

Can video-aided classes help Italian students with SLD (specific learning disorders) to facilitate English language learning?

Federico Valente ¹

¹ University of Cassino and Southern Lazio; federico.valente@unicas.it

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore whether captioned videos in English can help students with SLD to facilitate EFL learning. The interest in this area of research derives from our teaching experiences to students with learning disorders who struggled to study English, therefore we carried out some experiments in class in order to investigate whether the bi-modal input (the combination of the aural input with the text) could meet the need of these students and reduce their difficulties in L2 learning. The literature review thoroughly analyses theoretical issues concerning the main characteristics of learners with cognitive impairments along with the benefits of using videos as L2 learning tools, besides it makes mention of significant outcomes from previous studies. Findings seem to suggest promising results as not only does this approach show signs of decreasing the main complexities experienced by this type of learners when studying a foreign language, but it also manages to reduce the problems associated with lack of confidence that generally characterize learners with SLpD.

Keywords: Acquisition process; Dyslexic; EFL; SLD; Videos



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.
Submitted for possible open access
publication under the terms and
conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate whether videos in English can simplify English as foreign language (EFL) learning for Italian students with specific learning disorders (SLD) that attend high school.

We are particularly interested in the Italian context because we have been working as teachers in Italy at high schools and universities. These teaching experiences gave us the opportunity to observe that SLD students normally encounter several difficulties in learning English, therefore we decided to undertake this research in order to investigate whether the use of videos in English with captions could facilitate EFL.

First and foremost, studies done L2 learning demonstrate that SLA (second language acquisition) is an arduous and challenging task as it entails several cognitive processes that learners need to automatize and make available in very little time (Balboni, 2018). Moreover, learners generally have to deal with several problematic language features which make the process even more difficult. For this reason, students with SLD normally find L2 learning a harder and more demanding process. As far as EFL is concerned, not only do these students have to cope with difficulties involving the four

basic skills such as listening, reading, speaking and writing, but they also have to consider further complexities implicated in the acquisition process namely the communicative, emotional and psycholinguistic features. To further explain, it has to be pointed out that each student has a specific disorder, consequently the problems that learners with SLD may encounter in FL learning may be different. However, the aim of this analysis is to investigate whether video-aided lessons can make SLA easier and in particular which of the four skills mentioned before this technique leads to enhancement during the learning process.

Considering the above, research demonstrates that videos could be useful and effective L2 learning tools which may help students facilitate the acquisition process (Mirzaei, 2014). In this paper we are firstly presenting the results that define the key research on the usefulness of videos in L2 as means to overcome EFL difficulties for students with learning impairments and, at the same time, enhance their acquisition process. Then, we are providing the findings and discussion in which we mention further theories that inform our question on how the dilemma that we have identified can be addressed. In the final part of this article we have drawn some conclusions about the potential use of video-aided lessons with particular attention to how this type of technology can fulfil the needs of the students identified for this study and what possible new approaches could be.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in Italy and the data gathering processes consist mainly of qualitative semi-structured interviews with six participants with SLD (four EFL learners with dyslexia, one with dysgraphia and the last student who has difficulty staying focused in class since he finds himself being easily distracted), interview transcripts and content analysis technique which we used to examine and interpret data collected. The teaching context that we chose to focus on for this research is the high school where we worked. It is a technical institute attended by either Italian or foreign students (aged 13- to 20-year-old). We chose this specific educational environment as it has a high percentage of learners with several learning difficulties. Moreover, when I (first author) was teaching English at this school I tried to experiment for very brief sessions the use of simplified videos in English with captions in class (mostly Disney cartoons CEFR level A2-B1) with the intention to examine whether the students, especially those with learning problems, managed to have better opportunities to facilitate EFL study. In order to explore and evaluate critically the several ways in which the needs of this type of learners could be met through the use of this selected tool, we have examined existing literature in this field of study, discussing examples of similar equipment in use so as to be able to address this dilemma. Considering that the purpose of this investigation is to analyse the perceptions of students with SLD concerning the use of videos as a means to overcome their EFL learning difficulties, we regarded the qualitative approach as the most suitable methodology to employ. Qualitative research seemed to be suitable for the present investigation as it is a social exploration that aims to search and compare individuals' viewpoints, perspectives and experiences. Among the methods used in qualitative research, we selected semi-structured interviews as we figured that this modality could give interviewers better opportunities to interact with the interviewees and to elaborate questions (McDonough & McDonough, 2014). Finally, we deliberately chose to

