
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Improving Students' Listening Comprehension in Foreign Language Classes through Subtitled Videos

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ABSTRACT

This research sets out to investigate the importance of video subtitling in improving foreign language students' listening comprehension. The researchers employed a pre-post test to measure the impact of video subtitling on foreign language learners' listening comprehension achievement at the end of each six units used in the experiment. The study was carried out on five groups representing the five Unlock Cambridge levels taught at Birzeit University in Palestine. These levels include A1, A2, B1, B2 and C. Students are placed in these levels in accordance with their results in the English Placement test. Results of the study clearly show that the remedial (A1) and the intermediate level (A2 and B1) students have significantly improved their listening comprehension after watching the subtitled video. On the other hand, the advanced level (B2) students showed modest progress in their listening comprehension. The last group (C level) students showed almost no enhancement in their listening comprehension skills.

KEYWORDS

Subtitled videos, improvement, listening comprehension, foreign language students`

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1. Introduction

Listening is a difficult skill to teach in an EFL setting. It is just a receptive skill, and learners just listen, and they have no control over the speed of speech (Blyth 2010). This leads to anxiety and stress among EFL learners, thus raising the affective filter and clogging the path of the flow of information and skill development (Krashen 1988).

EFL beginners find listening comprehension difficult because they find themselves entangled between unearthing/guessing the meaning of new and difficult vocabulary and full comprehension of the complete sentence or idea (Goh 2000). Goh (2000, cited in Chen 2005, p. 3) clarifies that ESL learners show the following mechanisms while listening: thinking about the meaning of a part, neglecting the part that follows, forget quickly and easily anything heard, and understand the words but not the intended meaning.

Poor cognitive abilities of students stand as the main reason for this listening problem. The learners are unable to realize that they have the necessary knowledge to build on. According to Van de Pol et al. (2010), this is designated as a scaffolding approach to bridge a cognitive gap in learning. Wenden (1998, p.51) adds that this helps develop their meta-cognitive skills regarding personal knowledge, whereby learners are able to realize their personal weaknesses and strengths. Students have to recognize the demands of the task they are working on, designated by Wenden (1998) as task knowledge.

2. Review of Related Literature

Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, p.161) define subtitling as ‘the process of providing synchronized captions for film and television dialogue’. O’Connell (2007) gives a similar definition to subtitling by describing it as “supplementing the original voice sound track by adding written text on the screen.”

Subtitling has a main function: to facilitate access for foreign viewers to audiovisual products in a foreign language. Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) point out that various viewers around the world, when they follow a film or a subtitled report, very often have an incentive to fully comprehend what is presented and what is said. Thus, subtitling has an important role in the process of learning a foreign language. Therefore, television and, more particularly, subtitled videos allow different languages to be shown on the screen simultaneously.

In addition, subtitles fall into two major categories: interlingual vs intralingual subtitles. As the prefixes suggest, “inter” means two, while “intra” means one. According to Spanakaki (2007), the two terms are different; while interlingual involves two languages, intralingual occurs within the same language. Baker (1998) elaborates on the same point by saying that, “Subtitling can be both intra-lingual when the target language is the same as the source language, and inter-lingual when the target language is different from the source language.” Clearly, Baker (1998) discussed the difference between both terms from a translational point of view. First, an inter-lingual subtitle means the original language of the movie is translated into another language. The viewers or language learners watch and listen to the movie in the original and target language and, at the same time, read the subtitles translated into their own language. Second, intra-lingual subtitle means the original language and the subtitle of the movie are the same.

Subtitling serves very important functions. It is very helpful for learners’, and therefore, it is a teaching tool in the foreign language learning class because when students watch a video with a subtitle, they will feel better and confident simply because they understand words and their meaning. It is also motivating to them. According to Vanderplank (1988, pp. 272/73), subtitles might have a potential value in helping the learning acquisition process by provoking learners with the key to massive quantities of authentic and comprehensible language input.

Many studies in the field of foreign language learning show that subtitling/captioning has positive effects on foreign language learning. These positive results also include subtitles’ positive effects on productive skills like recalling the words entirely and keeping them in the correct context besides communicative performance in specific oral and written communication (Rokni & Ataei, 2014, p. 718). According to Blommaert (2005), subtitles present chunks of language that are in context (both visually and aurally) and can be used to encourage text analysis that takes account of contextual elements.

Many researchers have tested the effects of using subtitled/captioned videos on EFL learners’ speaking and listening comprehension. In his MA thesis, Farouk (2020) studied the importance of using subtitled videos to improve freshman students’ speaking skills at the University of Setif 2. Through the distribution of a questionnaire to teachers and students, the researcher found that teachers and students have positive attitudes about using subtitled videos to improve speaking skills in an EFL setting. Subsequently, the researcher recommended using subtitled videos as an audiovisual aid to improve EFL students’ speaking skills.

Markham (1989) conducted a study on the effects of subtitled videos on the listening skills of beginner, intermediate and advanced ESL students. To this effect, the researcher displayed two videos, one with subtitles while the other without, to students. The topics were unfamiliar to those learners. Then, the researcher used a multiple-choice test to test his hypothesis. He found out that students’ scores in the subtitled video were significantly better than their performance in the video without the subtitles.

