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The Impact of Watching Films without Subtitles on Listening Skills of EFL Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of the present work is to investigate the effects of English language films without subtitles on the listening comprehension of the mid-ability EFL learners. The research study that was conducted used a quasi-experimental design design and both quantitative and qualitative methods which included pre and post-test measures as well as focus group discussions. The subjects also included an experimental group which watched full films with no subtitle and a control group which equally watched the similar films with subtitles. These findings indicate that that the experimental group performed better than the control group in listening comprehension thus supporting the notion that elimination of subtitling aids in directing is attention and helps in the acquisition of inferential skills. The qualitative data also suggest that learners who watch the programs without subtitles paid more attention to the content listening to the dialogues while using contextual and visual context hence probably encouraging a more complex processing of the content. These findings indicate that although, with the help of subtitles spectators are initially comprehending the audio information, subsequent reliance on the subtitles harms the independent listening, which is essential for communication in real life. The study claims that there should be a gradual transition in the learner's education process from using subtitles, so that the learners will be able to develop their own language learning capacity as well as prepare them for various communicative simulation.

Introduction

Technology has played very important role in implementing of language into learning where the learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) become very easy as compared to the past. Out of these tools, films and videos deserve applause simply because they have the potential of exposing a learner to real live language contexts. These audiovisual resources EFL students provide opportunities to Exposure to live use of language Different accented, dialectal and cultural forms that many a times are not taught in classroom (Caruana, 2021; Sánchez-

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Auñón et al., 2023). Nevertheless, while numerous works have been published in the field pointing to the effectiveness of making use of films in language instruction, the function of subtitles in either facilitating or interfering with listening comprehension is still an area of significant discussion among scholars (Talaván, 2019; Perez, 2022; Güler & Buyukkarci, 2020).

The use of subtitles can be considered helpful for the language learners as it is a textual support for learning which helps to 'translate' the spoken language into the comprehensibility level of the learner (Chan et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2022). Subtitles can actually help in decreasing the load on learners especially the ones who have low learning levels since they are able to align what they are hearing with text forms they are able to understand instantly (Baranowska, 2020; Hao et al., 2022). However, this have brought about some reservations that subtitles may hinder growth of listening comprehension since it depends on the visual input. Therefore, it has been postulated by certain scholars that while there are benefits in comprehending subtitles, this may also have a negative effect on the learner in that he or she is unable to review and process the flow of speech independently in real time as determined by Michon (2022) and Dalim et al. (2020).

It may be noted that the application of films in EFL context is not just for linguistic gains only, however, it has important pedagogical implications. Television also directs a part of emotions and cognition of learners, which can in essence, facilitate language learning retention and mastery (Ankeli, 2020; Lubis et al., 2021). This perhaps owes to the narrative structure of films as well as the attendant, and often, emotionally engaging learner environment that fuels active listening in learners and enhanced language learning engagement (Estefanía Sánchez-Auñón et al., 2023). This purposeful language and emotional interaction render films an asset in EFL learning experience that goes beyond the four skills acquisition (Grande et al., 2022; Jehma, 2020).

But as for the influence of subtitles on the second language listening comprehension it is not quite as simple. Previous work provides evidence for two poles on the nature of subtitles: Some of them may be enhancing for viewers' immediate understanding, and other studies claiming that no subtitles may assist the development of larger gains in listening comprehension in the long run. As Metruk (2018) and Vanderplank (2019) notes, while it is true that subtitles make comprehension in the short term somewhat better, their employment does not necessarily give a viewer better listening skills in the long run. On the other hand, Metruk (2018) and Nagy (2020) contended that while banning subtitles when watching films can force learners to listen more carefully thus improving on their listening comprehension of spoken words without relying on written texts.