interview the students that we already knew as we considered that it would have been easier for us to think carefully of valid questions to ask.

3. Results

As mentioned in the introduction, learning a foreign language seems to be a complex task for students with SLD. Moreover, research maintains that the type of the foreign language to study may influence the learning process for this kind of students (Daloiso, 2016). In point of fact, since languages are different, this diversity and especially their standardized systems of writing seem to have a deep influence on the students' cognitive process and their learning experiences therefore learners can have dissimilar difficulties which can vary according to the language they are learning. As reported by Ellis *et al.* (2004:438), Alphabetic orthographies change in the degree to which they are regular in their representation of sound. The writing systems of Welsh, Turkish, Spanish, German and Finnish appear more regular in symbol–sound correspondences compared to those of French and English. The former are considered as transparent orthographies as they have highly consistent sound–symbol correspondences, whereas, the latter are regarded as opaque or deep orthographies since they are less consistent as each letter or group of letters can have different sounds in diverse words. On the grounds of this, we can state that students with learning difficulties tend to have less problems when learning a transparent language compared to an opaque or deep one like English. With this regard, Daloiso (2016) claims that when dyslexic learners study languages with greater regularity, they often succeeds in gaining an understanding of the basic combinations of the writing system, whereas the intrinsic complexity of the more opaque languages' spelling system causes inaccuracy that can persist until adulthood. Regarding the Italian education system, English is normally the first foreign language taught at school starting from primary education until high school, even though it is an opaque language characterized by a substantial degree of irregularity (Duguid, 2001). This irregularity stems from the fact that this language has an alphabetical system constituted of 26 letters and a phonetic inventory of 40 phonemes that can be represented by approximately 1120 diverse graphemic mixture, therefore the association among graphemes, phonemes along with the sound of the words appears rather unclear and opaque to non-Anglophone speakers (Stella & Grandi, 2016). For this reason, the process of EFL learning becomes even more problematic for students with learning disorders (Daloiso, 2016). Nevertheless, before analyzing the main problems that students with SLD generally experience in SLA, it is firstly necessary to take into account some important considerations. Firstly, it is necessary to acquire a better understanding of what problems the students might experience and secondly to have a general neurolinguistic framework of reference regarding the students' impairments which might help the teachers to adapt EFL material and contents to their learners' needs (Melero et al., 2019). The second consideration regards the connection between EFL learning complexities and the difficulties concerning native language acquisition. According to Nijakowska (2010:67), L2 language learning is the equivalent of the native language learning faculty, the result is that children who learn to speak their first language fast and without difficulties have the tendency to score higher on the L2 aptitude test. Studies seem to corroborate this supposition: Ganschow and Sparks (1986) have given a demonstration of students with L2 learning problems that had already experienced difficulties during their first language acquisition. Additionally, a further observation to consider is that in the

same class there could be students with learning deficits who, at the same time, may have dissimilar L2 cognitive styles, such as independent or collaborative, reflective or converger and analytical or global (Daloiso, 2016). Research in ELT and pedagogical practices for students with SLD maintains that pupils with learning problems normally encounter several barriers that may hinder SLA, in addition they specify that among all learning difficulties, dyslexia causes more problems in L2 learning. This happens because as maintained by Kormos, Smith (2012:65-66) “this type of disturbance is a condition of neurodevelopmental origin and is characterized by reduced phonological short-term memory ability, as well as difficulties with phoneme awareness and slow and imprecise word-recognition capacity”. In actual fact, these are essential skills that individuals need to have in order to effectively learn a foreign language regardless of the teaching context where the language is studied (Kormos & Smith, 2012).