Garza (1991) conducted a study on the effect of video segments with sound language captions vs video segments without captions. The results of the data analysis (comprehension test) showed that students scored higher when they saw captioned videos.

Guillory (1999) studied the effects of fully captioned videos, keyword-captioned videos and no caption videos on the listening comprehension of students over the course of one semester. At the end of the semester, all students sat for a listening comprehension test. The results were as follows: the fully captioned video was the best as far as students comprehension scores were concerned, followed by the vocabulary captioned video and then the no caption video.

Huang and Eskey (1999-2000) used 30 intermediate students trained by the Family Album, USA series to test the effects of using subtitling on listening comprehension. The results of the study clearly showed that the captioned learners scored higher than the uncaptioned ones.

Hayati and Mohmedi (2011) found that subtitled videos have positive effects on EFL learners after investigating a group of intermediate Iranian learners.

However, other studies have found that subtitled videos have negative effects on learners' listening comprehension. Taylor (2005) studied the effects of captioning on Spanish learners. The test clearly indicated that the no-captioned group significantly outperformed the captioned group. A possible interpretation, according to the researcher, could be the distraction caused by captions that were simultaneous with the audio track. The research hints that at a lower level, captions could have a negative effect. This was supported by Caimi (2006), who found that students are occupied primarily with reading the captions instead of listening, thus having a negative effect on listening comprehension.

3. Questions of the Study

1. Does video subtitling improve foreign language students' listening comprehension?
2. Is there a correlation between the students' English level and their progress in listening comprehension by watching subtitled videos?

4. Subjects of the Study

The subjects of the study are students at Birzeit University in their first year. These students are classified as follows:

1. A1.1 30 students
2. A2.1 30 students
3. B1.1 30 students
4. B2.1 30 students
5. C 30 students

The English levels proposed by Birzeit University are the following:

1. A1 students who scored between 0—38 out of 100 in the University's English Placement test. This level is **Remedial**
2. A2 students who scored between 39—58 out of 100. This level is **Lower Intermediate**.
3. B1 students who scored between 59—70 out of 100. This level is **Upper Intermediate**.
4. B2 students who scored between 71—85. This level is **Advanced**.
5. C students who scored 100 out of 100. This level is **Superior**.

Students at Birzeit University take the same level over two semesters. For example, students who take the A1.1 level means that they are A1 level in their first semester in the first year. Upon passing this course, they are promoted to A1.2 level.

5. Frame time of the Study

This research was conducted in the scholastic year 2021/2022 during the first semester.

Listening comprehension skills are the skills defined per every level as follows:

1. **A1 level:** tick the information you hear, circle the words you hear, tick the true statement from the video, circle the correct answer, and complete the sentences with numbers or words from the box.
2. **A2 level:** circle the letter of the correct answer or circle the correct answer, discuss the questions, match two columns, write T or F next to the statements, complete each sentence with a word or number from the box, match the sentence halves, answer the questions, complete the sentences with a word from the video, put the sentences in the order you hear them.
3. **B1 level:** number the sentences you hear in order, write T, F or DNS (does not say) next to the statements, circle the letter of the correct answer, complete the summary with the words in the box, complete the sentences with the numbers in the box, circle the words you hear.
4. **B2 level:** write T or F next to the statement, add supporting details for the main ideas, match ideas to the speakers in the video, and complete the notes.
5. **C level:** write a detail for each main idea, write examples for main ideas, write T or F next to the statements, match the speakers to the main point they make, answer the questions, write one or two sentences summary, and complete the table.

6. The Experiment

The researchers employed a pre-posttest tool to measure statistically the differences between the results of the pretest videos without subtitling and the results of the posttest videos with subtitling. Each level took twelve tests. Six tests for the reading book and six tests for the listening book. The six tests for the reading book are divided into three pretests and three posttests. Similarly, the six tests for listening are divided into three pretests and three posttests. The four-level (A1, A2, B1 and B2) students sat for twelve tests each; however, the C level students sat only for six reading tests since there is no listening book for this level of the Cambridge Unlock series.

7. Results of the Study

The results of the experiment will be displayed in bar graphs as follows:

A1.1 Level

Figure 1 A1.1 reading book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the reading, writing book

