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SUBTITLE

Captioned Media in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

*Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing
as Tools for Language Learning*

Robert Vanderplank



New Language Learning and Teaching Environments

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Captioned Media in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing as
Tools for Language Learning

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*For Sirpa, but for whom I might never have
watched a programme or film with captions*

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1

Introduction

1.1 Why a Book on Captioned Viewing and Language Learning?

Welcome to the world of watching television programmes and films with subtitles in the same language, or captions, as I shall call them in this book. If a reader who has never watched a programme or film with captions thought that captioned viewing was a simple matter, rather like watching a foreign film with translation subtitles, he or she needs to think again and try and watch a few programmes with captions. The many over-simplistic experimental studies on foreign language learning with clips from captioned programmes that are published in journals may conceal the richness and variety of the world of captioned viewing, a world in which both language and culture are made accessible to those who have normal hearing but who are “hard of listening” in the foreign language.

The reader may well wonder why there should be a book on foreign language learning with such a simple device as captions intended to enable the deaf and hard-of-hearing to enjoy television programmes,

films and DVDs. It really ought to be pretty obvious, oughtn't it? After my first article was published back in 1988, I also thought that would be the end of the argument, so obvious was it to me that they were a boon to language learners and to second language users with normal hearing. But no, questions and issues have been raised for over thirty years about their value, the advantages and downsides, how they work (or not) at different levels of proficiency, whether keywords and summaries would be better than those produced by captioners for the deaf, their relationship with translation subtitles and their availability in different languages.

With regard to the last point, until relatively recently, captions were rare in languages other than English, and it has only been through the pressure from deaf associations and through legislation that we now see captioning of TV programmes and DVDs in many countries and languages. I had thought about writing a book on captions and language learning some years ago but put it aside, as I wanted a book that would open up the world of captioned programmes and films to a global, multilingual audience, not just the English language learning and teaching audience. With captioning now widespread in Europe and elsewhere in the world, as well as in North America and the UK, we can say that significant progress has been made, albeit very slowly and not without reluctance on the part of some countries. It is in this context of widespread and growing multilingual captioning, together with the growth in informal language learning fuelled by the sophisticated multimedia use of independent learners worldwide, that this book has been written.

While this book will, I hope, be of interest to a wide readership of teachers as well as students and researchers in applied linguistics and second language acquisition, the message is also for all those who wish to learn a foreign language, especially those who choose to learn independently. If there is one thing that has come out quite conclusively over the years, it is that to gain benefit from watching TV programmes and films with captions, the learner-viewer needs to have choice and control of the viewing and to put effort into watching. The paradox of using television programmes and films to help learn a language is that our very viewing habits work against us taking it seriously and gaining much apart from fleeting enjoyment and entertainment.

1.2 Chapter Outlines

This book has a thesis and a narrative, which I build through the chapters. I begin in Chap. 2 by outlining what captions are and the basic principles of captioning. I also provide information on the current state of captioning in Europe and elsewhere before moving on to talk about television and video in foreign language learning. If asked what sort of medium television is, most people would probably say that it is a visual medium, or possibly an audiovisual medium. It is almost a reflex to call it a visual medium, yet, as I shall argue, television has its roots in radio and is very much a verbal medium. This reflex is especially true in foreign language teaching and learning where “recipes” for teachers about using audiovisual material in language teaching have stressed the visual side of TV and films from the 1950s to the present day. I acknowledge that such a position is entirely understandable given the fast and fleeting nature of speech on television and in films, but in focusing on the visual, we have been missing out on a fantastically rich source of language input for our learners. However, learning from television is not without its special problems and conceptual issues; I draw on the work of Gavriel Salomon and Albert Bandura to tease out why it is not enough to just “open the box” by providing captions, for it requires motivation, effort and a positive “can-do” attitude on the part of the learner-viewer, as evidenced by recent research in France and Brazil.

While Chap. 2 serves to set the conceptual and functional scene, Chap. 3 takes us through the pioneering of Karen Price and Anne Dow at Harvard in the early 1980s and my own *Teletext 888 Project* in the 1980s and 1990s. Readers may well be surprised to find that so much was achieved by Price and Dow in their large-scale study, yet the study has often been overlooked in the research literature. In my case, the project occupied ten years of my professional life before I decided that, at the time, there was little more I could do, as I had come up against some paradoxical issues affecting my own learners’ ability to exploit captions for language learning.

