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January 2013
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How Can Subtitles Help Intermediate Students in Kuwait to Develop their Vocabulary Acquisition?

Introduction

Acquiring a new vocabulary of words and phrases in any language is an on-going process in students' lives, whether it is in a first language (L1) or a second language (L2). Learners need the help of every available tool to build up their vocabulary, and if it is in their L2, this will be even more difficult to do. "Video can be a very valuable tool that helps students process, remember, and actively produce foreign terms", (Danan, 1992: p. 524). Some teachers in intermediate schools in Kuwait prefer to concentrate and spend more time in the classroom on different areas of language learning, and unfortunately vocabulary learning is not one of these areas. Although new course books (Pearson Longman) now are being used in Kuwait, and they place more attention on vocabulary than previously, vocabulary learning is often still neglected. One of the reasons for this is that perhaps teachers cannot cover the required amount of new vocabulary in classrooms due to time constraints, as they also have to cover other skills. Using the audio-visual (video) materials could be a helpful tool in classrooms in Kuwait. Such a tool that can save time for teachers, offer students a new technique to develop their vocabulary, and perhaps establish a new trend towards vocabulary learning.

The great combination of sound, image, and subtitle (text) in videos suggests that we (teachers) could use them as a tool to teach vocabulary in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), classrooms. This combination can offer students a new way of acquiring vocabulary, through listening (pronunciation), reading (subtitles), and using the new vocabulary in meaningful sentences and real life situations. In this paper, I intend to examine how subtitled videos might help students in intermediate schools in Kuwait to develop their acquisition of vocabulary. First, I will give a general overview of Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition. I will then discuss vocabulary learning. Finally, I will focus on the use of videos and subtitles in classrooms.

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- Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition (SLVA)

Second Language Acquisition theory (SLA) proposes that through ample comprehensible input, learners will unconsciously acquire a considerable amount of language, based on how the comprehensible input is suitably delivered, in order to acquire a second language. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis is part of second language acquisition theory. It argues that through meaningful conversations, L2 learners can naturally acquire a language. Subtitled videos can offer learners this incidental 'natural' acquisition, which is context based. The Input Hypothesis distinguishes between how second language acquisition can be incidental and natural, while learning is more formal and depends on instruction, language and grammar (Krashen, 1989). Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition (SLVA) is considered to be an integral part of the language. It is an important component of learning a foreign language. SLVA can be achieved in two main ways, direct learning of vocabulary (memorization), and indirect learning (context). Teachers are encouraged to balance the two ways of teaching vocabulary in L2 classrooms. However, many teachers try to use the implicit (incidental) acquisition of vocabulary instead of explicitly teaching them (Krashen, 1983). With previous SLVA research, there are still gaps that can cause concern. The lack of a theory and the theory of how vocabulary is acquired is one of SLVA gaps. Also, there may be concern about the limited space that been given to vocabulary learning in English as a L2. A good example is the books being used, which show how the SLVA community is neglecting the importance of SLVA, compared to other skills in language learning. However, many new books have started to pay more attention to learning vocabulary and the best input model to be used.

"Input in various modalities is now being used in language teaching because multiple modalities are believed to improve language acquisition" (Sydorenko, 2010: p.50). Due to the increased use of multimedia materials in language learning, teachers and educators often express their interest towards modality of input. In addition to the use of multimedia which allows learners to have exposure to target culture, through authentic input, and motivates them by using a different learning style. Subtitled videos are one example of using multimedia as an input for learning vocabulary.

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The early experimental studies of subtitled videos focused on the significant effects on reading and listening comprehension (Garza, 1991). In previous studies, researchers focused more on in language learning different areas, and investigated the effects of subtitled videos on the acquisition of vocabulary (Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999; Neuman & Koskinen 1992). With regard to the usefulness of subtitled videos, different researchers were divided between the use of standard subtitles (L2 audio with L1 text), bimodal subtitles (L2 audio with L2 text) or reversed subtitles (L1 audio with L2) text. The opinions of educators, researchers and teachers are still debatable in this area, with regard to whether to use which type, to whom and why. For example, in 1999 Koolstra and Beentjes's study into the effectiveness of the use of standard subtitles in Dutch, showed how well the students in terms of learning vocabulary. The study investigated whether grade four and grade 6 children, in primary schools in Netherlands, would acquire new English vocabulary through watching standard subtitled television programmes (English audio with Dutch text). Two groups were assigned to watch the same programme, the first group with standard subtitles and the second group without subtitles (English audio). The vocabulary scores for the first group (with subtitles) were higher than for the second group (without subtitles). However, Neuman and Koskinen (1992) support the impact of bimodal subtitles in creating a rich language environment, depending on learning incidentally through context. A more recent study (2010) conducted by Yuksel and Tanriverdi in Turkey, examines the effects of using English bimodal subtitles on intermediate-level EFL students' vocabulary acquisition of a video episode examined by vocabulary test. The study focused on the vocabulary acquisition of learners, with reference to them watching a short piece of video recording. The 120 intermediate university-level participants were enrolled in preparatory classes in Turkey. A popular American TV series was used, because it was available in Turkish TV in the 1990s. There were two tests, pre-test and post-test, and students were divided into two groups (with subtitles and without). The results showed that both groups improved from the pre-test to post-test, but that the first group with the subtitles performed better. An important point concluded from the results was that, regardless of subtitles, watching videos helped the development of students' vocabulary acquisition.

