


Chinese EFL Teachers’ Perceptions of Subtitles’ Effects on English Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition: Subtitles’ Effects on English Capability

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a qualitative study that evaluated Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers’ perceptions of the effects of four different subtitling modes on English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of learners in secondary education. The four types of subtitles refer to no subtitles, Chinese subtitles, English subtitles, and bilingual subtitles in audiovisual materials. The results of the study indicated that interviewees regarded the use of no subtitles as the least effective of the modes for enhancing students’ language proficiency. Chinese subtitles were perceived to assist students with comprehension of content but were less effective at enabling them to recall and memorize English lexis. English subtitles were perceived to aid comprehension of the content to some degree, while also inspiring learners to develop their English vocabulary knowledge. Bilingual subtitles were considered to enhance both students’ English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

KEYWORDS

EFL in China, English Comprehension, Subtitles, Vocabulary Acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have witnessed increasingly innovative pedagogies and approaches in foreign/second language education worldwide. Currently, the effect of subtitles on the proficiency of ESL (English as a Second Language)/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners is a research topic of widespread interest. As the availability of audio-visual materials with subtitles has increased, some research has reported that these are useful and effective instructional resources in language teaching classrooms (Alabsi, 2020; Ebrahimi & Bazae, 2016; Gorjian, 2014) and that they have a positive

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impact on comprehension (Kruger & Steyn, 2014). In particular, it has been suggested that students can understand some feelings and expressions of foreign idioms, proverbs, and slang under different cultural contexts using native language subtitles (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011). It is also believed that learners can develop decoding skills to improve word recognition with the support of subtitles (Black, 2021). However, there is still limited research on some areas, such as the extent to which subtitles can support learners in cultivating productive language abilities (Vanderplank, 2016). In addition, there is a lack of research that analyses teachers' perspectives on the efficacy of subtitles as tools to enhance EFL learners' English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, even in areas such as mainland China, where there are large numbers of such learners. Teachers' perspectives on this are important, as even if some research supports the use of subtitles to enhance language learning, if this view is not shared by teachers then it is unlikely that such findings will translate into any changes in practice. Teachers may also offer suggestions for how subtitles should or should not be used in the classroom, based on their experience, which may be of interest to both practitioners and researchers. With this in mind, research is required that aims to shed light on the current views of teaching practitioners.

To address the above gap in the literature, this study aims to explore Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions on the impact of videos with four subtitling modes (no subtitles, Chinese subtitles, English subtitles, and bilingual subtitles) on the English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of high school students. Implications for using subtitles in foreign language classrooms are also considered.

2. DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

2.1 Subtitles

In previous studies, various terminology is used to describe the different styles of presenting words on a screen. Markham et al. (2001, p. 440) claims that subtitles "refer to on-screen texts in the form of audience native language combined with a second language soundtrack, while captions refer to on-screen texts as a given language same with the language in the soundtrack". However, according to Neves (2008), there is no difference in the definitions of subtitling and captioning, although some believe that the distinction is that captioning is an auxiliary for the deaf and the hearing-impaired, while subtitling is intended for all viewers. It is also noted that Vanderplank (2019) uses the term 'closed captions' to describe subtitles in the same language as audio. Black (2021) uses the terms intralingual and interlingual subtitles, where intralingual subtitles refer to those that are in the same language as the spoken language on the audiovisual material, while interlingual subtitles are intended to provide a translation for the source language of the material. In this study, the term "subtitles" is employed to all forms of on-screen text, including examples given in this paragraph, that are accompanied by audio of the same or similar meaning, either in the same or another language.

2.2 English Comprehension

Regarding the definition of English comprehension, according to Ahmadi (2016, p. 8), listening comprehension is the understanding of "speech at the syntactic, lexical, pragmatic and discourse levels". Karimvand (2011, p. 1268) also mentions that some of the most common elements affecting the comprehension process of English learners involve "familiarity with intercultural difference, language structure, vocabulary accumulation, prior knowledge about the given context or topic, and attitude toward the text". In this study, the term English comprehension is employed to mean the understanding of spoken or written texts at the syntactic, lexical, pragmatic and discourse levels.

2.3 Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary acquisition is considered to be a crucial component of successful language learning. Before proceeding to examine the process of acquiring vocabulary, it is necessary to define what it means to know a word. According to Milton (2009, p. 13), one approach is to "divide word knowledge into

receptive or passive knowledge and productive or active knowledge”. Webb and Nation (2012) argue that knowing a word involves knowledge of the form, meaning, and use of it. Another lens through which to view lexical knowledge is that it consists of two primary dimensions that are breadth and depth (Qian, 1999; cited in Marzban and Hadipour, 2012). More specifically, breadth of vocabulary knowledge refers to vocabulary size, or the number of words for which at least one meaning is known, while the depth of vocabulary knowledge indicates how much detailed knowledge is held about a word, for example knowledge of “pronunciation, spelling, meaning, register, frequency, collocational properties” (Gass et al., 2020; Marzban & Hadipour, 2012; Schmitt, 2014). Vocabulary acquisition is therefore understood to be a complicated and multifaceted process in which learners acquire knowledge about words across a number of dimensions (Brezina & Gablasova, 2015).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Subtitles as a Teaching Support in Foreign Language Education

