

## Subtitles as a Tool to Boost Language Learning? Children's Views and Experiences of Watching Films and Television Programmes in Other Languages with Interlingual Subtitles

 Sharon Black 

University of East Anglia

Citation: Black, S. (2022). Subtitles as a Tool to Boost Language Learning? Children's Views and Experiences of Watching Films and Television Programmes in other Languages with Interlingual Subtitles. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 5(1), 73–93. <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v5i1.2022.157>

**Editor(s):** P. Romero Fresco

**Received:** August 5, 2020

**Accepted:** April 12, 2021

**Published:** April 19, 2022

**Copyright:** ©2022 Black. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This allows for unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### Abstract

There is growing concern about the steep decline in language learning in the UK over the last 20 years. A simple, inexpensive way to boost children's learning of other languages in the UK and indeed in other countries could be to increase their exposure to subtitled audiovisual (AV) content in other languages. There is considerable evidence that subtitled AV content can aid children's acquisition of other languages, enhance their literacy skills, and foster intercultural awareness. However, little attention seems to have been paid thus far to eliciting the opinions and experiences of children themselves of watching subtitled films and television programmes in other languages. This study aims to contribute to filling the gap. A cohort of 17 children aged 8–9 years took part in semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops and shared their views and experiences of viewing AV content in Spanish with interlingual subtitles in English. Although the sample size is small, the findings of this study support the proposal of providing children with greater access to subtitled AV content in other languages, since the children's responses to the idea were overwhelmingly positive, and many felt that this would help them to learn languages and about other cultures in a fun way.

**Key words:** subtitles, language acquisition, media literacy, children.

## 1. Introduction

The sharp drop in language learning in the UK over the last 20 years or so is a cause for concern. The percentage of secondary school pupils studying a language at GCSE<sup>1</sup> level in England has fallen from 76% in 2002 to 47% in 2017 and the numbers taking a language at A-level<sup>2</sup> have also declined considerably (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018), along with enrolments in degrees in languages (British Academy, 2018). Positive steps have been taken to address the problem, such as the UK Government's pledge that 90% of pupils in England will study a language at GCSE level by 2025 (Long et al., 2020). Moreover, the four UK National Academies (British Academy et al., 2019), the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (APPG on Modern Languages, 2019), and Kelly (2018) have called for a national strategy for languages. The recent call for action by the four UK National Academies points out, "[i]f we want to enhance both our engagement with the rest of the world and our national social cohesion, we need our citizens to be better at languages other than English and to value them more highly" (British Academy et al., 2019, p. 3). However, UK students' lack of engagement with learning languages still presents significant challenges.

This article proposes that a simple, inexpensive way to promote language learning in children in the UK and indeed in other countries would be to increase their exposure to films, television programmes and videos in other languages with interlingual subtitles. Subtitled audiovisual (AV) content in other languages could be put to more use in the classroom as a motivating, engaging aid to language learning, and if broadcasters such as the BBC were to incorporate subtitled foreign language films and television programmes for children into their schedules and online provision, children might also benefit from exposure to other languages and cultures on their screens at home. Moreover, children around the globe are spending more time in front of screens and using more multimedia resources than ever, and as a result, it seems that now is a better time than ever to raise awareness of and further investigate the educational benefits of subtitles. Furthermore, turning on the intralingual subtitles, principally intended for viewers who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing, could also be used to support children's literacy skills, as pointed out by the Turning on the Subtitles (TOTS) campaign,<sup>3</sup> which is currently calling for broadcasters and streamers to turn on the subtitles by default for child viewers.

---

<sup>1</sup> The General Certificate in Secondary Education is a UK qualification in a subject, several of which are usually attained by secondary school pupils on passing examinations in subjects studied for two years, between the ages of 14–16 years.

<sup>2</sup> The A Level, which stands for Advanced Level, is a UK qualification in a subject. A Levels are often obtained by students as school leaving qualifications and are generally required for university entrance.

<sup>3</sup> <https://turnonthesubtitles.org/>

## 2. Subtitles as a Tool for Boosting Language Learning, Literacy and Intercultural Awareness

There exists extensive empirical evidence that subtitled AV content can indeed aid children's acquisition of other languages and enhance the literacy skills of children learning to read in their L1 or the official language of the country in which they live and receive schooling. The strongest evidence shows that watching subtitled AV content can improve children's recognition, comprehension, and retention of vocabulary both in their L1 and in other languages (D'Ydewalle & Van De Poel, 1999; Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999; Koolstra et al., 1997; Koskinen et al., 1986; Kothari & Bandyopadhyay, 2014; Kothari et al., 2002; Linebarger, 2001; Linebarger et al., 2010; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992). It has also been observed that interlingual subtitles enhance children's grammar acquisition and general proficiency in other languages (Araújo & Dinis da Costa, 2013; Kuppens, 2010), although further longitudinal experimental research is required in these areas. Moreover, subtitles have been shown to improve children's literal and inference comprehension skills and reading fluency in their L1, and their recall of conceptual information from the subtitled AV content (see, for example, Linebarger et al., 2010; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992; Parkhill et al., 2011). The research in this area demonstrates the value of subtitles for children beyond their usual (and fundamental) function of facilitating access to AV content and provides convincing evidence that interlingual subtitles are the most appropriate form of subtitles for children in middle childhood for the incidental acquisition<sup>4</sup> of other languages (Bravo, 2008; D'Ydewalle & Van De Poel, 1999) and can also boost their literacy skills.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, watching subtitled foreign language films, television programmes and videos has the key potential to foster children's intercultural awareness. Most of the AV content for children broadcast on British television is produced in the UK or by companies belonging to large media conglomerates based in the USA, and is culturally either US-centric or is designed for international audiences. As a result, children in the UK generally do not have much exposure to content produced in other countries, at least not on their television screens. Providing children in the UK with greater access to high quality, educational AV content from countries other than the UK and the USA would grant them opportunities to learn about the lives of children in other cultures and to identify with children or characters who speak languages other than theirs. As Luyken et al. (1991, p. 28) note, television can act as "a window to the rest of the world", and in relation to the distribution of translated television content in Europe, they remark (1991, p. 28) that:

Because of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe, Language Transfer can be an important means of access to life-styles, thoughts and creative productions of peoples from

---

<sup>4</sup> Incidental language acquisition occurs without the acquirer being aware of it and, according to Krashen, (1982) is similar to the process by which children acquire their L1. Moreover, incidental language acquisition is unintentional, as it involves the "learning of vocabulary as the by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning" (Hulstijn, 2001, p. 271).