However, the advancement of the internet along with the development of multimedia and communication innovations seem to offer EFL learners more opportunities to facilitate language studies (Stella & Grandi, 2016). Videos have lately been the EFL learning sources commonly used in the classroom and also out of the class for independent learning (Ismaili, 2013). Accordingly, studies claim that video-aided lessons seem to offer to L2 learners a major exposure to the target language who, at the same time, could benefit from simultaneous auditory and visual input. That being the case, research has been exploring the potential of using captioned videos as effective EFL learning tools which might help learners, especially students with listening difficulties to overcome this problem and compensate for reduced vocabulary size (Perez et al., 2013). Consequently, it demonstrates that EFL learners and especially students with learning disorders could benefit from captioned videos in English as the presence of the text that supports the verbal input can simplify the comprehension of the target language content (Leveridge & Yang, 2013). Moreover, not only can the bimodal input simplify the acquisition and retention of vocabulary, but it can also facilitate the training of reading skill (Chai & Erlam, 2008), as well as support beginner learners and especially students with learning deficits when the aural input becomes accelerated and hard to understand (Hubbard, 2007). Furthermore, Chapple and Curtis (2000) maintain that in addition to help students extend their vocabulary size and enhance their listening comprehension skills, video-aided lessons seem to foster L2 learners' confidence in speaking, especially in students with learning impairments (Başaran & Köse, 2013). To clarify further, this hypothesis can be ascribable to the consideration that videos in the foreign language, especially if they are provided with captions, could help students to internalize more words and consequently increase their knowledge of the language that is being studied, as a result, learners appear to be more confident when using the new words acquired in appropriate contexts (Başaran & Köse, 2013).

4. Discussion

Data gathered from the experiments of using videos in English with captions in class and from the six interviews has provided interesting and useful material to analyze the dilemma identified for this research. It follows that the four dyslexic students maintained that the presence of the text is indispensable in order to train their EFL reading skills, since this disturbance seems to cause mainly difficulties with reading. Yet, two of them maintained that captions in the same language of the audio, rather than subtitles would better address their needs, especially a reduced text, since having

less words at the bottom of the screen could help them to read faster, decrease their reading struggles and keep the same pace of the spoken dialogues. Another interesting element that emerged from the students' interviews with attention deficit is the fact that watching a video in the foreign language and simultaneously reading the script underneath seemed to foster concentration, therefore this approach seems to help them to memorize more foreign words and extend their vocabulary size. According to research, L2 learners using videos in the target language can benefit from captioning since, not only does it help to decrease listening comprehension difficulties deriving from fast speech rate and confusing pronunciation, but they may also encourage viewers to train their reading abilities and internalize more words and expressions (Janfanza et al., 2014).

Another benefit of captions is that they can stimulate attention which is a determining element in SLA (Danan, 2004). In fact, not only has research demonstrated that captioning can help L2 learners to isolate words and divide difficult phrases that cannot be easily understood through listening (Vanderplank, 2010), but it can foster their attention towards new word forms which makes it easier for them to notice and consequently learn them.

In general terms, Italian students normally opt for captioned videos when relying on this approach for L2 learning since they regard their reading skills as more developed compared to their listening comprehension abilities and consequently consider the presence of the text in videos as more relaxing (Duguid, 2001).

