

Do subtitled films really help you learn languages?

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In general, films in the original language and versions with subtitles in a range of different languages are both widely available in Europe. If the main aim of subtitles is allowing viewers to understand dialogue in films

where they don't know the language, subtitles are also being seen to an ever-greater extent through an educational lens.

Clearly, watching a film in a [foreign language](#) that you're studying is a good way to pick up vocabulary in that language.

Nevertheless, depending on our learning level and abilities in the language of the film, the impact of subtitles on our understanding varies quite considerably. So, with that film you want to watch: with or without subtitles?

Different types of subtitles

To understand a film involves processing an audiovisual, and thus multimodal, complex format. The film viewer must [simultaneously parse](#) with their eyes and ears verbal and non-verbal cues in constant interaction with each other.

Subtitles are intended to make comprehension easier—but they also add a new source of information with a speed and tempo beyond our control. The [different kinds of subtitle](#) that can be deployed are the following:

- **The standard format**, offering translation from one language to another, where the dialogue is in the film's original language and the subtitles are in the audience's mother tongue
- **A reversed translation format**, with the dialogue dubbed in the [viewers'](#) mother tongue, and the subtitles in the original language of the film
- **A "same language" version**, often used for those with hearing difficulties, with both the subtitles and the dialogue of the film in

the original language it was shot in.

One might readily imagine that the language mix presented to the viewer of a subtitled film isn't a particularly effective way to memorize words in another language. [Bairstow and Lavour's study](#) looked at two factors that could influence vocabulary learning: one, what languages there are, the other, how the language is presented (spoken or written).

The people who took part in this study had French as their first language and were identified as having only a modest level of English. They were shown different versions of the film: standard subtitles, reversed, and with both dialogue and subtitles in English. While the study authors found no detectable difference between the film with English dialogue and subtitles and the one with standard subtitling, the viewers who had seen the inverted version (French dialogue and English subtitles) got the best results in terms of being able to reconstruct the film dialogue.

The reverse version stands out as allowing better reproduction of words in the language being studied, suggesting that the semantic links between languages are more easily generated here than under other viewing conditions.

Other researchers have found evidence of the beneficial effect of subtitles in the same language as the film dialogue on vocabulary retention. According to these studies, same-language subtitles involve a positive redundancy factor, whereas standard ones lead to an interference in the brain between the languages.

Adapting subtitling strategies

We can have very different abilities when it comes to getting to grips with language in film dialogue. To optimize understanding, we need to

choose the combination of soundtrack language and subtitles that suits us best. Lavour and Bairstow's study looked at levels of understanding of a film by beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners of a foreign language.

Learners from each tier were divided into four and watched either the original version of the film, without subtitles, the "same language" version (soundtrack and subtitles in a foreign language), classic subtitles, or the inverse version (soundtrack in the mother tongue, subtitles in the foreign language).

While the results for the intermediate group were the same across the different versions, the beginners got their best results in the two "different language" formats. Specifically, it was the inverse version (native language soundtrack, foreign language subtitles) where the beginners scored better: the connections between the languages are made more easily here.

The advanced learners, however, saw their comprehension levels decline when subtitles appeared on the screen. If their language skills are good, how to explain this slide in comprehension when subtitles are present?

The 'cognitive load' of subtitles

Subtitles are constrained by their place on the screen. There is a set time they appear and as a result, they can't correspond exactly to the film's dialogue. They thus represent a shortened, watered-down version of what's said in the film, which causes comprehension problems when one can't link the words in the subtitles to those in the dialogue.

It's difficult to stop oneself from reading subtitles—our eyes have the tendency to read information in front of us automatically. In one study tracking eye movements, D'Ydewalle, and others showed that when the

viewer's gaze is diverted toward subtitles, that automatically reduces attention time given to the activity happening on screen.

In the context of watching a film, subtitles can have the effect of splitting a viewer's attention between the subtitles and the action, leading to a heightened cognitive load.

This cognitive load could also explain the difficulty associated with parsing two languages and two different channels of communication simultaneously. There's plentiful scientific literature on the cognitive cost associated with changing from one language to another, which manifests notably in a slowing down of the capacity to process linguistic information.

If we think about classic and inverted subtitles, they both involve moving rapidly between representations of two different languages, which leads to a cognitive cost that takes the form, in this context, of viewers struggling to match up the dialogue they hear with the text on the screen.

The variable effectiveness of subtitling

We're interested in the impact of language changes during a film on viewers' understanding. With people watching an extract of "Real Women Have Curves" (directed by Patricia Cardoso—which in the original version alternates between dialogue in English and Spanish), we've found evidence that moments of the film where there's a change of language are associated with a weaker grasp of the dialogue.

Two factors might undermine viewers' understanding: alternation between languages and audiences' attention being split between different modes—soundtrack and the written word—due to subtitles.

What the benefits may be of film subtitling is thus a subtle question,

depending on what the individual viewer wants and their language ability. Subtitles allow a better understanding of [dialogue](#) and the plot generally, but they can also lead to a decline in the ability to process the action of the film when their presence isn't strictly needed (by adding to cognitive load and making it difficult to keep focus).

We, therefore, need to keep in mind that the effectiveness of subtitles depends both on the combination of languages involved and the viewers' skills in these languages.

More generally speaking, we can acknowledge that these aids offer very useful exposure to a second language and, in this sense, help vocabulary acquisition. However, they don't put film viewers in the position of actively using this language—a vital condition for building [language](#) ability, especially for spoken communication.

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