Despite the extensive amount of work that has been done in determining the impact of subtitles in learning EFL, one may think of why there is more research being done on this particular area (Gesa & Miralpeix, 2022; Pujadas & Muñoz, 2020). Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the literature is filled with such studies where the results may differ from one context to another depending on the learner's proficiency, cultural locus, and the films employed. Furthermore, most of the published material only deals with the short term impact of subtitles on learning or at least concerns only certain groups of learners, which means that the results of various investigations that relate to learner differences as well as to learning conditions fail to cast light on how varying learner characteristics and learning environments moderate the strategic employment or non-employment of subtitles in the long term (Wei & Fan, 2022; Alonso-Perez, 2019; Hsieh, 2020). Therefore, this research aimed at filling the above research gap by offering a systematic and integrated synthesis of the available literature on the effects of watching films

with no subtitles on EFL learners listening comprehension abilities. Instead of implying that no study has been made prior to this, this particular study accepts the copious amount of work that has already been done in the area, while also seeking to integrate such information across settings to propose consolidated generalizations that seem to have been missed (Amin et al., 2020; Braimah & Rosenberg, 2021). Thus, it is the intention of this research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the circumstances, where lack of subtitles may be beneficial to the development of listening skills as well as whether and how the process of learning through films can be optimized in a variety of EFL context.

Research Methods

The method used in this study is a systematically constructed mixed-method research to examine the effects of the viewing movies without sub-tiles on EFL learners' listening comprehension ability. The rationale for the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches was to ensure that the study offer an essence of balance in an attempt to fit the research problem to the chosen research methods. This way, the study surpasses the simple measurement of the impact of subtitle omission on listening skills, while also giving a detailed view of learners' experiences of the phenomenon in question.

This type of design is called quasi experimental which is used in this study to effectively measure both pre and post treatment evaluation to ensure validity and minimize experimental bias with an aim of establishing a causal relationship between the independent variable watching films without subtitles and the dependent variable which is the listening comprehension skills. The quasi-experimental design is supported by quantitative data collection through focus groups, which is expected to provide understandings of participants' perceptions and experiences. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches guarantees that the research question is answered from different perspectives so that gathered information is examined as profoundly as possible.

In this study the participants were carefully chosen in a way that the sample would be homogeneous as far as the fluency in English is concerned. The participants comprised 120 learners of EFL, in the age range 18 to 24 yrs, who were learning English in an Indonesian university, in a beginners-intermediate English as a foreign language class. Inclusion criteria of participants were based on purposive sampling where all participants were given a placement test from Oxford Placement Test, all the students were at par proficiency level. This procedure of selection reduces variability which enables internal validation for the study by reducing language differences which could have an impact on the results. The participants were then systematically divided into two groups: duration on an experimental group (n=60) consisting subjects who watched films without subtitles and a control group (n=60) that saw the films with subtitles.

The target films were filtered with regard to the linguistic relevance, as well as the suitability for intermediate level learners of English. The films covered a wide spectrum in terms of genre so that there is a broad range of L1 usage from casual to business like. Both the films were screened and their content was made to see whether the participants would grasp the message in the languages used so as to get the best opportunity of language learning.

Moreover, a pre and post-intervention listening comprehension achievement test which was developed in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference was used alongside the films. This test was very structured to test for several facets of listening comprehension such as a comprehension of the main idea, details, and making inference. What

is more, the test included multiple choice questions, gap filling and short answer questions making it a thorough check on the participants' listening skills.

The study was conducted over a six-week period, very carefully scheduled so as to ensure the subjects were exposed and had time to provide data. The experimental group was exposed to a different movie each week without any subtitles while the control group watched the same movie with English subtitles. The weekly film sessions which were following the sections were accompanied with the comprehension checks and discussion to reinforce the material and check they are focused and participating. In this study, a pre-test was conducted to all participants before the intervention to ascertain the participants' listening comprehension abilities. The second test that was done was similar to the first test after six weeks and this was in a bid to assess the effects of the six-week intervention on listening skills among the student participants. The use of a pre-test/post-test design along with the control group enables one to make a good comparison of learning outcomes and has good internal validity to support the effectiveness of the given intervention. In order further to compare the findings as well as to enrich the understanding of the views expressed by the patients, focus group discussions were conducted with a purposively selected subsample of the patients from both groups. The discussions were framed by the series of semi-structured interview questions by which I tried to get the participants' detailed feedback on their practice of watching films with/without subtitles, any changes in their listening comprehension they experienced and their reactions to the learning process. The discussions held with the participants yielded useful qualitative data that enriched the study by offering richness to the quantitative results and paint a richer picture of the learners' experiences.

