

## THE EFFECT OF USING AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS WITH SUBTITLES ON SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY LEARNING

KGSRK Jayawardane<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Vocabulary plays a dominant role in second language learning, directly affecting the learner's overall language competence. Acquiring new vocabulary is a significant component of successful language learning because learners cannot use the target language effectively without enough words and meanings. Furthermore, if vocabulary is not learned and applied in ways that will expose students to language input in authentic target language environments, it will likely be forgotten. In this sense, learners in the modern era find it easier to acquire vocabulary independently due to the growing availability of various multimedia and technological resources. Specifically, watching movies with subtitles can be a beneficial method for introducing pupils to real-world communication in a language. The main objective of this study is to provide a review of current knowledge relevant to second language vocabulary acquisition and to reveal the effect of audio-video materials with subtitles on second language vocabulary acquisition. In order to achieve this objective, 75 previous research papers that empirically investigated the effectiveness of captioning for vocabulary learning were analyzed as a secondary sources and all these different empirical studies were collected using different methods including online search engines, data bases and published research journals. The findings indicated that many prior researchers have confirmed that watching movies with subtitles positively impacts on learners' vocabulary development. The result of this study can be implemented in designing vocabulary teaching techniques in ELT classrooms.

**Keywords:** Acquisition, Authentic Materials, Subtitles, Technology, Vocabulary

---

<sup>1</sup>Career Guidance Unit, University of Sri Jayawardenapura, Sri Lanka.

Email: [sameera@sjp.ac.lk](mailto:sameera@sjp.ac.lk)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0735-9326>



Proceeding of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Desk Research Conference – DRC 2025 © 2025 by [The Library, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Received date: 30.03.2025

Print Publishing Date: 31.10.2025

Accepted date: 02.07.2025

Web Publishing Date: 31.10.2025

## **Introduction**

### ***Background of the Study***

Second language vocabulary acquisition (SLVA) is an essential aspect of second language learning, and it has received significant attention in applied linguistics. SLVA is the process of acquiring new words and phrases in a second language, and effective strategies for teaching vocabulary have also been identified in SLVA research, namely presenting new words in context with visual aids or providing translations or definitions (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Activities such as extensive reading, vocabulary games, and word association tasks can also effectively promote SLVA (Nation & Webb, 2011). Apart from that, using technology with multimedia projectors and computers can be seen in modern language classes as an effective technique for teaching vocabulary because it provides audio and video input simultaneously. Zhang and Liu (2014) found that the use of multimedia materials with explicit vocabulary instruction was more effective than naturalistic input alone. This analysis reviews some of the key research findings on the effect of using audio-video materials with subtitles on second language vocabulary learning.

### ***Literature Review***

Words can be considered as the constructing blocks of language, which make sentences and paragraphs, and L2 vocabulary is a highly effective area in L2 teaching. (Mazahery et al 2021). ELT experts use various types of techniques to develop vocabulary in learning a second language. Watching videos with subtitles is one of the techniques which is applied in the ELT classroom today. As many research findings emphasized, it supports the learners to acquire many words while watching the video. According to Ayand and Shafiee (2016), as language learning techniques, Subtitles can be used as a powerful tool in improving language skills. Further, they have mentioned that language teaching should be more innovative, creative and motivated. Therefore, creating an interesting learning environment is essential for learning a language. Movies are productively affected by developing learners' motivation to learn a language. (Tajgozari 2019).

However, an accurate method for mastering vocabulary is not clearly defined. (De Groot, 2006) According to Zahmatkesh and Ebrahim (2021), teachers have applied audiovisual materials for teaching L2 in the ELT classroom over the last 20 years. Audiovisual materials can be considered an effective tool for teaching a language. (Cakir et al, 2006). According to Nation (2001), there are four learning opinions: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development. Learners can learn new words when the unknown words are displayed in pictures and notes (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997).

According to Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2008), subtitles are a textual translation of the conversation of a movie that appears on the screen. He has further mentioned that there are three steps in the process of subtitling: from one 'language' to another, from verbal speech to a written text, and from a non-condensed (verbatim) form of text to a condensed (non-verbatim) form of text. According to Reich (2006), subtitles are a type of translation known as audiovisual translation that allows viewers to read dialogue on the screen while viewing videos and hearing the dialogue. Bird and Williams (2002) mentioned that captions support the interpretation of speech by watching audiovisuals with subtitles because they indicate word boundaries.

### ***Research questions***

The main aim of this study is to explore to what extent subtitles help L2 learners to enhance their second language vocabulary. Therefore, the following questions are addressed in this research;

1. How do subtitles influence L2 learners to understand the content of the videos when they watch with subtitles?
2. How do videos with subtitles help L2 learners acquire the vocabulary with their meanings?