However, an interesting aspect to take into account for the scope of this research is to investigate whether this assumption is valid for students with SLD, especially for dyslexic learners as they generally experience more difficulties with reading. In connection with the above, considering that learning foreign languages involves complex processes and requires the combination of the cognitive, linguistic, cultural and social skills, it is firstly necessary to determine the difficulties and the weaknesses that students with SLD are likely to confront themselves with during the learning path (Grabe, 2009). Above all, it has to be taken into account that students with learning deficits struggle to automatize specific processes which are indispensable for the improvement of L2 skills. For this reason, Daloiso (cit. in Valenti 2016: 18) maintains that learners with specific learning disorders may have problems in understanding a written text in another language due to the difficulty in making the decoding processes of the written code automatic. Likewise, they also struggle to speak the target language as they find it hard to quickly retrieve the linguistic information which are necessary for the communication.

As mentioned previously, it appears that dyslexic students experience more problems with reading, however, as suggested by Grabe (2009), it has to be observed that the basic cognitive processes connected with the mother tongue and the foreign language reading are analogous, so this means that these learners can have nearly the same L2 reading difficulties that they have already experienced when learning their first language (Kormos & Smith, 2012). In connection with the above, Smith (2012:73) maintains that: "In L2 reading, the primary source of the problems for students with SpLD (difficulty with one or more parts of learning) is reduced phoneme awareness and phonological short-term memory capacity. Therefore, learners with SpLD whose phonological processing skills might be impaired have problems with establishing letter sound correspondences in L2 reading and in recognizing the phonological form of words. [...]". As far as listening is concerned, it appears that learners with SLD

experience two prevailing difficulties. As specified by Melero Rodríguez (Daloiso, 2016) on the one hand, due to phonetic-phonological deficit and, consequently, low phonological consciousness, they may struggle to segment the flow (to understand the words at the beginning and at the end of the speech as they are said instantaneously therefore the listener has to recognize the chains and segment them) and perceive a higher rate of speech than the real one. On the other hand, the difficulties in long-term memory retrieval can make it difficult to understand the message even when it has already been segmented. Most importantly, students with cognitive impairments generally tend to manifest difficulties in the phonological short-term memory that is the crucial intrinsic element indispensable to understand oral messages as it contains “different units of auditory material in the working memory for further processing” (Kormos, Smith 2012:78). Hence, it emerges that the main drawback of these deficits is characterized by the difficulty to understand the aural input which could be relatively minimized by decelerating the speech tempo and concentrating on the key words while listening (Daloiso, 2016).

Moreover, data gathered from the interviews has revealed that a further obstacle which can hinder students with SLD to learn foreign languages is the emotional barrier. On balance, L2 learners have the tendency to experience the same acquisition problems and frustrations that they might have already faced in L1 learning which is then likely to cause a sort of emotional fragility, lack of self-confidence and demotivation (Daloiso, 2016).

One of the main causes for L2 learning problems could be attributable to learners’ anxiety which is generally referred to as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986:128). In view of the foregoing, research demonstrates that students with SpLD manifest a greater degree of anxiety when studying a foreign language compared to students who do not have learning problems. Moreover, Kormos, Smith (2012:65) specify that “the cognitive effects of anxiety might further aggravate the language learning problems of students with dyslexia”.

However, a controversial question concerning the use of videos as L2 learning tools that research has been attempting to answer is whether the binomial input could help learners and especially those with learning impairments to develop reading or listening skills (Mirzaei, 2014). King (2002) maintains that full captioning generally requires too much reading and not only can this be a problem for viewers with reading difficulties, but it can obstruct the training of listening comprehension skill. Additionally, the presence of the full text may hinder the acquisition of compensatory abilities and strategies which aim to facilitate FL comprehension.

According to Pujolà (2002), while advanced FL students tend to ignore captions or subtitles since they consider them as a sort of interference and distraction which do not let them focus on listening, less advanced learners and especially those with learning difficulties normally prefer to rely on them in order to have major support to better understand the dialogues in the foreign language.

As a result, a feasible solution that could address the needs of all the students in the class would be to use videos with only keyword captions.

