

Subtitling for EFL Video: Revisiting Research and Production Methods

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This paper reexamines the educational value of subtitled digital videos in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction, drawing upon established theories and recent research. It also aims to support educators seeking to improve the production and utilization of digital videos in their language education contexts. Video's multimodal input supports comprehension and engagement, while subtitles offer additional linguistic scaffolding that enhances learners' ability to notice and process lexical items. Research indicates that interlingual subtitles assist initial comprehension, intralingual subtitles promote vocabulary noticing, and bilingual subtitles can strengthen both comprehension and lexical uptake. The paper also introduces practical methods for creating subtitled instructional videos using freemium, premium, and freeware tools, highlighting trade-offs in cost, ease of use, and customizability. By combining theoretical grounding with practical guidance, this paper aims to support educators' choices in integrating subtitled digital video into contemporary EFL classrooms.

本稿は、既存の理論や近年の研究成果を踏まえ、EFL指導における字幕付きデジタル動画の教育的価値を再検討し、語学教育におけるデジタル動画の制作や活用の改善を目指す教育者を支援することを意図している。動画のマルチモーダル入力は理解と関与を促進する一方、字幕は学習者の語彙項目への気づきと処理能力を高める言語的足場となる。研究によると、L2-L1字幕は初期理解を助け、L2-L2字幕は語彙の気づきを促し、バイリンガル字幕は理解と語彙の習得の両方を強化することが示唆されている。本稿ではまた、フリーミアム、プレミアム、フリーウェアのツールを使用して字幕付き教育動画を作成するための実用的な方法を紹介し、コスト、使いやすさ、カスタマイズ性における利点と制約を整理する。本稿は、理論的基盤と実践的指針を組み合わせることで、字幕付きビデオを現代の EFL 教室に導入する際の教育者の判断を支援することを目的とする。

Digital video has become an increasingly central component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Its multimodal nature combines visual, auditory, and contextual cues, offering distinct comprehension-supporting advantages over traditional text-based or audio-only materials. Additionally, as EFL teaching practices continue to incorporate normalized technology from wider society, the subsequent inclusion of subtitles permits further linguistic assistance. A variety of customisable subtitle types can support comprehension, enhance lexical noticing, and provide learners with additional redundancy that lightens cognitive load and scaffolds understanding. At the same time, the growing availability of automated and user-friendly subtitling tools—in part supported by recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI)—makes it feasible for teachers to create or to further customize and improve their instructional materials, updating them for contemporary language classrooms.

Instructors may consider creating and deploying subtitled video materials in EFL settings because video offers multimodal input that integrates visual, auditory, and contextual cues, supporting comprehension and vocabulary development more effectively than text- or audio-only resources. Research throughout the years confirms that such input approximates real-world communication (Tschirner, 2001) and aligns with learners' existing familiarity with video platforms, thereby reducing cognitive load and friction (Zhang & Zou, 2022). This normalization (Bax, 2011) of digital video technology in both entertainment and education further enables teachers to focus on pedagogical goals rather than training students in the medium itself (Chao & Liu, 2022). Furthermore, videos are often noted for their motivational value and potential to improve learner engagement (Bayon, 2004; Gruba, 2006; Pujadas & Muñoz, 2024; Tschirner, 2001; Zhang & Zou, 2022). They can also provide simple “how-to” explanations for learners unfamiliar with new software or materials, particularly first-year university students. In addition, subtitle support can mitigate foreign language listening anxiety by “stabilising” (Kozma, 1991) the information medium, helping learners to scaffold their viewing without overwhelming them (Gruba, 2006), leading

to greater confidence and persistence (To, 2024). Empirical studies demonstrate that different subtitle formats—such as second-language (L2) captions, first-language (L1) subtitles, or dual subtitles—enhance lexical noticing and comprehension (Bayon, 2004), with dual or L1 options often proving particularly beneficial for vocabulary gains and listening performance (Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2021; Pujadas & Muñoz, 2024). Meta-analytic evidence reinforces these advantages, showing positive effects on listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition across multiple experimental studies (Alotaibi et al., 2023). Overall, by customizing digital videos with different types of subtitles to match learners' proficiency levels and needs, teachers can create successful learning experiences that help sustain motivation (Li, 2022). Indeed, as on-demand video resources, they may be viewed both in the classroom and beyond it, creating a web of useful instructional and experiential resources for the modern language learner.