Subtitles in English may have a positive impact on ESL/EFL students’ English comprehension. It has been suggested that, through the provision of a comprehensible representation of an utterance, subtitles can help to assign meaning to previously unintelligible expressions, to bridge the gap between reading comprehension and aural comprehension (Garza, 1991). In addition, subtitling in the target language can help learners visualize what they are hearing with input beyond their current English proficiency (Danan, 2004). As well as developing learners’ English linguistic knowledge, the subtitles may help with understanding cultural content (Huang & Eskey, 1999; Markham, 1989). Several studies have also found that videos with English subtitles may help intermediate-level English learners develop their listening comprehension skills more than any other mode of subtitling (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Rokni & Atae, 2014).

Additionally, some researchers have asserted that English subtitles can impact on vocabulary acquisition. For instance, by delivering intelligible input in the form of captioned videos, students improved their performance in a word recognition test (Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992). Another study found that learners’ ability to identify key words was significantly improved with the help of English subtitles (Markham, 1999), while a further study noted that the transcripts from subtitling helped learners to process and retain phonological knowledge (Bird & Williams, 2002). Moreover, Yuksel and Tanriverdi (2009) assert that English subtitles support students in learning the meaning of words, as well as their form/spelling. Rosales (2019) also suggests that the acquisition of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge is notably enhanced by watching subtitled materials.

Audio-visual materials with subtitles in learners’ first languages have also been found to exert a positive impact on English language learning. Danan (2004) claims that first language subtitles are beneficial for users of English as an additional language to improve comprehension and process information in depth. Some research also suggests that students can benefit from first language subtitles in terms of strengthening understanding of idioms and developing lexical learning strategies (Napikul et al., 2018; Suetrong, 2015). This is consistent with the assertion made by Pratama et al. (2021) that first language subtitles can be used as a supplementary resource to help students with limited vocabulary knowledge to understand the content of written texts. However, one further study found that students in higher education prefer the target language (i.e. English) subtitles of academic lecture videos (Grgurović & Hegelheimer, 2007). One of the possible reasons is that the availability of first language subtitles for learners might distract learners from the authentic pronunciation, according to Vandergrift (2007).

However, some critics have been skeptical about the sustainability of any improved comprehension skills and vocabulary acquisition resulting from subtitles, for the reason that using subtitles may reduce opportunities to hone listening abilities. Zanón (2006) pointed out that certain participants in their study regarded first language subtitles as a distraction, rather than a beneficial feature of videos. In a

further study, students believed that full English may also serve as a distraction when listening to the English material (Hsu et al., 2013). In this case, a caption filtering approach was promoted to reduce the dependence on full subtitles (Hsu et al., 2014). Metruk (2018) also suggested that neither first language subtitles nor target language subtitles could have a significant effect on improving listening comprehension and reading comprehension.

It has been argued that, by watching English programmes with subtitles, learners are likely to become more familiar with vocabulary and master lexical usage in the corresponding context (Fang et al., 2019). Peters (2019) claims that the use of on-screen texts can promote vocabulary learning by the way of word recognition and meaning recall (Mousavi & Gholami, 2014; Perez et al., 2015). However, other research has indicated that watching with no subtitles or captions is more favorable for vocabulary acquisition, because students are forced to concentrate on the linguistic features of utterances, especially in the aspect of pronunciation characteristics, such as assimilation, elision, and re-syllabification (Field, 2003; Hulstijn, 2003; Vandergrift, 2007; cited in C. K. Hsu et al., 2014). In addition, spelling mistakes and incorrect translations of subtitles in some instances may cause confusion (Suetrong, 2015).

Although much of the research on subtitles has focused on the impact of first language or target language subtitles on second language acquisition, one topic that has received less attention is bilingual subtitles, which are now widely available. A further topic area where there has been limited research is teachers' perceptions on how to use subtitles to facilitate language learning among their students. It is also noteworthy that research about subtitles in a Chinese context has tended to focus on higher education, resulting in a lack of focus on secondary school education. This research attempts to address these gaps in current literature.

3.2 Research Questions

In order to address the gaps mentioned above, this study attempts to evaluate Chinese teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of four different modes of subtitles on English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of Chinese EFL learners in secondary education. The four subtitling modes refer to target language subtitles (English), first language subtitles (Chinese), bilingual subtitles, and no subtitles. The study has the following research questions:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive the four different modes of subtitling to impact on English comprehension?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive the effects of the four different types of subtitles on vocabulary acquisition?

