

Ukrainian EFL Learners' Perception towards the Use of Subtitles to Improve Their Listening Skills: a Case Study

Nataliia Tymoshchuk



Department of Foreign Philology and Translation, Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics of State University of Trade and Economics, Vinnytsia, Ukraine
Corresponding Author: n.tymoshchuk@vtei.edu.ua

Violeta Nechyporenko



Department of Foreign Philology and Translation, Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics of State University of Trade and Economics, Vinnytsia, Ukraine
Email: v.nechyporenko@vtei.edu.ua

Nataliia Havryliuk



Department of Foreign Philology and Translation, Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics of State University of Trade and Economics, Vinnytsia, Ukraine
Email: n.havryliuk@vtei.edu.ua

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Abstract

Watching English videos is a powerful and popular tool for learning English as a foreign language, and teachers and researchers should pay close attention to it. The research paper investigates current EFL learners' attitudes towards using subtitles when watching English audio-visual materials. The authors attempt to answer the following question: What are Ukrainian EFL learners' perceptions of using subtitles to improve their listening skills? The significance of this study is that understanding the learners' preferences and support for subtitles would help find effective teaching practices. We used a quantitative method to collect research data through online tools (Google Forms). The third-year students training in the BA program to become interpreters were under research. The findings suggest that students agreed on the importance of listening skills. Moreover, almost all participants are convinced that watching audio-visual materials with English subtitles improves their English proficiency. An area worth further investigation is the effect of subtitles on listening and reading skills, which is necessary as it would shed more light on using videos with and without subtitles in EFL acquisition.

Keywords: Case study, English as a foreign language, listening skills, subtitles, Ukrainian EFL learners

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Introduction

The researchers argue that “the system of higher education in Ukraine is experiencing some constructive changes since its traditional model does not meet the current needs of society” (Ivanytska, Dovhan, Tymoshchuk, Osaulchyk & Havryliuk, 2021, p. 476). Modern foreign language teaching is closely related to innovative processes in education. Scholars suggest that the implementation of innovative pedagogical technologies and techniques in foreign language classes increases the foreign language proficiency of students, provides the best conditions for gaining listening and reading skills, increases motivation for learning, promotes the personal development of students, and makes the teaching and learning process student-oriented (Zamkova, Tymoshchuk & Havryliuk, 2023). No method is considered to be more effective for teaching and learning EFL (Alzamil, 2022; Zahorodna, Saienko, Tolchieva, Tymoshchuk, Kulinich & Shvets, 2022; Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2021; Rokni & Atae, 2014), but there are varieties of technical materials that should be used (Rokni & Atae, 2014; Tymoshchuk, 2022). Improving the four primary skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) is the critical objective for teachers and learners (Metruk, 2018). Some scholars believe that listening skills are the most important one. Hasan (2000) argues that listening comprehension is the key to language acquisition and improving other skills. Brownell (2016) suggests that listening might be the most vital skill for fostering personal and professional growth, as it significantly affects how effectively individuals work and learn. Korkmaz and Güneşli (2017) maintain that listening comprehension is more important than others as it is the first acquired skill.

According to Metruk (2019), listening comprehension continues to be one of the least-developed abilities of foreign language learners. Holden (2008) highlights that fostering listening proficiency in students has consistently been a challenging aspect of foreign language instruction, mainly due to the complexity of the cognitive processes involved. These interconnected processes must occur almost instantaneously to ensure accurate message interpretation. Thus, students must watch movies and materials containing clear and authentic input. Films with subtitles or captions can promote listening by helping learners associate gestural with spoken language (Faqe, 2020; Richards, 2002). The significance of this study is that understanding the learners' preferences and support for subtitles would help find effective teaching practices.

To our knowledge, there are no studies that have examined Ukrainian EFL learners' attitudes toward English subtitles. This study attempts to fill the gap by investigating the following research questions: 1. What are Ukrainian EFL learners' perceptions of using subtitles to improve their listening skills? 2. What are the viewpoints of Ukrainian EFL learners on the benefits and drawbacks of subtitles? 3. Do they use English films to improve their language skills? 4. What are Ukrainian EFL learners' subtitle preferences?

