

Authentic Language Exposure Through English-Subtitled TV Series: Enhancing Listening Comprehension among Secondary ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of English-subtitled TV series on the listening comprehension of secondary ESL learners. The research data were collected using an online open-ended survey involving 20 secondary school students from an urban school in Selangor. There were seven thematic analysis applied in this research including subtitle enhanced comprehension of fast speech and slang, multimodal learning and TV as an engaging alternative compared to conventional classroom listening. The research found that learners expressed a clear preference for subtitled TV series, citing their natural speech patterns, authenticity and engaging content. The findings of this study supported the theories such as Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, Paivio's Dual Coding and Krashen's Input Hypothesis. The study highlights potential for integrating subtitled TV series into ESL listening instructions and suggests directions for future research on subtitle formats and pedagogical implementation.

Keywords: TV series, ESL Learners, English Subtitle, Listening Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Listening is a fundamental language skill to develop English as a Second Language (ESL) education. It is an important skill in second language acquisition that should not be overlooked. Mastering this skill is critical for achieving complete language competence. According to Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), listening skills are essential for foreign language learning since receiving linguistic information is essential to learning a new language. Krashen (1982) made a claim that "we learn to be fluent in verbal acquisition not by repetitive talking, but by processing input through listening and reading".

In ESL pedagogy, multimedia is no longer a foreign integration into educational settings for the teachers nor the learners. Texts, images, audio, animations and videos are frequently integrated in enhancing comprehension of the learners. Visual aids and aural stimuli engage learners while offering authentic language exposure that mirrors real-world contexts. Ebrahimi and Bazae (2016) stated, "In foreign language lessons, captioned videos are being used more and more. It perhaps due to the availability of real videos recently, which make it [simple](#) for teachers to caption them if they aren't already". It provides a unique combination of visual narrative and language exposure. With the inclusion of subtitles, students can understand the language used in films better.

Language learners frequently face difficulties including speaking pace and vocabulary levels that exceed their proficiency (Baltova, 1999). It would be very challenging for language learners to comprehend the target language's multimedia content if they have to rely only on what they perceive through listening. Due to this, researchers suggest visual texts, such as conventional subtitles, as a way to overcome these obstacles and improve the pedagogical efficacy. English language learning materials that lack subtitles may cause a negative effect on students' enthusiasm and can hinder their acquisition of listening skills (Zarin, 2013). For a better listening performance, native pronunciations and accents are important with the accompaniment of written forms such as subtitles, as stated by Napikul, Payung & Roongrattanakool (2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML)

The theory of multimedia learning has become well-known as a result of the contributions of researchers. It is designed to enhance cognitive methods for more efficient learning and entails creating mental representation from both words and pictures. Mayer and Moreno (1998) proposed that CTML is grounded on three assumptions:

The dual-channel assumption

Based on Paivio's dual coding theory (Clark & Paivio, 1991 as cited in Mayer & Moreno, 1998) and Baddeley's working memory theory (1986), the dual-channel assumption holds that working memory includes both auditory and visual channels.

The limited capacity assumption

Based on cognitive load theory, the limited capacity assumption states that every working memory subsystem has a finite capacity. (Sweller, 1988, 1994 as cited in Mayer & Moreno, 1998).

The active processing assumption.

According to the active processing assumption, people create meaningful knowledge when they concentrate on relevant data, arrange it into an appropriate conceptual framework, and incorporate it with what they already know (Mayer, 1996; Mayer et al., 1999 as cited in Mayer & Moreno, 1998).

Mayer (2005) explains that when information is processed by the memory, there are five more ways that words and pictures are represented. According to the multimedia learning three memory stores model, each form represents a specific processing stage:

- 1st form: The text and images in the multimedia presentation itself
- 2nd form: The iconic representation (pictures) and acoustic representation (sounds) in sensory memory.
- 3rd form: The visuals and sounds stored in working memory.
- 4th form: Working memory also contains verbal and pictorial models.
- 5th form: Schemas, or prior knowledge that is kept in long-term memory.

Dual-Coding Theory (DCT)

One general theory of cognition that has been directly applied to literacy and language acquisition is the dual-coding theory (DCT) as suggested by Allan Paivio in 1971. According to his thesis, Paivio states that while verbal associations and visual imagery can both be used to help learn new content, learning is most successful when both are combined.