RQ3: Do teachers promote any of these four modes of subtitling to their students?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with five Chinese EFL teachers (named Teachers A, B, C, D and E in this study) who worked in different private educational institutions located in Shanghai and Zhejiang provinces of mainland China. All these participants mainly taught secondary school students. Participants were selected because they were experienced English teachers, and they showed interest in the research topic. Before they agreed to participate in this research, a Participant Information Sheet was given to them to learn more about the project, and signed consent forms were collected before interviews took place.

4.1 Data Collection

This qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews. An English/Chinese bilingual version of an interview protocol was designed, covering teachers' perceptions regarding the effects of various subtitle conditions on English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Five online interviews were

conducted through Microsoft Teams application with a duration of approximately 15-30 minutes per interview. Interviews were conducted in Chinese (the first language of participants), to minimize the potential for any misunderstandings. Interviews were recorded, and the recordings were stored in a secure location with password protection. The protocol for the semi-structured interviews can be found in the appendix.

4.2 Transcription of Data

After completing the work of online interviews, the transcription and translation of interviews were the next key steps in the treatment of the data. Interviewees were conducted using Microsoft Teams (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-teams>) which has the ability to produce transcripts of conversations. All automated transcripts were copied from Microsoft Teams into separate documents. To ensure the validity and confidentiality of transcripts, the recorded videos were reviewed, the correctness of the Chinese transcripts was checked, and personal information was removed from the Chinese texts. Following this, the Youdao Translate Website (<https://fanyi.youdao.com/>) was employed to produce the initial English transcripts. Youdao is a widely used translation tool, and was deemed to produce good translations, while also having adequate security for this task. Finally, language accuracy was checked by manually comparing the English and Chinese texts to ensure that there were no discrepancies, with some adjustments made at this stage.

4.3 Data Analysis

This study employed Thematic Analysis (TA) with the aid of Nvivo 12 (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/support-services/nvivo-downloads>) software to evaluate data. TA is a widely used qualitative analytic approach that involves “identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 79). The process of TA involves three stages, which are data engagement, coding, and theme development. In particular, coding is an essential component for the theme construction, in which the objectiveness and unbiasedness of codes may be of core concern (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

With respect to TA in this study, the analytic work was conducted in NVivo12 software. Once the English transcripts of the five participants’ interviews had been imported into NVivo12, the data was reviewed and initial codes generated. These codes were based on meaningful sections of texts that illustrated teachers’ perceptions regarding subtitles. Coded data was then reviewed, and from this themes and subthemes were identified, defined and named. In the following section, each theme has been illustrated. There were 17 codes in total, all of which related to different aspects of relationships between subtitling types, English comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition. By reviewing and comparing these codes, overarching themes that were of relevance to the research questions were identified.

5. RESULTS

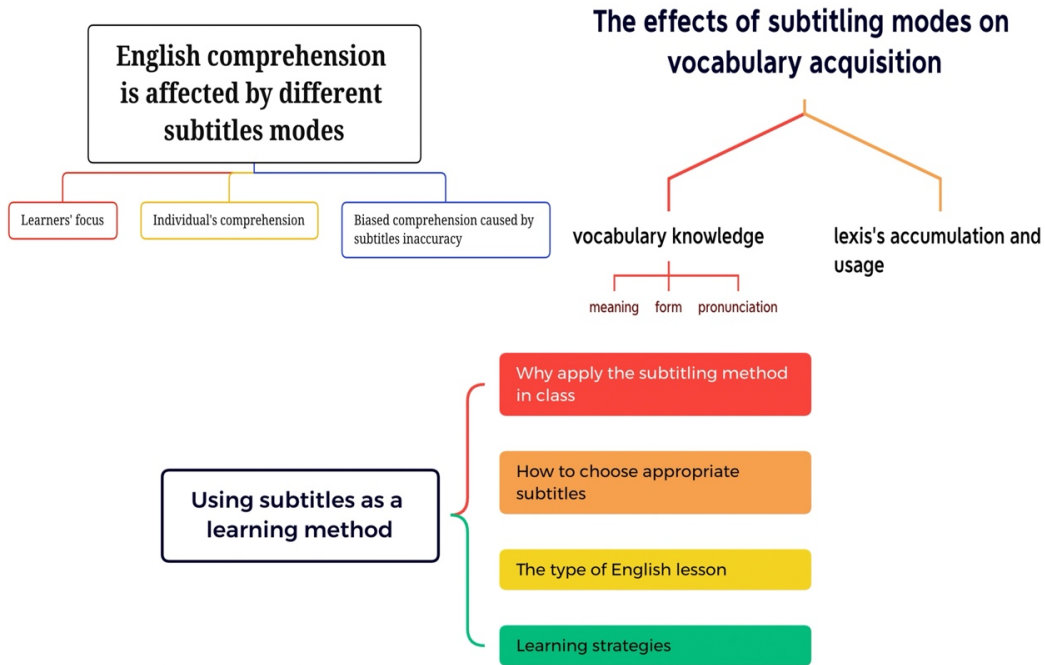
A diagrammatic representation of the themes and subthemes from the thematic analysis is presented in Figure 1. Each of the three main themes is explored in the subsections below.