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- The Situation in Kuwait

The idea of watching subtitled videos as a pedagogical tool in learning English as a foreign language is widespread in Kuwait among learners and teachers outside classrooms. Television, which is the main source of foreign language programmes, is available in almost every home in Kuwait and many classrooms. In Kuwait, the mainstream TV channels programs are mostly subtitled, unlike other countries (e.g. Turkey, Iran and Russia) where they are dubbed. The mainstream TV channels in Kuwait therefore use subtitles. For example, on channel one (KTV 1) most of the programmes is in the Arabic language (in the Kuwaiti dialect), but when there is a foreign-language (mostly likely English) programme or movie, the standard subtitles will appear on the screen. On the other hand, on channel two (KTV 2), also known among people as the English Channel, most of the programmes (news, movies, series, etc.) are in English, but there are some Arabic movies and Kuwaiti series, where the reversed subtitle will appear on the screen. Both channels are free. There are many different channels with English subtitled videos or no subtitle broadcast in the Middle East via satellite, but the only to watch them is to pay for them. For example, the famous Disney channel offers the viewers in the Middle East the chance to watch cartoons and series with standard subtitles, bimodal subtitles or without subtitles. This feature can also appear on DVDs. The cinema in Kuwait is similar to mainstream TV, depending on the movie's language (Arabic, English or other languages), and whether standard subtitles or reversed subtitles are used.

The learners and teachers in Kuwait live in a situation where subtitles are seen as normal, unlike many other countries where dubbed programs are the norm. Watching English programmes (TV, DVDs and cinemas) without subtitles is unusual. Living in such an environment can be very useful in language learning classrooms. Using a subtitled video in a classroom will not be a new experience for learners, even beginners. Although subtitled video technology appeared more than twenty years ago, unfortunately it never became wide spread in classrooms in Kuwait, despite the fact that it helps vocabulary to be acquired through recreational as well as academic means.

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Teachers in intermediate schools in Kuwait use cassettes and tapes for listening activities. This is considered to be as an input model in language learning for listening skills development and vocabulary acquisition in L2 classrooms. Listening alone is considered to be a useful means of vocabulary acquisition (Toya, 2004), but Japanese students often find it difficult to acquire vocabulary through listening only (Brown, Waring & Donkaewbua, 2008). Therefore, forms of visual inputs such as images and subtitles can make listening input a more effective tool for vocabulary acquisition. Garza (1991) argues that subtitles help to develop listening skills and vocabulary learning. This combination (visual, audio and text) in videos can be used to improve both skills in students' L2. On the other hand, it can be hypothesized that watching videos with subtitles might hinder students' listening skills development, as they may not pay attention to audio while watching subtitled videos. This is due to the fact that the working capacity of memory is limited, as suggested in the Cognitive Load Theory CLT, when the learners receive three types of presentations at the same time (visual, audio and text). However, the previous ideas and theories did not stop researchers and educators investigating more in this area and proving that, using three types of stimuli (subtitled videos) is more beneficial for developing listening skills and vocabulary learning than two types (video and audio) or only audio. Learners paying attention to video and subtitles more than audio might depend on the type of input they receive in classrooms. For example, if they receive reading more than listening practice, learners might process subtitles better than audio.

Sydorenko (2010) investigated what input modalities learners attend to when they are watching subtitled videos. The results, as predicted, were that learners paid most attention to subtitles, then to video, then audio. "An interesting finding was that learners preferred to have access to all modalities (video, audio, and subtitles)". In order to get the best results in achieving both skills (listening and vocabulary learning), it was necessary to show the same video twice; once with subtitles and once without. DVDs often offer this feature to learners outside classrooms and are widely spread in Kuwait among students. This provides them with a way to spend their free time and have fun. They like the idea that they can choose to watch a movie or a series with subtitles or without. The number of times they play back the DVDs also

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has an effect. Teachers in Kuwait can benefit from this idea and try to develop it to be used in classrooms for pedagogical purposes. They can have full control of the videos, which can be used with subtitles or without. They can also use the stop and play back functions and choose different parts of a video to concentrate on.