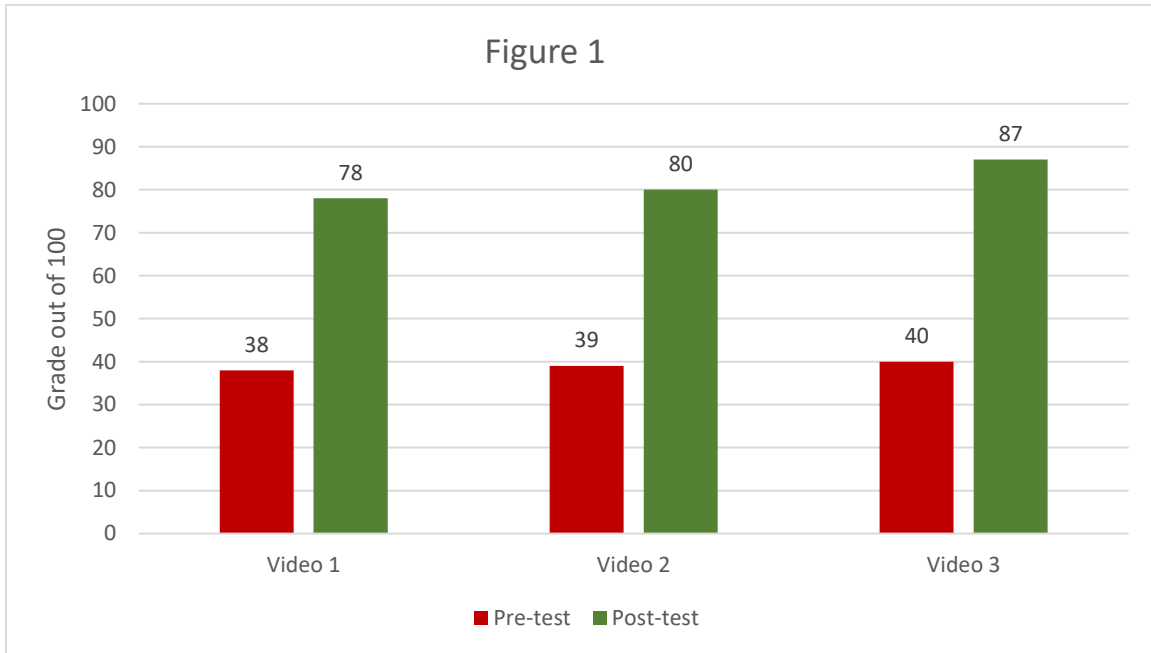
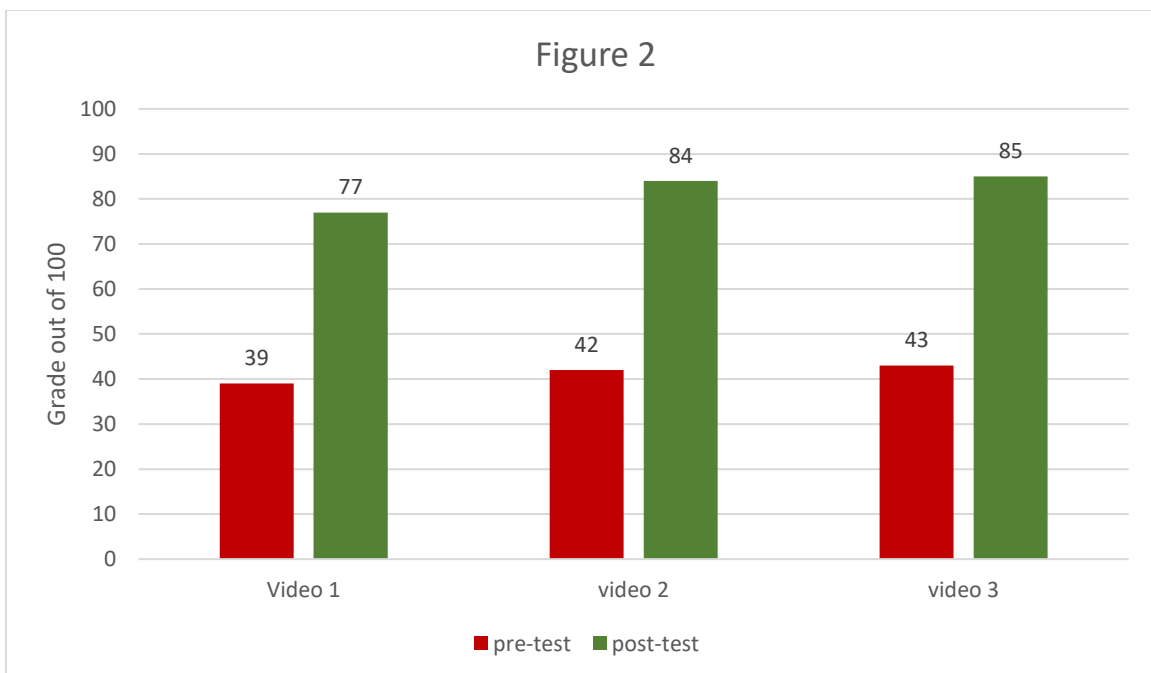


Figure 2 A1.1 listening book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the listening speaking book



A2.1 level

Figure 3 A2.1 reading book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the reading, writing book

