The Effect of Watching Standard Subtitled Audiovisual Materials on Improving Vocabulary Knowledge of Iranian EFL Learners

Mansoureh Hashemi¹, Behzad Pourgharib²

¹Department of English Language Teaching, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Golestan, Iran
²Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, Golestan University, Golestan, Iran

*Corresponding Author Email: pourgharib_lili@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the effects of standard subtitled audiovisual materials on improving vocabulary knowledge. To achieve this goal, 50 female intermediate students who were learning English as a foreign language (EFL), participated in the study. Their ages varied. They were between 14 to 25 years old. In order to be assured of the homogeneity of all participants in terms of English language proficiency, a standard proficiency test (Nelson, Series 400B) was utilized and piloted on participants. They were randomly divided into two groups of experimental (N=25) and control (N=25). Then two groups were administered the pretest. During 8 sessions of treatment, 56 vocabularies were instructed to the participants. Experimental group was instructed using standard subtitled audiovisual materials while control group was instructed using the same audiovisual materials but without any subtitle. After treatment, the two groups were administered the posttest. The results of the posttest based on the findings of t-test showed that experimental group generally performed better than control group in vocabulary learning and also it was proved that watching standard subtitled audiovisual materials was significantly more effective than watching audiovisual materials without any subtitle on improving vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: Standard subtitle, audiovisual materials, Vocabulary knowledge, EFL learners.

Introduction

Vocabulary is the core of language and vocabulary learning is an essential part for each student that necessitates a long process; hence, learners can become familiarized with the many words through this process. Some teachers think it is easy for learners to learn new vocabularies but it is difficult to memorize and remember a large amount of vocabularies. Therefore, teachers are trying to find out the best ways for vocabulary teaching. They should consider how to teach vocabulary for better learning. Unlike learning grammar which is a system with many rules, vocabulary is a subject of recalling (Thornbury, 2004). There are technologies which are presented through multimedia presentations for increasing the understandable level of the students. Since audiovisual materials are designed and recommended to develop the language proficiency of the learners. The use of audiovisual materials in English classes, are growing quickly due to the importance of communicative techniques which are increasing. Video is popular both for teachers and students because it is a resource which is excellent and valuable (Hemei, 1997).

Statement of the problem

Today, one of the most serious problems in Iran is foreign language learning. Many researchers have been working on vocabulary learning and they believe that if learners want to learn a word, they should know that learning a word needs abundant encounters with the word in different forms (Horst et al., 1998; Nation, 1990; Schmidt, 2001). It is not easy task to teach new vocabulary to students. If students want to have a good communication in a foreign language, they have to learn enough words and have to know how to select and perform them accurately. Therefore, the use of audiovisual materials is a useful way. Zhang (2009) stated that students prefer audiovisual vocabulary learning more than traditional learning. Using subtitled audiovisual materials for improving English vocabulary knowledge can be useful because it motivates learners and removes some of anxiety of not knowing the language. Audiovisual materials can be both without subtitles and with subtitles in the native language. And also the subtitles of different languages can help to comprehension and language learning (Kusumarsadtyat, 2005). So, students can improve their language learning if they are exposed to the authentic environment of the target language (Dwyer, 1978).
Significance of the study

In Iran teachers’ pay little attention to effects of subtitled audiovisual materials in vocabulary learning. The focuses of this study is on vocabulary improvement, rather than on listening comprehension or reading. Researchers can be interested in this matter that how many words students can learn from audiovisual materials especially with subtitles, and what factors can influence the amount and kind of learning. Features like message structure and format characteristics were investigated by some researchers to recognize those which best facilitate learning (Reese & Davie, 1987). Watching audiovisual materials have a positive effect on comprehension skills and combining viewing with text. Use of subtitles as a suitable tool for teaching is still confined, but there are the results on the use of standard subtitles that encourage learners (Williams & Thorne 2000). There is evidence affirmed audiovisual materials like videos can simplify language learning, particularly when the materials are subtitled (Winke & Gass, 2010). According to Garza (1991), captioning or subtitling can be an award, because it is helpful for linking auditory to visual input by learners.