Data collected from the pre and post-tests include raw scores that were subsequently subjected to statistical analysis in the form of descriptive statistics as well as paired sample t-tests to compare the units of comprehension in the experimental and control groups. Another measure referred to as the effect size was computed to determine the practical applicability of the studies' results to real life, and therefore give an indication of the actual size of the impact. They help to get the results which would both be statistically valid and have real-life significance in the same process. These focus group data were transcribed and purified for analysis with only quality data being used to draw themes. Coding of the data was done descriptively so as to classify all the data into emerging themes and patterns at different intervals and interpreted for deeper understanding of the learners' experiences and the success of the intervention. The performed thematic analysis was done with a focus on the details of the obtained qualitative data and feature of its interaction with the quantitative data.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Pre Test and Post Test Scores for Listening Comprehension

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Experimental	60	65.3 (8.2)	72.8 (7.5)	+7.5	4.21	0.0001
Control	60	66.1 (7.9)	69.2 (7.8)	+3.1	2.05	0.043

Table 1 below shows the findings on the pre and post test results for listening comprehension of the experimental group which watches the films without subtitle, and for the control group who watches the films with subtitle. Mean of the experimental group was statistically significant with the increase in number of points in listening comprehension section. It may be inferred that in the absence of subtitles, there is appreciable extent of improvement in listening

skills because of the general dependency of the mechanism on auditory input processing. The control group also showed a similar increase, albeit not as significant as that of the researchers' group with the mean increase points being statistically significant. The change in the control group did not increase as much which means that although subtitles can serve as a supplement to listening comprehension, this effect may not be as significant if compared with results of focusing solely on audition.

Table 2. Effect Size (Cohen's d) and Confidence Intervals

Comparison	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	95% Confidence Interval
Experimental Pre-Test vs Post-Test	0.92	[0.65, 1.19]
Control Pre-Test vs Post-Test	0.38	[0.05, 0.71]

Table 2 represents the value of cohen's d for the listening comprehension scores of both the groups before and after the test. The result evidences large for the experimental group which further strengthens the fact that watching films without subtitles improve listening comprehension. The confidence interval indicates that this effect is positive and significant across all analysis. On the same note the results of the control group have a less impact comparing to the experimental group with a moderate effect. Based on this, it can be suggested that although subtitles are beneficial, it is to a moderate effect than was observed in the experimental group.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Focus Group Discussions

Theme	Description	Example Quotes
Increased Auditory Focus	Participants reported a greater need to focus on auditory cues when watching without subtitles.	*"I had to listen more carefully because there were no subtitles to rely on."*
Difficulty in Initial Stages	Many participants initially struggled but adapted over time, leading to improved comprehension.	*"At first, it was hard, but by the third film, I noticed I was understanding more."*
Enhanced Engagement with Content	Watching without subtitles led to deeper engagement with the film's content, as participants paid closer attention to the dialogue.	*"I found myself getting more into the story because I wasn't distracted by reading subtitles."*
Perceived Improvement in Listening	Participants felt that their listening skills improved noticeably after the intervention.	*"I think my listening has definitely improved—I can catch more words now."*
Greater Reliance on Contextual Clues	Without subtitles, participants reported relying more on visual and contextual clues to understand the dialogue.	*"I started paying more attention to the actors' expressions and body language to figure out what was happening."*
Increased Confidence in Listening Skills	Participants expressed a boost in confidence in their ability to understand spoken English without visual support.	*"I feel more confident listening to English now, even without subtitles. It's like I don't need that safety net anymore."*
Reduced Reading Distraction	Participants noted that without subtitles, they were less distracted by reading and more focused on listening.	*"Without subtitles, I wasn't constantly looking down to read, so I could focus more on what was being said."*