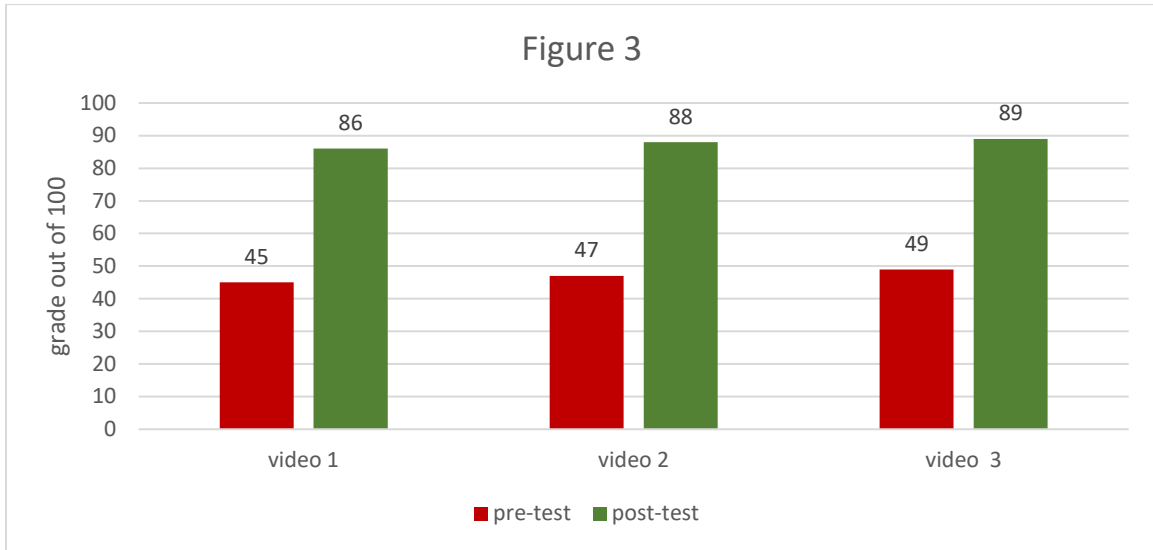
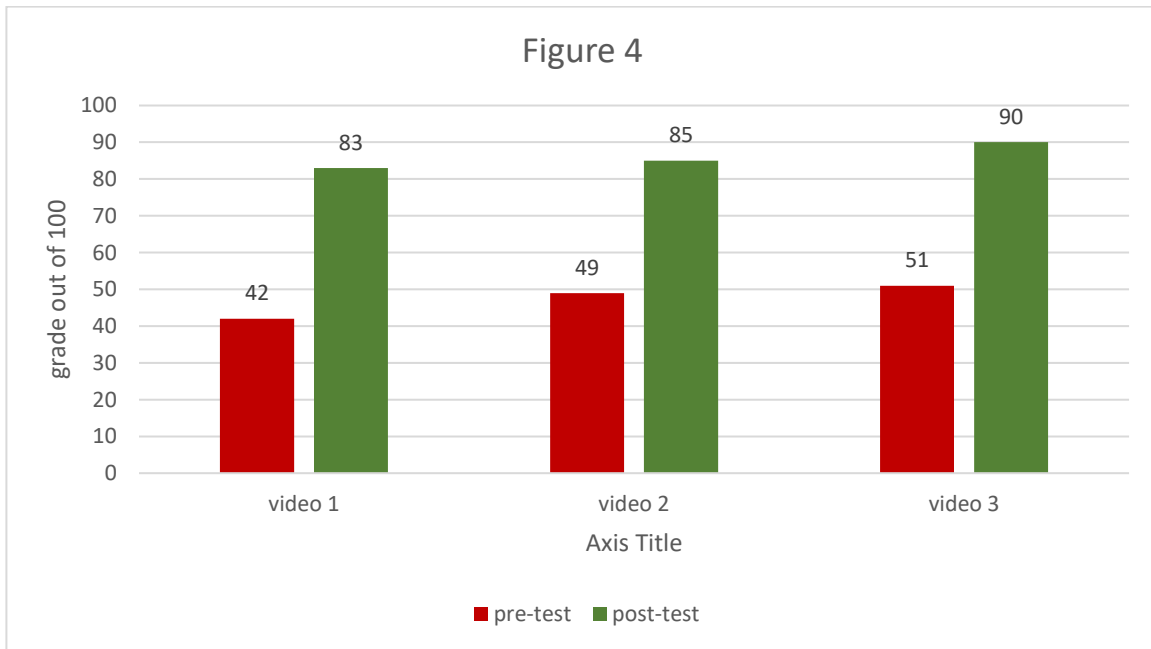


Figure 4 A2.1 listening book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the listening speaking book



B1.1 level

Figure 5 B1.1 reading book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the reading writing book.