Related of review literature

Subtitles in audiovisual materials can have a key role in foreign language acquisition, if teacher is not able to handle video activities, this matter causes learners lose their motivation. Therefore, if teacher has proficiency in the use of subtitles, learners can overcome de-motivating. It is obvious that learners can have supervision on a speech through the text in form of subtitles. On the other hand, audiovisual materials without subtitles can causes anxiety in learners, while subtitled audiovisual materials are able to create a positive feeling or feeling of confidence in students when they are watching a film, television programs, etc (Vanderplank, 1988). According to Zanon (2006), there are three kinds of subtitling as follows:

- Standard subtitling: foreign language audio with mother tongue subtitles
- Bimodal subtitling: foreign language audio with foreign language subtitles
- Reversed subtitling: mother tongue audio with foreign language subtitles

Standard subtitles are also called interlingual subtitles or L1 subtitles. It commonly used more than other subtitle (Zanon, 2006). The process of creating interlingual subtitles has been viewed as more of an art than a science, due to the skill, imagination and creative talent required to produce them (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998). Koolstra et al (2002) believe that standard subtitles permit learners to pick up foreign vocabularies when they watch L1 translation and listen to the L2 audio simultaneously. Kosslera and Beentjes (1999) carried out a study on the effectiveness of the use of standard or interlingual subtitled audiovisual materials on the fourth and sixth graders’ vocabulary learning and word recognition in Dutch. The finding indicated that learners in the experimental group who exposed standard had a satisfactory improvement in vocabulary learning. In other research of the English language learning of Dutch learners, they use subtitled audiovisual material in a non- instructional setting. Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) suggested convincing proof to propose that if learners watch interlingual subtitled audiovisual materials, they can both learn new English vocabulary and develop their word recognition.

On the other hand, experimental group who watched the audiovisual materials without subtitles could learn new vocabularies but there was less improvement toward the group exposed to the subtitled videos (Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999). As Mitterer and McQueen (2009) mentioned “target language subtitles can also facilitate foreign language speech perception. They argue that the reason for the difficulties in understanding a foreign language is the unusual mappings between words and sounds in the foreign language”. Danan (2004) claims that it is more effective for beginners to start their learning process through subtitles with the standard or interlingual type. But experienced learners benefit more from bimodal or reversed subtitles. Ydewalle and Van de Poel (1999) investigated the effect of standard and reversed subtitles on vocabulary acquisition of younger and older children. Their investigation indicated that both younger and older children performed better and had a noticeable progress in vocabulary acquisition through standard subtitled mode more than reversed subtitling. But there was an important point that younger children benefit more than older when they watch audiovisual materials with standard subtitle. They also discussed that the mother tongue subtitles are especially instructive because of the fact that the learners have better progress if they watch audiovisual material with text translation of the audio.

Research questions

This study sought to find answers for following questions:

- Do watching standard (Persian) subtitled audiovisual materials like animated cartoons have any positive effect on improving vocabulary knowledge of intermediate EFL learners?
- Is there any significant difference between the vocabulary learning through watching audiovisual materials with standard subtitle and vocabulary learning without subtitle?

Research hypotheses

For the above research questions following hypotheses were assumed:

H1: The watching of standard (Persian) subtitled audiovisual materials like animated cartoons have a positive effect on improving vocabulary knowledge of intermediate EFL learners.

H2: There is a significance difference between the vocabulary learning through watching audiovisual materials with standard subtitle and vocabulary learning without subtitle.
Methodology

Participants

The participants of the present study were 50 Iranian female students who agreed to volunteer for this research. The participants’ ages varied. They were between 14 to 25 years old. Their native language was Persian. All the participants were studying English as a foreign language at intermediate level in the four main skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing at English language institutes. They had to attend 80% of the classes.

Instruments

To collect the data, three types of instruments were administered by the investigator. The instruments included background questionnaire, proficiency test and vocabulary tests as pretest and posttest. Each of these instruments are explained as follows:

- **Background Questionnaire**
  In order to elicit subjective information of participants, a background questionnaire was developed by the investigator. It covered issues such as the participants’ age, gender, first language status, their parents’ socio-educational background and also occupation.

