Literature Review:
Language Acquisition through Audiovisual Translation

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What does an increase in audiovisual media and decrease in reading mean for foreign language learners? Can we harness the popularity of television for the cause of learning a foreign language, and how do different forms of captions affect language acquisition? In the following literature review, I will look at scholarly conversations surrounding language acquisition through audiovisual media. This literature review will act as a basis for a multimodal project looking at the effectiveness of various modes of captioning in the Netflix series *Sex Education*. For the purposes of this piece, I look at one article citing Neftlix, rather than the series itself, as there is a lack of scholarly work connecting *Sex Education* and foreign language acquisition. I will present definitions of relevant terms—such as incidental learning and L2—demonstrate differences in modes of translation, and present findings from studies evaluating the effectiveness of several of these modes for foreign language learners.

Terms and Definitions

From the fields of translation and linguistics come a number of relevant terms. The term "incidental vocabulary learning" is defined by Associate Professor of applied linguistics Mark Feng Teng as "a type of vocabulary learning through meaningful activities such as reading, listening, or viewing without an explicit intention to learn the target words." Watching foreign television, with or without some form of translation, is a means of incidental vocabulary learning. This term can be shortened to "incidental learning" to refer more broadly to language acquisition through the same means. Next, the term "L1" refers to one's first language, while "L2" refers to one's second language (Kruger et al.). More often in the evaluated texts, L1 is referred to as the "target language." Captions and dubbing can take form in either the target language or L2, with efficacy that we will look at below.

Multiple forms of captions exist. Unlike popular media, scholars do not tend to distinguish simply between "closed captions" and "subtitles," but rather between more specific types of captions. Among these are "glossed captions," "full captions," and "keyword captions." First are "glossed captions," which allow viewers to click on captions to view vocabulary definitions at will (Fievez et al.). Full and keyword captions are more intuitive, as they refer to on-screen text that displays all or a portion of the dialogue, respectively (Hsieh). Other common terms, such as subtitles and captions, seem to take on different meanings depending on the research goals and methods of a study. In a study by Geòrgia Pujadas and Carmen Muñoz, subtitles refer to first language—or L1—on-screen text in the context of target language—or L2—television or film viewing. Captions, then, refer to L2 on-screen text that aligns with the L2 visual medium.

Alternatively, other studies seem to use the two terms interchangeably, only placing “L1” or “L2” beforehand for clarity, as seen in a study by Elke Peters and Stuart Webb.

Television as a Language-Learning Tool

Pujadas and Muñoz’s 2019 study highlights television’s potential as a language-learning tool. They explain that its potential comes not only from the effectiveness of multimodal input, but also from its popularity over reading. In another of Peter’s studies, titled “The effect of out-of-class exposure to English language media on learners’ vocabulary knowledge,” 40% of Dutch students surveyed reported watching English language television multiple times per week. Conversely, only 1% of the students surveyed reported reading English-language books multiple times per week (qtd. in Pujadas and Muñoz). Furthermore, a 2017 study by Pujadas and Muñoz concluded that a television viewing experience—which students reported appreciating over traditional classroom learning methods—can be a superior method of learning because it reduces anxiety and allows students to enjoy learning. According to Pujadas and Muñoz, some scholars have feared the opposite: that television might be distracting and counterproductive to the goal of language learning (Pujadas and Muñoz). That being said, much research is currently being conducted on the topic, suggesting that scholars believe there is, in fact, much potential for the method.

Glossed Captions, Full Captions, and Keyword Captions

A study by Isabeau Fievez et al. demonstrates variables of the frequency with which vocabulary repeats itself within and across episodes, the comprehension level they begin with, and the pre-teaching of vocabulary. For our purposes, we will avoid looking at pre-teaching and the level of effort made to retain vocabulary, because we are concerned with incidental language acquisition, which should not include those variables. Fievez does categorize the use of glossed captions, though, as an incidental learning. The compelling, but not yet standardized, mode of glossed captioning was shown to be an effective means of L2 learning in said study. Fievez found that watching a French-language series with glossed captions produced significant gains for students. Additionally, the study showed that students with higher starting French proficiencies learned more vocabulary throughout the process than did those with lower starting proficiencies (Fievez et al.).

Teng’s 2023 study corroborated these findings and provided more evidence in favor of full and keyword captions. Young L2 students showed the most vocabulary gains with glossed captions, and no significant difference in gains was found between full and keyword captions, although both groups outperformed the control group (Teng).

A study on language acquisition for English as a Foreign Language students (EFL) through captioned and uncaptioned episodes of the series *Chuck* by Michael P. H. Rodgers and Stuart Webb took two groups of EFL students and compared their comprehension, with one group having on-screen captions and the other group having none. The captions were in the same language as the audio—English—and reflected exactly what was being said. Both groups demonstrated improvement in comprehension from the start to end of the testing period, though there was no difference in comprehension between the two groups in the long term (10 episodes’ worth of exposure) (Rodgers and Webb). Unlike this study, previous studies showed a significant association between improved language acquisition and the use of captions—as we saw—which Rodgers and Webb say might be a consequence of different media types; *Chuck* is a series in which each episode stands alone as a comprehensible piece, whereas the more educational episodes used in other studies may have required more leaning into the tool of captions for aid (Rodgers and Webb).

Conclusion

Research is still being conducted to continue the evaluation of television series as language-learning tools and the most effective mode of captioning. Despite remaining questions about differences between glossed, full, and keyword captioning, scholars have come to a consensus that the general addition of on-screen text, whether in L1 or L2, is valuable for language learners. Outside of the scope of scholarly research, issues facing language learners using television as a tool are the accuracy of captions, the frequency with which vocabulary repeats itself within and across episodes, the comprehension level they begin with, the level of effort made to retain new vocabulary, and the pre-teaching of vocabulary. For the sake of this literature review, these last two points were not discussed, but it should be noted that scholars pay attention to them. Going forward with my multimodal project evaluating this subject and *Sex Education*, I will need to consider the accuracy of Netflix's captions, whether its subtitles are different than its captions—which scholars do not deal due to the nature of their definitions of the terms—and how a consistent plot and set of main characters may affect ESL viewers.

Works Cited

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