Based on the information provided, research on videos as FL tools has been analyzing the potential of keyword captions and investigating whether the reduction of words in the captioning lines still manages to provide support for the under-

standing of L2 contents (Perez et al., 2013). Findings indicate that this type of captioning could resolve the problem of textual density and at the same time help viewers to overcome their listening comprehension difficulties (Vanderplank, 2010). Accordingly, Guillory (1998) claims that videos with keyword captions can help FL learners to develop good comprehension skills as the provision of a shrunk script on the screen stimulates viewers to concentrate on listening. A further advantage of videos provided with the written support is that they could help learners with SLD to decrease their listening comprehension's anxiety and consequently enhance their confidence during their listening performance (Danan, 2004). To conclude, considering that Italian students and particularly learners with SLD normally experience frustration when studying a foreign language, especially English for the complexities specified in the previous section, then what these students actually need is an effective and simplified modality that enables them to acquire the target language effortlessly. In light of the issues hitherto raised, data collected and the existing literature suggest that videos in L2 with keyword captions could be effective EFL learning tools which may meet the needs of learners with SLD since not only can the combination of the auditory input with the written support and the images facilitate the acquisition of reading and listening skills, but at the same time they could be the best demonstration of the foreign language application in real situations (Canning-Wilson, 2000).

5. Conclusions

All things considered, the key elements that emerged from the interviews with the students and from the experiments carried out in the teaching context identified for this investigation concern mainly, the type of videos used for EFL learning. In other words, captioned videos seem to best help students with SLD to learn L2. However, the modality of captioning can also influence the learning process as keyword captions seem to best suit dyslexic students since they generally present problems with reading, and, consequently, the fact of having less words in the captioning line could speed their reading process and relieve them from the anxiety associated with their comprehension performance. On balance, data gathered indicates that captioned videos in L2 can help students with learning disorders to enhance their reading and listening skills, nevertheless, it still remains unclear how this approach can lead them to train writing and especially speaking skill which is generally the most difficult ability to acquire in SLA. Therefore, the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that further research should be necessary in order to explore how this technique can prompt the students taken into consideration for this analysis to train and enhance speaking.

References

- Balboni, P., E. (2018). Fare educazione linguistica: insegnare italiano, lingue straniere e lingue classiche. Torino: UTET Università.
- Başaran, H., F., Köse, G., D. (2013). The Effects of Captioning on EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension. *Volume 70*, 25 January 2013, Pages 702-708.
- Canning-Wilson, C. (2000). Practical aspects of using video in the foreign language classroom. *Internet TESL Journal*, 6(11) November.

- Chai, J., & Erlam, R. (2008). The effect and the influence of the use of video and captions on second language learning. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics. Volume 14*, 2008
- Chapple, L., & Curtis, A. (2000). Content-based Instruction in Hong Kong: Student responses to film. *System*, 28, 419-433.
- Civinini, C. (2016). *Digital EL Gazette. Behind the news at Italian schools*. Retrieved from: https://www.cebs.at/fileadmin/user_upload/service/CLIL/clil_research_italian_model_230516_ab_01.pdf. [Accessed 12-10-24].
- Daloiso, M. (2016) L'insegnamento delle lingue straniere agli alunni con DSA. Il quadro teorico dell'accessibilità glottodidattica. In Valenti, Alfia (a cura di) (2016), *Esperienze di didattica inclusiva delle lingue straniere. Percorsi per alunni con DSA*. Firenze: Libri Liberi Editore.
- Danan, M. (2004). Captioning and subtitling: Undervalued language learning strategies. *META*, 49 (1), 67-77.
- Duguid, A. (2001). Italian speakers. In: Swan, M. and Smith, B. (eds.). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 7389.
- Ellis, N., C., Natsume, M., Stavropoulou, K., Hoxhallari, L., Van Daal, V., H., P., Polyzoe, N., Tsipa, M., Petalas, M. (2004). The effects of orthographic depth on learning to read alphabetic, syllabic, and logographic scripts. *Reading Research Quarterly Vol. 39*, No. 4, pp. 438-468.
http://wwwpersonal.umich.edu/~ncellis/NickEllis/Publications_files/Orthographic%20Depth%20Reading.pdf
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a Second language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guillory, H. G. (1998). The effects of keyword captions to authentic French video on learner comprehension. *CALICO Journal*, 15(1-3), 89-108.
- Horwitz, E., K., Horwitz, M., B.; Cope, J., A. (1986), Foreign language classroom anxiety. In *Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132.
- Hubbard, P. (2007). *Technology and Listening*. The encyclopedia of applied linguistics, 2007 - Wiley Online Library. Cambridge University Press.
- Ismaili, M. (2013). The Effectiveness of Using Movies in the EFL Classroom – A Study Conducted at South East European University. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 2(4), 121-132.
- Jackson, R. L., Drummond, D. K. & Camara, S. (2007). What Is Qualitative Research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 8,21-28.
- Janfanza, A., Jelyani,S.J., Soori, A. (2014). Impacts of Captioned Movies on Listening Comprehension. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies; Footscray Vol. 2*, Iss. 2, (2014): 80-84.
- King, J. (2002). Using DVD feature films in the EFL Classroom. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 15(5), 509-523.
- Kormos, J., Smith, A., M. (2012). *Teaching Languages to Students with Specific Learning Differences*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