- **Proficiency Test (PT)**
  In order to be assured of the homogeneity of all participants in terms of English language proficiency, a standard proficiency test (Nelson, Series 400B) was utilized and piloted on participants before being assigned to classes and certainly before the pretest. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice items including four parts of cloze tests, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The time allotted was 60 minutes. All of the participants were approximately at a similar English proficiency level (intermediate) based on their scores.

Vocabulary test as pretest and posttest

A test of vocabulary based on teaching materials and consisting of 40 multiple-choice items was prepared by the researcher and was used both as pretest and posttest. They included nouns, verbs, adjective and adverbs. The time allotted was 60 minutes.

Materials

Three popular animated cartoons were selected and used as the materials for treatment. The first animated cartoon was brave, directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. The second one was ice age 4, directed by Steve Martino and Mike Thurmeie. The third and the last animated cartoons was Madagascar, directed by Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath.

Procedure

At first, the background questionnaires were given to the participants to be answered and filled. After that, there were three main and important steps that should be taken. The first step was to make sure of the learners homogeneity, so a proficiency test was administered. The second step was taking pretest of students. Hence, one day prior to the treatment, all 50 participants were tested (pretest). Afterwards, the participants were randomly divided to two groups of experimental (N= 25) and control group (N= 25). Experimental group required to watch the animated cartoons with standard subtitles, while control group had to watch the same animated cartoons without any subtitle. Treatment was 8 sessions and the researcher devoted 60 minutes for each session and 10 to 15 minutes to watching the each part of animated cartoons.

During the treatment, 56 vocabularies were instructed to the participants by researcher. It means that, the students were taught 7 new vocabularies in each session. Because according to Grains (1986, cited in Moras, 2001, p.1), "Retention in short-term memory is not effective if the number of chunks of information exceeds seven. This suggests that, in a given class we should not aim at teaching more than this number. However, "our long term memory can hold any amount of information". Generally, the teacher worked on the selected parts of the animated cartoons. Experimental group was instructed through watching standard subtitled animated cartoons, while control group learned new vocabularies without subtitles. The treatment for two groups was the same. After treatment to both groups, the posttest was also given with the same number of items administered to participants.

Data analysis

The data got from the questionnaires which were analyzed by using SPSS statistical software. And also, the data was submitted to sample t-test. Results determined whether the use of standard subtitled audiovisual materials had a positive on improving vocabulary knowledge or not. Hence, the overall results of this study are illustrated.

Results

| Table 1. Descriptive statistics of both groups’ performances on pretest. |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Pretest                  | Group                    | N            | Mean | SD   | Std.Error Mean |
| Experimental             | 25                       | 8.32         | 1.773 | 0.355 |
| Control                  | 25                       | 8.12         | 1.691 | 0.338 |
With reference to Table 1, the descriptive statistics of the pretest reveals that both control and experimental groups have almost the same mean score on the pretest before the treatment. It indicates that both groups are homogeneous in terms of vocabulary knowledge. The experimental group received the mean score of 8.32 with the standard deviation of 1.77, whereas the mean score and standard deviation of control group are 8.12 and 1.69 respectively. The mean scores of both groups show that there is not significant difference between two groups in the pretest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Std.Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38.20</td>
<td>3.202</td>
<td>0.640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17.32</td>
<td>2.982</td>
<td>0.596</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The full score is 40.

Table 2, clearly indicates the difference between the mean scores of two groups in posttest. Descriptive statistics of the posttest reveals the experimental group which received new vocabulary through standard subtitled audiovisual materials, has achieved the highest mean score which is 38.20 with the standard deviation of 3.20, whereas the mean score and standard deviation of control group which received new vocabulary without any subtitle are noticeably lower than the experimental group which are 17.32 and 2.98 respectively. It indicates that the experimental group using standard subtitled audiovisual materials outperformed the control group in improving vocabulary knowledge.