<sup>5</sup> Reviews of the literature on the educational benefits of subtitles for enhancing language acquisition and literacy in children can be found in Black (2017; 2021).

other regions in Europe and elsewhere. High quality Language Transfer is, therefore, a vital key to better understanding between countries and people in Europe.

If children are to be open to the world and to learning languages, it is important to foster their intercultural awareness from a young age. Providing them with greater access to subtitled AV content in other languages might prove a simple and inexpensive way to contribute to this key goal.

### **3. Children's Views and Experiences of Interlingual Subtitles**

While a substantial amount of research has investigated the educational benefits of subtitles for children, and some experimental studies have tested children's attention to / processing of interlingual subtitles, a few of which have used eye tracking (see, for example, Black, 2020; d'Ydewalle & De Bruycker, 2007; d'Ydewalle & Van Rensbergen, 1989; Koolstra et al., 1999; Muñoz, 2017), it seems that very few have focused on children's views and experiences with regard to subtitles. Most of the existing research has been conducted using performance tests and questionnaires, and while some have collected attitudinal data, they rarely focus on user preferences and experiences. Lamentably, a factor in the paucity of research of this type is likely to be that children's opinions and experiences of (translated) culture have been considered to be of lesser importance than those of adults, and children have not always been perceived as reliable, competent research participants and informants. However, such attitudes are fortunately less common nowadays, and there is emerging research in this area that has sought the opinions of children and young people.

Chiaro and Piferi (2010) conducted a focus group with Italian children, who are used to watching dubbed AV content only, to investigate their views on humour in an animated film originally in English and dubbed and subtitled into Italian. However, despite conducting a focus group, the main focus of the study was the questionnaire developed on the basis of the focus group findings. Marzà and Torralba (2014) also investigated children's attitudes to interlingual subtitles in a dubbing country, via questionnaires, interviews and discussion groups. Having watched a cartoon in English with subtitles in Catalan, most of the children reported having found them useful and that they would prefer to watch the programme with subtitles rather than dubbed. In 2011 the Media Consulting Group published the results of a large European survey with over 1500 respondents aged 12–18 years. A large majority felt that watching subtitled AV content could improve their knowledge of other languages and would watch films in other languages with subtitles if they were broadcast on television. However, this research was conducted using surveys only.

The present study aims to observe whether participants will report similarly positive attitudes towards interlingual subtitles as those in the aforementioned studies, and to obtain a rich picture of their views and experiences of viewing interlingual subtitles, thereby contributing to filling the gap in this area. Interviews and participatory workshops have been conducted for the purposes of the present study as it recognises children as competent, reliable participants who are the best source of

information on their own lives and opinions, and are well able to “speak ‘in their own right’ and report valid views and experiences” (Alderson, 2000, p. 243). Moreover, since the advent of the “new sociology of childhood” in the 1980s/1990s (Alderson, 2000, p. 243), there is not only growing recognition of children as reliable participants in research, but children are increasingly given an active, participatory role in the research process itself, becoming more involved in creative activities that reflect their perspectives, such as storytelling or painting, or even leading on elements of the research (Alderson, 2000; Veale, 2005). Such participatory methods promote children’s capacity to communicate their views and perspectives meaningfully and recognise them as creators of culture. Moreover, they promote critical thinking skills (Veale, 2005), can improve children’s listening and interpersonal communication skills and boost their confidence (Clark, 2004). While it was not feasible for the participants in the study contained herein to design and conduct research themselves, a participatory approach was incorporated into the workshops held with the children, during which they took part in participatory activities and discussions, and created posters reflecting their experiences of being involved in the present study (see section 4.5).

#### **4. Methodology**

This paper presents findings from a larger study on children’s reception of interlingual subtitles placed in standard and integrated positions on the screen, which adopted a mixed-methods approach, using eye tracking, scene recognition tests, content comprehension tests, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and participatory workshops (Black, 2017). The present article focuses on the results from the interviews and participatory workshops, and aims to answer the following research question:

- What are the participants’ views and experiences of viewing the two subtitled AV clips in the current study, and of watching subtitled films and television programmes in general?

Thus, this research is oriented by constructivism, as a paradigm which focuses on research participants’ knowledge, views and experiences of the phenomena being studied, which, in turn, are viewed as socially constructed, or formed through “interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Moreover, an awareness of the power imbalance between adults and children, and of the imperative to promote an understanding of children as competent, active participants who can benefit from the research process, informed my decision to adopt a participatory approach to the workshops.

#### 4.1. Participants

17 participants aged 8–9 years took part in this study. A homogeneous sampling method (Coolican, 2014) was used to recruit participants.<sup>6</sup> As such, the children who took part in the present study were from the same geographical area (Northern Ireland), the same primary school and class, with the aim of recruiting participants with a similar socio-cultural context and shared experiences. Moreover, little is currently known about the reception of subtitled AV content in children of this age group (Black, 2017).

The provision of language teaching in the participants' school seemed particularly successful, since in addition to the Spanish tutor who taught there every week, they also had a permanent Modern Languages Coordinator supplementing the Spanish teaching and regularly involving the children in Spanish-language performances and events. The Modern Languages Coordinator confirmed that the participants were all L1 English speakers with similar exposure to Spanish as their L2. While the participants could understand and confidently communicate several everyday items of vocabulary in Spanish and could hold simple conversations, they did not have the more advanced command of Spanish required to produce complex sentences, or to understand much of the dialogues of the clips they were shown during the study without the assistance of interlingual subtitles.