5.1 Theme 1: English Comprehension is Affected by Different Subtitling Modes

Analysis of the transcripts suggested that participants perceived subtitles to affect students’ comprehension of English audiovisual materials in three different ways. The first way was that learners’ focus on material could be significantly influenced by different types of subtitles.

With respect to the no subtitles mode, Teachers A, B, C, D and E indicated that students with lower English proficiency might easily lose interest in and focus on materials without any subtitles, which may affect their ability to understand the content:

Figure 1. Themes and subthemes



The student would immediately turn off the video and stop listening to it. Or after the first listening the student would say to me, “Teacher, I don’t understand it. You need to translate it for me.” ... The advantage of no subtitles is for students who have a good level of English competence ... based on the prior knowledge, learners can understand at least 70% or 80% of the content and pay more attention to what the characters are saying. (Teacher A)

The mode of no subtitles make students better focus on and exercise listening, but this is only for students with a good English level. (Teacher B)

Similarly, Teachers A and C further pointed out that student focus may transferred to the images and soundtrack of the videos, if they cannot grasp the meaning of the language being used:

If the English material is a clip of an action movie, and the student whose English level is not very good, he/she is likely to focus on some fighting scenes and doesn’t care what it’s about. (Teacher A)

Students just look at the characters’ facial expressions, listen to the background music, and guess what the whole video is possible about based on their own prior knowledge. (Teacher C)

Meanwhile, Teacher D believed that the difficulty level of the material is likely to affect learner’s focus on attempting to understand:

If the material is easy to understand, it is definitely better to do it with the mode of no subtitles English Subtitles. If the material is too difficult for the student to understand, it may be distractive and not very helpful to the learner. (Teacher D)

Additionally, Teacher E perceived that cultural and gender differences may also have an impact on the degree to which learners focus on materials with no subtitles:

Maybe most of students living in China are not exposed to the environment related to English culture. Boys are not interested in learning English. It seems that they are even less interested in the mode of no subtitles. (Teacher E)

On the other hand, all teachers believed that Chinese subtitles would maintain focus and support thorough comprehension of the materials, but felt that student focus may remain on the Chinese subtitles rather than the English audio, which is of limited value from the perspective of developing language ability:

Once students see the Chinese subtitles, they will not listen to the English audio at all. The advantage of Chinese subtitles is that maybe they feel like they understand all the content. (Teacher C)

Students may only focus on the story, because they think the video is interesting, and then ignore the language learning. (Teacher D)

A similar observation was made by Teachers B and C about bilingual subtitles – they indicated that their students had reported to them that when watching English language television series with bilingual subtitles, they only paid attention to the Chinese subtitles:

Many of my students would say, “when I watch American TV series, I totally watch the plot and read Chinese subtitles, and I don’t pay any attention to the English subtitles. (Teacher B)

Students can’t help but stare at Chinese, even if they don’t want to. You will still look at it and do not want to pay attention to English. (Teacher C)

However, Teacher A further indicated that playing the video with bilingual subtitles more times is possible to enable learners to concentrate on developing the comprehension ability based on English on-screen texts, which is also agreed with Teacher E:

I think when a student listens to the material for the first time in bilingual subtitles, it is unlikely that he/she will read the English subtitles, but will definitely read the Chinese subtitles. If you want to use video to let students achieve the purpose of learning English, the teacher needs to show the material more than once. ... After the second and third time, students will focus on the English subtitles, and understand the content through English, because they already have the corresponding Chinese translation in their minds. Then students can automatically match Chinese and English when looking at English subtitles. (Teacher A)

Moreover, Teacher D held the view that bilingual subtitles would facilitate student concentration on comprehension, if the difficulty of the material is above a student’s current level of ability:

If there are many things that students do not understand, then bilingual subtitles will certainly be of great help to attract their focus. (Teacher D)

In addition, all teachers commented that the use of bilingual subtitles may be a useful way to familiarize students with new material.

With regard to English-only subtitles, Teacher A believed that these would not maintain student focus or aid understanding in cases where students have a limited vocabulary. They did not see that the supplementary provision of an unfamiliar word in textual form would be any more beneficial for such students than just listening to the audio:

This is actually also a test of vocabulary, right? If the student's vocabulary storage is really limited, then there is not much difference between English subtitles and no subtitles, because the student can't understand even if it presents English subtitles. (Teacher A)

However, Teachers A, B and D indicated that if learners have an intermediate level of English proficiency, either no subtitles or English subtitles could help them to concentrate more on the English language used in a video, and therefore aid comprehension. Teacher C also agreed that proficient English speakers might benefit from subtitles in English:

For students with good English scores, I recommend full English subtitles. ... You would just play videos with English subtitles and (ask the student to) tell me the Chinese meaning and it would be OK. Then play the video a third time without subtitles, you repeat the important sentences just said. (Teacher C)

On the other hand, it was noted from Teacher E that if students' reading speed was not fast enough to keep up with English subtitles, they might lose the meaning of what is being said when trying to keep up with the subtitles.