Thus, this paper briefly reviews and synthesizes the established theoretical background on the use of video and subtitles in language learning, while incorporating recent research on how different subtitle types affect comprehension and vocabulary noticing. Following this, a series of different categories of software that educators can use to create subtitled videos (e.g., freeware, offline-lifetime, and online subscription) to support L2 learning and understanding will be introduced. By doing so, this paper aims to provide EFL educators with a basic understanding of current theory on subtitled L2 digital video and practical guidance on selecting video- and subtitle-editing software, helping them explore new approaches to using digital video in their own classrooms and courses.

Background and Rationale

Video as a Multimodal Learning Resource

Video provides rich multimodal input that supports language comprehension through multiple channels. Previous studies have shown that video integrates visual and aural information in ways that approximate real-world communication (Hill, 1999). Previously, Fawkes (1999) emphasized that video offers a closer representation of linguistic and social reality when compared with audio-only materials or written text; this is reiterated in more recent studies and reviews of the literature (Zhang & Zou, 2022). Several researchers highlight the benefits of nonverbal cues, including facial expressions, gestures, movement, and contextual visuals, that support learners in interpreting tone, register, and meaning (Chao & Liu, 2022; King, 2002; Tschirner, 2001;). These cues provide authentic examples of natural L2 use, offering learners valuable exposure to real

communicative situations. Thus, though there are situations in which instructors may wish to emphasise purely aural linguistic competence (as in training scenarios for logistic workers, and particularly for ship and aircraft operators) in general vocational settings, the expanded use of videoconferencing (e.g., Teams, Zoom, etc) lends much credence to the use of video to promote higher linguistic comprehension and competence.

In addition to its multimodality, video is now a highly normalized (Bax, 2011) technology for both entertainment and educational purposes, with services such as Youtube, Tiktok, and Instagram providing easy access to interesting and informative videos. As such, digital video is extremely cognitively familiar to modern learners, with contemporary research (Chao & Liu, 2022) echoing Alter & Oppenheimer (2009) who suggest that familiarity reduces cognitive friction, making video a relatively effortless medium to process. Because learners already know how to navigate video, instructors can focus their attention on pedagogical goals rather than training learners to interact with the medium itself.

Digital Video as a Learning Technology

The digitalization of video, too, has dramatically increased its pedagogical utility. According to Sherman (2008), digital video is accessible, portable, sharable, editable, and easily stored across devices. Long gone is the previous era of teachers lugging physical media such as VHS tapes or DVDs into the classroom, unlocking a black-curtained TV-in-a-box in the corner and struggling with the settings to make it play. As previously stated by Bax (2011), the widespread incorporation, acceptance, and ease of access to digital video (i.e., normalisation) means that instructors and students alike are both accustomed and able to smoothly deploy and engage with educational videos in media-rich experiences in the classroom. Furthermore, popularised in part due to the Sars-Cov-2 era, the possibility for instructors to share such videos with students via institutional email or Learning Management Systems (LMSs) means that remote, out-of-class learning by video is also rapidly becoming normalised, even expected, as a core part of a course of education.

Another advantage of digital video lies in its “stability.” Kozma (1991) explains that tools such as pause, rewind, slow play, and replay give learners fine-grained control over their interaction with the input. Gruba (2006) coined this as “playing the videotext”, and notes that such stability makes video similar to written text in that learners can revisit specific segments repeatedly to confirm understanding. Such findings are more recently repeated by studies by Dizon & Thanyawatpokin (2021) and Pujadas & Muñoz (2024),

who both demonstrated the practical value of “playing the videotext” in studies in which learners watched episodes on TV and Netflix and showed improved comprehension when they could manage the input through repeated viewing. This user-controlled replayability, far smoother and simpler than having a teacher rewind the tape in a classroom, is especially valuable for listening comprehension development, allowing learners to process challenging stretches of speech at their own pace. Thus, the general technological abilities which digital video is able to utilise are increasingly suited to learner-centered educational utility. On top of this, digital video is able to support individually created subtitles which support understanding and uptake.