### ***Methodology***

In order to identify studies that empirically investigated the effectiveness of captioning for vocabulary learning, data was collected using different methods including online data bases and published research journals. Google scholar was used as an online search engine for finding empirical studies conducted to investigate the effectiveness of captioning for vocabulary learning and data bases namely Research Gates, Academia, Eric, Elsevier, Science

Direct, Procedia, Routledge and Scopus. International research journals namely Journals on Computer Assisted Language Learning, CALL journal, Foreign Language Annals, Journal of Educational Technology Systems, Language Learning, Language Learning & Technology, the Modern Language Journal, System, and Studies in Second Language Acquisition, British Journal of Educational Technology, Arab World English Journal, Language Teaching Research Quarterly, Academic Journal of Educational System and etc. The number of studies collected from different sources are indicated in table 1.

**Table 01: The number of studies collected from different sources**

Sources	No of Empirical Studies
Data Bases	26
Journals	49

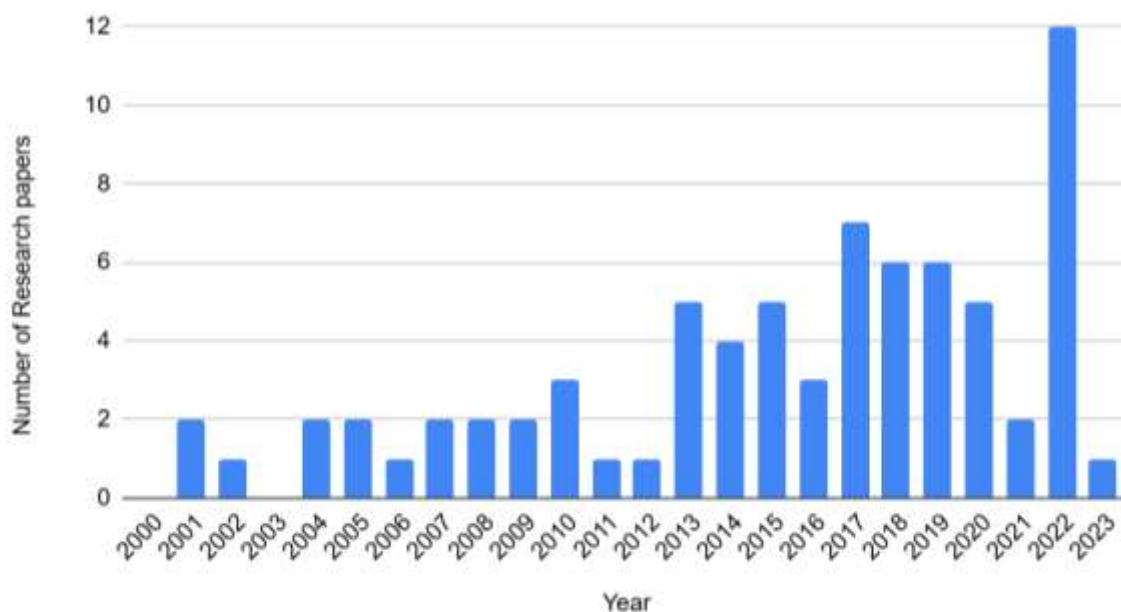
The collected data was qualitatively analyzed establishing a coding scheme to identify specific features of the studies conducted on the effectiveness of captioning for vocabulary learning. Eight main coding categories were established namely sources, research design, methodology, materials used, types of subtitles, language focused, Assessed Vocabulary Knowledge, and overall result. All the details based on above variables were entered into an excel sheet to analyze them thematically.

**Table 02: Variable coded used**

Codes	Categories
Sources	Author, Year, Publication
Research Design	Experimental, Qualitative, Quantitative
Methodology	Participants, Proficiency level, Data collection tools
Materials used	Documentary, Movies, Instructional videos, Animated cartoons, News clips, TV series, Flash cards
Types of Subtitles	Bimodal subtitles, Stranded subtitles, Reversed subtitles, interligual subtitles, intra lingual subtitles, bilingual subtitles, Verbatim subtitles, Non verbatim subtitles
Language Focused	Incidental vocabulary learning Intentional vocabulary learning
Assessed Vocabulary Knowledge	Receptive vocabulary knowledge Productive vocabulary knowledge
Overall Result	Positive impact Native impact

**Result and Discussion**

The result is discussed in this section based on the codes which were used to analyze the data thematically. When considering the sources of research papers, it was clear that there is not any research on this topic which is published in Sri Lankan context. All the papers which were collected for this study were published from 2000 to 2023 and the most significant finding is the maximum number of papers in this sample were published in 2022 and the amount is 12. It implies that many experiments were conducted on this topic during the covid pandemic period as online teaching was practiced throughout the world during that period. The total number of research papers published in each year is indicated in the figure 01.