The actor may speak at a fast pace in the video. If the students do not pay attention, they may not be able to follow the content. (Teacher E)

The second way in which participants perceived subtitles to affect students' comprehension was through how individual understanding of authentic English materials may be negatively affected by different types of subtitles.

Teacher A claimed that with no subtitles or English subtitles, lower-level students might rely on some visual aids, background music, facial expressions of characters, or other contextual information to guess what was happening or being communicated in a video. Nevertheless, Teacher B argued that higher-level students may be able to achieve a good understanding of the English language being used, without the interference of any Chinese language subtitling:

Like the saying 'there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes', in the face of English subtitles, everyone's understanding may be different, and it's this kind of feeling. (Teacher B)

On the other hand, Teacher E expressed the concern that the mode of no subtitles could cause the hurdle for learners during the process of understanding culturally related languages:

The audiovisual material contains slangs, and students may not understand it without subtitles. (Teacher E)

Regarding the Chinese subtitles, all the teachers indicated that although it provided a translation that allowed students to grasp the basic content, learners' understanding of the English material was limited by reliance on their first language:

The advantage of single Chinese subtitles is that the audience will enjoy it very much, right? Because you can understand it right away. Its disadvantage is also very obvious, that is, unless the student

has a very high initiative of self-learning, he/she is unlikely to play the video again. In fact, what he/she heard was fleeting, and he/she did not look into it at all. (Teacher A)

The Chinese-only subtitles tell you exactly what it means. However, with only Chinese subtitles, the students' English learning effect is the worst in my opinion. (Teacher B)

Students will be affected by Chinese subtitles. Once you see Chinese, you will not listen to the English at all even if you understand English. The advantage of Chinese is that maybe in Chinese you feel like you understand all the content. (Teacher C)

When most children have Chinese subtitles, they will certainly not listen to the English audio. It is more convenient to see them (Chinese texts) directly, so they will have a complete dependence on Chinese subtitles. (Teacher D)

Chinese subtitles may just be better at helping them understand the general meaning directly. (Teacher E)

In particular, it was noted by Teachers C and D that some meanings are not easily translated between languages, or may simply be translated inaccurately, so more subtle aspects of communication may be missed:

A lot of things related to culture, like slangs, are strange to be translated into Chinese, the feeling completely changes. So, it still needs to get the understanding by students themselves, perhaps not as deep as foreigners understand it. (Teacher C)

I do not recommend Chinese subtitles, because some of the Chinese subtitles commonly seen today are not translated accurately. (Teacher D)

In terms of English-only subtitles, Teachers B and C felt that English on-screen texts provided a more accurate comprehension than subtitles in other languages because it lessened the chance of interference from mother tongue or other languages during input:

During my undergraduate study, when my foreign teacher showed me a movie, he put this single English subtitle. If you don't understand, you can also watch subtitles, which is a very good way to learn. (Teacher B)

English subtitles are more consistent with the meaning of the English context, more authentic and more accurate. (Teacher D)

Although using English subtitles is an excellent technique to aid comprehension, Teacher E emphasized the importance of picking movies that are appropriate for your students' levels and aid in their understanding of vocabulary or language usage. Additionally, Teacher A recommended that students who have strong reading comprehension skills and a wide vocabulary watch English subtitled materials to help with comprehension:

If this student has a very good command of vocabulary, but his listening skill is weak, I think English subtitles are a very good choice in this case. For example, his listening is poor, but his reading is excellent, such a student is very suitable for only English subtitles. (Teacher A)

With respect to bilingual subtitles, Teacher D believed students were likely to focus on Chinese words to comprehend the content, while Teacher C stated the efficiency for learners rapidly comprehending the content was notable. However, Teacher A noted that a strength of the bilingual mode could be to provide an appropriate Chinese translation of some English proverbs or colloquial expressions to aid students' understanding of these:

Some proverbs and slangs are not translated literally. If there are bilingual subtitles, it can help students understand what the phrase means immediately. (Teacher A)

Teacher B also indicated that, in their experience, some (presumably higher-level) learners enjoyed examining the bilingual subtitles to see how English had been translated into Chinese, and that this examination may deepen their comprehension, as well as their understanding of English in general:

I found that a lot of students would actually savor the bilingual subtitles. For example, why is this sentence translated this way? Even in the disjunctive question, the actor says no, but the Chinese translation is yes, so the students will think about it. (Teacher B)