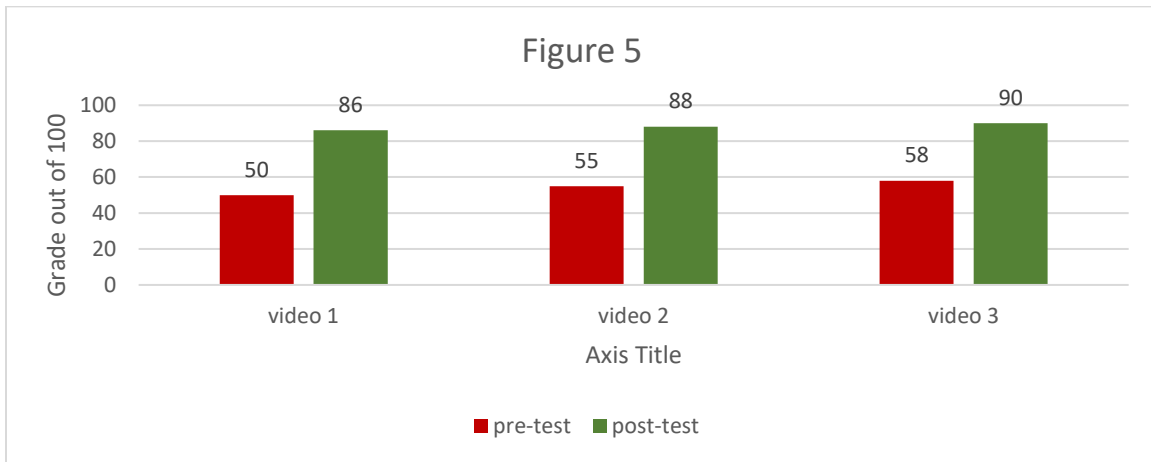
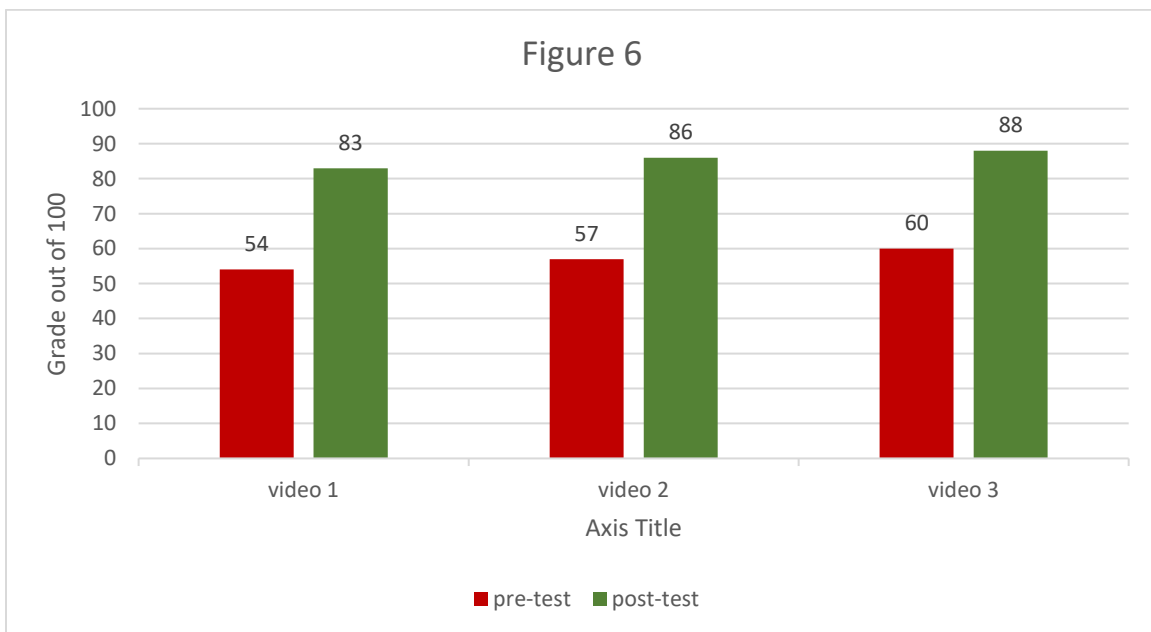


Figure 6 B1.1 listening book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the listening speaking.



B2.1 level

Figure 7 B2.1 reading book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the reading writing book.