#### 4.2. Ethical Approval and Consent

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Modern Languages at Queen's University Belfast. Permission was obtained from the school principal and information letters and Informed Participant Release Forms were sent to parents. When undertaking a study with children, it is especially important to ensure that the relevant ethical issues are fully considered, and that the research is designed and conducted in a way that respects their needs, rights and capabilities. Thus, the active, freely given, ongoing consent of each child was also sought. Each child was read an assent form, which was written in clear, age-appropriate language and approved in advance by the children's teacher. As regards confidentiality and anonymity, all data and transcriptions were anonymised by allocating an identification code to each participant and were stored and processed securely and in confidence.

#### 4.3. AV Materials

Participants were shown two clips from a Mexican animated film, *La Leyenda de la Llorona* [The Legend of the Weeping Woman] (De Fuentes & García de Letona, 2011), in Spanish with English

---

<sup>6</sup> Homogeneous sampling is a non-probability, purposive sampling method which involves selecting "settings, groups, and/or individuals based on similar or specific characteristics (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007, p. 285).

subtitles. Both clips, coded WKM (*With Kika's Mother*) and LL (*La Llorona*) in Table 1, contain complete scenes and present coherent sections of the film's story arc. Thus, as illustrated in Table 1, the clips are of comparable rather than identical duration. Word count and rate of the source dialogues are also comparable. Comparability of subtitle density was also a criterion of selection – the differences between the numbers of subtitles, two-line subtitles and characters per second are small. While the differences between the numbers of characters and percentage of time that the subtitles are on screen are somewhat larger, a degree of variation is to be expected, particularly since the aim was to create subtitles that are analogous to good quality commercial subtitles rather than to impose artificial restrictions for the aims of the study. Overall, the clips were deemed comparable and suitable for use as stimuli in the present study.

Table 1.

*Density of Source Dialogue and Subtitles in Clips*

Clip	Duration (seconds)	Source dialogue				Subtitles			
		Word count	Words per second	No. subtitles	No. 2-line subtitles	% 2-line subtitles	No. characters	Characters /second	% time subtitles on screen
<b>WKM</b>	106	169	1.59	40	6	15%	821	11.09	65.25%
<b>LL</b>	116	177	1.53	39	5	13%	768	10.63	57.1%

Source: Black (2017, p. 62).

The subtitle speed conformed with the traditional six-second rule, as recommended by the BBC (Ford Williams, 2009) for its channel aimed at viewers in middle childhood, CBBC. The typeface used was Arial, following Tamayo (2015) and Zárte (2014). Participants were shown printed images of the characters, which served as visual prompts, as recommended in the literature on conducting research with children (de Leeuw, 2011; Scott, 2000). Brief textual information about the story was also read aloud to participants to give them the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the narrative and the Spanish and Nahuatl names of the characters and the location of the film. This film was selected firstly because it presents the well-known Mexican myth of the ghost of *La Llorona*, and could therefore be used in classrooms not only as a resource for learning Spanish, but also as a stimulus for learning about Mexican folklore and culture. Moreover, the film was a commercial success and was critically well-received in Mexico. Thus, it was chosen for its popularity with Mexican children, which is likely to be the case not only as it represents aspects of Mexican folklore and culture which are meaningful for Mexican children, but also because it is full of action, comedy, and scary moments. These aspects of the film would almost certainly make it attractive to child viewers from other cultures as well.



#### 4.4. Semi-Structured Interviews

According to the research on interviewing children, if designed and conducted carefully, semi-structured interviews are suitable from the early years of middle childhood onwards (Borgers et al., 2000; Scott, 2000). Scott (2000) points out that interviewing addresses the issue of developing literacy, as children can express themselves in more complex, nuanced ways verbally than in writing. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted rather than unstructured or structured interviews as while children in middle childhood cannot generally be expected to focus on and discuss a topic at length or in depth without considerable guidance, interviewers of children also usually require more flexibility than is possible in a structured interview. They are likely to need to repeat questions in paraphrased form (Scott, 1997), and to use prompts and probes to encourage and guide participants to focus on and explore the topic further. Indeed, the researcher-interviewer found that prompts were often needed to gently encourage quieter children to talk more about the topics, and probes to explore aspects of the topics in greater depth, since participants often initially gave short responses.

The structure of the interview topics discussed was as follows:

1. Discussion of participants' responses to questions in an earlier questionnaire (see Black, 2017). The discussions analysed in this article were in response to the following questions:
  - a. How hard or easy were the subtitles to read?
  - b. How hard or easy was it to understand the story of the videos?
  - c. Were the subtitles too fast, too slow or about right?
  - d. Did you enjoy watching the videos?
2. Do you watch films, TV programmes or videos in other languages with English subtitles?
3. Participants' views on having access to subtitled TV programmes and films for children in other languages with subtitles in their L1 (English).
4. Any other topics participants wish to discuss or final comments.

The researcher-interviewer took care to use clear, unambiguous language, and in an attempt to mitigate any potential effects of acquiescence or social desirability biases, participants were told that it was okay for them to say that they did not like or enjoy something. Furthermore, the researcher-interviewer made sure not to ask leading questions (Scott, 1997), and paid attention to body language, facial expressions and tone of voice to avoid unwittingly exhibiting non-verbal leading behaviour. The interviews were held with participants in pairs, each lasting 10 minutes. 15 minutes is the maximum time suggested by Hill et al. (2009) for interviews with children of this age, as some find just talking without the focus provided by activities or games difficult. All of the interviews were video recorded and transcribed.



#### 4.5. Participatory Workshops

Two 40-minute participatory workshops were held with all participants as a group prior to and following the other elements of the larger study and the interviews. They were held in the classroom where participants attend Spanish lessons and were recorded and transcribed. The main aims of the workshops were to recognise and promote the capabilities of children as competent, active participants in the research process, and to encourage the children to reflect and express themselves freely on their opinions and experiences of subtitles. It was moreover intended that the participants would benefit from a broader understanding of translation and subtitles.

Figure 1.

*Participants Stick Cards About Research on the Whiteboard*



Source: Black (2017, p. 147).