The third way in which participants perceived subtitles to affect students' comprehension was through biased English comprehension caused by inaccurate subtitles. Teacher B mentioned that English subtitles sometimes contained errors, which might result in misunderstanding of the content:

For example, when I watched a foreign film, I heard 'Indian Chief', but the English subtitles showed to 'Indian Chef'. The meaning of 'chef' and 'chief' are completely different. (Teacher B)

Teachers B, C and D also perceived that some Chinese subtitles appear strange and difficult for learners to understand when they are translating the meanings of colloquial expressions in English:

The translation of many Chinese subtitles is not particularly perfect or does not perfectly reflect the meaning of the English subtitles, which may give a misleading effect to students. (Teacher B)

It doesn't necessarily translate well with Chinese subtitles. For example, a popular subtitle translation group YYeTs (URL) is quite professional, but it is not so satisfying to express the meaning correctly. (Teacher C)

Because the Chinese subtitles are definitely translated by Chinese people, it may not be authentic in the English context. If the Chinese translation is not accurate, students may have a deviation in understanding of the meaning. (Teacher D)

5.2 Theme 2: The Effects of Different Subtitles Modes on Vocabulary Acquisition

The thematic analysis indicated that participants perceived two effects of subtitles on vocabulary acquisition: one was on the learning of the meaning, form, and pronunciation of vocabulary items; the other was on the sustainable accumulation and usage of lexis.

In terms of teachers' perceptions of how various subtitling modes impact on vocabulary knowledge, all teachers mentioned that it was time-consuming for students to elicit the meanings and forms of vocabulary when there were no subtitles; this was only really possible for higher-level learners. In contrast, the use of Chinese subtitles and bilingual subtitles were considered convenient for students to obtain the meaning of unfamiliar words, and for teachers to further explain the form.

However, Teacher C reported that students might not have enough motivation to learn vocabulary that appears in bilingual subtitles:

With bilingual subtitles, students would be lazy and just copy down the words and meanings, regardless of the part of speech and usage. (Teacher C)

Meanwhile, Teacher B argued that both English subtitles and bilingual subtitles were suitable for vocabulary enhancement, and she particularly indicated the strengths of bilingual subtitles in enhancing the learning of vocabulary:

The advantage of bilingual subtitles may greatly save the translation time for students, and some corresponding Chinese explanations may be more helpful for them to digest English knowledge. (Teacher B)

However, Teachers B and E added that English subtitles could be more beneficial for students to learn the vocabulary in depth, as the Chinese translation could only provide one of the meanings of each vocabulary item:

For example, the word “hide” usually means to “隐藏 yin cang” in Chinese, and then I came to Shanghai to teach a vocabulary class and learned that “hide” also means the strong, thick skin of an animal (“兽皮 shou pi” in Chinese). But we usually use “fur” to express that meaning. Many seemingly simple words have all kinds of meanings that we don’t know. ... With bilingual subtitles, many students may only learn one meaning of ‘hide’ and not understand its other meanings. Students may not even bother to look it up in the dictionary because the Chinese texts in the bilingual subtitles already tell them the meaning. So maybe the single English subtitles would be more helpful. (Teacher B)

Moreover, as mentioned previously, due to the possibility of translation mistakes in the Chinese subtitles, students might not be able to learn an appropriate meaning in any case. It was also noted by Teacher C that English subtitles might be not be useful for learning new vocabulary in general:

If students are serious about learning English, they could copy down some words or phrases. But it takes a lot of time, like if you don’t understand the word, you pause and look it up, and then if you don’t understand the next word, you pause and look it up again. (Teacher C)

With respect to teachers’ perceptions of whether different types of subtitles could be effective on vocabulary accumulation, Teachers A, B and E perceived that it is unlikely any of the subtitle types would help learners achieve the aim of sustainably accumulating and using lexis:

I am pessimistic about using videos to learn the word spelling because I think the video is not helpful for it. It can only help you to remember the meaning of the word and its usage in a specific context. (Teacher A)

Vocabulary takes time to accumulate. In my opinion, vocabulary learning cannot be improved rapidly in a short time by subtitling. (Teacher B)

Students may forget the meaning and usage of the word after a week or a month. (Teacher E)

Teacher C stated that students were unlikely to use the words they observed proficiently in different contexts, while Teacher A claimed that it may be possible for learners to employ bilingual subtitles to learn vocabulary in the short term, but this may not be retained in the longer term:

The specific usage of this word, including its phrase collocation, may require subsequent learning consolidation and practice to fully grasp. (Teacher C)

Teacher D held the similar view that any vocabulary students initially acquire through subtitles needs to then be employed in writing or oral communication to consolidate this knowledge.

5.3 Theme 3: Using Subtitles as a Learning Method

The participants mentioned four different points regarding the use of subtitled materials for learning support. These were why they would promote subtitled materials in an English classroom, how to select the appropriate materials and mode of subtitles, the type of English lesson subtitles could be appropriate for, and learner strategies for studying English using subtitles.