**Figure 01: Number of research papers published in each year**

Participants were selected for each studies according the proficiency level from universities and schools. All these participants are following English as a second language in their degree programs and school syllabus. All these studies were conducted as experimental studies by analyzing data quantitatively. The proficiency level and the educational level of the participants are indicated in the table 03.

**Table 03: The proficiency level and the educational level of the participants**

Proficiency Level	Number	Educational Level	Number
Beginners	0	Primary school	0
Intermediate	75	Middle school	5
Advanced	0	Vocational school	7
Mix	0	University	63

The data was collected by conducting experimental studies employing pretest and posttest before and after the treatment sessions. Authentic video clips selected from many sources namely YouTube, TV channels and social media were applied in the treatment sessions and table 04 indicates the number of the input materials implemented in the data collection procedure.

**Table 04: Input Materials Used for Data Collection**

Input Materials	Number
Documentary	10
Movies	05
Instructional videos	11
Animated cartoons	12
News clips	05
TV series	10
Flash cards	8

Different types of sub titles namely Bimodal subtitles, Stranded subtitles, Reversed subtitles, Interligual subtitles, Intra lingual subtitles, Bilingual subtitles, Verbatim subtitles, Non Verbatim subtitles were tested in all these experiments and the relevant statistics are indicated in the table 05.

**Table 05: Different Types of Subtitles Tested**

Types of Subtitles	Number
Bimodal subtitles	35
Stranded subtitles	10
Reversed subtitles	05
Interligual subtitles	8
Intralingual subtitles	5
Bilingual subtitles	7
Verbatim subtitles	2
Non verbatim sub	3

All these experiments were tested incidental vocabulary learning and activities were prepared to examine both receptive vocabulary knowledge and productive vocabulary knowledge. According to the final analysis, 72 research studies indicated that subtitled videos are positively affected on vocabulary learning. (Winke et al (2010), Kord et al (2022) Some studies emphasize that repeating videos is very supportive for the growth of vocabulary size. Examples : Peters et al (2016), Alharthi (2018). Some studies indicate that a significant impact cannot be seen in vocabulary acquisition when watching videos with subtitles. Examples: Koolstra and Beentjes (1999), Mousavi and Gholami (2014)

When comparing the studies conducted by Ahmad and Zahra (2022), Winke et al (2010), Madhubala et al (2010), Ebrahimi and Bazaee (2016), Bellalem et. al (2018) using undergraduates to examine the effect of subtitled videos with subtitles and without subtitles, they all have indicated that subtitled videos are positively affected on vocabulary learning.

The study conducted by Kord, Najmeh Arab Goorehooyi and Zahra Mohammadi Dehaj (2022) to investigate the effect of subtitles on vocabulary learning indicates a positive impact on acquiring vocabulary. The statistics show that watching films without subtitles also has affected the control team because a considerable change can be seen between the pretest and post-test scores. However, a significant increase can be seen when comparing the experimental group's pretest and post-test scores. It reveals that watching films with subtitles encourages learners to improve their vocabulary knowledge. The findings of this study agree with the study conducted by Lestari (2018) on the use of English subtitles in movies to improve students' vocabulary. It means that subtitles on both TV screen as well as Film screen support learners to acquire the vocabulary.

The research findings conducted by Ayand and Shafiee (2016) suggest that watching films with subtitles is a very effective tool which facilitates second language learning. Because it creates a comfortable learning environment and motivates the learners. Danan (2004) has indicated that using subtitles is a very effective technique as it helps with word recognition, improves vocabulary, increases listening comprehension and decreases stress and tension of the learners. This result confirmed that bimodal subtitles are more effective than standard and reversed subtitles. Many research findings have proved that L2 audio with L2 texts supports vocabulary acquisition more than L2 audio plus L1 subtitles. And also, this kind of experiment promotes the use of technology in ESL classrooms. The development of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) method can be considered as an innovative step in the English language teaching and learning process and showing subtitled videos with the support of technological equipment such as computers, multimedia projectors, televisions, and audio cassettes will be an ideal combination in modern language classrooms.

Paula Winke, Susan Gass and Tetyana Sydorenko (2010) have analysed the effect of subtitles in video-based listening activities, and the result of this study indicates that videos with subtitles were effective for vocabulary development. This study was conducted using 150 undergraduates who were learning languages such as Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese from Midwestern University in USA.