Literature Review

There has been a growing interest in using English movies to develop the listening skills of EFL learners for the past two decades. Researchers have explored the theoretical and practical aspects of implementing these methods for educational purposes. Many scholars argue that films are profoundly valuable resources for learning English. They are more effective at keeping learners interested than textbooks or educational videos. Furthermore, they help learners to get a clear picture of the content through these visuals. According to Safranji (2015), using films effectively improves listening skills and contributes to a better understanding of English culture. A large-scale Canning-Wilson survey (2000) illustrates students' preference for learning a language through

video. Mekheimer (2011) claims authentic videos represent a valuable approach to whole language learning.

There have been several studies examining using subtitles in foreign language learning. Zanon (2006) investigated the contribution of computer-based subtitling to foreign language learning and concluded that subtitling motivated learners to appreciate the film's vast content that only reaches the audience when dubbed. Hayati and Mohamadi (2011) investigated the effectiveness of using documentaries with and without subtitles. According to their research results, the English subtitles group performed better than the Persian one, which performed substantially higher than the no subtitle group on the listening test. Ghoneam (2015) has examined the effect of feature movies with and without subtitles on Egyptian EFL learners' listening comprehension. Alkhatnai (2010) studied the effectiveness of subtitles in aiding non-native Saudi speakers to understand English, and research results indicated that subtitles improved the learners' listening comprehension. The findings of the Thai scientists (Napikul, Cedar, Roongrattanakool, 2018) study revealed that "Thai subtitles affect tenth-grade students' listening comprehension more than English subtitles and not having any subtitles at all" (p. 104).

Dizon and Thanyawatpokin (2021) researched if there were significant differences in listening comprehension and vocabulary learning between EFL students who watched second-language (L2) videos with first-language (L1) subtitles, L2 captions, and dual subtitles. According to their research data, "the participants who viewed the episode with dual subtitles did significantly better than the other two groups in listening comprehension" (p. 52). Saragih, Matondang, and Purba (2022) have analyzed the correlation between watching films with and without subtitles on students' listening comprehension. The scholars concluded that "watching movie with subtitle is better on students' listening comprehension" (p. 524). Thus, the reviewed studies revealed the positive effect of using authentic visual materials with subtitles on listening comprehension. Movies also help create a learning environment with content-rich contexts and a motivating atmosphere.

Several studies have shown learners' attitudes toward using subtitles to improve their listening skills. According to these researches, students adopt positive attitudes toward using English subtitles and their potentially positive impact (Rokni & Ataee, 2014; Kadem, 2020; Alzamil, 2022). Alzamil (2022) claims that research results "indicate that curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia and around the world should take into consideration that L2 learners link their use of subtitles to improvements in English in general and listening skills in particular" (p. 492).

The scholars claim that "the educational events of the last decade have given impetus to significant changes in the education system in Ukraine" (Zahorodna, Saienko, Tolchieva, Tymoshchuk, Kulinich & Shvets, 2022, p. 78). Research in this field still needs to be improved in Ukraine compared to those conducted in other countries. There have yet to be any previous attempts to investigate the use of subtitling in movies in Ukraine using both Ukrainian and English subtitles. Moreover, no studies have examined Ukrainian EFL learners' attitudes toward using movies with subtitles (Ukrainian, English, or both) to improve their listening skills. The present study aims to address a significant gap in the literature.

Methods

We have used theoretical methods to analyze scientific literature on teaching EFL, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), emergency remote English learning and teaching, and the challenges and benefits of subtitling in movies in Ukraine using both Ukrainian and

English subtitles. We conducted an online survey at Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics of the State University of Trade and Economics (VITE SUTE, Ukraine) in September 2023. We used online tools and techniques to obtain data; we analyzed research data employing computer-aided software; we interpreted the research results using texts and numerical information.