The first workshop began with a warm-up activity, followed by a group discussion exploring the question “What is translation?”. The purpose of this was for the children to attain a collective understanding, at an age-appropriate level, of what translation is and can be, and to stimulate reflection on the variety of different types of translation. Then, we discussed the question “What are subtitles?”, and played a translation game, in which the children translated simple phrases and sentences from Spanish into English. The main aims of the game were for the children to think about how they can be translators, and about how we cannot always translate word for word. After this, the children shared their experiences and opinions of watching subtitled television programmes and films. They also watched a subtitled clip of an Argentinean children’s film and commented on their experience of reading the subtitles. The principal aspiration of these activities was for the children to become more aware of subtitling as a form of translation and of the variety of AV content from different countries that they can access through subtitles. Finally, the children engaged in a group discussion in response to the question “What is research?” and took part in an interactive game, which involved sticking statements about what research can be, on the board (see Figure 1).

The second workshop began with a collective thought shower activity (Hill et al., 2009), during which the children's memories of the most meaningful aspects of the research project were elicited. Then, the children took part in a "Draw and write" exercise (Thomson, 2008), during which they created posters representing their experiences and opinions of having taken part in this research project. This activity aimed at giving the children space to create a visual and verbal representation of their experience of having participated. Moreover, as Leitch finds, activities involving drawing can "engage children and young people's creative tendencies and are intrinsically motivating and inclusive" (2008, p. 51). The use of innovative visual research methods in participatory studies with children has grown in recent years, and is situated within the sub-field of "visual sociology" (Thomson, 2008, p. 8). However, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, the study contained herein includes a first and exploratory attempt at adding a participatory element into AVT reception research with children.

## 5. Results

This section presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops. The results have been divided into categories according to the questions presented in sections 4.4 and 4.5, as explained below in sections 5.1 and 5.2.

### 5.1. Semi-Structured Interview Findings

Participants' responses to the questions listed in section 4.4 were analysed and are presented in this section. The data collected and analysed from the responses have been categorised as follows: data pertaining to Q1.a. & Q1.b. = *self-reported effort*, Q1.c. = *subtitle speed*, Q1.d. = *enjoyment*, Q2. = *participants' prior experiences of viewing subtitled AV content*, and Q3. = *participants' views on accessing subtitled AV content at home*.

#### 5.1.1. Self-Reported Effort

In response to the questions "How hard or easy were the subtitles to read?" and "How hard or easy was it to understand the story of the videos?" a large majority of the children confirmed they found it easy or very easy to read the subtitles in time and felt they understood what was happening in the clips. However, a few participants talked about the difficulties they had experienced. Participant 5 observed that it is more challenging to understand subtitled AV content in other languages than in one's L1 because you have to rely on the subtitles: "Sometimes when you're watching something in a different language it's a bit harder to understand 'cause you don't know, like, you can't hear them saying it. All you know is the subtitles."

### **5.1.2. Subtitle Speed**

In response to the question “Were the subtitles too fast, too slow or about right?” the majority of the children confirmed they were happy with the speed of the subtitles which they felt was about right for them. For example, Participant 1 felt she got used to the speed of the subtitles quickly. However, some participants found the subtitles too fast. Participant 6 commented that they were “a wee bit too fast”. Participants 2 and 9 also said they found the subtitles too fast, and commented it was because they felt they were slow at reading. Moreover, Participant 5 stated that he would have liked the subtitles to be a bit slower, as he did not have enough time to read all of them. Furthermore, as explained in section 5.2.3, two other participants stated on their posters that they had found the subtitles fast, even though they had not indicated as such in the interviews.

### **5.1.3. Enjoyment**

All except one of the children said they had enjoyed watching the videos, with several commenting enthusiastically that they found the characters funny, or enjoyed the action in the clips. However, Participant 2 felt that she did not enjoy watching the videos so much, as she found it difficult to understand them and to keep up with the speed of the subtitles. Some participants explained that they liked reading the subtitles because they enjoy reading in general, such as Participant 15, who commented, “I just like reading subtitles. I like reading.” Others enjoyed the experience of listening to the characters speaking in a different language and being able to understand what they were saying by reading the subtitles, such as Participant 16, who explained, “I liked the fact that you could, like, listen to other people’s languages and know what they were saying from the subtitles” and Participant 14, who stated, “I liked the way, like, it was in a different language, and you could know what they were saying.” Participant 11 enjoyed the learning experience of watching the subtitled clips, commenting that “it’s fun to learn”.

### **5.1.4. Participants’ Prior Experiences of Viewing Subtitled AV Content**

Participants’ interview responses revealed that they had had little exposure to interlingual subtitles prior to taking part in this study. Most reported having viewed interlingual subtitles only once or twice in their lives, and for some it was their first experience of watching AV content with interlingual subtitles. Moreover, some did not distinguish between intralingual subtitles for viewers who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing (SDH) and interlingual subtitles. For example, when asked what kind of subtitled AV content in other languages they had watched, Participant 2 responded that she had seen her mother watching her favourite programmes on TV with SDH, and Participant 9 commented that he had seen a film in English on Netflix with English subtitles.

Nevertheless, the children could recall the specific occasions on which they had watched subtitled AV content in other languages clearly, and recounted these enthusiastically, which revealed that

these experiences had made an impression on the participants and had been enjoyable. Moreover, they had watched a surprising variety of types of subtitled AV content in different languages and on a range of platforms and devices. Participant 15 had watched Japanese Godzilla films on his computer, Participant 11 had viewed songs from the film *Frozen* (2013) in different languages on DVD and YouTube, and Participant 10 had seen trailers of films in other languages at the cinema. Moreover, participants had not only watched contemporary AV content: Participant 8 had watched the silent film *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), and described the intertitles, and Participant 12 explained that he had watched a multilingual subtitled film: *The Longest Day* (1962). Not all participants gave examples of watching AV content from other countries: Participant 10 recounted having seen TV programmes in Irish with English subtitles. However, for several participants, their only experience of watching films and TV programmes in other languages with subtitles was while abroad on holiday.