Firstly, with respect to the reasons why teachers promote subtitled materials in class, Teacher B asserted that the use of audiovisual materials with subtitles would attract students' attention:

I think it might make the class atmosphere livelier. (Teacher B)

Teachers D and E believed that some language abilities would be enhanced by using subtitles as part of the learning process, for example listening and speaking skills, discourse comprehension as well as vocabulary knowledge:

In the subtitle mode, it is obvious that learners can directly exercise their listening ability. Then when the students listen more, they will try to practice speaking according to what they hear. Then at this time, you can practice your speaking ability, because the learner will definitely imitate the pronunciation and intonation in the video. (Teacher D)

Students can practice listening skills, then vocabulary skills, and then text comprehension skills. And then there are transitions, like connectives, maybe the logic ability. (Teacher E)

Secondly, Teachers B and C mentioned that choosing appropriate subtitled materials was of great importance. As Teacher A commented, the learning or teaching objectives for a course or class should be taken into account when making this decision, as well as the level of learners' English ability, and also their degree of learning autonomy.

BBC and CNN News are not recommended for middle school or high school. They are a bit too difficult. I recommend BBC Learning English Series which is okay, and then VOA also has something related to education. (Teacher A)

Thirdly, all the participants indicated the types of English lesson that they felt subtitled audiovisual materials would be most appropriate for. Teachers A, B and D preferred to use subtitles in listening and speaking classes, while Teacher B indicated that she wanted to use subtitled materials in all skills-based classes, to make the lessons more interesting. Teacher C also felt that subtitled materials would be useful in vocabulary-focused lessons. Teacher E stated that the application of subtitled audiovisual materials might be employed on listening lessons.

Lastly, participants suggested some strategies for using subtitled materials to learn English. As previously stated, most participants indicated that appropriate subtitled materials needed to be selected as a first priority. A second suggestion offered by all teachers was to use a variety of different types of subtitles to work on English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (e.g. starting with bilingual or Chinese subtitles, and then moving on to English subtitles, and then no subtitles). It was also suggested by Teacher A that learners should try to note down useful language from the subtitles and retell the general idea of the material.

In addition, Teacher B advocated for learners to try to find errors in subtitles:

I think students need an attitude of daring to doubt the authority, because some subtitles may be wrong, and then you can doubt them. Use the subtitles as a reference, but don't assume they're 100% correct. (Teacher B)

6. DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of this study has identified three main themes from the teachers' interview transcripts. The first theme, *the effects of different subtitling modes on English comprehension*, relates to the research question focused on how teachers perceive the four different modes of subtitling to impact on English comprehension. First, the findings indicate a belief among teachers that some subtitle types could interfere with learners' focus on the comprehension of English language content. This echoes the findings of Pratama et al. (2021), who argue that first language subtitles should be a supplementary solution to help students understand the content of written texts when their vocabulary knowledge is too limited to understand in the target language. However, a finding of the current study was also that some teachers are concerned that students' attention may be distracted from the English language content by the first language subtitles, which is an issue mentioned in several other studies (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Hsu et al., 2013; Zanón, 2006). Second, the results of this study indicate that teachers hold concerns about the influence that the presence or absence of subtitles may exert on the way students try to comprehend English language content. For example, a concern was noted that students who cannot read English subtitles fast enough to finish reading before they change may find that the presence of these subtitles interferes with their understanding of content. In addition, learners may misunderstand content in cases when either Chinese or English subtitles are inaccurate. The concern about students not being able to read fast enough is a novel finding, and the concern about subtitle accuracy echoes Suetrong's study (2015), which noted that some spelling mistakes and incorrect translations present in subtitles led viewers to doubt their accuracy.

The second theme regarding vocabulary acquisition, relates to the second research question about how teachers perceive the four different modes of subtitling to impact on vocabulary acquisition. The findings indicate that teachers believed the four subtitling modes could affect two aspects of the process of vocabulary learning: the learning of vocabulary knowledge about the meaning, form, and pronunciation, and the sustainable accumulation and usage of lexis. The research indicated that none of the teachers viewed Chinese subtitles as a useful tool to assist learners in mastering the form, grammar, and usage of lexis. This is in contrast to Black (2021), who argues that first language subtitles can help young learners develop decoding skills, as the subtitles allow them to improve word recognition. The current study also sheds light on the teachers' concern that the use of subtitles may not help learners sustainably accumulate and use vocabulary in the long term.