Participants

We selected the study population in a non-probabilistic way. The third-year students training at VITE SUTE to become interpreters in the BA program (Philology, Germanic languages, literature (including translation), first foreign language – English) were under the research. A total of 32 students participated in the interview.

Research Procedures

We have used a student questionnaire to collect quantitative data on the attitudes towards electronic dictionaries, preferences, and the frequency of their implementation. It has been created using Google Forms and administered online in a randomized and equal way to the students of VITE SUTE. We have reviewed the questionnaires of Alzamil (2022), Ghoneam (2015), Aksu-Ataç and Köprülü-Günay (2018). We have used particular criteria relevant to the learner questionnaire for our study. We measured part of the questions using a Likert-scale survey. We had the items related to the learner's agreement, i.e., "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree". We also had items related to the frequency of EFL learners' watching movies and their preferences.

Results

This section presents the findings of the gathered data and the analysis of the results obtained. Many students (34.4%) have mentioned that they watch a movie once a month, and 9.4 % (N=3) said they watch a movie less than once a month. The most significant part, with a total of 20 participants and a percentage of 56.2 % of the population, is watching movies more frequently (once a week, three to five times a week, or every day). For more detailed information, see Figure One.

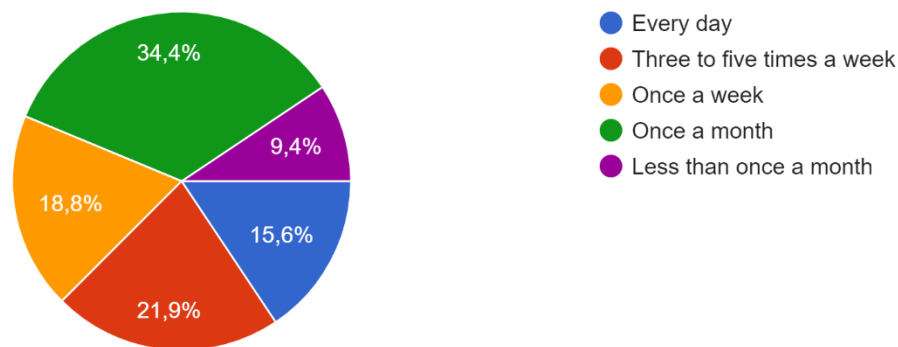


Figure 1. Movie watching frequency

According to Figure Two, the items "Less than once a month" and "Once a month" were the most frequent responses, scoring 37.5 % (N=12) and 25 % (N=8), respectively. While 21.9% (N=7) of the students have been watching an original English movie once a week, 12.5% (N=4)

said they watch original English movies three to five times a week. One respondent (3.1 %) has ticked “Every day”.

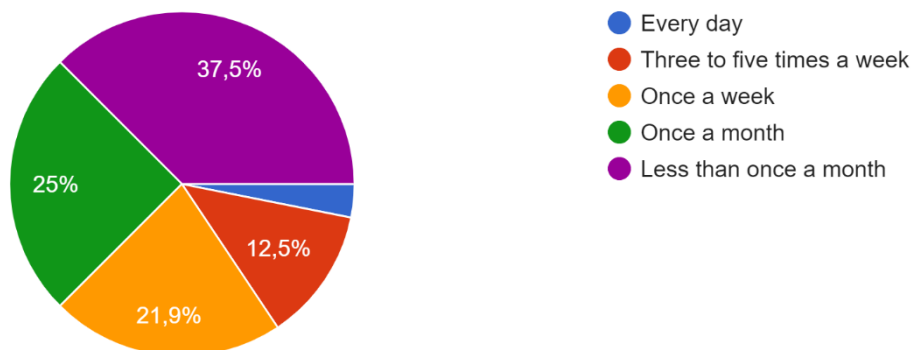


Figure 2. English movie-watching frequency

Figure Three demonstrates the learners' responses to whether they prefer watching films with subtitles. 81.3 % of students who have participated in the questionnaire prefer subtitles while watching movies.