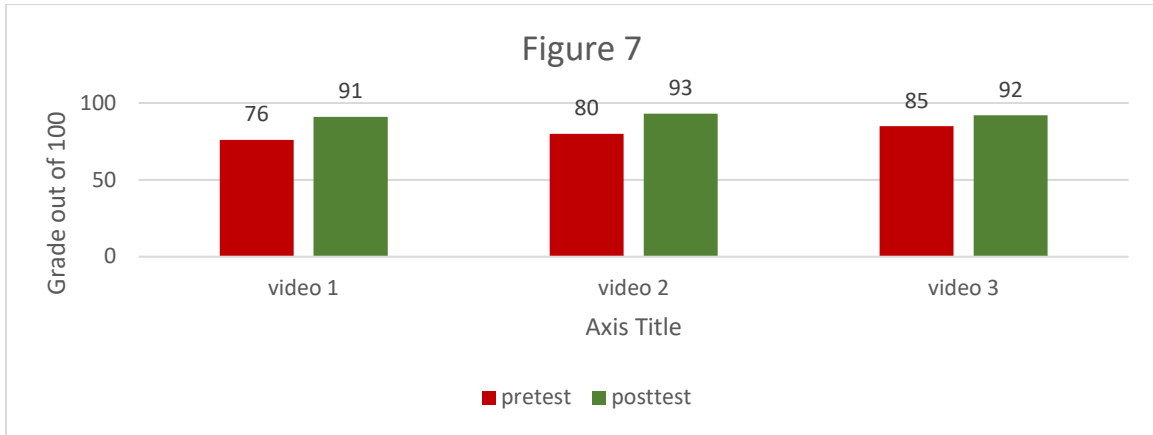
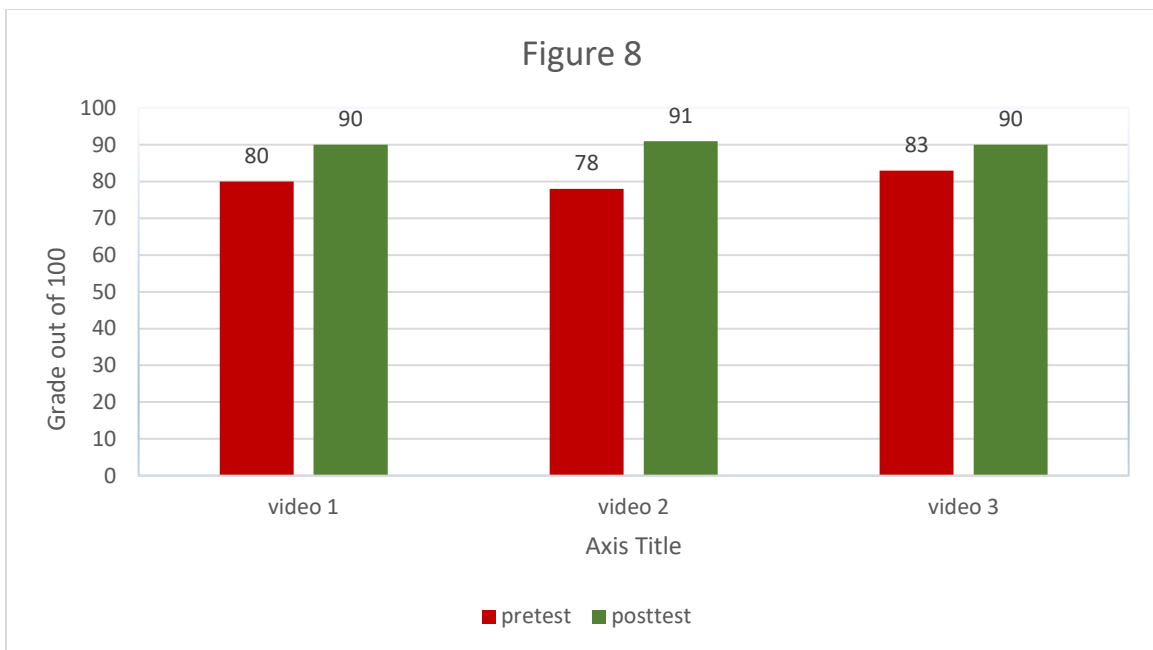


Figure 8 B2.1 listening book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the listening speaking.



C level

Figure 9 C reading book videos

Six tests: 3 pretests (without subtitling) and 3 posttests (with subtitling) for the first 3 units of the reading writing book.

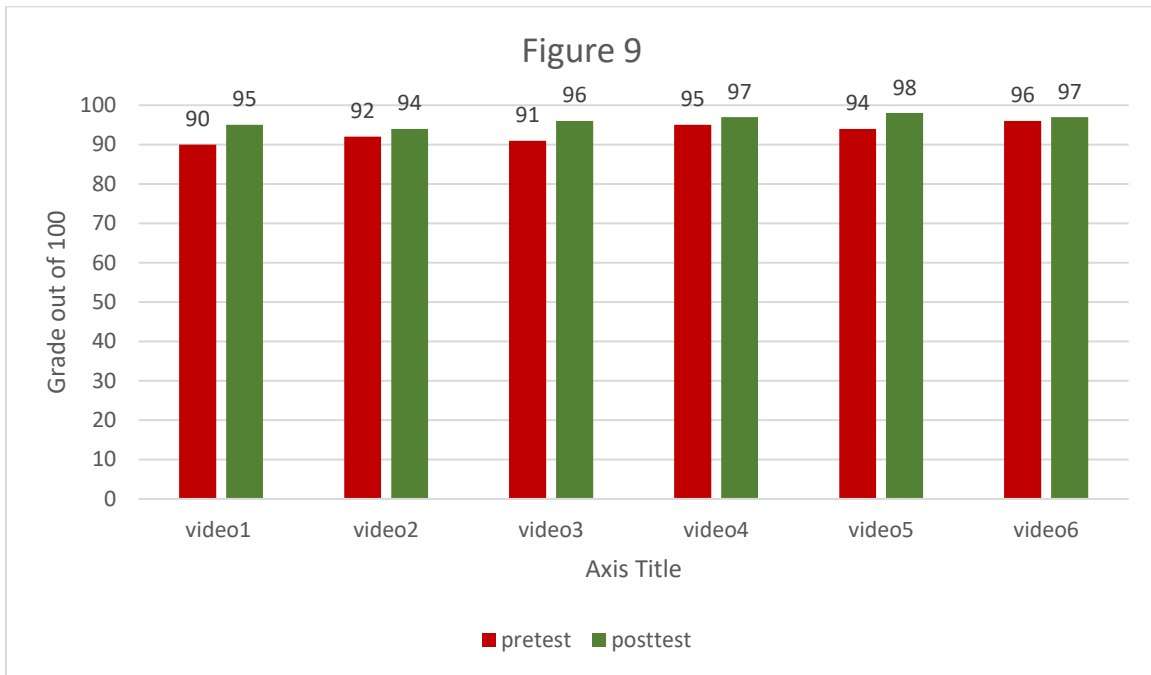


Figure 10 Average of pre post tests for A1, A2, B1, B2 and C reading books videos