Interestingly, some participants were able to identify some of the technical features of subtitles; namely, that some subtitles can be turned on and off while others cannot (closed/open subtitles) and that some films and television programmes are multilingual. Moreover, Participant 11 observed that while subtitles normally appear at the bottom of the screen, if there are other words there, such as on a signpost, the subtitles move to the top of the screen.

#### 5.1.5. Participants' Views on Accessing Subtitled TV at Home

When asked whether they would like to have more access to subtitled AV content in other languages at home on their television screens, and whether they would watch it, the children's responses were overwhelmingly positive. Participant 1 was very enthusiastic, stating, "I would definitely put that on my TV. I would actually buy a TV that only did that if I could" and Participant 7 said she thought it was a good idea because "it's a lot more fun, like, 'cause you get to read and watch at the same time". Participant 1 also commented positively on the idea of watching and reading the dialogue in the subtitles at the same time, as she felt that:

...you would really get to see what they are actually saying. [...] You get to see what that person actually is like on the inside, 'cause what they are saying kinda represents what they are on the inside. I would like that, for the learning experience.

Only Participant 3 expressed some reservations, saying he would rather watch programmes in English, but that if the AV content in other languages was good and he liked it he would watch it.

Many of the children stated that they would like to have more access to subtitled AV content in other languages on their television screens because they felt that it would help them to learn other languages in a fun way. Participant 5 remarked that he would enjoy looking at the subtitles to check words he does not understand, and commented, "You would kind of enjoy watching it and you would also get taught a bit of another language as well, at the same time as watching it." Participant 12 commented in similar vein:

I like it because you can learn different languages while reading subtitles in English, you can know, like if you don't know words, you can check on the subtitles and then you know how to say that word.

Participant 11 felt similarly, noting that watching subtitled AV content in other languages could supplement language learning at school or with family: "You can learn different languages, and different countries, and different words that you never knew before in school or class or when your mum and dad maybe teaches you." Participant 6 also thought that watching subtitled AV content in other languages would help him "get smarter". Some also noted they could learn about other countries, how people live there, and "what they believe in" (Participant 16). Moreover, a few of the children commented that it would be nice to be able to share the experience of watching and understanding the same children's programmes as family members or friends from other countries or who speak other languages.

## **5.2. Findings of the Participatory Workshops**

This section presents findings from the group discussions held during the first participatory workshop exploring the questions "What is translation?" and "What are subtitles?". Data collected on participants' views and experiences of watching subtitled AV content during both workshops and on the posters created during the "Draw and write" activity (see section 4.5) in the second workshop are also presented.

### **5.2.1. What is Translation?**

During this discussion, the children identified several translation modes and contexts. They defined a translator as someone who knows more than one language, and identified that translation can be spoken, written or signed. For example, several participants identified interpreting as a form of translation, commenting that interpreters can help people who do not speak the language of the country which they are living in or visiting. One participant noted that sign languages are different from spoken languages, and can also be translated. The children commented that they learn sign language at school, and one participant explained that she uses sign language to communicate with and interpret for a family member.

### **5.2.2. What are Subtitles?**

The children constructed a definition of subtitles together through their responses, and identified various uses and technical features of subtitles. For example, they identified both interlingual subtitles and intralingual SDH, with some participants displaying an awareness that SDH can be beneficial not only for viewers who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing but also for audiences in general, such as Participant 2, who commented:

Whenever my mum is watching one of her programmes, if she like misses out a word or something, if she can't really understand it she brings up the subtitles, and it is kind of a lot easier for her to read.

In their posters, several participants wrote that they had learned that subtitles can be in any language, and that they can "help people understand different languages". Participant 10 commented that subtitles "can be used in lots of different ways". Participant 2 identified the dynamic nature of subtitles compared to printed text, commenting that you have to read subtitles faster because they appear and disappear on the screen, and that subtitles are often in different colours<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, Participant 2 noticed that, in the clip of the Argentinean film they watched during the first workshop, the subtitles sometimes remained on the screen over shot changes, commenting that the picture changed while the subtitle did not.<sup>8</sup> A few participants also specified that subtitles can appear in different colours in their posters, and in different places on the screen.

### 5.2.3. The Children's Views and Experiences of Watching Subtitled AV Content

In addition to recounting their experiences of watching subtitled films and television programmes in the semi-structured interviews, the participants also had the opportunity to talk about this in the workshops, with the aim of enriching the data collected on this topic. As was the case in the interviews, the participants recounted a surprising variety of experiences of watching subtitled AV content from different countries, different genres and on various devices. Moreover, in general, the children appeared to have very positive attitudes towards subtitles. They recounted their experiences of watching subtitled AV content with enthusiasm, and most commented that they generally found the subtitles easy to read. Participant 2 commented, "it was very easy for me to read them" and Participant 17 noted, "It was okay reading them. I missed a couple of words." Participant 1 recounted that she had watched a *Monster High* movie on her tablet in a different language with subtitles in English, and reported that "it was actually really easy for me to read since it's for young girls. So, it was pretty easy."