The verbal system uses sequential units called "logogens" to retain linguistic information and units, including text, sound, and even motor experiences like sign language. The visual/nonverbal system interprets visual data and units (such as images, movies, or symbols) and stores them in what is referred to as "imagens". The names "logogen" and "imagen" describe representational units of information, respectively, that generate pre-existing mental words and images and can work unconsciously to enhance cognitive function (Paivio, 2014).

Krashen Input Hypothesis

According to Krashen (1982), language acquisition happens when people are exposed to comprehensible input (CI), highlighting how crucial it is to comprehend messages in order to acquire them. The six stages of listening are as follows: hearing, attending, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding, according to Nunan (2002). These phases follow one another quickly and correspond with the four main ways that people process information. These modalities are linked to four learning styles cited by Felder & Spurlin (2005):

1. Identifying visual-spatial learners
2. Grasp concepts through visualisation.
3. Auditory learners
4. Processes information auditorily.
5. Tactile-kinesthetic learners
6. Benefits from physical touch and demonstrations.
7. Sequential learners
8. Processes information sequentially.

Video is presented by Mayer (2001) as a multimodal tool that simultaneously engages the visual and audio channels. Videos provide a comprehensive learning experience by utilising a variety of presenting types, such as spoken and visual representations. As recommended by Krashen (1982), captions and subtitles should be incorporated into language instruction in order to provide understandable input. To support further, according to Yang and Chang (2014), subtitles reduce anxiety related to different accents and dialects heard when listening by making continuous speech understandable. This demonstrates how beneficial captions are for improving the fluency of listening comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

Population

The target population for this research is ESL learners from secondary schools in Malaysia. The subjects for this study consist of selected Form 3 students. The demographic background was included as to relate to their prior and experience regarding the use of subtitled English TV series.

Sampling size

A sample of 20 Form 3 students answering a survey consisting of open-ended questions, and 3 of the students were conveniently selected for the semi-structured interview.

Sampling technique

The researcher employs a non-probability sampling method to select the participants of the research by using

purposive sampling to obtain 20 Form 3 students who have experience watching at least one (1) English TV series using English subtitles to participate in the survey.

Instruments

In this qualitative study, an open-ended questions survey was conducted and followed by a semi-structured interview for selected participants. Both instruments are considered qualitative data which helped in collecting insights for the research questions respectively. The interviews were conducted individually to collect useful inputs from different perspectives (Chua, 2020). The questions for the survey and interview consisted of self-made questions and adapted questions from prior studies that are relevant to the research. The open-ended surveys were distributed through Google Form. Before conducting the interviews, consent forms were distributed to each participant and were conducted after school hours.

Open-ended questions

For the purpose of data collection, the open-ended questions consist of questions regarding the participants' demographic and eight main questions to answer the first research question which is "How does subtitled English TV series influence secondary ESL learners' listening comprehension?". Most of the questions are adapted from a study by Semilla & Soriano (2017) and the previous research by Ray (2022). The questions are adapted to align with the research question of this study.

Reliability and validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research, the questions for both open-ended survey and semi-interview were adapted from instruments used in previously published research with only minor modifications in terms of wording and the type of media used. According to Ranganathan & Caduff (2023), by using pre-existing questionnaires, researchers are able to save time and resources needed to design a new set which also allows comparability between studies. Although some aspects need to be considered such as the context and purpose of the research where this study has adapted the questions tailored according to the acquired type of media which is English-subtitled TV series. This entails that the questions for both instruments for this study are from reliable sources.

Other than that, peer debriefing was conducted to further strengthen the reliability of the findings. According to Ahmed (2024), peer debriefing is an engagement between colleagues or experts to review the findings and interpretations of the study to minimize researcher bias. For this technique, the researcher, sought feedback from their peers to help validate the responses from the participants and check whether the findings are aligned with the objectives of this study. The process included, sharing of the interview audio and transcriptions and the thematic analysis table for both instruments. This introduced alternative perspectives thereby increasing the objectivity of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings from the open-ended survey questions based on the research question and thematic analysis was conducted to interpret interview responses. Before the thematic findings for RQ1 are discussed, information on the participants' TV viewing behaviours and preferences are surveyed to provide some contextual understanding of their English-subtitled content exposure.