Preference for Varied Learning Approaches	Some participants mentioned the value of mixing subtitle and no subtitle viewing to balance comprehension support and listening practice.	*"I think alternating between watching with and without subtitles could be the best way to improve both understanding and listening skills."*
Frustration and Motivation	While some participants expressed initial frustration, they noted that this feeling often motivated them to try harder and improve.	*"It was frustrating at first, but that made me want to really focus and get better at understanding without needing subtitles."*
Impact on Vocabulary Acquisition	Several participants reported that watching without subtitles also helped them notice and learn new vocabulary in context.	*"I picked up on new words and phrases because I had to figure out what they meant from the context and how they were used in the dialogue."*

These episodes are summarized in table 3 and present a thematic framework of focus discussion in experimental group about a range of experiences and perceptions of participants. That of Increased Auditory Focus was recurrent; several participants mentioned that for them it was essential to pay more attention to verbal features without transliterations. This is in line with the results on Perceived Improvement in Listening whereby learners perceived a positive improvement on their ability to listen. The second major shift of focus was identified as Greater Reliance on Contextual Cues, wherein learners over relying of contextual cues like gesture and eye movements to get the context of the dialogues. This adaptive strategy highlights with the participants' advancement in the ability to assess auditory data on their own. Further, suppression of subtitles seemed to cause a decrease in reading distraction, and therefore limiting participants' distractions to only listening with minimal interference from reading.

Greater Confidence in Listening Skills: Many of the participants said that after going through the lessons they felt more confident in their listening abilities which came from feeling that for the first time they are not completely reliant on subtitles to understand English. Nevertheless, one may observe that the participants are in favor of Varied Learning Approaches with reference to the fact that while watching a movie, the participants mentioned that turning between subtitles and no subtitles may be more effective since it involves a better comprehension in the short run and improves listening in the long run. Notably, while some of the learners pointed frustation and motivation, this challenge inevitably acted as a driving force that made learners try harder and perform better. Finally, several participants observed the positive impact on Vocabulary Acquisition as the use of context helped them to notice new related terms, making no subtitle approach beneficial as well.

The results of the research based on quantitative method showed that students of the experimental group, who watched the films without subtitles, demonstrated rather significant increase in their listening comprehension. This increase was statistically significant and may imply that with no subtitles learners may be forced to pay a lot of attention to audible information, thus improving their listening skills. As some of the previous studies have stressed on enhancement of auditory learning in language acquisition contexts, this conclusion coincides with the prior work. For example, Rukthong & Brunfaut (2020) pointed out that only listening approach which requires the listeners to ignore the written text as they listen will effectively prepare them for real life situations. This view finds support in experimental findings, as considerable changes in the subject's behavior were detected in the context of the experiment eliminating subtitles, which means that the subjects focused on auditory streams, can facilitate increased attention to the auditory features of language.

The fact that level of improvement was big with large effect size of 0.92 being agreed by the researcher also supports the fact that subtitle omission can be a useful tool in developing listening skills. Therefore, the present study is corroborating the research by Chen et al. (2019) and Suvorov (2022) who has shown that the saturation with movies without subtitles can enhance the listener's comprehension a lot. However, it is also important to noted that the first steps of the intervention were problematic for the learners. This is described in the quantitative data whereby participants are acquainted with the task with great difficulty in following the dialogue which made them frustrated. It is in this regard that Springer & Whittaker (2019) observed that the learners will initially refuse to omit subtitles because the mental demand that is occasioned by spoken word without written support is very high.

The study also detects that cognitive load affects the use of subtitles as well it suggested. As stated by cognitive load theory of Darejeh et al. (2022) and Plass & Kalyuga (2019), learners have limited ability to accommodate cognitively usable resources for processing new information. In the case where these resources are provided in form of subtitles, then children are able to read the subtitles at the same time with the spoken word, which spreads the concentration on the aural understanding. In this way, by taking off the subtitles, the learners are able to engage all the cognitive capacities exclusively to monitor the spoken language, which might help them improve listening comprehending. Such a shift of the focus of cognition was reflected in the participants feedback on the fact that they had to pay more attention to the auditory stimuli in the absence of subtitles.