---

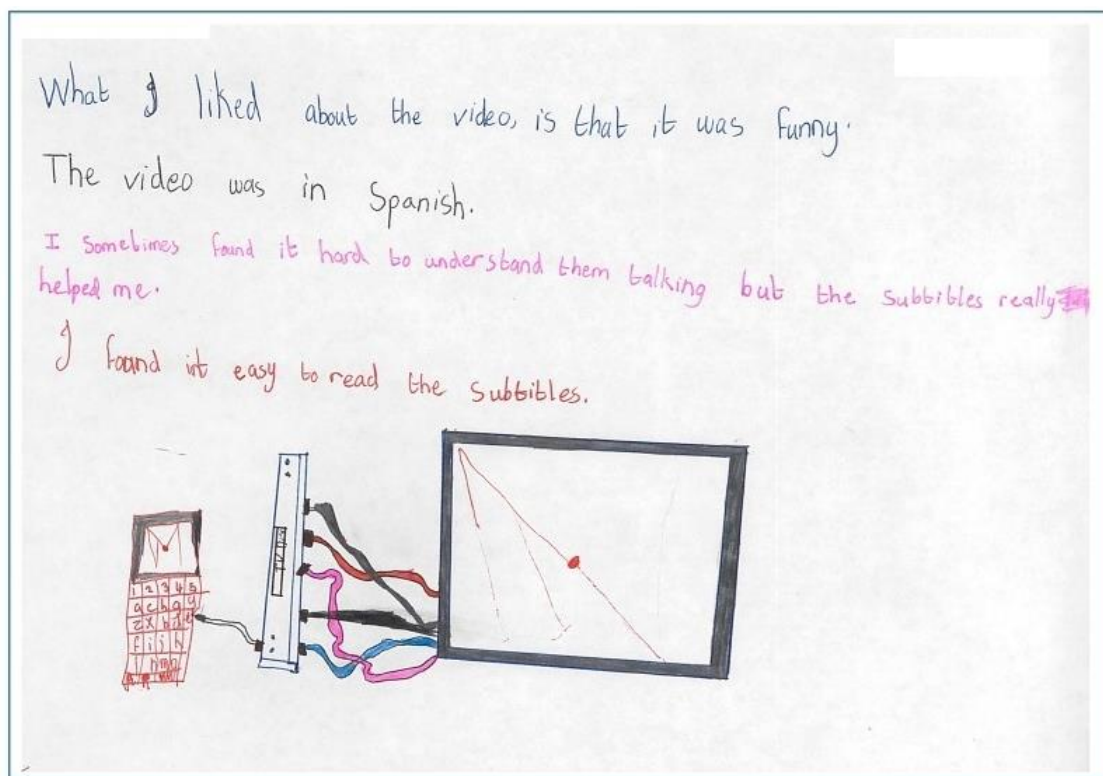
<sup>7</sup> Pre-recorded SDH broadcast by the BBC use different colours to facilitate character identification.

<sup>8</sup> It has long been recommended that leaving subtitles on the screen over shot changes should be avoided wherever possible (Díaz-Cintas and Remael, 2007, pp. 91–92; Luyken, et al., 1991, p. 45), on the basis that this induces disruptive re-reading of the subtitle.



Figure 2.

*Poster Created by Participant 11 Including Eye Tracker*



Source: Black (2017, p. 234).

However, as was the case in the interviews, some of the children found the subtitles too fast. Participant 9 commented that she found the subtitles in the clip shown in the workshop difficult to understand “because I’m not a very good reader”, Participant 1 thought that they were “too quick”, and Participant 3 said he preferred watching AV content in English “because I know exactly what they sound like.” Moreover, in the posters, two participants wrote that they had found the subtitles in the test clips too fast although they had not mentioned it in the interviews or discussions. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 2, Participant 11 commented, “I sometimes found it hard to understand them talking but the subtitles really helped me”. Several participants also mentioned that they learned that reading subtitles was easy, such as Participant 11 (see Figure 2), while Participant 1 had learned that “not all people can read subtitles as well as others”.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The interview and workshop data yielded a rich picture of the children’s views on watching the subtitled videos and their experiences of watching subtitled AV content in other languages in general. Moreover, it seems that including participatory workshops in the study, a novel approach in the field of AVT, was successful in engaging the children as active participants, and sparked their interest in



subtitles and translation. The participants' experiences of watching the subtitled AV clips were found to be positive overall. Most commented that they had experienced low levels of effort when viewing the videos and that they had very much enjoyed watching them. Furthermore, their reactions to the idea of having greater access to subtitled AV content in other languages at home on their screens were overwhelmingly positive, as they thought that it would allow them to learn about other languages and cultures and have fun at the same time. In general, the children communicated very positive, open attitudes towards subtitles, and since preferences in relation to language transfer practices are thought to be largely shaped by habit (Luyken et al., 1991), these findings suggest that children who are not generally accustomed to viewing subtitles may well be more open-minded and willing to accept them than adults. In sum, although the number of participants is small, it can be concluded that the findings of this study support the idea of providing children with more widespread access to subtitled AV content in other languages.

It was found that the children had very little prior experience of watching subtitled AV content in other languages, which is unsurprising given the lack of such content broadcast on television in the UK, as discussed in section 2. However, the participants had watched a surprising variety of types of subtitled AV content in different languages on a range of platforms and devices, and had found these experiences enjoyable and memorable. These findings may challenge assumptions about children's viewing experiences and preferences, such as that they may prefer to watch AV content that has been dubbed or produced in their L1. Moreover, the children were able to identify a range of technical features, uses and benefits of subtitles. For example, they identified interlingual and intralingual subtitles, closed vs open subtitles, and were aware that subtitles are a form of dynamic text that requires faster reading than static text, and that sometimes remain on the screen over shot changes. These results show that children can have a complex, sophisticated understanding of subtitles, even if they have had little exposure to them. In addition, these findings and the posters created by the participants, such as that presented in Figure 2 which includes a detailed drawing of the eye tracker used in the larger study that the present article is based on, demonstrate that children can indeed be knowledgeable participants in the research process who are capable of creating cultural meaning.

Although a majority of the children responded that subtitle speed was not a problem for them, several indicated in the interviews and/or posters that they had found them too fast. Moreover, some participants linked their perceived difficulty in keeping up with the subtitles to their reading abilities, which highlights the importance of displaying subtitles at an appropriate speed for young readers, since subtitles that are too fast may be discouraging for slower readers. Although some experimental research has been performed in recent years with child viewers which has tested subtitle speed or considered subtitle speed as part of its design (see, for example, Cambra et al., 2014; Tamayo, 2015; Tamayo & Chaume, 2017; Zárata, 2014; Zárata & Eliahoo, 2014), such studies have largely focused on subtitles for children who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing. Moreover, as Tamayo (2015) explains, there is considerable variation in the speed of SDH for children, and researchers in this field have recommended different subtitle speeds. Furthermore, the study by Koolstra et al. (1999) seems to be the only research thus far to have tested the processing in hearing children of interlingual subtitles

set at different speeds. Thus, it is evident that further research in this area is required in order to address this knowledge gap.

