

# Towards a Quantative Assessment of the Benefits of Using DVD Media as an Aid to Instructing Listening Skills to Second Language Learners

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## Towards a Quantative Assessment of the Benefits of Using DVD Media as an Aid to Instructing Listening Skills to Second Language Learners

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### Introduction

DVD media are widely available on the market, presenting a fresh way to approach language learning. As a language student myself, wherever possible I avail myself of the opportunity to use videos and other media as effective sources of native spoken text, but the advent of DVD media, with the enhanced storage and playback potential this present has opened up a variety of new avenues in my personal study and teaching. Although exhaustive research into acquiring a faculty for listening comprehension has been conducted (see Ur (1984)) and Bristol University in the United Kingdom has a well established linguistics course specializing in closed caption technology, particularly for Hellenic students, to date very little published research has been done however to verify the benefits DVD media can bring to language learning, particularly in the area of listening comprehension. This position paper sets out to explore the avenues of research which are being opened by this new media, as well as to question the degree to which a quantative assessment is possible. Although in places anecdotal of necessity, this paper aims to set out the positions necessary for the quantative study which will follow in the near future.

In this paper I will make a distinction between the terms *closed caption* and *subtitled*. *Closed caption* will be used to refer to the fixed lettering at the bottom of the screen on videos and cinema playback. *Subtitled* is used here to refer to the lettering which a user can freely select when viewing moving DVD media. The two terms are often used interchangeably on the internet and in everyday conversation, but the above distinction is not arbitrary. Closed captions, which are immutable, and are built into the respective media, are primarily designed to enable a non-native audience to appreciate dialogue. Subtitles may serve the same function as closed captions, but are primarily designed for the hearing-impaired to follow the dialogue. Strictly speaking, modern DVDs on sale in Japan for a Japanese audience have both closed captions (in Japanese) and subtitles (in English), but due to the fact the closed captions may be turned on and off at will, for convenience here they will be bracketed together as subtitles.

Table 1 (A) shows the four basic setting for a movie DVD together with a simplistic rating of their efficacy in improving listening skills. Table 2 (B) shows the same scheme from the perspective of an English-speaking native-Japanese person's viewpoint. Clearly a Japanese/Japanese setting will not improve a native Japanese person's English listening skills, whereas clearly the best situation for a language learner would be to watch the movie without any subtitles or captions at all. However, there is the matter of the confidence gap between a false beginner and the advanced student which needs to be taken into hand. Even many intermediate students can be described as anxious learners (Ellis et al (1999) p46) and are hesitant about attempting to bridge the listening gap between broken comprehension and fluency. Video DVDs may offer a partial solution using the audio/visual settings described as *useful* in tables 1A and 1B.

Table 1 (A) shows the four basic setting for a movie DVD together with a simplistic rating of their efficacy in improving listening skills and Table 1 (B) the re-interpretation from an English-speaking native-Japanese person's viewpoint

(A)	Subtitle		
		<b>Native</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>tongue</b>	<b>Second</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>tongue</b>
Sound <input type="checkbox"/> dubbing	<b>Native</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>tongue</b>	Not <input type="checkbox"/> useful	Useful
	<b>Second</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>tongue</b>	Useful	Best/ <input type="checkbox"/> Ideal

(B)	Subtitle		
		<b>Japanese</b>	<b>English</b>
Sound <input type="checkbox"/> dubbing	<b>Japanese</b>	Not <input type="checkbox"/> useful	Useful
	<b>English</b>	Useful	Best/ <input type="checkbox"/> Ideal

Tertiary level students in Japan have often described to me their anxiety when studying from an original video text, and so I introduced two groups of students to western movies using DVD technology. As a first step to an exhaustive quantative study, I observed their response to the text and registered their reflections on the experience. Two movies were utilized on the basis of their familiarity to the students as well as the neutrality of the language: *Notting Hill* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. *Notting Hill* has the advantage of being slow-paced and involving actors from a number of continents with mildly localized accents featuring everyday situations and dialogues. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* on the other hand was more of an action adventure, but with the advantage that it was based upon a children's novel, and when transcribed contained no difficult dialogue. The majority of students had either seen or read the stories

beforehand and were familiar with the characters and actors. The DVDs used were Region 2 (Japan) and used subtitles for both languages, the original English and Japanese.

The movies were shown straight through once for the benefit of those students who were unfamiliar with the story, and then individual scenes were isolated and examined. The comprehension skills tested can be divided three ways. Firstly, the ability to pick out by ear specific words in detail from a shortened scene was tested. This was accomplished by asking students to fill in blanks within incomplete sentences. Secondly general information, such as names, plot, actions and concepts was picked up on using a basic questionnaire. Finally the students skill at interpreting body language cues and visual references was looked at, to see whether concentrating on subtitles inhibited the students from following visual clues which would normally aid aural understanding.

It can be assumed that all three skills are essential factors in the acquisition of aural comprehension faculties but by isolating each skill in turn it was assumed that it would be possible to gauge the relative benefits each subtitle arrangement avail. The following notes give an insight into the feelings and recollections of the test subjects.