**Investigation of the first research question**

Table 3. Paired sample t-test on mean scores of vocabulary pretest and posttest of experimental group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Paired difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>95% Confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>95% Confidence level</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental(pre/posttest)</td>
<td>29.880</td>
<td>2.698</td>
<td>0.540</td>
<td>28.767</td>
<td>30.993</td>
<td>55.384</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

By comparing the overall results of the pretest and posttest scores of experimental group, the findings indicated that the first hypothesis was completely proved. The experimental group had significant gains from pretest with mean score of 8.32 to posttest with mean score of 38.20. As a result, according to mean scores of pretest and posttest, and also the level of significance (see table 3), there was a significant difference between the participants of experimental group on their performance in pretest and posttest. Therefore, the watching of audiovisual materials with standard subtitles was an effective way on improving vocabulary knowledge.

**Investigation of the second research question**

Table 4. The summary of t-test results for the gains between two groups (independent samples test).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>95% Confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td></td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning</td>
<td>23.861</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>20.880</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>19.121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05

In order to ensure that there is a significant difference between the vocabulary learning through watching audiovisual materials with standard subtitle and vocabulary learning without subtitle between experimental and control group regarding their knowledge vocabulary, an independent sample t-test was performed. With regarding the level of significance in Table 4, the results indicated that there is a significant difference between experimental and control group in their performance on posttest. As a result, the second hypothesis was also proved.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

According to Zarei (2009), subtitled audiovisual materials must be chosen carefully. They should be suitable both for the language to be taught and for the classes’ students in their English level. It is better for EFL learners to watch English audiovisual materials with standard subtitles rather than their dubbed version. In this study the EFL learners had the opportunity to practice and evaluate their knowledge of vocabulary. The use of standard subtitled audiovisual materials helped the participants to increase their vocabulary knowledge. Even a short part of an audiovisual material could help learners to progress their vocabulary greatly. The findings of this study support Koolstra et al. (2002) study, in which mother tongue subtitles permitted participants to learn many words when they watch L1 translation and listen to the L2 audio simultaneously. And also this study is in accordance with such studies as
Ydewalle and Van De Poel (1999) who investigated the effect of standard subtitle on vocabulary acquisition. They concluded that the participants had progress in vocabulary acquisition through use of standard subtitles. They also discussed that the mother tongue subtitles are instructive because of the fact that the learners have better progress if they watch audiovisual material with text.

**Conclusion and pedagogical implications**

There are some advantages which are related to this study: the first advantage was that this kind of instruction indicated both the instructor and students who took part in this study had positive attitudes towards using the standard subtitled animated cartoons. The instructor used three interesting animated cartoons in her class, so both English teacher and students were believed that using subtitled audiovisual materials makes learning process more enjoyable and memorable. The instructor felt that subtitled audiovisual materials attracted the learners for better vocabulary learning. And also it was found that if students learn vocabulary items through reading subtitles, it is easy for them to remember the meaning of the words. The second advantage was that vocabulary instruction through this way provided a useful channel of information which was reading subtitles in the native language (i.e., Persian).

This channel could reduce the level of stress in participants. If learners have to rely on channel of listening, there is much pressure on them; therefore, they are not able to acquire many words; as a result, this method is highly effective if the audiovisual materials which used are the students’ favorites and they should be chosen based on the students’ language proficiency and background knowledge (Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011). In addition, the findings of studies showed that the experimental group benefited from vocabulary learning through watching standard subtitles audiovisual materials. Hence, it is suggested to teachers that vocabulary instruction by use of audiovisual materials with standard subtitles is more effective than audiovisual materials without subtitles. As a result, this way is a popular way for learners who are interested in learning English vocabulary as a foreign language. The findings of the present study can have implications not only for the teachers and learners, but also for materials preparation experts. The choice and performance of the suitable kind of subtitled audiovisual materials can have a noticeable effect in both recognition and recall of foreign language vocabulary. If it is recognized that subtitling have the best results in vocabulary learning, both teachers and syllabus designers will able to simplify the learners’ learning by exposing them to authentic subtitled audiovisual materials.

**References**


