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The effects of captioning on EFL learners' listening comprehension

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of English captions, Turkish captions, or no captions on the listening comprehension of intermediate and low-intermediate level EFL learners. A total of 30 Grade-8 primary school students participated as intact groups in the study. The participants viewed the first 19-min segment of the movie *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* in only one of the three passage conditions: English captions, Turkish captions, or no captions and completed a 20-item multiple-choice listening comprehension test. The results of ANOVA procedures demonstrated that the students in all three conditions performed similarly on the listening comprehension test.

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1. Introduction

Listening is a key language skill, it has a crucial role in the language acquisition process, and its development is of prime concern to language teachers (Rubin, 1994; Dunkel, 1991). Consequently, it has been a cornerstone of many theories of second language acquisition (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Briefly, these theories posit that exposure to authentic listening and reading texts facilitates an implicit process through which new language and linguistic rules become internalized and can then be automatically reproduced (Brett, 1997). Therefore, it has been a widely held assumption that the level of proficiency

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achieved in a foreign language is directly affected by the amount of exposure to the target language in its natural settings (Rott, 1999). Since the students in Turkey learn English as a foreign language, they have limited chance of being exposed to the target language beyond the classroom. Besides, in the classroom, the quality and quantity of language input they gather from their language learning materials and teachers in a limited class time may not be enough to compensate the lack of exposure to real spoken and written language in use and its cultural aspects. EFL teachers, therefore, should provide authentic communicative input to their students and also encourage them to do extensive study. In addition, they should help them to make use of this kind of input in an efficient way by themselves. Consequently, one of the most important tasks that the language learners have is to expose themselves to their target language. So as to tackle this task, they may make use of authentic materials; such as radio/TV programmes, songs, newspapers, magazines, books, films in English, etc.

Although all kinds of authentic materials are commonly accepted as helpful for learners, watching captioned films in English might be one of the richest ways of presenting authentic input since it is the combination of these three mediums: aural, visual and textual (Ogasawara, 1994).

In order to emphasize the original linguistic content of the films, King (2002) states,

‘Films are invaluable teaching resources for many reasons; they present colloquial English in real life contexts rather than artificial situations, and they expose students to a wide range of native speakers, each with their own slang, reduced speech, stress, accents, and dialects (p.2)’.

Moreover, the presence of extralinguistic features such as facial expressions and gestures may reinforce learners’ comprehension of the conversations (Chapple & Curtis, 2000). Besides, the language spoken in films is not only authentic, but also presented in the appropriate cultural context and, therefore, can be an effective means of providing more appropriate use of language and preventing cross-cultural understanding (Herron, Dubreil, Corrien & Cole, 2002). In addition to exposure, motivation is another highly indicated essential condition for language learning. Viewers are generally quite motivated to understand what is shown and said in films. Furthermore, Current DVD technology offers another advantage: watching foreign language films closed-captioned in the target language, which provides visual reinforcement of what students are hearing (King, 2002). Adding printed captions provides a third dimension to the visual and auditory cues provided by the video and further encourages students to think in English (Baltova, 1999). On the whole, captioned movies may be a highly influential, motivating, and beneficial method to create at least one out-of-class channel of authentic communication for EFL learners.

With the ever increasing popularity and availability of target language feature films, sitcoms, and documentaries, using captioned video to facilitate language learning becomes widely welcomed (Brett, 1998). Consequently, many studies were conducted to investigate the effects of captioning on language learning. A number of studies have demonstrated some beneficial effects of captions on listening comprehension of ESL/EFL learners (Chung, 1999; Garza, 1991; Herron, Morris, Secules & Curtis, 1995; Huang & Eskey, 2000; Hwang, 2003; Markham, 2001; Markham, Peter, & McCarthy, 2001; Markham & Peter, 2003; Taylor, 2005; Yoshino, Kano, & Akahori, 2000). For example, Huang and Eskey (2000) examined the effects of closed-captioned TV (CCTV) on the listening comprehension of intermediate-level students learning English as a second language, and found that Closed-Captioned TV had beneficial effects on the listening comprehension of intermediate level ESL students. Also, the study by Markham, Peter and McCarthy (2001) sought to establish the effects of three different conditions on the comprehension of Spanish-as-FL DVD soundtrack material in the case of university students at intermediate level. The results demonstrated that students improved their general comprehension of Spanish-language DVD video via the aid of either English captions or Spanish captions as opposed to viewing the same DVD material without captions.

Through the researchers' teaching experience, it has been assumed that watching English video programs not only make English study more interesting, but also seem to contribute to the improvement of EFL students' listening ability. However, the use of captions has generally been indicated as a controversial issue. Some believe that no matter what language they are in, captions are distracting and create a form of text dependence (Wang, 2007). Nonetheless, others hold the view that captions contribute a lot to students' second/foreign language acquisition (Markham & Peter, 2003). Thereby, this study was aimed to examine the effects of using English and Turkish captions on low-intermediate and intermediate-level EFL grade-8 primary school students' listening comprehension of a feature film segment as measured by a multiple choice test. Accordingly, the three following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How does English-language DVD material with English language captions affect English as a Foreign Language students' listening comprehension?
2. How does English-language DVD material with Turkish language captions affect English as a Foreign Language students' listening comprehension?
3. How does English-language DVD material without captions affect English as a Foreign Language students' listening comprehension?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

30 Grade-8 primary school students learning English as a foreign language participated in this experiment. They are from MAT-FKB Gelişim Private School in Eskişehir, Turkey. Their average age is 14 years. Their native language is Turkish. They have been taking English classes for almost 8 years in school, and they have 8-hour of English lessons in a week. 10 of the participants are intermediate-level, 20 are low-intermediate level learners, previously labelled by the English Department of the school according to the results of a proficiency test devised by the department. They were distributed among the three conditions according to their proficiency levels. 10 intermediate level students were assigned to No Captions condition. 20 low-intermediate level students were randomly assigned across treatment conditions: English Captions and Turkish Captions.

