The Impact of Keyword Caption Ratio on Foreign Language Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of three keyword caption modes on the listening comprehension of Arab learners of English as a foreign language (N = 90) while viewing authentic video clips. The keyword caption modes contained approximately 10%, 30% or 50% of the words in the video scripts. The participants watched three different video clips from three science videos, each of which contained one of the three keyword caption modes. Each participant experienced all three modes and the order in which they were viewed was counterbalanced. Their understanding of the content of the video clips was measured using comprehension tests consisting of gap fill and multiple-choice questions. The analysis of the listening comprehension test scores found evidence of an effect for the 50% keyword caption condition.

Keywords: Captions, Keywords, Listening, Multimedia, Video

INTRODUCTION

Listening is frequently identified by second/foreign (L2/FL) language learners as the most difficult and demanding language skill to acquire (Graham, 2003; Kim, 2002; Sun, Chang, & Yang, 2011; Vandergrift, 2007) and is also frequently identified by learners as a source of anxiety (Aniero, 1990; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Yang, 1993). One of the major reasons learners find listening problematic is that developing the ability to comprehend real-world spoken language requires exposure to input that is both authentic and comprehensible. A difficulty in meeting the authentic, but comprehensible requirement, however, is that authentic input, because it was not produced with language learners in mind, is often largely incomprehensible to individuals who are not already competent in the language.

One method that has been used to address the problem that authentic input is often too difficult for L2/FL learners is to provide authentic input by adding captions to an otherwise authentic video. Many studies have found that captioning increases language comprehension and facilitates language learning by allowing L2/FL learners to visualize the language they are exposed to. However, the vast majority of these studies have focused on the effects of full script or verbatim captions. While full-script captions have been shown to have positive effects on L2/FL language learning, their use is problematic when the specific instructional goal is to develop listening skills. Adult L2/FL learners...
learners typically develop their ability to read the L2/FL more quickly than their ability to understand aural input. Listening ability typically does not become comparable to reading ability until L2/FL learners reach an advanced level of proficiency (Hirai, 1999). Therefore, if learners are provided with too many words in the caption area of a video, they may be able to comprehend the content by relying on their more developed reading skills. This is counterproductive when the instructional goal is to develop listening comprehension skills.

One way around the problems of using full-script captions is to use keyword captions. Keywords visually support listening comprehension by providing a selection of important content words, but also force learners to use and develop their listening skills to understand the video content more fully. Only a small number of studies, however, have investigated the effects of keyword captions (Baltova, 1999; Guillory, 1997; Kikuchi, 2003; Park, 2004). While these studies have shown that keyword captions can be as good as, or even better than, full-script captions for language learning, more research is needed, particularly with regard to which words in a video script should be included in keyword captions and what percentage of the full script keyword captions should contain. This study is an attempt to add to the literature in these areas.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Research on the use of captions for L2/FL language learning began after the first broadcasts of television programs with closed-captioning (same language subtitles that appear at the bottom of the screen) began in the United States in 1980. After approximately three decades of research, however, the use of captioning for L2/FL learning remains controversial. Many researchers have conducted studies that have indicated captioned viewing has a positive effect on L2/FL comprehension and acquisition (Chung, 1996; Garza, 1991; Goldman, 1996; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992; Price, 1983; Vanderplank, 1988, 1993), listening comprehension (Bird & Williams, 2002; Garza, 1991; Etamadei, 2012; Guichon & McLorman, 2008; Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Hernandez, 2004; Hwang, 2003; Markham, 1989, 1999; Price, 1983; Vanderplank, 1988), accent comprehensibility (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009), vocabulary acquisition (Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999; Koskinen, Knable, Markham, Jensema, & Kane, 1996; Koskinen, Wilson, Gambrell, & Neuman, 1993; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992; Yuksel & Tanriverdi, 2009), reading (Garza, 1991; Parlato, 1986; Smith, 1990) oral communication proficiency (Borras & Lafayette, 1994) memory of language encountered in videos (Garza, 1991; Vanderplank, 1988; 1990), and learner attitude towards language learning (Chung, 1996; Kikuchi, 2003; Vanderplank, 1988). Overall, these studies have indicated that captioned viewing can have a variety of positive effects for L2/FL skill development because captions effectively act as a “hearing aid” (Vanderplank, 1988, p. 272) that scaffolds the development of L2/FL listening comprehension skills by helping learners “visualize what they hear” (Danan, 2004, para.1) and promotes deeper processing of the language contained in the input (Danan, 2004).

**Research on Captions and Listening**

*Studies Finding Positive Effects*

Particularly relevant for the present study is research indicating the positive effect of captioned viewing on listening comprehension. Price (1983) is frequently credited with conducting the seminal study in this area. In a study involving 450 ESL learners with 76 native languages, posttests suggested that the addition of captions significantly improved their comprehension of the linguistic information featured in the video and helped them to “acquire more of the cultural script” (p.8) that is part of English communication.

However, it was still questionable whether the use of captions would result in improved
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