The study conducted by Madhubala Bava Harji, Peter Charles Woods and Zhinoos Kamal Alavi (2010) was designed to examine the effect of subtitled videos on vocabulary acquisition using multimedia technology as a comprehensible input. This study consists of 92 Iranian undergraduates, and their vocabulary learning was tested. These learners were randomly assigned to two groups, namely the control group and the treatment group. The treatment group was able to watch the video with subtitles, and the control group watched a video without subtitles. The result of this study statistically proved that subtitled videos support the learners to learn more words than without subtitles. Many research findings have revealed that using subtitled video is highly successful in vocabulary acquisition as it provides both the sound and the visual impact, such as body language, pronunciation, and the text.

As Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) have pointed out that showing a video clips more than once is highly benefitted for second language learners to acquire more vocabulary, Yasser Ebrahimi and Parise Bazae also recommend the above mentioned finding because they could not recognize a significant difference in vocabulary learning according to the research conducted to study the impact of English movies with subtitles on content and vocabulary comprehension. After analyzing the data, they realized that students who watched the movie with English subtitles performed well than the other group in listening comprehension but no good improvement in vocabulary learning. In the researchers' point of view, the accent of the spoken language may be a barrier for non-native English learners to acquire more vocabulary and they suggested that repeating the videos may support to acquire not only the new words with their meanings but also the pronunciation.

The result of this study is linked the findings of the researchers conducted by Fatemeh Mousavi, Javed Gholami (2014) Yufen Hsieh (2019) to examine the acquisition of incidental vocabulary among elementary learners watching flash stories with subtitles and without subtitles. Above both studies also revealed that subtitled videos do not affect vocabulary significantly as expected because a significant difference cannot be seen in incidental vocabulary acquisition between with and without subtitle groups.

With the intension of introducing technology in education in Algeria and to investigate the effect of multimedia in language learning, the researchers Bellalem, Neddar, Bouagada and Djelloul (2018) conducted an experimental study on the use of subtitled movies for vocabulary acquisition in ESP setting. According to the main objectives of this study, the researchers expect to introduce a methodology on second language acquisition with the support of multimedia technology and to recommend it to the school's curriculum system. This study was qualitatively analyzed using a vocabulary test to identify the effect of subtitled movies on vocabulary learning. 27 university undergraduates were selected for this study and their mother tongue is Arabic. After dividing them randomly, an English short movie was presented without subtitles to the control team and with Arabic subtitles to the treatment group. Finally, they were tested using a pre vocabulary test and a post vocabulary test. The result indicates that the treatment group has scored well in the vocabulary test, compared to the control group, emphasizing the hypothesis that the subtitles in movies enhance vocabulary, and a significant gap can be seen between the two groups. In considering the overall result of this study, the use of multimedia in the ESP classes indicates a positive impact on acquiring a foreign language effectively.

In searching for the effect of audio-video materials with subtitles, it is clear that most of the experiments were conducted using undergraduates in universities. However, Lestari (2018), Peters and Eva (2016), Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) and Fatemeh & Javad (2014) have conducted their studies using school children as the participants in data collection to investigate the effect of subtitled videos on second language vocabulary learning.

### **Conclusion**

According to the overall analysis, it can be concluded that vocabulary acquisition can take place through subtitled videos and audio-video materials with subtitles and watching videos with subtitles once is sufficient for receptive vocabulary knowledge gains. Furthermore, the findings indicated that watching videos without subtitles multiple times may also increase receptive vocabulary knowledge but for productive vocabulary knowledge gains, learners may have to watch videos with subtitles multiple times. Therefore, subtitled videos can be recommended to be applied in the ELT classrooms because a positive impact on second language vocabulary acquisition can be seen in this kind of learning method. But the following factors can be recommended to consider in applying this method in English language classrooms, as given below,

1. Repeating input supports more vocabulary acquisition, and showing movies more than once really benefits vocabulary learning.
2. The video with subtitles provides both listening input and reading input together with visuals. However, these three inputs may distract the learners from picking up the meaning of the words correctly.
3. Teachers are advised to encourage the learners to watch subtitled videos from their childhood, as practicing this method will enhance the ability to switch between reading and listening while watching visuals.