2.2. Materials

The first 19-min segment of the movie *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* was captured and utilized as the research material. The movie selection was done by taking the target audience of the movie into consideration. It was assumed appropriate to the participants in terms of both language level and interest. Also, a questionnaire was implemented in order to find out whether they had seen the film before or not. A 20-item English-language multiple-choice listening comprehension test was employed as the testing material. The test was devised based on the DVD passage material. It consisted of words and structures that were used in the DVD episode. That is, the vocabulary and the structures of the English-language multiple-choice items directly reflected the difficulty level of the English-language passage material itself. Two experts, one of whom was a native speaker having expertise on ELT, were relied on for their opinions on the appropriateness of the test items. They conducted an item analysis of the multiple choice test by using the following Likert scale: (1) Very Inappropriate, (2) Inappropriate, (3) Fair, (4) Appropriate, and (5) Very Appropriate. Only test items that scored on or above the appropriate

level were employed. Moreover, prior to administering the listening comprehension test to the subjects, a pilot-study was administered to ascertain the reliability of the test items. Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 was conducted to analyze each of the pilot-tested multiple-choice items. The report of KR-20 analysis revealed that the reliability coefficient for the Listening Comprehension Test reached .82, which was statistically significant. Accordingly, 20 items were determined appropriate enough to employ.

2.3. Procedures

The research was conducted during the subjects' regularly scheduled class hours in the Media lab for about 40 minutes for each group. The participants were informed about the study and assured that their scores on the test would not affect their course grades. Each group saw the DVD episode only once in one of the three conditions: English captions, Turkish captions, or no captions. After each group viewed the DVD episode, the multiple-choice test was carried out. Each participant was given a test booklet including instructions. They were given 20 minutes to complete the test. While scoring the multiple-choice test, one point was awarded for each correct answer.

2.4. Results and Discussion

A one-way ANOVA procedure was conducted to analyze the data. The researcher examined the three different passage conditions (English captions, Turkish captions, or no captions) with the multiple-choice test as the dependent measure. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that there were no significant differences among the multiple-choice listening comprehension test scores of the students in all three conditions (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Summary of one-way ANOVA for listening comprehension test

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	50.911	2	25.456	2.386	.111
Within Groups	288.056	27	10.669		
Total	338.967	29			

* $p < .05$

Table 2. Descriptives of the listening comprehension test

Treatment	n	M	SD	Min.	Max.
No Captions	10	16.0000	3.31662	11.00	20.00
English Captions	10	17.7778	2.90593	12.00	20.00
Turkish Captions	10	14.5000	3.50397	10.00	19.00
Total	30	16.0333	3.41885	10.00	20.00

However, it should be taken into consideration that although the proficiency level of the students in English and Turkish captions conditions were lower than the level of students in no-caption condition, they were able to catch up with their intermediate level peers in the no-caption condition on the listening comprehension test scores. In addition, since the levels of the students were the same in the English and Turkish captions conditions, no significant difference between their scores might point out that both English and Turkish captions have similar effects on low-intermediate level EFL students' listening comprehension of the 19-minute movie segment.

As the participants were intact groups and the study was held in their natural environment, some limitations for the study include the number of participants and their proficiency level. Firstly, since the study was conducted with 30 students, the results might not be generalized to larger groups. A study with more participants would yield different results. Also, the proficiency level of the students in the no-captions group was intermediate whereas the other students were low-intermediate level. These students assigned into the no-caption group since they were considered to be able to handle with watching the movie in English without any help. Therefore, if all of the participants were at the same level, the results would be different. For instance, the students in no captions condition might not score as high as the others did.

3. Conclusion

The results yielded no significant differences among the listening comprehension test scores of the students in all three conditions. Nevertheless, the low-intermediate level students in English and Turkish captions conditions were able to keep up with their intermediate level peers in the no-captions condition on the listening comprehension test scores. Therefore, the findings for the use of English and Turkish captions might indicate that both English and Turkish captions enhance low-intermediate level EFL students' listening comprehension of the 19-minute movie segment in a similar way.

A study on different age group and proficiency levels can be conducted to see whether captioned video has different effects on them. They may obtain different results in different proficiency levels. For instance, the results of Neuman and Koskinen's study (1992) exhibited that in spite of the additional contextual support provided by the video, students with limited linguistic abilities learned less from the captions than viewers at the mastery level. On the other hand, Markham (1989) indicated that L2 captioned videos might not be as important for advanced learners since according to the results of his study, beginners performed better when supported with captioned videos. Given these controversial issues, future studies may investigate which effects can be observed if captioned materials are provided to students of different levels.

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