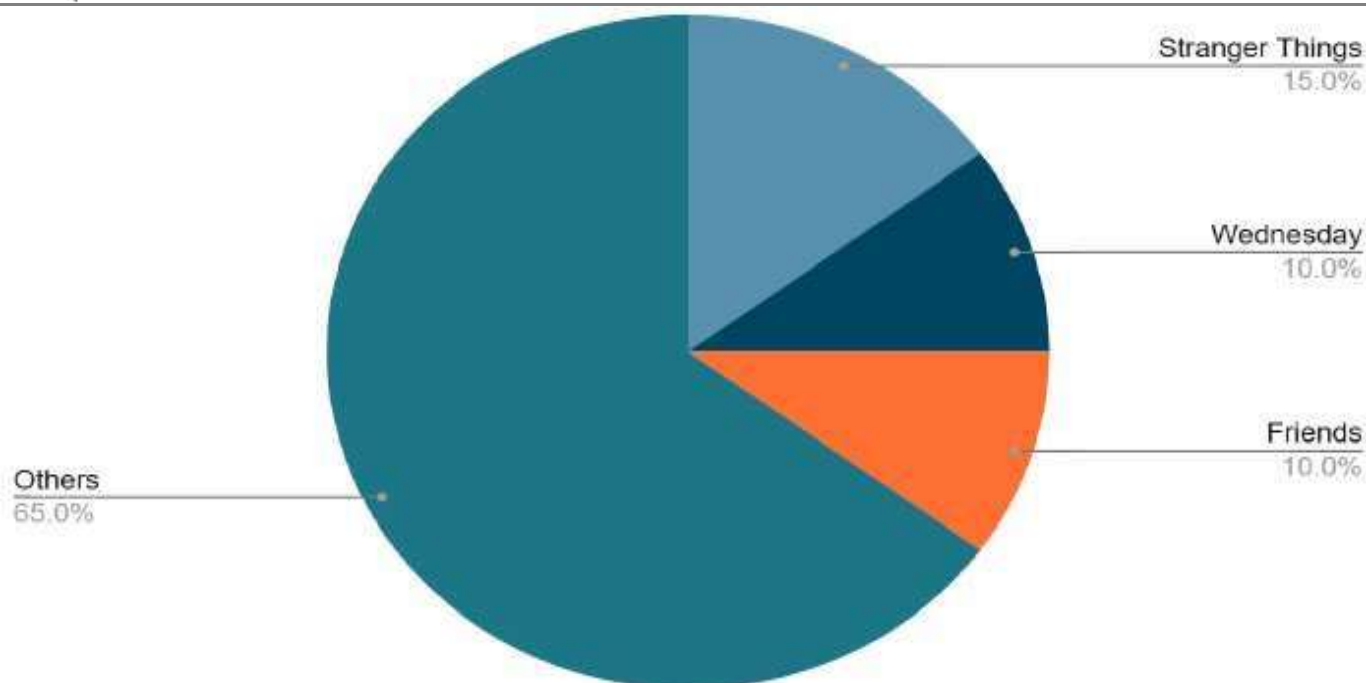


Figure 1 Participants' Preferred English TV Series

Figure 1 shows the most frequently mentioned TV series was Stranger Things ($n = 20$). This series is widely known for featuring fast-paced dialogues, informal expressions, humour and varied accents.