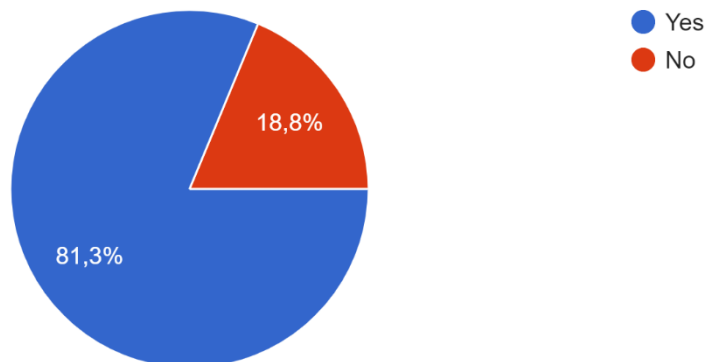


Figure 3. Subtitle preference

Most students (Figure Four) have claimed that they prefer English subtitles.

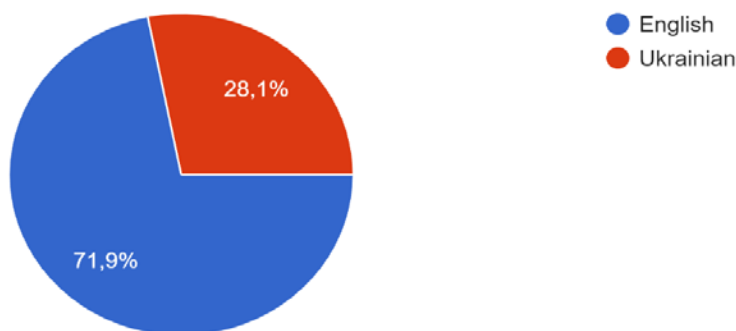


Figure 4. Language of the subtitle

Most students (51.6%) prefer English subtitles to see the equivalents of the words they hear. Many learners (41.9%) also prefer English subtitles to understand the dialogues while watching movies (see Figure 5).

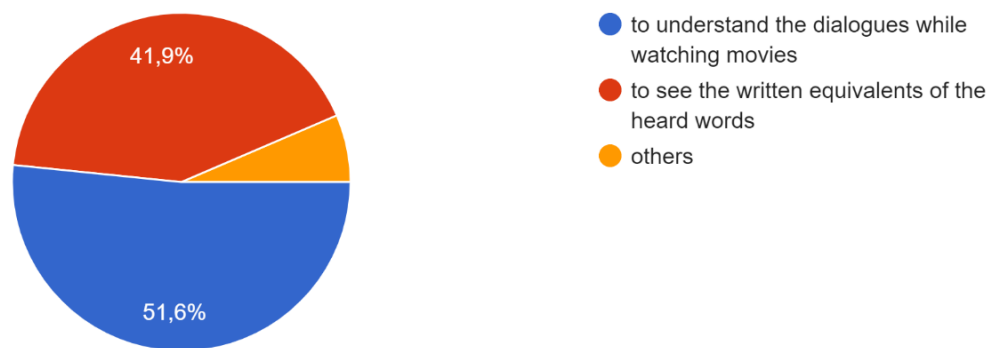


Figure 5. Reason for English subtitle preference

According to Figure Six, 36.7 % of students prefer Ukrainian subtitles to see the Ukrainian equivalents of the words they hear, 20% of learners prefer Ukrainian subtitles in order to understand the dialogues while watching movies, and again 20% of learners prefer Ukrainian subtitles in order to understand the film.