## References

- Ahmad, N., & Zahra, R. (2022). *The effect of video subtitling on vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners*. **Journal of Language Teaching and Research**, **13**(4), 721–730.
- Alharthi, T. (2018). *Vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size of EFL learners*. **English Language Teaching**, **11**(9), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.xxxxxx>
- Ayand, A., & Shafiee, S. (2016). *The impact of subtitles on EFL learners' vocabulary retention*. **International Journal of English Linguistics**, **6**(4), 108–115.
- Bava, M., & Alavi, Z. (2010). The effect of viewing subtitled videos on vocabulary learning. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, **7**(1), 37–42.
- Bellalem, F., Neddar, B. A., Bouagada, H., & Djellou, D. B. (2018). The use of subtitled movies for vocabulary acquisition in ESP settings: Insights from an experimental study in Algeria. *Arab World English Journal*, **9**(3), 3–16.
- Bellalem, F., Neddar, B., Bouagada, S., & Djelloul, M. (2018). *The impact of subtitled movies on EFL learners' vocabulary development*. **Arab World English Journal**, **9**(1), 157–169.
- Bird, S. A., & Williams, J. N. (2002). *The effect of bimodal input on implicit and explicit memory: An investigation into the benefits of within-language subtitling*. **Applied Psycholinguistics**, **23**(4), 509–533. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716402004022>
- Cakir, I., Cengizhan, E., & Savas, P. (2006). *The use of video as an audio-visual material in foreign language teaching classroom*. **Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies**, **2**(1), 1–6.
- Danan, M. (2004). *Captioning and subtitling: Undervalued language learning strategies*. **Meta: Translators' Journal**, **49**(1), 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.7202/009021ar>
- De Groot, A. M. B. (2006). *Effects of stimulus characteristics and background music on foreign language vocabulary learning and forgetting*. **Language Learning**, **56**(3), 463–506.
- Ebrahimi, Y., & Bazae, P. (2016). *The effect of watching subtitled English movies on enhancing vocabulary learning of EFL learners*. **Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research**, **3**(5), 284–295.
- Gerzymisch-Arbogast, H. (2008). *Teaching translation and interpreting*. **The Interpreter and Translator Trainer**, **2**(1), 63–82.
- Koolstra, C. M., & Beentjes, J. W. J. (1999). *Children's vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language through watching subtitled television programs at home*. **Educational Technology Research and Development**, **47**(1), 51–60.
- Kord, N., Arab Goorehooyi, N., & Mohammadi Dehaj, Z. (2022). *The effect of different subtitling modes on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention*. **Journal of Language and Translation**, **12**(2), 45–59.
- Lestari, P. (2018). *The influence of English movies with subtitles on students' vocabulary mastery*. **Journal of English Language Teaching**, **7**(3), 350–359.
- Madhubala, B. H., Woods, P. C., & Alavi, Z. K. (2010). *Investigating the impact of video subtitling on vocabulary learning among ESL learners*. **Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences**, **2**(2), 398–402.
- Mazahery, H., Nematollahi, B., & Ebrahimi, A. (2021). *The role of subtitling in vocabulary acquisition among Iranian EFL learners*. **Asian EFL Journal**, **28**(1), 95–112.
- Mousavi, F., & Gholami, J. (2014). *Effects of watching English movies with and without*

- subtitles on EFL learners' listening comprehension. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 5(3), 618–625.*
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I. S. P., & Webb, S. (2011). Researching and analyzing vocabulary. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 581–595). Routledge.
- Paribakht, T. S., & Wesche, M. (1997). *Vocabulary enhancement activities and reading for meaning in second language vocabulary acquisition. Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition: A Rationale for Pedagogy, 174–200*. Cambridge University Press.
- Peters, E. (2016). *The effect of repetition and L1 glosses on vocabulary learning from audiovisual input. TESOL Quarterly, 50(2), 479–506.*
- Reich, P. (2006). *The use of films and subtitling in language learning. Language Learning Journal, 34(2), 52–57.*
- Schmitt, N., & McCarthy, M. (Eds.). (1997). *Vocabulary: Description, acquisition and pedagogy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tajgozari, M. (2019). *The effect of bimodal subtitling on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. International Journal of Instruction, 12(3), 93–108.*
- Winke, P., Gass, S., & Sydorenko, T. (2010). *The effects of captioning videos used for foreign language listening activities. Language Learning & Technology, 14(1), 65–86.*
- Yufen, H. (2019). *Effects of English subtitles on vocabulary acquisition through video-based learning. International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, 8(5), 89–96.*
- Zahmatkesh, Z., & Ebrahim, M. (2021). *The effect of video subtitles on EFL learners' vocabulary retention and comprehension. Journal of Language and Education, 7(3), 152–164.*
- Zhang, Y., & Liu, L. (2014). *The impact of English movie subtitles on Chinese college students' English listening and vocabulary acquisition. English Language Teaching, 7(6), 179–186.*