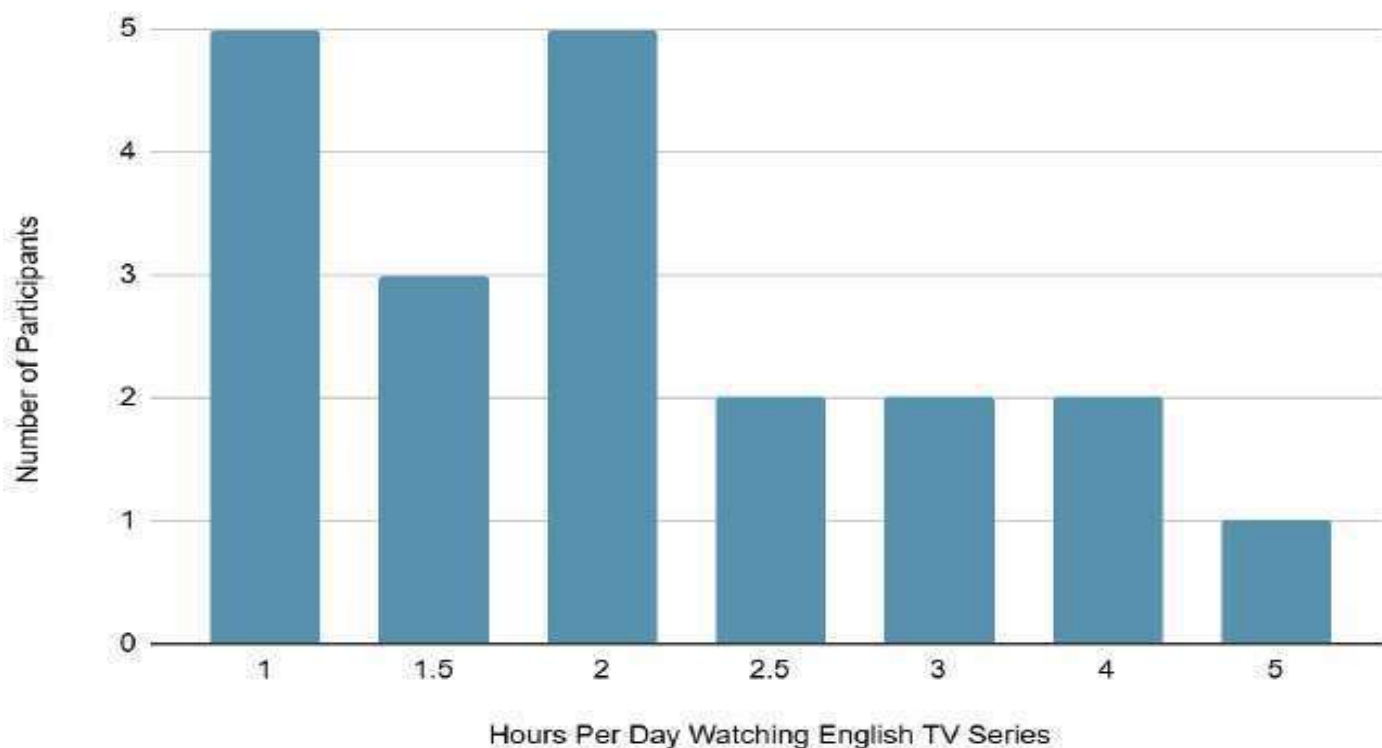


Figure 2 Participants' Viewing Duration Per Day

Figure 11.2 shows that the majority of students watch English TV series for 1 to 2 hours per day, with some noting higher watching time than others (n=20). This level of consistent engagement indicates that subtitled English TV series are not a passive medium but rather a regular part of students' media consumption.