- Vocabulary Learning

My experience as a learner and teacher in Kuwait has revealed that vocabulary learning is a neglected area in language learning. Previous experiments (e.g. Kellogg & Howe, 1971) have shown how foreign words with imagery techniques are learned more easily. Researchers indicated that vocabulary is an important aspect of language, as it affects the four skills of language, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When students have a limited vocabulary, they will probably have difficulties in expressing themselves, whether in L1 or L2. Vocabulary learning is important for students who are learning English as L2 or any foreign Language. With a large amount of vocabulary, students can communicate and express their ideas and thoughts clearly. Thus they acquire a vital tool for communication. Vocabulary learning, in English as L2 or any other language, is one of the first steps in acquiring a language. However, as a teacher once told me and as I tell my students, there is no last step in vocabulary acquisition, even in our first language. Memorization (direct) is one of the main methods that still used by teachers for vocabulary acquisition, despite some students perhaps finding it boring at some stage. The emerging of technologies such as video has offered students a new and interesting way to learn vocabulary, through incidental (indirect) vocabulary acquisition (Yuksel & Tanriverdi, 2009). This can be achieved through listening while watching and reading (brown, Waring & Donkaewbua, 2008). The process by which incidental vocabulary learning works has similarities to how children start to acquire their first language.

In order to ‘know’ a word in English, ESL/EFL learners need to know more than the meaning itself. Knowing the meaning alone (translated) will probably hinder the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. Knowing a word involves understanding how to pronounce, write and spell it. In addition, learners should be the

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able to recognize a word when it is heard or seen, as well as other words which might be used with it and in which situations, with reference to the social consequences. For example, saying 'scram' has a different social consequence in English to saying 'please leave', even if the two words have the same translation in some Arabic dictionaries. In fact they are used in different situations. Learners need to know such facts about vocabulary. Teaching vocabulary through using real life situations could be one of the ways to help learners understand these things, and subtitled videos can offer such real life situations to learners in classrooms.

Students in intermediate schools in Kuwait are required to conduct oral presentations and write compositions in English. In order to do so, students should be able to recognize and recall what they have studied during the course. Zarei (2009) investigated which type of subtitles (standard, bimodal or reversed) are more effective in influencing vocabulary recognition and recall. The participants were 97 BA level students in Imam Khomeini International University in Iran. The results showed that bimodal subtitles are more effective, for both recognition and recall, than the other two types. The conclusion here is that, regardless the types of subtitles, subtitled videos can be used in classrooms to develop L2 learners' vocabulary and recognition. For some learners in Kuwait, vocabulary learning of English as a L2 is simple and easy, because we use some English words in our daily conversations in Kuwaiti dialect, such as pipe, cake, glass, wire, radio, and tyre, even though they could be translated into Arabic. In addition, English is taught as a L2 in schools from grade 1 (age 6), as a primary subject. On the other hand, other learners may find it difficult and challenging to acquire English as a L2, for a range of reasons.

The issues that ESL/EFL learners have with vocabulary learning around the world are different, depending on learners' native language background. For example, many learners in Kuwait, and Middle East, may have issues in differentiating between 'p' and 'b', because in Arabic there is no 'p' sound. Some learners will say 'b' instead of 'p', as in 'bebsi' or 'bolice'. Knowing a word includes knowing how to pronounce it. Listening activities can help learners to differentiate between 'p' and 'b', but subtitled videos can be even more effective, as learners can watch how the air is stopped at the

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lips, and how 'p' is voiceless while 'b' is voiced.

- Videos and Subtitles

Subtitled videos offer the combination of text, pictures and sound, and this have attracted language educators and researchers to explore them more and to experiment with ways of using subtitled videos for developing language skills (Garza, 1991). A number of studies have investigated the effects of subtitles on reading and listening comprehension (e.g. Baltova 1999, Danan, 1992; Garza, 1991), while other studies have examined the influence of subtitles on vocabulary learning (e.g. Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999; Neuman & Koskinen 1992). The multisensory presentation of subtitled videos can help learners in an entertaining way, while watching. The vocabulary can be used in meaningful context, presented in a dialogue, and can involve a great deal of repetition.