Subtitles as Pedagogical Support

Research consistently demonstrates that subtitles—a long-standing staple in video creation and processing—support comprehension, with different types of subtitling doing so in different ways. Williams & Thorne (2000) found that subtitles generally enhance learners’ ability to follow and understand video content. Interlingual (L1) subtitles are particularly helpful for initial comprehension, as they facilitate general understanding of plot and context. Intralingual (L2) subtitles, by contrast, can facilitate lexical noticing by helping learners identify individual words within the overall audio input (Abbas & Rashvand, 2011). They can also provide greater stability in the input (Alotaibi et al., 2023; Mackey, 2002) and act as a “pre-loader” for the audio stream (Gruba, 2006), helping learners decode what they hear. L2 subtitles promote noticing by improving the saliency of individual lexical items. Carroll (2006) and To (2024) both highlight that when written forms coincide with auditory input, learners are better able to segment the speech stream, identify unfamiliar words, and notice previously encountered vocabulary in new contexts. Subtitles transform fleeting auditory signals into visible, stable text, enabling learners to detect patterns in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Repeated research through the years (Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2021; Li, 2022; Montero Perez et al., 2013) have demonstrated that L2 subtitles help scaffold both noticing and comprehension to a higher degree than L1 subtitles, and that these facilitative effects are more noticeable in lower-to-intermediate learners than in advanced learners (Pujadas & Muñoz, 2024).

Subtitles also offer secondary, contextual advantages, by enabling digital video to be viewed silently in public spaces. In contexts such as commuting, particularly common in Japan for university students (Lees, 2015), when combined with said students’ tendency to complete homework and study tasks just prior to hand-in deadlines (Landsberry, 2018) this supports opportunities for engagement, attainment, and learning.

Recent Findings on Subtitles and Comprehension

Though much of the research into the benefits brought by video in general, and subtitled video in particular, has been conducted and established many years ago, more recent research continues to provide nuanced insights into how different types of subtitles support learning. Napikul et al. (2018) found that interlingual subtitles help activate vocabulary comprehension and improve learners’ ability to make connections between known and unknown items. Furthermore, Xu et al. (2022) report that when no subtitles are present, lower-level learners struggle to build cognitive “in-roads” into the target content, often losing engagement due to the difficulty of processing the audio alone. Li & Hennebry-Leung (2022), echoing Bayon’s (2004) previous studies with more up-to-date technology, demonstrate that bilingual subtitles (L1 + L2) promote even higher levels of lexical noticing and vocabulary uptake. Despite this high degree of subtitle information, however, Reynolds et al. (2022), in their large-scale meta-analysis, suggest that among standard one-style subtitle conditions, intralingual L2 subtitles produce the most consistent effects on vocabulary acquisition.

Taken together, these findings suggest that subtitles not only improve comprehension but can also serve as a strategic tool for lexical development. Subtitle design and deployment—be it standard, karaoke-style, interlingual, intralingual, or bilingual—plays a key role in how learners process and acquire language from video.

Software for Subtitling

Due to technological advancements and the normalisation of those advances for general use in wider society, EFL instructors have increasing access to commercial tools that allow them to create and supplement videos with their own subtitle content. These tools can be loosely categorized into three groups: freemium browser-based services, premium video editing software, and freeware subtitling applications. Each category offers distinct advantages in cost, speed, and sophistication.

Freemium Browser-Based Services

Freemium subtitling services, here represented by VEED.io (link in Appendix A) provide fast, automated subtitle generation. Users can upload their video, apply automatic transcription, and edit subtitles through a simple interface. Services of this type are very user friendly and require minimal technical skill. The workflow typically involves only a few steps: creating an account, uploading video, automatically generating subtitles, editing timing and line breaks, and exporting the final video. As such, the

main advantages are speed and ease of use. However, the most useful features, such as exporting without watermarks, high-quality rendering, a wider range of standard and Karaoke subtitle styles, longer video length, and processing time-per-month, all require a paid subscription. Nonetheless, for teachers needing quick turnaround, such as with short instructional videos, these tools are efficient and accessible, and for adding subtitles to a large number of videos, the time these services save may well be worth the money spent.

Premium Video Editing Software

Premium software such as Wondershare Filmora (link in Appendix A) provides comprehensive editing tools suitable for more polished or professional educational materials. Users can create a project, import video and transcripts, add subtitle elements as titles, adjust timing manually, and export the final product in a range of high-quality formats. The exact pricing model varies, particularly as much legacy software (such as the Adobe suite) now require subscriptions, though other options still remain on the market. In Wondershare Filmora, for example, users have the option to buy in-software credits which can be spent on automated transcription and subtitling (like the browser-based services) on a job-to-job basis to further reduce the time required to produce subtitled video. This opt-in pricing system may be attractive to some instructors as it allows a more considered, opt-in usage in contrast to a flat subscription. Other notable advantages of premium software include stability, offline use, and greater customization of fonts, colours, positioning, and effects. These applications are particularly useful for creating well-designed instructional videos that may be reused across semesters. The general drawback is in the initial cost—or the ongoing subscription—though some options on the market allow lifetime access for a one-time fee. There is also the moderate learning curve to become used to the video-editing software itself.