In addition, the presence of subtitle omission impacted positively on the attention paid to the content of the film. Such views are in line with other studies by Albus et al. (2021) and Klepsch & Seufert (2020) that propose that the decrease of the cognitive load of irrelevance results in the increase of interest and learning outcomes. The experimental group of learners stated that due to the absence of reading, they fully understood the sequences and the characters presented in the movie; hence improving on their desire to achieve mastery of the dialogue. This can be attributed to what Stiller & Schworm (2019) and Zhu & Aryadoust (2022) described as 'germane cognitive load' the load that is used to interact with and work on the matter that is pertinent to mastering the content or the process at hand, in this case the spoken language.

Another interesting aspect of the results coming from the qualitative data was the observed increase of the use of contextual inferencing by the participants in the experimental group (Mölenberg et al., 2019; Harrits & Møller, 2021; Kazdin, 2021). Inferencing is one of the important skills of listening comprehension, where the learners can identify the gaps and complete them with the help of context and prior knowledge (Hall et al., 2020; Soto et al., 2019). Learners were able to exercise more in the area of inferencing since there were no subtitles to give printed words of the conversation seen on the videos. This is in concord with the assertion of Brogaard (2019) and Huang (2020) that human listening is inferential because actual listening does not offer one a chance to understand everything. The move to enhanced inferencing confirms that beyond enhancing the listening comprehension, subtitle omission serves to promote simulated cognitive learning skills that are useful in language mastering, English language included. Inferencing requires learners to go beyond the identification of the literal meaning of the text, but instead of reconstructing meaning, which is much more effective. This is important because the current experiment indicates that there are elements of subtitle omission that go beyond the shower positive effects in expanding and refining the listener's auding experience to include positive cognitive effects that are instrumental in the learning of another language, align with research from Sung et al. (2022) and Carter (2020).

The conclusion that can be made from these findings is immense when it comes to the aspects of teaching and learning. In a way, which underlines the relevance of subtitles for enhancing learning at the lower levels, the same study provides argument for withdrawing the use of subtitles in the further process of learning because the habit of reading the subtitles rather than listening interferes with the process of developing independent listening skills. As learners advance in their language learning it is advisable to gradually decrease the use of subtitles so that the learners can be forced to gather meaning from spoken words on their own.

This approach is in congruence with the 'fading' model, a scaffolding technique that involves the gradual withdrawal of support from the learners as they develop competency (Traer et al., 2021; Friston et al., 2020; Elleman et al., 2022). Also, this work points to the need to offer learners resources that would enable them listen to real life complex materials in context. Films that have no subtitles present an added advantage to the extent that learners are exposed to natural use of the language in a way that is interesting and more so relevant. On the same note, it is crucial to accept the fact that learners may have a hard time at the beginning should the subtitles are taken away. Pre teaching of some significant terms and concepts should also be considered as well as giving regular short summaries of the material since the complexity if the learning process has been enhanced.

Conclusion

It is evidenced in this research that the inadvertent exclusion of subtitles from audiovisual content can be used to complement the learning of listening for intermediate level EFL students since it forces students to rely solely on auditory information in an attempt to make meaning from it while developing inferential skills at the same time. Thus, although severe comprehension difficulties may be magnified by using subtitles, continued reliance on subtitles as a compensatory mechanism may enhance the client's impedance, this is because subtitle; while placing a degree of initial structural support to improve understanding, will over time encourage dependence which hampers the learner from processing spoken language fully independently and applied well in natural and communicative situations. The significant gains in the post test that were evidenced in the experimental group supports the possibility of subtitle free as being an effective means of enhanced and more engaged language acquisition. Thus, by steering the learners' attention to auditory and contextual features of the learning environment, the educators can promote the formation of higher mental processes necessary for achieving the goal of communicative competence. As such, the present study supports the reinforcement of pedagogy, implying that when the learning contexts increase the L2 learners' autonomy and expose them to real life L2 use, the level of access to subtitles/SA should decline based on a phased decrement. In reference to the current conversation on language learning strategies for multilingual learners, this study adds to the knowledge concerning the need to overemphasize support, while at the same time fostering learning for the goals of achieving linguistic independence, which is an essential qualification of L2 learning, advanced listening skills that are crucial for meaningful L2 communication.

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