Combined Use of English and Japanese Subtitles in Film Videos  
— An Attempt to Make Closed Captions More Accessible to Learners —

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that English and Japanese subtitles can be successfully combined for use in the language classroom to enhance language learning. Following a review of the research findings on the use of closed captions as reading and vocabulary materials, this paper examines the addition of previewing questions and combined use of both subtitles as a possible approach to make closed captions more accessible and comprehensible to learners.

In order to get student feedback, a brief survey of 144 students was conducted, and the results indicate that overall, they felt less nervous and learned more target vocabulary items, referring to both subtitles as they needed. The paper concludes that Japanese subtitles, though often viewed negatively in English education, can be successfully used in various activities as an effective use of L1 in language learning.

1. Introduction

With recent increasing awareness and interest in authentic materials such as film videos, closed captions, or English subtitles are often used in EFL classrooms in Japan. The writer himself has used closed-captioned film videos in the classroom for the past seven years, with somewhat mixed results. Although they were very effective to advanced learners, some students, especially lower-level learners felt that English subtitles were too fast and difficult. In some cases, the use of English subtitles even caused a lack of motivation on the part of less advanced students. As a compromise to facilitate and ensure student comprehension, the writer has come to use Japanese subtitles as well as English ones, but at the same time has always sought new ways
to fully exploit the potential of Japanese subtitles. This search was the starting point for this study.

Japanese subtitles are often used simply because students can not fully understand film videos without them, and, in contrast to a wealth of research studies on the use of English subtitles, little attention has been paid to them so far. Some teachers even consider them as a kind of “necessary evil”. However, some researchers are aware of their potential use in the classroom. For example, Obari (1996) says that the combined use of both English and Japanese subtitles was more effective than the use of either one. Investigating the use of “bilingual format”, the format in which L2 text is printed side by side with its L1 translation, Shizuka (1997) also reports that the format was superior to conventional methods of reading L2 texts with the help of bilingual dictionaries both in enhancing comprehension and in facilitating lower proficiency learners’ vocabulary learning. Despite these studies, research into suitable teaching methods has been scant.

Fundamental to the issue is that no matter how good the material is, it cannot bring about the desired effect if it is beyond the learner’s ability. Film videos and other authentic materials are not originally developed for the purpose of teaching, adding further importance to the study of teaching and presentation methods. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the effect of the combined use of English and Japanese subtitles as a means of enhancing language learning.

2. Problems with the Use of Film Videos in the Classroom

For many learners, so-called authentic English used in film videos is very difficult to understand because it is spoken fast with many reduced forms and contains a lot of colloquial expressions not familiar to them. Without the help of subtitles, therefore, students can hardly understand film dialogues, unless clearly and slowly spoken, and film segments with such comprehensible dialogues are extremely limited. Hoping that they might bridge this often sizable gap between students’ reading and listening abilities, the researcher has used English subtitles in the classroom for the past seven years, and his initial approach was to encourage students to read all the English subtitles as they watched film segments. This achieved mixed results. The results of questionnaires conducted regularly at the end of each term indicated that students favored the use of film videos and English subtitles themselves, but most of them answered that their comprehension was insufficient. A majority of them attributed their inability to understand the dialogues to their “fast speed”, followed by “many unknown words”.

The writer then started using film videos with Japanese subtitles to ensure student comprehension, and just like the experiment by Obari (1996), students watched video segments first with Japanese subtitles and then with English subtitles, resulting in prolonged viewing time and much less time was left for post-viewing activities. Also, advanced students preferred watching videos only with English subtitles.
3. Justification for the Use of Japanese Subtitles

(1) A Review of Findings of Previous Studies in the U.S.

As an activity to motivate students, the writer tried an in-class movie translation exercise, using both Japanese and English subtitles (See Kadoyama 1996 for details). In the exercise, which was designed for would-be translators and other students with an interest in movies, students showed a distinct interest in comparing the two subtitles. This led the writer to utilize subtitles not only to facilitate student comprehension but also to teach vocabulary and cultural comparison. Studies on the use of closed captions in Japan, however, seem to have been limited to listening comprehension (for example, Obari 1996; Miyamoto 1991), and little research has been conducted on the use of captioned video materials for vocabulary development.

