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AVT Consumption and Success in Foreign Language Acquisition
As Reflected in Academic Achievements of Children and Adolescents
with a Focus on Slow Learners

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Abstract

Does foreign-language acquisition occur through the consumption for leisure purposes of audiovisual material with foreign audio in that same language and interlingual subtitles? Are there certain characteristics of this leisure consumption of foreign-language audiovisual material with interlingual subtitles, which may be conducive to foreign-language acquisition? These are the main questions dealt with in this research paper.

The consumption of audiovisual material with foreign-language audio and interlingual subtitles in the consumers' native language is the common mode of consumption for foreign audiovisual material in Israel and in the world in general (see for example, Markham et al. 2001: 441). Extensive research based on eye-tracking devices has shown that while viewing audiovisual material the reading of subtitles is automatic and inevitable. A recent study has even found that this automatic reading occurs regardless of the language of the subtitles – whether they are in the mother tongue, in the foreign language or even when the audio is in the mother tongue and the subtitles are in the foreign language (Bisson et al. 2012). Therefore when consuming audiovisual material in the common mode, which is foreign audio and native language subtitles, the consumer is exposed to the text in two languages simultaneously.

From the literature review, it becomes evident that different points of departure, from different disciplinary and research directions, lead to very different assumptions as to the efficacy of the consumption of foreign audio-visual material with interlingual subtitles as a tool for acquiring the foreign language:

- Research on the effect of TV consumption on the academic achievements of children and adolescents has generally reached the conclusion that the effect is

negative, i.e. as TV consumption increases, grades drop in all major school subjects (Evans Schmidt et al. 2008);

- Research on L1 acquisition through the consumption of audiovisual material has generally found that such consumption is not conducive and may even be detrimental to L1 acquisition in very young children (Comstock 2007). However, at later stages of acquisition, the consumption of L1 audiovisual material with same-language subtitles may improve literacy (Kothari 2008);
- The use of translation in foreign language learning and teaching (whether the translation is given to the learners or whether they engage in creating it themselves) has until recently been as well as banned by pedagogues and theorists alike. However, newer approaches tend to perceive translation as an inherent element in the natural process of foreign-language acquisition, and therefore translation has been reinstated as an important tool even in formal settings of foreign-language learning.
- Studies of the effect of various modes of AVT on foreign-language acquisition tended at first to attach lesser efficacy to interlingual subtitles as compared to other modes such as SLS and reverse subtitles. However, recent findings show that interlingual subtitles are efficacious in foreign-language acquisition (Bianchi 2007).

The first aim of this study is to re-examine the connection found in the literature between the consumption of foreign-language audiovisual material, specifically when it is consumed with interlingual subtitles, and the acquisition of that foreign language.

The main hypothesis of this study is that there is no correlation between the quantity of AVT consumption, as it occurs in real leisure conditions, and success in foreign-language acquisition. This hypothesis challenges the conclusions of previous research,

which pointed to a connection between the two things. Consumption was measured through a methodology of questionnaires, whereas success in foreign-language acquisition was measured through information on placement of students in ability groups at school and through the grades they achieved within their ability groups.

The second aim of this study is to analyze various characteristics of AVT consumption with English audio and Hebrew subtitles amongst the study population based on subjects' reports regarding habits and choices in foreign-language audiovisual consumption. The study focuses on a comparison between these characteristics as reported by learners successful in foreign-language acquisition and by students who are slow learners (the distinction between successful and slow learners was done as explained in the paragraph above). This data may advance the understanding of ways to better utilize AVT consumption for the purpose of foreign-language acquisition. Ostensibly, this second aim may be perceived as contradicting this study's primary aim, but in fact it is based on the following logic: Even if under current real-life conditions, no correlation can be found between AVT consumption and foreign language acquisition, there is still a possibility that a better understanding of the said consumption may point the way towards new standards (for the audiovisual material itself, for TV programming, for the modes and characteristics of AVT), in such a way as to turn this easily available resource into an efficacious tool for foreign language acquisition.

Some 500 students in Grades 9 and 10 from five regular high schools in four different towns in Israel took part in the study and filled out questionnaires which dealt with English studies, English language acquisition and their habits and choices in the consumption of English audiovisual material.

Subjects' answers to the various questions in the questionnaire were analyzed against their placement in ability groups for English studies at their schools. About two thirds of the subjects were placed by their schools in the high-level Aleph group and the remaining third were placed in the lower-level Bet and Gimmel groups. In order to further understand the data, an additional analysis of subjects' responses to the questionnaire was done against their reported academic achievements as embodied by grades received within their ability groups. This means that the research variables were compared between successful learners and slow learners and also between the higher- and lower-achievers within each of these groups separately.

The main hypothesis of this study has been confirmed: The study found no correlation between the amount of leisure AVT consumption (English audio and Hebrew subtitles) and ability-group placement or academic achievements in English foreign language studies at school. The entire research population reported an average consumption of English audiovisual material with Hebrew subtitles of 2.5 hours daily, or about 17 hours weekly. No significant differences in amount of consumption were found between successful learners and slow learners based on ability group placement or on achievements within their groups.

It was also found that the entire research population considers the consumption of foreign audiovisual material to be one of the most important sources for foreign-language acquisition. However, it was noted that foreign-language learning within a formal setting, i.e. English studies at school, was considered by the subjects to be the main and most influential source in foreign-language acquisition. A logical conclusion from this result is that there is a need to reincorporate (as was done in Israel forty years ago) the use of English language audiovisual material within the formal setting of school English studies. The reason for this is that a positive attitude and a feeling of

learning may be considered desirable outcomes in themselves, even when it turns out that the feeling is not backed by actual achievements or significant progress in acquiring the foreign language. Incorporating an element, which the students report motivates them to learn (audio-visual material), within the setting in which they believe they learn the most (school), may enhance the learning in that setting.

Statistically significant differences were found between the two groups within the research population – successful students and slow learners – regarding consumption choices of audiovisual material with English audio and Hebrew subtitles. While the amount of reported consumption did not vary significantly, the groups were very different in the level of acquaintance with the foreign audiovisual material. Accordingly, successful students also placed higher value on the consumption of foreign audiovisual material for foreign-language acquisition than slow learners. In addition, the preference for certain genres of English audiovisual material with Hebrew subtitles differed between the two groups. For example, while the preferred genre of English audiovisual material with Hebrew subtitles within the entire research population was sitcom for young adults, this preference was weaker amongst slow-learners. Conversely, slow learners had a stronger preference for the genre of teenage programs and movies than did successful learners.

Another finding of this study is that the age when students begin to consume English audiovisual material with Hebrew subtitles varies significantly between the two research groups: slow learners began consuming such material at an older age than did successful learners. This finding may explain some of the differences found in preferences and choices of audiovisual consumption between the two groups, and therefore it requires further investigation into its causes. The finding of a correlation between a young age at the beginning of English-language audiovisual consumption

and success in the acquisition of English, suggests a need to explore ways of making AVT more accessible to younger audiences, in order to enhance success in English language acquisition.