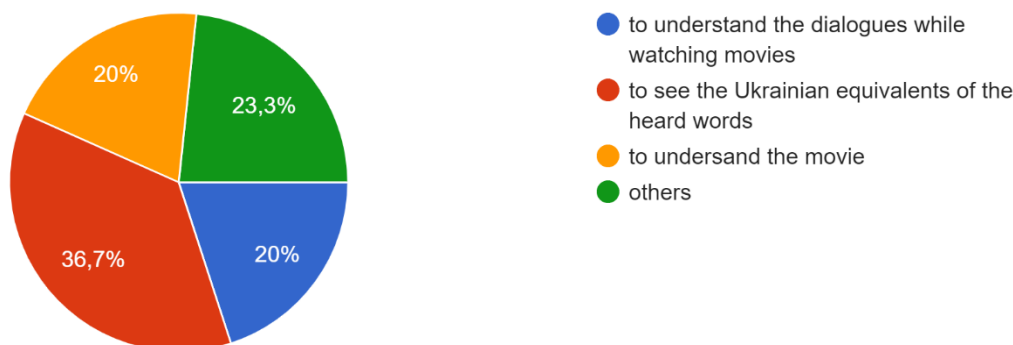


Figure 6. Reason for Ukrainian subtitle preference

According to the research results, most students agree with all statements. Learners agree that original English movies can improve their listening skills more than other English media typically used in class. For more detailed information, see Table 1.

Table 1. Learners' opinions on the effects of movies and subtitles on language learning skills

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. English subtitles help me understand conversation in the movies better	n	0	1	3	19	9
	%	0	3.1	9.4	59.4	28.1
2. English subtitles help me learn correct pronunciation through movies	n	0	0	6	17	9
	%	0	0	18.8	53.1	28.1
3. English subtitles help me understand unfamiliar accents and dialects better	n	0	1	4	17	10
	%	0	3.1	12.5	53.1	31.3
	n	0	1	5	17	9

4. I learn new words by watching movies in the original English language,	%	0	3.1	15.6	53.1	28.1
5. I learn new words by watching English movies with Ukrainian subtitles	n	1	6	8	12	5
	%	3.1	18.8	25	37.5	15.6
6. I find Ukrainian subtitle translations sufficient	n	1	2	14	12	3
	%	3.1	6.3	43.8	37.5	9.4
7. English subtitles help me understand unfamiliar idioms and slang better	n	0	0	7	13	12
	%	0	0	21.9	40.6	37.5
8. Authentic English movies can enhance my listening skills more effectively than other English media commonly used in class.	n	0	2	9	9	12
	%	0	6.3	28.1	28.1	37.5
9. Original English movies are good for teaching listening to students	n	0	0	8	13	11
	%	0	0	25	40.6	34.4
10. Watching English movies can benefit the use of English in everyday life.	n	0	1	3	20	8
	%	0	3.1	9.4	62.5	25

The participants agreed that improving their listening skills is essential. They also expressed positive attitudes toward teachers' help in improving their listening skills (Table 2).

Table 2. Learners' opinions on listening skills

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Improving my listening skills makes me proficient in English	n	0	1	8	13	10
	%	0	3.1	25	40.6	31.3
2. It is essential to improve my listening skills in English	n	0	0	3	11	18
	%	0	0	9.4	34.4	56.3
3. Improving my listening skills is not important	n	11	15	3	1	2
	%	34.4	46.9	9.4	3.1	6.3
4. My teacher should not focus on improving my listening skills	n	8	14	9	0	1
	%	25	43.8	28.1	0	3.1
5. I like my teacher to focus on improving my listening skills	n	0	1	7	17	7
	%	0	3.1	21.9	53.1	21.9

The study intends to investigate learners' opinions on the potential impact of subtitles on learning English. The findings presented in Table 3 show that the participants expressed positive attitudes toward using both English and Ukrainian subtitles to improve their English proficiency. The students need to be more confident about watching audio-visual materials without subtitles.

Table 3. Learners' opinions on the potential impact of subtitles on learning of English

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Watching audio-visual materials with Ukrainian subtitles improves my English	n	1	3	11	12	3
	%	3.1	9.4	34.4	37.5	9.4
Watching audio-visual materials with English subtitles improves my English	n	0	0	4	21	7
	%	0	0	12.5	65.6	21.9

Watching audio-visual materials without subtitles improves my English	n	1	6	13	10	2
	%	3.1	18.8	40.6	31.3	6.3

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that more than 90% of the students agreed on the importance of listening skills. More than 75% of the participants supported the idea that teachers should assist them in enhancing their listening skills. The research findings concur with those of previous studies (Ghoneam, 2015; Metruk, 2018; Metruk, 2019; Alzamil, 2022), emphasizing the significance of enhancing listening skills. Concerning their attitudes to using subtitles, more than 87 % of the participants had positive ones about using English subtitles. In comparison, 37.3% were optimistic about watching audio-visual materials without subtitles, and 46.9% about using Ukrainian subtitles. Research data demonstrate a preference among the participants for watching audio materials with Ukrainian subtitles rather than without subtitles.