This paper therefore reviews U.S. studies on closed captions as reading and vocabulary materials. Table 1 summarizes the findings of previous research studies conducted in the United States on hearing populations (ESL students and learning disabled LI students).

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>to examine the effect of closed captions as comprehensible input in incidental vocabulary learning</td>
<td>to examine the effect of closed captions as reading materials, focusing on sight vocabulary development, oral reading &amp; comprehension</td>
<td>to examine the effect of closed captions as reading materials, focusing on sight vocabulary, writing &amp; comprehension</td>
<td>to examine the effect of closed-captioned TV as a medium for sight vocabulary development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>7th &amp; 8th Graders (ESL)</td>
<td>9-13 year old Ss (Learning disabled LI)</td>
<td>High School Ss (Learning disabled LI)</td>
<td>Adults (Learning disabled LI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject #</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>3-2-1 Contact (9 episodes were used)</td>
<td>3-2-1 Contact (4 episodes were used)</td>
<td>Amazing Stories, Family Ties, The Cosby Show, Perfect Strangers, etc.</td>
<td>3-2-1 Contact (5 episodes were used)</td>
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<td>Method</td>
<td>4 treatments (CCTV Group, TV G., Script with chorus reading G., Script only G.)</td>
<td>4 treatments (CCTV with sound Group, CCTV with no sound G., TV G., Script only G.)</td>
<td>From viewing with CC and sound to viewing with CC and no sound</td>
<td>3 treatments (CCTV with instruction Group, CC with no instr. G., Script with instr. G.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viewing time</td>
<td>A total of 90 minutes (watched 5-minute segments twice a week for 9 weeks)</td>
<td>A total of 8 minutes (watched 2-minute segments 4 times in 3-week experiment)</td>
<td>About 24 minutes per class</td>
<td>A total of 15 minutes (watched 3-minute segments 5 times in 3-week experiment)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>• Weekly 10-item vocabulary quiz • Weekly written retellings</td>
<td>20-item vocabulary quiz and 10-item comprehension quiz per class etc.</td>
<td>20-item vocabulary and comprehension quiz per class</td>
<td>• Pre-post 30-item word recognition test • Weekly 20-item sight vocabulary test and read-out exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>CCTV &gt; TV &gt; Script with chorus reading &gt; Script only</td>
<td>No difference among treatments, but overall, CCTV with sound &gt; TV &gt; CCTV with no sound &gt; Script only</td>
<td>Very encouraging but not conclusive</td>
<td>All groups showed improvements, but no distinct difference among treatments was observed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effect on motivation</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Significant effect was observed</td>
<td>Significant effect was observed</td>
<td>Significant effect was observed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B.

- supports the notion that simultaneous processing enhances learning
- points out that lower-level learners need instruction

- supports the notion that simultaneous processing enhances learning
- points out the necessity of long-term experiments

- attributes no difference among treatments to the small number of subjects

Research studies on learning disabled L1 students revealed no distinct difference among treatments, which seems to imply that closed captions are obviously too difficult for many slow L1 learners, despite their significant effects on learners’ motivation. Although Neuman & Koskinen (1992) report that just viewing television with closed captions led to incidental vocabulary learning, they also suggest that low proficiency students need instruction. The above studies, contrary to the researchers’ expectations, seem to prove that without a certain proficiency level closed captions would not enhance language learning as comprehensible input and that the required level seems to be quite high. Of course, the findings of studies on ESL and learning disabled L1 learners cannot be directly applied to Japanese EFL learners, but they seem to imply that captions might be too difficult for low proficiency learners to be considered as comprehensible input, which justifies the use of some kind of support to make English subtitles more comprehensible to them. One possible solution is the use of Japanese subtitles and previewing activities to raise students’ awareness for target vocabulary items.