The third theme, using subtitles as a learning support, relates to the third research question about whether teachers promote any of the four modes of subtitling to their students as an approach to learning. The results shed light on the reasons why the teachers use subtitled materials in their EFL classrooms. The results also identify the abilities teachers believe are facilitated through subtitle use, demonstrate how teachers believe appropriate subtitled materials should be selected, and illustrate

teachers' preferred strategies for adopting subtitled materials to learn English. Generally, the findings suggest that teachers believe learners' English proficiency level needs to be considered to select suitable subtitles to support their learning. This is in line with the Comprehensible Input (i+1) Theory proposed by Krashen (1982), which argues that target language input needs to be slightly beyond the current level of competence of a foreign language learner.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this qualitative study sought to investigate five Chinese EFL teachers' attitudes toward the impact of subtitling modes on English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of students. The findings reveal that teachers perceive different modes of subtitle to have different effects on students' English comprehension. Not using subtitles at all was perceived to have no beneficial impact on supporting understanding of English content or facilitating vocabulary acquisition. Chinese subtitles were generally viewed as helping learners to understand basic meaning, but not seen as useful for vocabulary learning. Concerns were also noted about whether some of the more subtle aspects of English content meaning were translated appropriately into Chinese.

With regard to English subtitles, teachers perceived that these may facilitate their comprehension of the actual English language content directly, while also providing opportunities for student lexical development. However, it was recognized that English subtitles may not be an appropriate choice for lower-level learners. Bilingual subtitles were viewed as being convenient for understanding English content via Chinese translations, while also providing opportunities for vocabulary learning. Across all modes of subtitle, there was a concern that the subtitle text may not be accurate, and that this could lead to misunderstandings. However, some participants also saw such errors as an opportunity for learning, particularly when English and Chinese subtitles can be compared side-by-side in the bilingual mode. In general, this study indicates that when employing subtitled materials as part of an EFL teaching course, the teachers in this study felt that students' English proficiency level and degree of learning autonomy should be taken into account when deciding how to proceed.

This study has shed light on the ways in which Chinese EFL educators believe subtitles can be effectively used with student, and some of these may be of interest to teaching practitioners in Chinese and other EFL contexts. However, the findings also indicate that the teachers in the study are already engaged with subtitles as a teaching tool, and are aware of some of the benefits of subtitles that are reported in academic literature. The interviews that formed part of the study appeared to provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on their practice in this area, which may result in a more intentional approach to using subtitles as part of learning programmes in the future.

Future research in this area could take the approach of examining both teacher and student perspectives on the use of subtitles in EFL contexts, to establish whether teacher perceptions are supported by those students.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this publication declare there is no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

Different Subtitling Modes Effects Research Interview Protocol

1. Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to do an interview with me about your perception with the effects of subtitle types on English comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Before we start, I would like to confirm with you your responses to the statements on the consent form that I emailed you before this interview. An English-Chinese bilingual version of this form is on the table in front of you. Please can you say either “agree” or “disagree” after each of the following four statements from the form?

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated DD/MM/YYYY for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide, and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish. However, it will not be possible for anonymously submitted data to be identified and destroyed.
4. I agree to take part in the above study.

Thanks. I am now going to move on to ask you about your attitudes toward how these four modes of subtitling impact on English comprehension...

2. Main Questions

(Follow up as appropriate, and refer to individual questionnaire answers if available)

1. How do you perceive these four different modes of subtitling to impact on English comprehension?
 - a. Do you think that compared with three other subtitling modes; the no subtitles mode can be helpful for students to focus on the English material?
 - b. Do you think that the Chinese subtitle, English subtitle, or the bilingual subtitle can distract students' concentration on the input of English material, even though their English comprehension improves?
 - c. Do you think that the no subtitles mode can help learners fully understand the English content? What are the benefits and drawback of the no subtitles modes?
 - d. Do you think that the Chinese subtitle or the English subtitle can help learners fully understand the English content? What are the benefits and drawbacks of the Chinese subtitle and the English subtitle respectively?
 - e. Do you think that the bilingual subtitle (Chinese & English) can help learners fully understand the English content? What are the benefits and drawbacks of the bilingual subtitle?
 - f. Which types of subtitling you would prefer to choose to aid learners' English comprehension enhancement? Please give explanations.
2. How do you perceive the effects of four different types of subtitles on vocabulary acquisition?
 - a. Do you think that any of these subtitling modes can benefit the vocabulary size of learners most?
 - b. Do you think that students can grasp the function of the vocabulary (e.g., form, use, related grammar) and correctly use it according to these four different subtitles modes?
 - c. Do you think that which subtitling modes can best help vocabulary acquisition?

3. Do you promote any of these four modes of subtitling to their students?
 - a. Have you adapted any of these subtitling modes as a pedagogical approach to assist your English teaching?
 - b. If yes, how do you apply this approach into the teaching? And what abilities students can practice under this subtitling mode?
 - c. If not, do you want to promote one of subtitling types or make a combination of them used in the teaching?
 - d. Which kind of English classes (listening, speaking, reading, writing) do you prefer to use a subtitling mode? why?
 - e. If your students want to utilize one of the four subtitles' modes to learn English, what advice or what learning strategy will you propose to them?