The students usually watch various movies once a month. The frequency of watching an authentic English movie is less than once per month. The vast majority of participants subtitles. The majority of people watch movies for language development, and they prefer subtitles. Although there is no significant difference between the preference for English and Ukrainian subtitles, English subtitles are preferred because they want to see the English equivalents of the words they hear to understand the dialogues and see the spellings. Ukrainian subtitles are preferred to understand the meanings of the words they hear. These results coincide with the results obtained in similar research by Aksu-Ataç and Köprülü-Günay (2018) on the role of subtitles in foreign language teaching.

Concerning the relationship between the use of subtitles and improved English proficiency, almost all participants (87.5%) thought that watching audio-visual materials with English subtitles improves their English proficiency. These results coincide with similar research by Alzamil (2022) on Saudi students' attitudes to using subtitles to improve their listening skills. However, 37.6% of learners have not linked using subtitles with language improvement compared with 46.9% of participants who have linked using Ukrainian subtitles to improvement in English. These findings support Ghoneam (2015) and Metruk (2018), who also found that their participants benefited more from using L1 subtitles.

The findings obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire revealed Ukrainian students' positive attitudes to the importance of listening skills, the use of English subtitles, and their potentially positive impact. Several surveys (Alzamil, 2022; Alabsi, 2020; Faqe, 2020; Ghoneam, 2015) have revealed that subtitles improve learners' English proficiency. Thus, viewing audio-visual materials with subtitles can positively impact students' learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Listening is a skill of crucial importance that deserves serious attention from EFL teachers and learners. Foreign language learners can enhance this skill by practicing extensive listening. This study focused on the attitude of Ukrainian learners towards developing their English language skills and the viewpoints of Ukrainian EFL learners on the benefits and drawbacks of subtitles. The research found that learners agreed on the importance of listening skills. Moreover, almost all participants are convinced that watching audio-visual materials with English subtitles improves their English proficiency. Implementation of innovative pedagogical technologies and techniques

in foreign language classes, such as watching movies with subtitles, has increased the foreign language proficiency of students, providing the best conditions for gaining listening skills, increasing motivation for learning, promoting the personal development of students and making the teaching and learning process student-oriented.

One of the limitations of this study lies in employing a small sample size, which can lower the generalizability of the findings. Thus, performing the study on a larger sample size would prove valuable and helpful.

It is a fact that watching authentic English is gaining increasing popularity among English learners in Ukrainian and foreign educational institutions. It profoundly influences users' preferences and ought to be devoted considerable attention by teachers and researchers. To conclude, an area worth further investigation is the effect of subtitles on listening and reading skills, which is necessary as it would shed more light on using videos with and without subtitles in EFL acquisition.

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About the Authors:

Nataliia Tymoshchuk, Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Philology and Translation, VITE SUTE, Vinnytsia, Ukraine. Her research interests include linguistics, e-learning, mind-mapping, flipped classrooms, innovative technologies, and methods of teaching English. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5638-5825>

Violeta Nechyporenko, Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Philology and Translation, VITE SUTE, Vinnytsia, Ukraine. Her research interests include linguistics, psycholinguistics, text linguistics, innovative technologies, and methods of teaching English. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2429-9487>

Nataliia Havryliuk, Ph.D. in Pedagogy, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Philology and Translation, VITE SUTE, Vinnytsia, Ukraine. Her research interests include comparative pedagogy, flipped classrooms, innovative technologies and methods of teaching English, e-learning, and distance learning. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6031-7777>

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