(2) Use of Japanese Subtitles

With regard to the type of video materials used, most U.S. studies discussed above used segments taken from the educational television program, “3-2-1 Contact” partly because audio/video correlation is very high in the program where scientific information is explained using a lot of pictures and other visual supports. In Japan, however, film videos are often used, providing students with useful information on social situations where language is being used. Some parts of a film video, though, offer a low level of visual support (low audio/video correlation), providing much less positive visual support for comprehension. Japanese subtitles would be effective in providing clues to the meaning of the unknown words that students see on the screen.

One further complication is that film translation is quite different from normal translation because of its strict limit on the number of Japanese characters used for each dialogue. Japanese subtitles should be short enough for ordinary movie viewers to read before a character in a movie
finishes speaking the lines, and, in general, only four Japanese characters per second can be used for subtitling. For example, a line like “I saw him yesterday in New York.”, which can normally be said within two seconds, has to be translated into up to eight Japanese characters (Okaeda, 1989:8). Thus, Japanese subtitles are carefully designed not to burden viewers; this strict limit on the number of Japanese characters significantly lowers the danger of information overload.

(3) Previewing Activities

The findings of previous studies seem to support the writer’s class observation that low proficiency learners cannot read and digest all the English subtitles as comprehensible input. Thus, the focus in the writer’s teaching objectives was shifted from encouraging students to read all English subtitles to more focused reading in order to successfully learn target vocabulary items. One approach is to raise students’ awareness for target expressions in the segments with previewing activities and have them look for the answers in actual viewing.

4. Combined Use of English and Japanese Subtitles

In considering the limited class hours available, the writer decided to show both English and Japanese subtitles on the screen, instead of having students watch the same segment twice as tried before. Using closed caption decoders, English subtitles were shown just above Japanese ones. This format was similar to the bilingual format used by Shizuka (1997), where L1 and L2 are presented side by side, and it was utilized based on his finding that the bilingual format was effective in enhancing comprehension and in facilitating lower proficiency learners’ vocabulary learning. Shizuka (1997:8) says, “Obviously this (bilingual format) does not offer a perfect solution but the format seems to be at least one practical option for remedying lower proficiency learners.”

Some may question if this format might overload students. For example, Neuman & Koskinen (1992) report that some have suggested that the “crowdedness” of television, requiring readers to process simultaneously through multiple modalities, might be difficult due to hypothesized limits of human attention (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Singer & Singer, 1983). With the decoding task so difficult for ESL students, Williams & Snipper (1990:20) question whether they have the attentional capacity to read, view, and listen at the same time. Contrary to these concerns, the results of their research supported the theoretical notion that simultaneous processing enhances learning. In addition, Kamei & Hirose (1994) report that advanced learners tend to select media in decoding language information, while lower-level learners seem to decode various information unconsciously without selecting them. All of these seem to justify the use of Japanese subtitles to ensure student comprehension and facilitate vocabulary learning.
5. Actual Class Procedures

(1) Examples of Previewing Activities

In one lesson students watched a video segment of about 10 minutes after answering five previewing questions, examples of which are presented as follows:

■ Typical English Expressions

1. (taken from the film “Batman Forever”)  
   In the segment, a female reporter asks Edward how he feels about being selected as “Kekkon Shirai Donsei No Ichii”. How do you translate this expression into English? Compare your translation with the line in the video.  
   (Answer: How does it feel to be the most eligible bachelor?)

   The question was intended to make students aware and appreciate the differences in expressions. Most students used the word “marry” or “marriage” in their translations due to a direct association with the Japanese word “kekkon”.
   Then, students’ translations were compared with the line in the video. Other segments with the same expression, (for example, a news story about a son of the late President Kennedy, who was until recently considered by the media as “the most eligible bachelor” in the United States) were viewed as reinforcement. Also, related vocabulary, such as “eligible” and “bachelor” was assigned to students as homework.