In Chap. 4, I use the pivotal meta-analysis of research into the benefits of captioned viewing for language learning by Maribel Montero-Perez and

her colleagues to review key research studies, especially those that focus on listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. I also describe in some detail the key study by Holger Mitterer and James McQueen, comparing viewing with captions and viewing with translation subtitles. I close by suggesting that the scale and nature of the research justifies captioned viewing having its own space quite separate from video and language teaching on the one hand, and translated subtitles on the other.

I continue to review research in Chap. 5, covering themes such as “keyword” captioning, learners’ strategies, longitudinal studies and literacy development with captions. I highlight how there is one area of research that remains underdeveloped, namely, how learners may develop their listening skills and strategies through watching captioned TV programmes and films over time and the complex matrix of factors at work. I also outline the theories and ideas that have been advanced for how captions appear to work or not with language learners.

The following chapter, Chap. 6, looks at the richness and variety of the language in TV programmes and films, how the language can be exploited and the positives and negatives that arise from using such a linguistically rich medium. I discuss the “flipped classroom,” which may be the only feasible way of exploiting extensive watching of audiovisual material, and consider genres such as comedy, news, documentaries, lifestyle programmes, culture and drama. We may make programmes accessible through captions, but if a comedy programme contains discourses that are constantly shifting in topic, style and content, how can a learner possibly make either sense or use of the language. Similarly, what should a teacher or learner focus on when watching a documentary? A documentary is a sophisticated and often complex product containing a narrative thread, which may be disrupted by case studies and highly engaging talking heads. We may easily become so absorbed in a programme that we retain little in language learning terms.

In Chap. 7, I describe my recent EURECAP pilot project, the first longitudinal study of how informal learners watch and make use of captioned films in DVD format in four languages, namely, French, German, Italian and Spanish. While there are obvious limitations to this pilot project, the results underline the complexity of the interactions between the nature and the quality of the film watched; the viewer’s proficiency,

strategies, confidence and mental set; the tasks and setting and the quality and perceived value of the captions. I analyse the diary feedback of the participants in terms of their self-perceived relationship to a captioned film, their confidence, the degree of self-regulation, the value they place on the activity in terms of language learning, the amount of effort they appear to invest and their attitude to captions.

In Chap. 8, I provide evidence for the new environment for captioned viewing by learners outside formal learning in the classroom. I describe a large-scale survey reported at the “watershed” conference at the University of Pavia in 2012, which identified informal captioned viewing as an important and growing phenomenon among Europe’s expatriate and immigrant communities. I outline some studies that also capture how independent learners in informal contexts are exploiting captions to further their goals to substantial effect. This leads me to consider the changing roles of the learners and technologies, and how both formal and informal independent learners have become active agents in accessing and using foreign language audiovisual material in novel ways. We have moved from a position where we look at the “effects of technology” to one where we need to think of the “effects with technology” and also “effects through technology,” together with the implications for teaching and learning with captions. I end the chapter by revisiting my earlier model of language learning through watching captioned programmes and films to arrive at a reformulated model, which takes not only the research evidence into account but also the perceptual, cognitive and affective complexities of captioned viewing for language learning. The model is intended not only to capture the processes of captioned viewing but also to provide a source of future research questions.

In the final chapter, Chap. 9, I provide a brief overview and look forward to what more is needed in global terms to help the spread of captioning. While informal language learners may already be making good use of captioned viewing, the potential for teachers and learners in drawing on captioned TV and films in the classroom remains largely unfulfilled. This book is intended to help teachers and researchers understand the challenges and potential of using captioned TV programmes and films and provide ideas and a framework for developing their benefits in our classrooms and research studies.

2

Some Essential Themes in Building the Case for Captions in Language Learning

2.1 The Pavia “Watershed”

The conference, “Subtitles and Language Learning,” held at the University of Pavia in September 2012, brought together, on the one hand, translation researchers and professionals and, on the other hand, those of us who have spent years promoting same-language subtitles or “captions” for deaf and hard-of-hearing people as a valuable aid to foreign and second language learning. It marked not only a watershed but also a “coming out,” as captioning has now spread beyond the UK and North America, and has the backing of the European Union (EU) as a multilingual means of supporting its accessibility and equality agenda beyond deaf and hard-of-hearing people. We also heard about the findings of a large-scale survey (reported in detail in Chap. 8), which confirmed the importance of captions for second language viewers, especially migrant workers and adult expatriate learners of host country’s languages. While the recognition by the EU that captioned viewing may help to bring the reality of a