Freeware Subtitling Software

Freeware options maintained by researchers and foreign film enthusiasts such as AegisSub (often paired with AVI Recomp for burn-in subtitling) offer the highest degree of control and customization. These tools allow line-by-line subtitle creation, detailed timing adjustment, style editing, characters-per-second monitoring, and even karaoke-style word-level timing. AegisSub (link in Appendix A) is widely used in communities that require precise subtitle timing, such as fan-group subtitle creation and Karaoke-video production. The advantage of freeware is its power and flexibility at no cost.

However, there is a steep learning curve which is time intensive. These tools are ideal for instructors seeking highly detailed subtitle effects, perhaps for research purposes, or perhaps for actually teaching students media production skills, but they may be less suitable for educators seeking rapid, batch-based video-subtitling solutions.

Synthesis & Conclusion

Discussion

This paper revisits the pedagogical value of subtitled video in EFL learning and instruction. The literature suggests that the multimodal nature of video supports language learning, while subtitles can enhance comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning. Furthermore, different subtitle formats have varying effects on learning outcomes. Intralingual subtitles may be particularly effective because they direct attention to existing lexical items, combining auditory and textual cues. Interlingual subtitles, while useful for providing initial comprehension support, may offer less benefit for detailed lexical noticing compared to intralingual subtitles. Finally, bilingual subtitles appear to combine the strengths of L1 and L2 subtitles and have shown promising effects on vocabulary acquisition though target-word emphasis. Pedagogically, subtitle choice should be aligned with learner proficiency and instructional goals. For lower-level learners, the existing literature suggests that interlingual subtitles reduce cognitive load and maintain engagement. For intermediate and advanced learners, a wide range of studies imply that intralingual subtitles may offer better opportunities for vocabulary development. Teachers may also consider bilingual subtitle formats for targeted vocabulary teaching.

Finally, from a practical standpoint, this paper has outlined three types of subtitling software, each with a representative example specified, which educators may choose to use for their subtitling needs based on their available time, funds, technical skill, and desired output quality. More specifically, freemium tools (such as Veed.io) are ideal for rapid production; premium editors (like Wondershare Filmora) for more granular control and polished content; and freeware (e.g., AegisSub) for no-cost, highly skilled, technical subtitle creation. It is hoped that this review of the literature, combined with an overview of representative video-editing tools based on the author's hands-on experience, may be useful for instructors considering the creation and customization of their own digital video educational materials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, subtitled digital video represents a powerful and accessible resource for EFL instruction. Video's multimodal properties support comprehension and engagement, while subtitles provide linguistic scaffolding that enhances lexical noticing and stabilizes input. Research consistently shows that subtitles in general, though particularly intralingual and bilingual formats, support lexical noticing and vocabulary comprehension, which in turn can lead to better engagement and eventual acquisition. With the widespread availability of video editing and subtitling tools, educators can now integrate subtitled videos into their teaching practice more easily than ever. Whether through rapid freemium services, robust premium editors, or highly technical freeware, teachers can produce customized materials that support learning across proficiency levels. Should subtitled video become more prevalent in educational contexts, future studies may well explore the lexical noticing or long-term retention effects of different subtitle styles, learner preferences, and the interplay between subtitle type and proficiency level. For the moment, however, the contemporary body of literature, combined with practical production methods, strongly supports the integration of subtitled video into EFL classrooms as an effective, engaging, and pedagogically grounded approach.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Resource Links

Here are links to the software mention in this paper for ease of access:

- **VEED.io:**
<https://veed.cello.so/L12OLXs7eFz>
- **Wondershare Filmora:**
https://filmora.wondershare.com/fission/invite?share_code=26H3BTRtpeF&referral_id=435&lang=en-us
- **AegisSub:**
<https://aegisub.org/>
- **AVI ReComp:**
<https://www.videohelp.com/software/AVI-ReComp>

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