■ Colloquial Expressions

2. (taken from the film “Casper”)  
   In the segment, you will see the Japanese subtitle “Gaman Suru-yo”. How do you translate this expression into English? Compare your translation with the line used in the video.
   (Answer: I could live with that.)

   This question served as a review of such expressions as “put up with” and “endure”. The entry “gaman-suru” in a Japanese-English dictionary was mentioned, and various expressions in the entry were explained from a pragmatic point of view. Also, students were instructed to look up other such examples which are not usually found in many Japanese-English dictionaries.

■ Differences and Similarities between Japanese and English Expressions

3. (taken from the film “Casper”)  
   In the video, the ghost trio compares Dr. Harvey’s deceased wife to a fruit, meaning that she was a very attractive woman. Which fruit comes to your mind first as a fruit associated with an attractive woman? Check the answer in the video.
   (Answer: She is a peach.)

   Before watching the video segment, students were encouraged to come up with their answers in order to raise their awareness, without which many useful expressions are often left
unnoticed. Following the teacher's explanation, students were told, as homework, to look up images associated with other fruits in a dictionary in order to find out differences and similarities in images between the two languages.

Differences and Similarities between Japanese and English Gestures

4. (taken from the film "Casper")

You will see the Japanese subtitle “Yubi-kiri (pinkie square or finger-crossing)” when Kat and her father make a promise to stop ghost-hunting. What does the English subtitle say for the expression? Do you think that Americans do “Yubikiri” just like Japanese do?

(Answer: Deal)

Students were told to pay attention not only to English expressions but also differences in customs and gestures. Related English expressions, such as “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” were introduced and compared with Japanese equivalents. Special care was taken to lead students into paying attention to differences and similarities between English and Japanese expressions.

(2) A Sample Teaching Plan

In order to demonstrate what has been discussed, a sample teaching plan will be presented. Basically, the lesson consisted of three activities: previewing, viewing and post-viewing activities. Before the actual viewing, students first worked with about five previewing questions discussed above. The purpose of this previewing activity was to raise students’ awareness for target vocabulary items in the segment. During the viewing activity, both English and Japanese subtitles were shown on the screen, and students were instructed to look for the answers of the previewing questions. After viewing, students checked their answers, viewing the relevant scene again, if necessary. Related vocabulary and cultural aspects were explained by the teacher and occasionally assigned to students as homework. Actual class procedures are as follows:

Academic Level: Variable (Lower–intermediate and above)
Sequence Type: Feature film
Sequence Length: About 10 minutes (An entire film was divided into 9 or 10 parts, each of which was used in one class.)
Activity Time: About 50 minutes
Preparation: Prepare copies of previewing questions for all the students.
In-class Procedures:

1. Distribute copies of the previewing questions.
2. Students work individually or in pairs, completing their answers.
3. As they finish, ask for volunteers, or call on some students, to read their answers to the class.
4. Play the segment, telling students to look for the answers as they watch it.
⑤ Check the answers with the students. Play the relevant scene again if necessary.
⑥ Explain related expressions and cultural topics for reinforcement.
⑦ Students work with pair conversation practice.
⑧ Tell students to look up related vocabulary in a dictionary as assignment.

The major difference in teaching procedures was the addition of previewing activity. Students used to watch the segment soon after the teacher’s brief introduction, and emphasis was put on post-viewing activities, such as Q&A, True or False questions and conversation practice. A distinct stress was, however, put on the previewing activity here, aiming at more focused viewing.

6. Opinion Survey and Analysis: Students’ Views

In this paper, we have looked at the combined use of both Japanese and English subtitles as a means to make closed captions more accessible to less advanced students. At this point, it is important to determine how the students felt about doing the activity. All of the students surveyed were taught by the writer, and they worked with the activity presented in this paper.

The following survey represents their views:
Respondents: STUDENTS (Ss.)
Group1: 1st year English majors, Hiroshima Bunkyo Women’s College ....96Ss.
Group2: 3rd & 4th year Law majors, Hiroshima Shudo University...................48Ss.
TOTAL 144Ss.