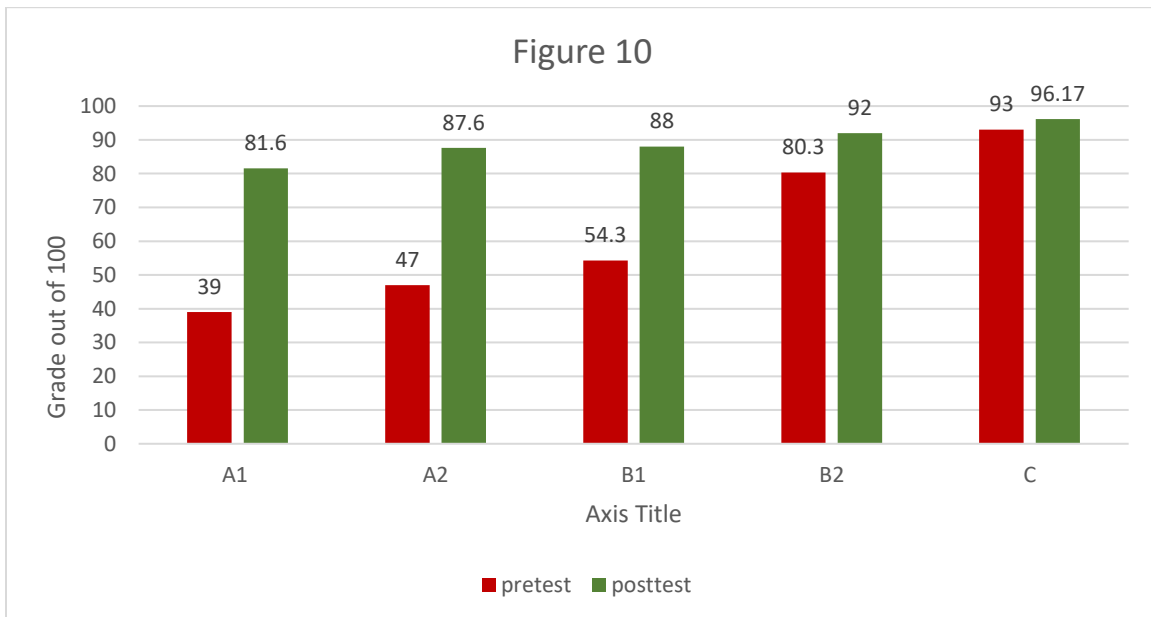
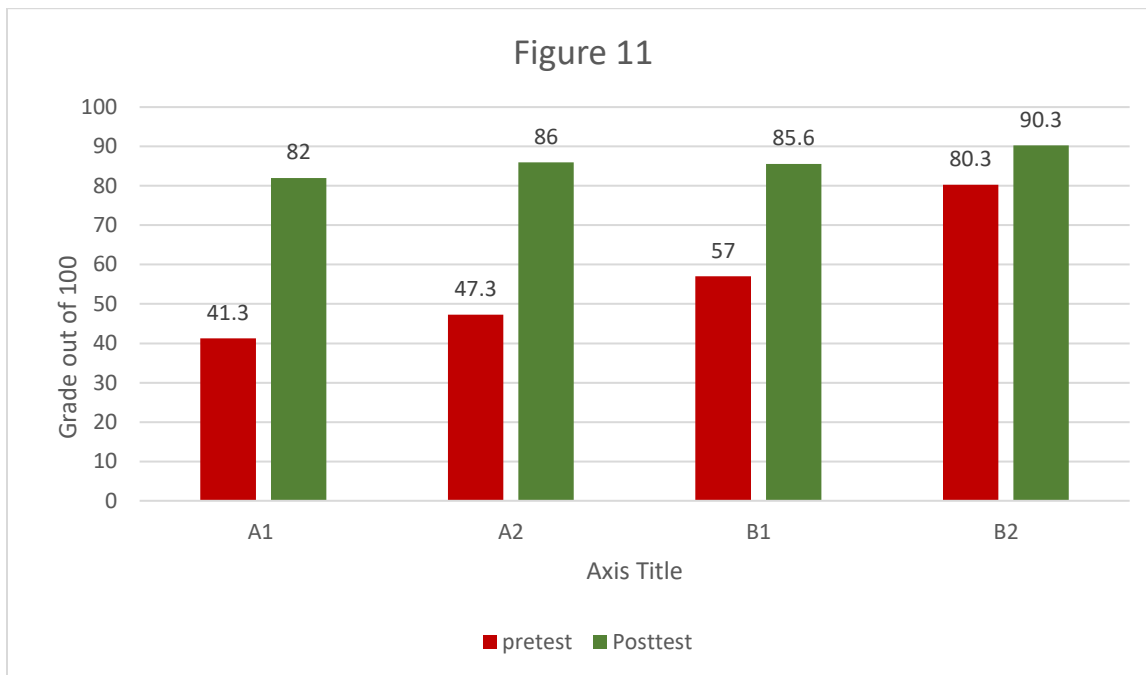