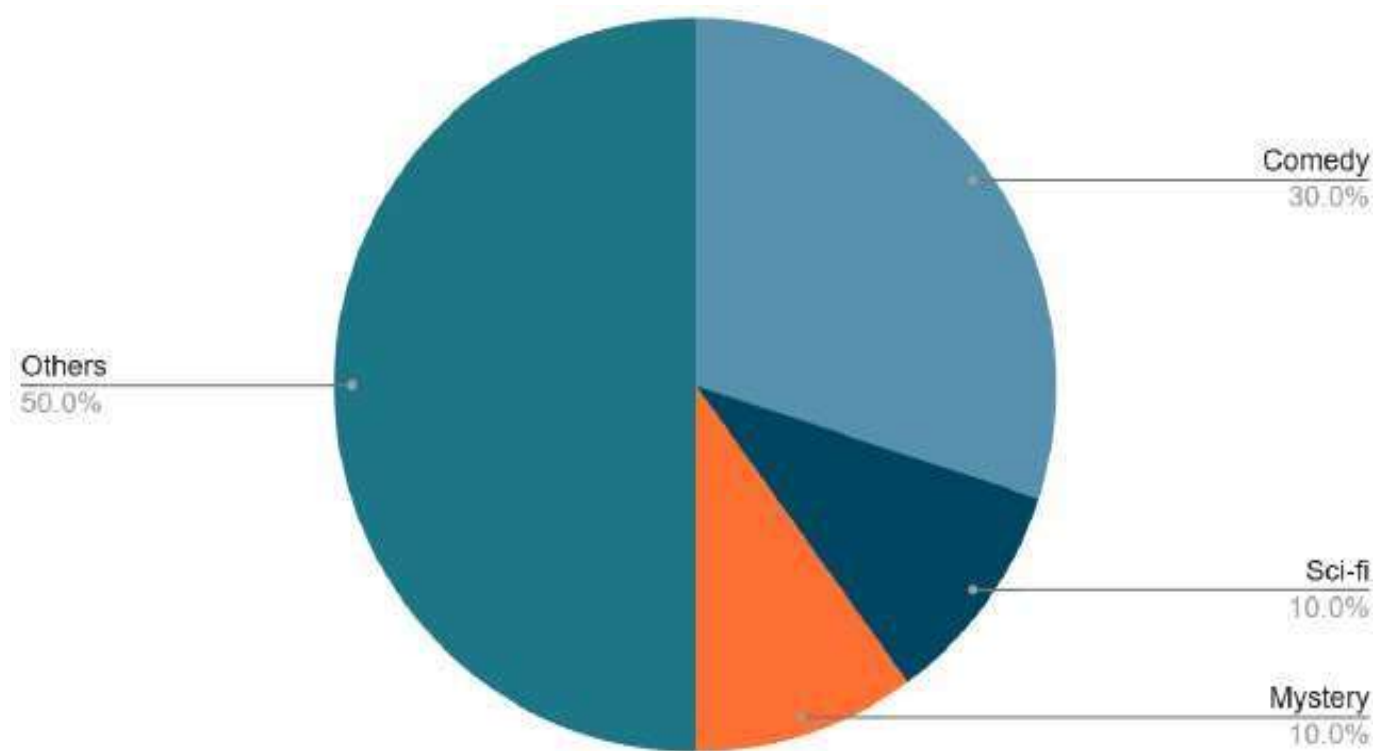


Figure 3 Participants' Preferred Genre of English TV Series

According to Figure 11.3, comedy was the most preferred genre among the other genres listed (n=20). Comedy series often use informal dialogues, idiomatic expressions and humorous tones within the plotline. This genre preference shows that participants are exposed to a variety of spoken English registers and contexts while potentially enhancing their general comprehension and vocabulary range through TV series.

Research Question: How does subtitled English TV series influence secondary ESL learners' listening comprehension?

Table 1 Themes analysed from the open-ended survey responses.

NO.	THEMES
1	Supports Comprehension of Accents, Slang, and Speed.
2	Multimodal Learning and Listening Strategies.
3	Vocabulary and Content Exposure Through Subtitles While Listening.
4	TV Series as a More Effective and Engaging Listening Alternative.

To address the following research question, open-ended survey responses from the 20 participants (referred to as S1 until S20), were examined to explore how learners' perceptions of how subtitles influence their listening comprehension. Inductive thematic analysis was employed and the findings were categorised into four main themes as shown in Table 1.

Table 2 Theme 1: Supports Comprehension of Accents, Slang and Speed

Response	Code	Subtheme	Theme
British accent <i>susah</i> , so need subtitle. [S9]	Subtitles help with British accent comprehension	Accent Decoding	Supports Comprehension of Accents, Slang and Speed
Yes, <i>saya belajar banyak</i> slang. [S3]	Subtitles expose learners to informal expressions/slang	Informal Speech & Slang	
To understand when they talk fast. [S2]	Subtitles support comprehension of fast paced speech.	Fast Speech Decoding	
<i>Kadang tak tahu apa dia cakap</i> . [S14]	Subtitles help decode unclear or unfamiliar phrases.	Unclear/ Mumbled Speech	

Subtitles were commonly described as a tool for helping participants manage difficult aspects of spoken English such as informal expressions, fast-paced dialogues and particular accents. These aspects may appear as challenges towards understanding authentic media like English TV series.

These responses collectively point to a perception that subtitles are not just passive text, but an active listening aid that helps learners decode complex oral features such as accents, idioms, and speech speed which are common in real-world English but challenging for ESL learners. The use of subtitles in English TV series bridges this gap, offering real-time, supportive scaffolding that enhances the listening experience.

Table.3 Theme 2: Multimodal Learning and Listening Strategies

Response	Code	Subtheme	Theme
I read and listen together [S11]	Subtitles support simultaneous reading and listening.	Dual-Channel Processing	Multimodal Learning and Listening Strategies
The subtitle is the one that I'm reading so that I can match the sound. [S7]	Subtitles help align audio and written input.	Audio-Text Mapping	
To help me read fast. [S16]	Subtitles improve reading fluency while listening.	Listening Supports Reading Strategy	
I can guess what they say next. [S2]	Subtitles help with predicting spoken language.	Listening Prediction Strategy	

Learners' responses suggest subtitles as part of a multimodal learning tool that helps reinforce listening through reading and visual cues. This integration of modalities (hearing, reading, and sometimes even visual scene context), were commonly described as enhancing overall comprehension and language patterns.