All the students took the same placement test at the beginning of the first semester of 1997, and based on the results of the test they were roughly classified into three categories: advanced (21Ss), intermediate (78Ss), and lower-intermediate (45Ss).

As van Lier (1988) notes, there is no single best way of doing L2 classroom evaluation. So the students were given freedom to comment on the activity in any way they wished, rather than answer a written questionnaire. Although questionnaires may present a more objective evaluation of the activity, they tend to force students to think along preconceived guidelines rather than their own impressions and ideas. The question to the students was “What do you think of watching both English and Japanese subtitles?” All the comments were written in Japanese, and the analysis of their comments revealed three categories of answer, two positive and one negative. In order of frequency they were: (a) useful to understand English subtitles, (b) able to compare the both subtitles, and (c) inclined to watch only Japanese subtitles.

An overwhelming majority of students (89%) mentioned that the addition of Japanese subtitles helped them understand English subtitles better. Comments from this category included statements such as:
• I felt much less nervous with the help of Japanese subtitles.
• Previewing exercise is very practical, and helped me focus on key expressions in actual viewing.
• Although I could not read all the English subtitles, I was able to locate and identify the answers of previewing exercises with the support of Japanese subtitles.
• Japanese subtitles helped me successfully guess the meaning of unknown words.

Judging from these comments, the exercise seemed to produce a beneficial effect on many students, significantly lowering their affective filter.

Twenty-one students (15%) mentioned that they found the activity stimulating because they were able to compare both subtitles. Interestingly, thirteen advanced students, many of whom initially objected to using Japanese subtitles in the classroom, specifically mentioned that Japanese subtitles turned out to be useful because they helped those students realize the similarities and differences between the two languages and cultures.

Also, the results of the survey supported the finding of Kamei & Hirose (1994). Seven advanced students wrote that they paid attention primarily to English subtitles, referring to Japanese subtitles as needed. They said Japanese subtitles did not interrupt them, but rather facilitated their comprehension. Ten intermediate and lower-intermediate students, on the other hand, specifically mentioned that they relied mainly on Japanese subtitles, and picked up some English expressions with the help of Japanese subtitles. Thus it was supported that students did not pay equal attention to both English and Japanese subtitles at the same time, and the issue of information overload was not observed.

On the negative side, however, nine students (6%) wrote that they tended to watch only Japanese subtitles even though they first tried to watch English subtitles. They were all lower-intermediate students, making up 20% of the students in the category.

This major criticism by the students could be significantly reduced, if not eliminated, by carefully designed previewing questions which best fit students' academic level, though some students still might be tempted to read only Japanese subtitles. Nevertheless, the students' comments generally demonstrated that a significant majority (89%) felt that the use of the both subtitles had produced some beneficial effects on them.

7. Conclusion

This paper has tried to demonstrate that English and Japanese subtitles can be successfully combined for use in the language classroom, lowering learners' anxiety and facilitating their vocabulary development. The review of the research findings on the use of closed captions as reading and vocabulary materials revealed that some kind of help or instruction was essential so that lower-level students could digest English subtitles as comprehensible input. The addition of previewing questions and the combined use of both subtitles were examined as one possible
solution to this challenge.

The survey of students indicated that overall, they felt less nervous and learned more target vocabulary items, referring to both subtitles as needed. Japanese subtitles, though often viewed negatively in English education, can be successfully used in various activities to enhance language learning. This study also supported the findings of Shizuka (1997); the use of "bilingual format" should be further explored as an effective use of L1 in language learning and teaching.

Authentic materials such as film videos are useful to motivate students, but at the same time, such materials rightfully require careful and thorough preparation in order to turn them into effective teaching materials. Considering the various proficiency levels that teachers often have to handle in class, the importance of studying presentation methods to maximize learners' achievements cannot be overemphasized. The potential of captioned materials is clear and it is hoped that more light will be shed on the effective use of L1 in order to make the materials more accessible and comprehensible to learners.

References