As this article began by proposing, giving children in the UK greater access to subtitled AV content in other languages would be a simple and inexpensive way to encourage them to learn other languages, which is a pressing concern in the UK given the steep decline in language learning over the past 20 years. Moreover, increased exposure to interlingual subtitled content is likely to be beneficial in the same way to children in other countries, perhaps particularly in dubbing countries. As discussed in section 2, there exists considerable empirical evidence that subtitled AV content can aid children's acquisition of other languages and enhance their reading skills in their L1 or language of the country in which they live and receive schooling.

If children's television channels (such as CBeebies and CBBC in the UK) regularly broadcast high quality children's programmes made in other countries with interlingual subtitles, young viewers would have the opportunity to benefit from the advantages that watching such content has been shown to bring. Moreover, it seems that if more parents were aware of the educational benefits, they might choose to increase their children's exposure to subtitled AV content in other languages, particularly now that they are increasingly using multimedia resources to support their children's education at home. In addition, language teachers may well benefit from a greater awareness of the advantages of using AV content with interlingual subtitles in the classroom. Koolstra & Beentjes (1999) suggest that, if used effectively in an educational setting, television programmes in the students' L2 with L1 subtitles may not only enhance vocabulary acquisition, but may also improve other aspects of students' language skills, such as their grammar, listening skills, pronunciation, or ability to distinguish between different dialects and registers. Moreover, Muñoz (2017) points out that increased exposure to subtitled AV content in other languages in the classroom will motivate students to choose to watch such content at home.

## References

- Alderson, P. (2000). Children as researchers: The effects of participation rights on research methodology. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 241–257). Falmer Press.
- APPG on Modern Languages (2019). *National Recovery Programme for Languages: A framework proposal from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages*.  
<https://nationalrecoverylanguages.weebly.com/>
- Araújo, L., & Dinis da Costa, P. (2013). *The European survey on language competences: School-internal and external factors in language learning*. Publications Office of the European Union.  
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC82366/lbna26078enn.pdf>
- Black, S. (2017). *Through a child's eyes: Investigating the effects of subtitle placement and reading level on children's reception of subtitled audiovisual content* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Queen's University Belfast.
- Black, S. (2020). Could integrated subtitles benefit young viewers? Children's reception of standard and integrated subtitles: A mixed methods approach using eye tracking. *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*. Advance online publication.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2020.1849324>
- Black, S. (2021). The potential benefits of subtitles for enhancing language acquisition and literacy in children: An integrative review of experimental research. *Translation, Cognition & Behavior*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tcb.00051.bla>
- Borgers, N., de Leeuw, E., & Hox, J. (2000). Children as respondents in survey research: Cognitive development and response quality. *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 66, 60–75.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/075910630006600106>
- Bravo, M. (2008). *Putting the reader in the picture: Screen translation and foreign-language learning* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Universitat Rovira i Virgili.  
<https://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/8771#page=1>
- The British Academy (2018). *The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: The current picture*. The British Academy.  
[https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/84/TheLandscapeForHumanitiesAndSocialSciencesInHigherEducation\\_0.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/84/TheLandscapeForHumanitiesAndSocialSciencesInHigherEducation_0.pdf)
- The British Academy, The Academy of Medical Sciences, Royal Academy of Engineering, & The Royal Society (2019). *Languages in the UK: A call for action*. The British Academy.  
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/61/Languages-UK-2019-academies-statement.pdf>
- Cambra, C., Penacchio, O., Silvestre, N., & Leal, A. (2014). Visual attention to subtitles when viewing a cartoon by deaf and hearing children: An eye-tracking pilot study. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 22(4), 607–617. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2014.923477>
- Chiaro, D., & Piferi, R. (2010). "It's green! It's cool! It's Shrek!" Italian children, laughter and subtitles. In E. Di Giovanni, C. Elefante, & R. Pederzoli (Eds.), *Écrire et traduire pour les enfants: Voix, images et mots* [Writing and translating for children: Voices, images and texts] (pp. 283–302). Peter Lang.
- Clark, J. (2004). Participatory research with children and young people: Philosophy, possibilities and perils. *Action Research Expeditions*, 4, 1–18.
- Coolican, H. (2014). *Research methods and statistics in psychology* (6th ed.). Psychology Press.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage Publications.

