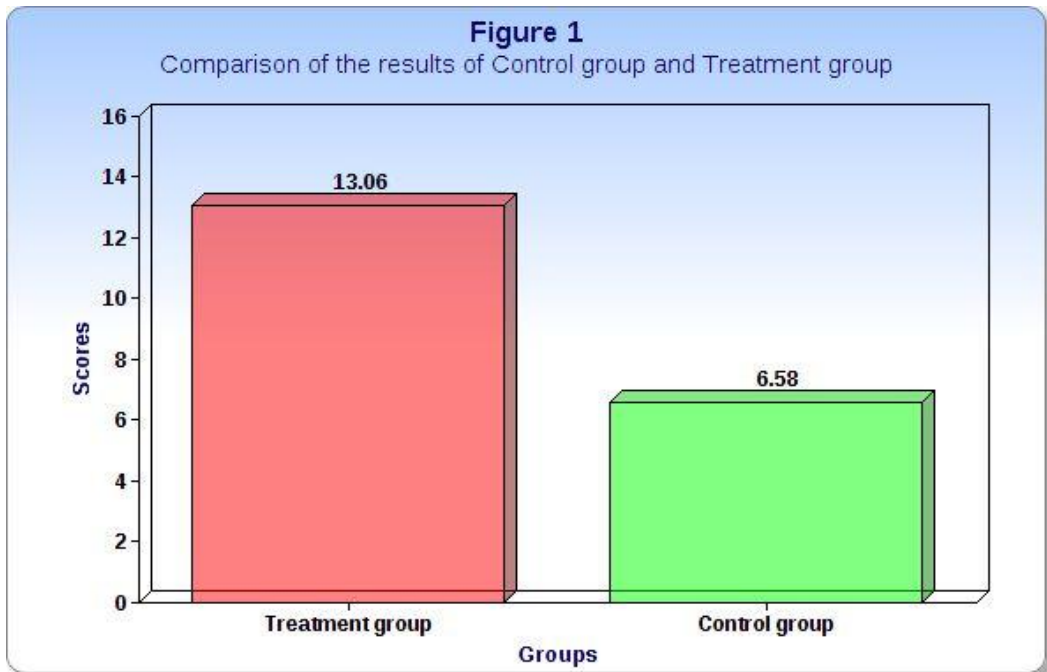
The experiment was conducted among secondary school students in Split (Croatia) in March 2014. The total number of students was one hundred (100), divided in two groups of fifty (50) participants each. They were given precise instructions for the activity: first they had to read the comprehension test questions, then carefully watch the sequence and afterwards answer the questions. They were not allowed to look at the questions while watching the sequence. Immediately after watching it, they were asked to complete the previously designed test and were given ten minutes (10') for the task.

The collected data were processed using t-test (SPSS programme) in order to determine the statistical difference between the Treatment group and the Control group.

Our hypothesis was that the group that watched the film sequence with subtitles (Treatment group) would have a higher score in the comprehension test than the Control group that had watched the same sequence without subtitles.

## **Discussion and findings**

After the answer sheets were collected and corrected, the score for each group was calculated. We ran these data through t-test to assess whether the means of the two groups were statistically different from each other. This analysis is appropriate whenever it is important to compare two groups. As can be seen in Figure 1: the Treatment group had a mean score of 13.06, while the Control group had 6.58.



The mean of the Treatment Group minus that of the Control Group equals -6.48. Given the 95% confidence interval, the difference is from -7.94 to -5.02. The standard error of difference was 0.736 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Results of the comprehension test

	Control Group	Treatment Group
Mean	6.58	13.06
Standard deviation	3.85	3.45
N (number of participants)	50	50

By conventional criteria, the t-test showed that the difference is considered to be extremely statistically significant. All the participants watched the same film sequence and the comprehension was tested by the same test. All the participants were equal in terms of all relevant criteria (age, numbers of hours of studying English, general culture and cineliteracy). The only difference between the groups

was the intervention with subtitles, in that the Treatment group had the opportunity to listen to the speech and simultaneously read the uttered words in the form of subtitles, while the participants of the Control group based their understanding only on the spoken utterances. Since all participants were equal and tested in equal conditions, the difference in the scores can be attributed exclusively to the presence or absence of subtitles.

## **Conclusion**

The findings are in accordance with previously conducted studies and these results lead us to the conclusion that subtitled film strategies have a positive impact to students' overall comprehension skills. Because of its realistic use of language, its undemanding grasp and its attractiveness, watching a foreign language film as an activity has an encouraging effect. Not only is film an important source of different themes and topics, it also offers audio-visual stimulation for developing listening, speaking reading and general comprehension skills in foreign language learning. It is important, however, to take into account that a film may be an assisting medium in covering a topic and that it has to be adequate to the level of students' language competences.

If used appropriately, such exposure to film subtitles with Croatian students should definitely strengthen their foreign language comprehension and acquisition of language functions and structures.

Nevertheless, the authors are aware of the fact that this study was conducted on a relatively small sample, homogenous in their age and education level. These data were collected exclusively from learners of English as L2 in a country where foreign TV and cinema programmes are usually subtitled and rarely dubbed, so viewers are accustomed to subtitles. Therefore, these data should be applied with caution when making inferences about other types of L2 learners.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This refers to audio-visual material subtitled in the same language as the original. Same-language subtitles are also labelled captions or bimodal, unilingual, or intralingual subtitles in scholarly literature (Danan 2004: 68). Captioning was initially intended for individuals who are hearing impaired, but later was used in all spheres of life, both as didactic material and as an assisting tool in daily watching video programmes and films. On the other hand, interlingual (or interlinguistic) subtitling refers to audio-visual material in a foreign language subtitled in the learner's language and it is the most common way of translating a medium into

another language so that speakers of other languages can follow it. For the purpose of this study we will use the term ‘subtitles,’ which has become a common term in Europe referring only to intralingual subtitles.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the LeViS (Learning via Subtitling) project, was coordinated by Hellenic Open University in Greece within the framework of Socrates Programme, LINGUA 2 (2006-2008) which developed the educational material for active foreign language learning based on film subtitling. (see: <http://levis.cti.gr/>)

<sup>3</sup> Subtitling is the language transfer practice used most widely in Europe. It concerns 28 countries (26 countries plus two regions in two countries): Belgium (Flemish-speaking), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland (German-speaking), Turkey and United Kingdom. (Retrieved 13 April 2014 from: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/lfp/studies/documents/study\\_on\\_the\\_use\\_of\\_subtitling/rapport\\_final-en.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/lfp/studies/documents/study_on_the_use_of_subtitling/rapport_final-en.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> Some American authors even emphasise “the incidental language learning occurring in Europe with spectators of American films” (Danan 2004: 68).

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