- Leveridge, A. N., and Yang, J. C. (2013). Testing learner reliance on caption supports in second language listening comprehension multimedia environments'. *ReCALL / Volume 25 / Issue 02 / May 2013*, pp 199 - 214 DOI: 10.1017/S0958344013000074.
- McDonough, J. and S.H. McDonough (2014). *Research Methods for English Language Teachers*. London: Arnold.
- Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Melero R., Carlos A., Caon, F., Brichese, A. (2019). Educazione linguistica accessibile e inclusiva: Promuovere apprendimento linguistico efficace per studenti stranieri e studenti con DSA. *ELLE*, 7(3), 341-366. DOI <http://doi.org/10.30687/ELLE/2280-6792/2018/03/001>
- Mirzaei, M.S. (2014). *Partial and synchronized captioning* - Research-Publishing.net <https://reference.research-publishing.net/publication/.../223.pdf>. [Accessed 15-11-24].
- Nijkowska, J. (2010), *Dyslexia in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Bristol [etc.]: Multilingual Matters.
- Perez, M.M. Peters, E., and Desmet, P. (2013). Is less more? 'Effectiveness and perceived usefulness of keyword and full captioned video for L2 listening comprehension', *ReCALL / Volume 26 / Issue 01 / January 2014*, pp 21 - 43 DOI: 10.1017/S0958344013000256, Published online: 22 November 2013. Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0958344013000256 [Accessed 12-10-24].
- Perez, M.M., Van Den Noortgate, W., Desmet, P. (2013). *Captioned video for L2 listening and vocabulary learning: A meta-analysis*, ITEC-iMinds, KU Leuven Kulak, Etienne Sabbelaan 53, 8500 Kortrijk, Belgium. Received 30 October 2012; revised 2 May 2013; accepted 19 July 2013 Available online 24 August 2013.
- Pujolá, J.T. (2002). 'CALLing for help: Researching language learning strategies using help facilities in a web-based multimedia program'. *ReCALL*, 14(2), 235–262.
- Seo, K. (2002). The effect of visuals on listening comprehension: A study of Japanese learners' listening strategies. *International Journal of Listening*, Volume 16, Issue1. Taylor & Francis.
- Stella, G., Grandi, L. (a cura di) (2016). *Come leggere la dislessia e i DSA. Conoscere per intervenire: metodologie, strumenti, percorsi e schede*. Firenze: Giunti.
- Vanderplank, R. (2010). Déjà vu? A decade of research on language laboratories, television and video in language learning, in *Language Teaching*, 43: 1-37.
- Winke, P., Gass, S., & Sydorenko, T. (2010). The effects of captioning videos used for foreign language listening activities. *Language Learning & Technology*, 14(1), 65-86.