Effects of age and proficiency on subtitle reading. An eye-tracking study

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Research suggests that watching FL video material with subtitles may improve language acquisition because different input modes reinforce one another (e.g. Bird & Williams, 2002). However, we still know very little about learners’ reading behaviour and the ways in which they may benefit from viewing subtitled material most. One important issue is learner age, i.e., whether school children can effectively benefit from this activity, and whether their reading behaviour differs when subtitles are in the L1 or the FL (D’Ydewalle & De Bruycker, 2007; Koolstra et al. 1997). A related issue is learner FL proficiency and the ways in which viewers’ proficiency level may affect learner reading behaviour of L1 and FL subtitles (e.g. Danan, 2004).

The present study uses eye-tracking to explore the extent to which learners’ behaviour when reading subtitles, in their native language and the FL (captions), may be influenced by learner age and FL proficiency. The participants are 38 Spanish learners of English with different proficiency levels (from A1 to C2) distributed into two age groups. One composed of primary school students (grades 5/6), and the other of older students. They all watched two excerpts from a TV cartoon series, one with L1 subtitles and the other with FL subtitles in a counterbalanced order. They completed a questionnaire about the frequency with which they viewed films with FL soundtrack and subtitles, and their perception of the task as well. Preliminary results show that age affects the number of fixations of the viewers in both the native language and the FL and that proficiency is negatively associated with the number of fixations as well as their duration. The educational relevance of the findings will be discussed, as well as their implications for FL learning in countries with a dubbing tradition.

Keywords: age, proficiency, eye-tracking.