Japanese voice dubbing and English subtitles was the most novel of the three configurations inspected. The English subtitles in this case are originally written to enable hearing impaired native speakers to follow the dialogue, and are very faithful to the spoken dialogue. The Japanese too, being spoken conveys the meaning very well since intonation and inflexion of the native tongue is immediately understandable. However this configuration was least popular, once the novelty had worn off. Many students were impatient and wanted to hear English.

English voice dubbing and Japanese subtitles was the arrangement they were most familiar with due to the omnipresence of VCRs with closed captions. However this method inhibited close detailed understanding of the grammatical structure, and from time to time the meaning of Japanese subtitles was at variance with the spoken text. The space at the bottom of the screen is limited and so the Japanese text is often heavily edited, or truncated. The students were able to pick up on gestures and body language, since the eye did not need to invest as much time concentrating on the subtitles to glean the meaning of the passage.

English voice dubbing and English subtitles was initially the most difficult for the students, and because they concentrated heavily initially on the subtitles they missed many visual clues to understanding. However after a while they settled into the rhythm of the subtitles and the pace of

their reading caught up. They stopped trying to decipher every word and found their eye was roving around the screen rather than being rigidly tied to the subtext. As noted above, the English subtitles in this case are originally written to enable hearing impaired native speakers to follow the dialogue, and are very faithful to the spoken dialogue, giving the students an authentic written text to follow simultaneously. When the students were given printed English language screenplays to follow, within minutes all but one student had abandoned either the screen or the screenplay, and failed to follow all the questions posed. Those with the printed manuscript prioritized the detail of the dialogue, whereas those watching the screen followed the gist from the snatches of conversation and body language they caught. This situation was clearly unsatisfactory, and only remedied by collecting in the screenplay scripts. When the students adjusted to the technique of using English voice dubbing and English subtitles, an increase in confidence and interest was observable.

After using the English voice dubbing and English subtitles arrangement, many felt confident enough to dive in and grapple the original text. Although the level of comprehension initially dropped, as confidence built up again, and they focused on what they understood rather than what they missed, some claimed this to be the most satisfying experience. Although they have a long way to go before they could watch a movie in the original from the outset without familiarity of the plot and language, many felt that they had achieved more than they had set out to. Subsequently, the students were encouraged to watch their favorite scenes in the original, and to re-enact them as role plays in the classroom in order to demonstrate their understanding of the text.

### **The next step**

These observations will form the basis of a detailed quantative study on a larger sample audience. Using a synthetic test I hope to combine questions about the three broad areas detailed above into one series of queries. Using a broader and more representative sample, the results of the quantative study can be developed into a short teaching programme designed to build confidence as well as ability from scratch. It should be noted that most children's education providers in Japan are using a mixture of bilingual closed captions throughout their visual media, with the effect that there is no continuity within the text: a song sung in English may, or may not have English or Japanese closed captions, but the decision seems to be arbitrary, and due to the permanent nature of captions is out of parental/ supervisory control. Other points worthy of study include the degree to which local dialects influence the suitability of a particular subtitle configuration. Care was chosen to select texts which avoided strong localizations, but in the future it may be valuable to see which subtitle method is best to introduce a movie such as *Trainspotting*, which was set in Scotland with an all Scottish cast with dialect with which many native speakers of English initially struggle. It

should be noted that the DVD edition of *Purely Belter* (renamed *Season Ticket* in the Japanese) has taken advantage of the enhanced features provided by DVD media to introduce the pertinent dialects and turns of phrase unique to the North of England where the plot is situated. Such a facility is not only a valuable learning tool, say to prepare a prospective homestayee to his intended locale, but further enhances the student's enjoyment and motivation to study. This appendix is specifically tailored to the movie, and includes snatches from the actors' original dialogue to reinforce the language points under inspection. Such a facility provides another unique dimension to this area of study, and offers media providers great opportunity to appeal to the language studying public. However, more research clearly needs to be done to maximize the utility of DVD media in language instruction so that the student can obtain the most beneficial learning experience.

## Conclusion

DVD video media have the potential to expedite the acquisition of aural comprehension faculties in second language learners. At the basic level they are easier to use than traditional video resources, having more rewind, review, chapter index and pause controls, as well as the fact the picture quality does not deteriorate after exhaustive viewing over a number of years. Modern DVDs also carry features such as the director's own commentary, actors' interviews and even more recently explanations of local linguistic styles to enhance the viewers' entertainment.

Crucially however the modern learner is able to assume control of the subtitle configuration and deliver the listening experience they require. Avoiding indelible closed captions, the learner is able to utilize the flexibility of the storage medium to create the variety of listening arrangements until they find the experience they are comfortable with. In this way, anxious learners are able to take immediate control of their studies and overcome the intermediate level listening barrier. Used with caution, these media offer us a new opportunity to gain access to original native spoken text, without the inhibitive expense of foreign travel.

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