- De Leeuw, E. (2011). *Improving data quality when surveying children and adolescents: Cognitive and social development and its role in questionnaire construction and pretesting*. Utrecht University.  
[https://www.aka.fi/globalassets/tietysti1.fi/awanhat/documents/tiedostot/lapset/presentations-of-the-annual-seminar-10-12-may-2011/surveying-children-and-adolescents\\_de-leeuw.pdf](https://www.aka.fi/globalassets/tietysti1.fi/awanhat/documents/tiedostot/lapset/presentations-of-the-annual-seminar-10-12-may-2011/surveying-children-and-adolescents_de-leeuw.pdf)
- D'Ydewalle, G., & De Bruycker, W. (2007). Eye movements of children and adults while reading television subtitles. *European Psychologist*, 12(3), 196–205. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040.12.3.196>
- D'Ydewalle, G., & Van de Poel, M. (1999). Incidental foreign-language acquisition by children watching subtitled television programs. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 28(3), 227–244. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023202130625>
- D'Ydewalle, G., & Van Rensbergen, J. (1989). Developmental studies of text-picture interactions in the perception of animated cartoons with text. In H. Mandl & J. R. Levin (Eds.), *Knowledge acquisition from text and pictures* (pp. 233–248). Elsevier Science Publishers.
- Díaz-Cintas, J., & Remael, A. (2007). *Audiovisual translation: Subtitling* (reprint 2012.). St. Jerome Publishing.
- Ford Williams, G. (2009). *Online subtitling editorial guidelines V1.1*. BBC.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/futuremedia/accessibility/subtitling\\_guides/online\\_sub\\_editorial\\_guidelines\\_vs1\\_1.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/futuremedia/accessibility/subtitling_guides/online_sub_editorial_guidelines_vs1_1.pdf)
- Hill, L., Gallagher, M., & Whiting, C. (2009). Group work toolkit. In E. K. M. Tisdall, J. M. Davis, & M. Gallagher (Eds.), *Researching with children and young people: Research design, method and analysis* (pp. 128–153). Sage Publications.
- Hulstijn, J. H. (2001). Intentional and incidental second language vocabulary learning: A reappraisal of elaboration, rehearsal and automaticity. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Cognition and second language instruction* (pp. 258–286). Cambridge University Press.
- Kelly, M. (2018). Conclusion: Steps towards a strategy for the UK. In M. Kelly (Ed.), *Languages after Brexit: How the UK speaks to the world* (pp. 251–256). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Koolstra, C. M., & Beentjes, J. W. J. (1999). Children's vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language through watching subtitled television programs at home. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 47(1), 51–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30220229>
- Koolstra, C. M., van der Voort, T. H. A., & van der Kamp, L. J. T. (1997). Television's impact on children's reading comprehension and decoding skills: A 3-year panel study. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 32(2), 128–152. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.32.2.1>
- Koolstra, C. M., van der Voort, T. H. A., & d'Ydewalle, G. (1999). Lengthening the presentation time of subtitles on television: Effects on children's reading time and recognition. *Communications*, 24(4), 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.1999.24.4.407>
- Koskinen, P. S., Wilson, R. M., & Jensema, C. J. (1986). Using closed-captioned television in the teaching of reading to deaf students. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 131(1), 43–46. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44400669>
- Kothari, B., & Bandyopadhyay, T. (2014). Same language subtitling of Bollywood film songs on TV: Effects on literacy. *Information Technologies and International Development*, 10(4), 31–47. <https://itidjournal.org/index.php/itid/article/view/1307.html>
- Kothari, B., Takeda, J., Joshi, A., & Pandey, A. (2002). Same language subtitling: A butterfly for literacy? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 21(1), 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370110099515>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.

- Kuppens, A. H. (2010). Incidental foreign language acquisition from media exposure. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 35(1), 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439880903561876>
- Leitch, R. (2008). Creatively researching children's narratives through images and drawings. In P. Thomson (Ed.), *Doing visual research with children and young people* (pp. 37–58). Routledge.
- Linebarger, D. (2001). Learning to read from television: The effects of using captions and narration. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(2), 288–298. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.93.2.288>
- Linebarger, D., Piotrowski, J. T., & Greenwood, C. R. (2010). On-screen print: The role of captions as a supplemental literacy tool. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 33(2), 148–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.2009.01407.x>
- Long, R., Danechi S., & Loft, P. (2020). *Language teaching in schools (England)*. (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No 07388). House of Commons Library.
- Luyken, G. M., Herbst, T., Langham-Brown, J., Reid, H., & Spinhof, H. (1991). *Overcoming language barriers in television: Dubbing and subtitling for the European audience*. The European Institute for the Media.
- Marzà, A., & Torralba, G. (2014). Incidental language learning through subtitled cartoons: Is it possible in a dubbing country? In Y. Gambier, A. Caimi, & C. Mariotti (Eds.), *Subtitles and language learning: Principles, strategies and practical experiences* (pp. 199–219). Peter Lang.
- Media Consulting Group (2011). *Study on the use of subtitling: The potential of subtitling to encourage foreign language learning and improve the mastery of foreign languages*. European Commission. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e4d5cbf4-a839-4a8a-81d0-7b19a22cc5ce>
- Muñoz, C. (2017). The role of age and proficiency in subtitle reading. An eye tracking study. *System*, 67, 77–86. <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.04.015>
- Neuman, S. B., & Koskinen, P. S. (1992). Captioned television as comprehensible input: Effects of incidental word learning from context for language minority students. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 27(1), 94–106. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED332538>
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Collins, K. M. T. (2007). A typology of mixed methods sampling designs in social science research. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(2), 281–316. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2007.1638>
- Parkhill, F., Johnson, J., & Bates, J. (2011). Capturing literacy learners: Evaluating a reading programme using popular novels and films with subtitles. *Digital Culture & Education*, 3(2), 140–156.
- Rodríguez, A. (Director). (2011). *La Leyenda de la Llorona* [Film]. Ánima Estudios, Eficine 226.
- Scott, J. (1997). Children as respondents: Methods for improving data quality. In L. Lyberg, P. Biemer, M. Collins, E. de Leeuw, C. Dippo, N. Schwarz, & D. Trewin (Eds.), *Survey measurement and process quality* (pp. 331–350). John Wiley & Sons.
- Scott, J. (2000). Children as respondents: The challenge for quantitative methods. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 98–119). Falmer Press.
- Tamayo, A. (2015). *Estudio descriptivo y experimental de la subtitulación en TV para niños sordos: una propuesta alternativa* [[Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Universitat Jaume I. <https://tesisenred.net/bitstream/handle/10803/353962/atamayo.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Tamayo, A., & Chaume, F. (2017). Subtitling for d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing children: Current practices and new possibilities to enhance language development. *Brain Sciences*, 7(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci7070075>

- Thomson, P. (2008). Children and young people: Voices in visual research. In P. Thomson (Ed.), *Doing visual research with children and young people* (pp. 1–20). Routledge.
- Tinsley, T., & Doležal, N. (2018). *Language trends 2018. Language teaching in primary and secondary schools in England: Survey report*. The British Council.  
[https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language\\_trends\\_2018\\_report.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_2018_report.pdf)
- Veale, A. (2005). Creative methodologies in participatory research with children. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experience* (pp. 253–273). Sage Publications.
- Zárate, S. (2014). *Subtitling for deaf children: Granting accessibility to audiovisual programmes in an educational way* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University College London.  
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1455707/>
- Zárate, S., & Eliahoo, J. (2014). Word recognition and content comprehension of subtitles for television by deaf children. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 21, 133–152.  
[https://jostrans.org/issue21/art\\_zarate.php](https://jostrans.org/issue21/art_zarate.php)