This demonstrates that participants do not view subtitles as mere aids to understanding but rather, they consciously use them to train their ears, improve focus, monitor accuracy, and practice active listening. This suggests a growing metacognitive awareness among learners of how to use subtitles as part of a multimodal language learning strategy, where both reading and listening work together to improve comprehension and skill development.

Table 4 Theme 3: Vocabulary and Content Exposure Through Subtitles While Listening

Response	Code	Subtheme	Theme
I learn new words. [S1]	Subtitles expose learners to new vocabulary during listening	Vocabulary Gain via Listening	Vocabulary and Content Exposure Through Subtitles While Listening
Listening and vocab improved. [S14]	Subtitles improve both vocabulary and listening skills together	Dual Learning (Vocab and Listening)	
Untuk tahu maksud word susah. [S10]	Subtitles improve contextual understanding	Enhances Contextual Listening	
To learn medical words. [S19]	Subtitles help with domain-specific vocabulary acquisition	Subject-Specific Vocabulary Learning	

Subtitled English TV series were consistently viewed by learners as a rich source of vocabulary exposure and acquisition, contributing directly to their listening comprehension. Learners frequently indicated that subtitles helped them identify, recognize, and retain new words especially those commonly used in spoken English during their viewing experience.

Overall, the learners' responses point to a strong perception that subtitles not only aid in decoding speech but also enrich the learning of vocabulary during the listening process. Subtitles serve as both a guide and a reinforcer, helping students connect spoken English with visual input and real-world usage, thereby enhancing their comprehension and linguistic repertoire.

Table 5 Theme 4: TV Series as a More Effective and Engaging Listening Alternative

Response	Code	Subtheme	Theme
It's fun compared to class listening. [S1]	TV series offer more enjoyable listening than classroom audio	Learning Enjoyment	TV Series as a More Effective and Engaging Listening Alternative
TV series tunjuk English used daily. [S14]	TV series show real, practical English in context	Authenticity in Listening	
Class punya listening short. TV boleh ulang. [S16]	TV shows allow for repeated listening unlike class	Repetitive and Immersive Learning	
TV series more real than class activity. [S3]	TV shows reflect authentic communication unlike school tasks	Realism in Language Exposure	
More useful than one-time listening practice. [S13]	TV shows offer repeated, consistent listening opportunities	Repetitive and Immersive Learning	
TV series tak stress, learning pun masuk. [S12]	TV series lower anxiety and support meaningful learning	Low-Anxiety Learning	

A recurring perception among students was that English TV series, particularly with subtitles, offered a more engaging, relatable, and effective platform for improving listening comprehension than traditional classroom methods. Learners commonly highlighted the appeal of TV series as a less stressful and more natural way to encounter real spoken English.

Therefore, the data reflects a strong perception among learners that subtitled English TV series provide a more

engaging, flexible, and authentic way to improve listening comprehension by blending enjoyment with examples to real-world language use in a way that traditional classroom instruction often cannot match.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how English-subtitled TV series influence secondary school ESL learners' listening comprehension and their perceptions of subtitle use. The findings revealed that subtitles supported learners in understanding fast and unclear speech while maintaining listening focus and improving their listening skills gradually. Subtitles also helped learners comprehend slang, unfamiliar accents and vocabulary by aligning it with written and spoken input. Thus, making listening a more accessible task. Learners viewed English-subtitled TV series as a more engaging and effective alternative to traditional classroom materials. This type of exposure to real-life language usage is much appreciated and it helps by boosting motivation, reducing anxiety and providing cognitive support during listening. Overall, subtitles were seen as a valuable tool that enhanced comprehension and contributed positively to their language learning development.

Research Question: How does subtitled English TV series influence secondary ESL learners' listening comprehension?

Theme 1: Supports Comprehension of Accents, Slang and Speed

The findings of this study also suggest that subtitles help decode fast speech, informal expressions and unfamiliar accents which aligns well with Krashen Input Hypothesis (1982), as stated by one learner who noted that subtitles help understanding of fast-paced speeches. This emphasizes that comprehensible input is significant in language acquisition. Subtitled TV series help in contextualizing language exposure which makes rapid and unfamiliar accents in speech more accessible especially for those who struggle with native accents such as the British accents. This allows learners to digest and process real-time spoken features that they would otherwise miss without the help of subtitles. This supports Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, where comprehension and understanding improves when learners focus on the specific linguistic features. This is because the presence of subtitles draws learners' conscious attention to the language forms such as word choice, new slangs and accents and pronunciation which is essential in acting as an incidental learning process or internalising new input.