The idea behind dual presentation of information via videos has been shown to support the vocabulary acquisition of language learners (Baltova, 1994). L2 literature suggests that videos depicting real life situations can provide a large amount of linguistic, contextual and nonverbal input and support the development of L2 vocabulary (Danan, 1992). In addition, some studies have shown that the choice of whether to use L2 subtitles rather than L1 language subtitles depends on the learners' proficiency level in the target language. This may be because the cognitive resources of the learners can be overloaded as they have to process the three sources (auditory, visual and textual) at the same time. The Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) suggests that the memory working capacity is limited, but by mixing two modes of presentation (auditory and visual), this can be maximized, resulting in increased learning (Mayer, 2001); a theory supported by the dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986).

Nowadays, videos are starting to rival television around the world, with the huge increase in video materials online. Students usually use their computers or laptops to watch videos, but with the emerging of mobile technologies and smart phones, things have changed. Smart phones now offering learners 'accessibility' to videos anywhere

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and anytime. Thus, the number of videos that can be watched and accessed by learners per day is huge and increasing. ESL/EFL learners are likely to make their smart phones their primary device for watching short videos in future. The huge increase of video materials and our ease of accessing them is a trend we cannot ignore. Learners should be encouraged to watch videos in L2, especially with subtitles. Many subtitled videos with pedagogical purposes can be found online and can be accessible for learners and teachers. We can use this accessibility, anywhere and anytime, for pedagogical reasons. For example, there are websites and applications online, where students can place their own videos (or downloaded ones), and place their own translation of a video on the screen as subtitles. This activity, in classroom or at home, can help students to develop their vocabulary, and share it later with the rest of the class.

Broady (1997) argues that the use of videos in the language teaching field can no longer be called a new form of technology, and states that "it provides the most accurate representation of language-in-use." The combination of sound, vision, and text featured together in one video might, however, be considered as a 'new technology' which could help learners in vocabulary learning. Multimedia technology (TV, computers, video cassette recorders (VCR) and interactive multimedia) can bring real life situations into the target language classrooms (Harji, Woods & Alavi, 2010). The Dual Coding-Theory (DCT) suggests that the connection between both systems (imagery and verbal) in presenting new information will only increase learning (Pavio, 1986).

"Today, language learning has turned out to be more available by implementing multimedia with spoken information and full visual context, such as subtitles" (Harji, Woods & Alavi, 2010: p.38). The authors argue that subtitled videos represent words and pictures in oral and visual form which activate the two coding systems in Paivio's (1986) Dual Coding-Theory. As a result, subtitles offer learners multisensory processing, interacting with audio, video and print mechanisms (Harji, Woods & Alavi, 2010).

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Many researchers agree that subtitles include the element of incidental learning. Such learning can help in the acquisition of new vocabulary as learners watch pictures and listen to their description in L2. In this case incidental learning is not entirely 'incidental', as learners must pay some attention to the subtitled videos. It can be flexible, giving learners a chance to guess meanings. Also, it can be contextualised, by giving learners a deeper sense of a word's use and meaning, and subtitled videos can put vocabulary together to make a video memorable.

Subtitles make videos possible to watch (motivation) for intermediate students in Kuwait, when they are studying English (as L2), as students in this age want to understand what they are watching. By using subtitled videos, learners can acquire new vocabulary through reading subtitles, and this can motivate them to read more, as part of language learning. Reading subtitles in classrooms could be a new experience to learners, and if it is positive, it might motivate them to read more to acquire L2. Also, subtitles can help learners with the missing information in listening activities, if they have difficulties in processing auditory components. In addition, subtitles can help learners through learning content-relevant vocabulary, by comparing and contrasting words with examples, as well as focusing on how they set words (terminology) to visual images. Subtitled videos can bridge the gap between reading and listening skills.

For example, learners can read a word and listen to the pronunciation at the same time. There are various other issues which teachers may have when explaining idioms, and in which situations to use them, and this is where subtitled videos offer learners examples of real life situations.

Conclusion

The medium of subtitled videos can play an important role in vocabulary learning and acquisition. Using a subtitled video in classrooms is a very good example of how to use foreign language in EFL classrooms productively (Harji, Woods & Alavi, 2010). Subtitled videos can be a way of helping learners 'know' acquire new words, by

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listening to the pronunciation, reading subtitles (spelling), deciding which situations they should be used in, and what the collocations of this word are. Also, learners will be able to see body language, face expressions, actions, reactions, and gestures, which can make using subtitled videos more effective than listening activities in classrooms.

English subtitled videos can thus contribute considerably to language and vocabulary learning by placing language in a suitable context. In my personal experience as an ESL learner in Kuwait, I have discovered that words are learned well when they are associated with real life situations or authentic videos. Subtitled videos therefore provide a contextualised target language which students can use to develop their vocabulary acquisition.

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