Figure 11 Average of pre post tests for A1, A2, B1, B2 listening books videos



8. Discussion

From the first glance at the previous graphs, one can easily identify that the remedial level students significantly benefited from the subtitled videos, both in the reading and listening textbooks. For instance, the average score for A1 jumped from 39% to 81.6% in the reading book videos. At the same time, the average score for this level rose from 41.3% to 82% in the listening book videos. This noticeable increase in the pre-posttests between the non-subtitled and the subtitled videos consolidates one clear fact, which is the importance of including subtitling to the videos in the context of the classroom. It seems that students in remedial levels in a foreign language situation benefit tremendously from video subtitling in improving their comprehension skills. One possible explanation for this is found in (Goh, 2000), who points out that EFL beginners try to guess the meaning of new vocabulary items and understand the idea behind the complete sentence. Another possible explanation for this progress is that students associate between the native sound they hear and the printed words they see in the subtitled videos. This hypothesis was reinforced by the progress these students –A1– have achieved between video one and video three, as shown in Figure 1. That is, the average for video one with subtitling was 78%, while the average for video three with subtitling rose to 87% for the reading book videos. This shows that remedial level students' listening comprehension has significantly improved due to watching subtitled videos.

Similarly, lower intermediate level students –A2– have also displayed a tremendous improvement in their listening comprehension skills, as shown in figures 10 and 11. The average score for this level in the reading book videos jumped from 47% to 87.6%, and the average score for the listening book videos also rose from 47.3% to 86%. This increase is similar to the substantial increase for the remedial students-A1 level students.

Concerning the upper intermediate level-B1 level students, there was a noticeable improvement between the non-subtitled and subtitled videos for both the reading and listening books videos. The average score for this level in the reading book videos rose from 54.3% to 88%; the average score for the listening book videos rose from 57% to 85.6%. Still, this difference between the non-subtitled and subtitled videos is worth teaching. To put it differently, the progress these upper level students have shown in their listening comprehension deserves, on the part of the teacher, to display to his/her students subtitled videos in the classroom or even in online classes.

The advanced group –B2 level students showed modest progress with the subtitled videos both in the reading and listening books videos. It seems that these students, who scored between 71-85 out of 100 in the University' English placement test, are not in dire need to see the words of the subtitled videos since their listening comprehension skills are usually very good. That is, they understand the native accent without much difficulty. It should be noted that a good percentage, more than 85%, of these students usually graduate from private schools, which teach either British or American English textbooks.

The last group—C level students have shown little progress—3.17% in the reading book videos. This level does not have a listening book. This group score a full mark in the University's English placement test, and over 98% of them come from private schools which adopt British or American English curriculum in their schools. They also teach the other subjects in English.

Our findings concerning the positive effects of subtitled videos on the EFL learners' comprehension skills are consistent with Markham (1989) and Guillory (1999), who conducted a test on a group of learners and found that the fully-captioned video students outscored the other groups as far as reading comprehension is concerned. Likewise, Garza (1991) found that students scored higher when they saw subtitled videos.

In short, and in response to the first question of research whether video subtitling improves foreign language students' listening comprehension, one can claim that the answer is definitely "Yes", especially for remedial, lower and upper intermediate level students. For the advanced level students—B2, the improvement is just moderate: it was 11.7% for the reading book videos and 10% for the listening book videos. Still, this improvement is worthwhile watching subtitled videos. Regarding the second question, if there is a correlation between the students' level and the progress in the listening comprehension through watching subtitled videos, the answer is "Yes". There is a clear correlation, which can be summed as follows: the lower the level of the students in English, the more they improve their listening comprehension skills through watching subtitled videos. Similarly, the higher the level of the students in English, the less they improve their listening comprehension skills through watching subtitled videos.

9. Recommendations

This study emphasizes the need to incorporate the subtitled videos in the English foreign language context by the teachers of the English language. There is no doubt that integrating the subtitled videos in the foreign language classroom would substantially improve the students' listening comprehension skills, particularly for the remedial, lower and upper level students. According to Vanderplank (1988, pp. 272/73), subtitles might have a potential value in helping the learning acquisition process by provoking learners with the key to massive quantities of authentic and comprehensible language input.

Therefore, the lower the students' level is, the more they need the subtitles. These students create associations between the native sound and its corresponding written forms. English language teachers in a foreign setting are highly encouraged to include subtitled videos in their listening classes or whenever there is a video to watch and listen to so as to enhance their students' listening comprehension, mainly for the lower levels. Even for advanced-level students, incorporating subtitled videos is a plus. However, for the superior level students, the question of integrating subtitle videos is of no significance since these students' listening comprehension skills are excellent.

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