This aligns with the findings of studies by Hayati and Mohamadi (2011) and Napikul et al. (2018) where all of them similarly showed that subtitles enabled better listening comprehension. Specifically, regional accents and speech speed according to the findings from this study. Subtitles also reduces ambiguity in informal speeches where learners' responses suggest exposure towards new expressions like slang through repeated watching. This interpretation offers subtitles to act as a bridge between learner comprehension and authentic input that proves its function in decoding fast speech, informal expressions and unfamiliar accents. The current findings also suggest that subtitles enabled them to understand spoken input more clearly and process unfamiliar or rapid speech more confidently.

Theme 2: Multimodal Learning and Listening Strategies.

As suggested, subtitles also support simultaneous reading and listening which aligns with the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2005), which states that learning improves when information is presented through both auditory and visual channels. This dual-channel processing is also reinforced by Paivio's Dual-Coding Theory, where verbal (audio) and visual (text) inputs are retrieved and stored together to further enhance understanding and retention. As a textual input, subtitles reinforce the auditory flow and reduce cognitive load which enables learners to focus attention on key spoken elements.

Findings from this study showed that using subtitles to align written and spoken input helps learners match the words and sound when they read it on screen. This also refers to speech prediction which indicates an emerging metacognitive strategy. This reflects what Mayer (2010) described as 'active processing assumption' in CTML, where learners organise and integrate information across modalities. Alabsi (2020) found that students performed better in multimedia environments that allowed both reading and listening. The use of subtitles to predict

upcoming speeches shows strategic and active listening behaviour. This shows how multimodal learning is connected to listening strategies through the use of subtitles.

Theme 3: Vocabulary and Content Exposure Through Subtitles While Listening

In this study, the use of subtitles to support vocabulary learning while listening is strongly supported by Dual-Coding Theory, which emphasises the importance and benefits of pairing visual text with spoken input to enhance memory and language acquisition (Paivio, 1971). Subtitles were noted as to help in understanding difficult words in context such as identifying meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary (refer to Excerpts Table 5, Chapter 4). This is consistent with representational and referential processing in DCT.

This finding is also supported by Rokni and Ataee's (201) study where positive results were shown in vocabulary retrieval. Other than that, Aidinlou and Moradinejad's (2016), reported that subtitles enhanced long-term retention through subtitled media. In a study by Hsien (2015), he similarly found that there are improvements in both listening and vocabulary skills when standard subtitles were used. These outcomes are connected in a way where subtitles are suggested as not only assisting in comprehension but also serve as an input-rich source of information for incidental vocabulary learning, making them highly beneficial for learners with developing lexicons. Which shows that vocabulary and content exposure does occur with the help of subtitles while listening.

Theme 4: TV Series as a More Effective and Engaging Listening Alternative

Findings in this study shows that learner's strong preference for English-subtitled TV series over traditional classroom listening materials reflects the high-motivation, low-anxiety environment described in Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982). This is because subtitled TV series provide authentic, context-rich input that feels more natural and less intimidating. This allows learners to absorb and process the language at their own pace through enjoyment and repetition. The relaxed environment and nature of watching TV series reduces stress and pressure which can often be felt in traditional classroom settings, which allows learners to be more focused on understanding what is learned during the learning process. This is supported by Aloqaili (2014), who found that students were more motivated when exposed to subtitled films, thus, shows how English-subtitled TV series are a more effective and engaging listening alternative.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that subtitled English TV series play a significant role in supporting secondary ESL learners' listening comprehension. Subtitled TV series were viewed as more enjoyable and effective compared to conventional listening materials. Also, subtitles are perceived as a helpful tool to decode fast speech, enriching vocabulary retention and understanding slang and accents. These findings serve as a potential statement where English-subtitled media may act more than as entertainment but also as an effective and engaging language learning alternative and resource. It is hoped that this study contributes to the growing understanding of multimedia-assisted language learning as proven through theories, such as CTML and Paivio's Dual-Coding, and encourages educators to explore more regarding practical applications in the classroom.

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