

Book Review

Language Learning Through Captioned Videos: Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

By Mark Feng Teng.

New York: Routledge, 2021. viii + 103 pp.

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This book is a pedagogy- and research-oriented introduction to incidental vocabulary acquisition through captions. As an experienced EFL teacher, an active researcher in the applied linguistics and TESOL communities, and initially an English L2 learner himself, Teng seeks to present captions' effectiveness in language learning, promote their pedagogical application, and encourage further investigation. Through its practicality and accessibility, the book distinguishes itself among all other volumes regarding language learning through multimedia. Besides reviewing basic concepts, theories, issues, and empirical studies about captions in incidental vocabulary acquisition, the book addresses teachers and junior researchers directly, offering pragmatic and succinct suggestions about how to integrate captions into classroom instruction and how to conduct related research.

Chapter 1 introduces basic concepts and issues in incidental vocabulary acquisition. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is “a slow and error-prone process with partial vocabulary gains” (p. 11). Since language learners may encounter obstacles such as unintentional neglect of newly encountered words and poor meaning-inferencing ability, they may gain little knowledge about new words while acquiring language in the wild. To remedy this ineffectiveness, Teng promotes the use of captioned viewing for incidental vocabulary acquisition, which can compel learners

to process new words. For instance, the bimodal input provided by audiovisual materials may allow learners to infer a word's meaning from either verbal or nonverbal input, which can enhance their comprehension of the word and the content.

Chapter 2 sheds light on captions, encompassing their definitions, features, and theoretical frameworks that support their effectiveness in language learning. The chapter distinguishes "captions" from "subtitles." "Captions" refer to "the on-screen text in students' native language combined with a second-language soundtrack in the video" (p. 18), while "subtitles" refer to "the on-screen text in a learner's original language combined with a soundtrack in the same language" (p. 18). To present the process of language learning through captions, Teng proposes a model delineating the effects of the dual-model presentation technique, which could help establish the form-meaning links of words. The dual inputs (auditory and visual) provided by captioned videos are assumed to be inadequate to determine a word's meaning. Instead, the inputs should interact with learners' prior knowledge and co-contribute to their working memory, which "functions as the central executive" (p. 30). The working memory will coordinate external information and finally facilitate the development of form-meaning links.

Chapter 3 focuses on captions' advantages and disadvantages in language learning and incidental vocabulary acquisition. Teng proposes language proficiency as one influential factor in learners' perceptions and processing of captioned videos. He supports this claim with one correlational study investigating the flipped teaching of language through captions, which showed that "listening and reading comprehension significantly affected students' ability to comprehend captioned videos" (p. 38). The study also used surveys and interviews to explore students' perceptions toward captions for language learning. The chapter highlights five key elements as predictive effects of captions in individuals' language learning through their enhancement in listening and reading comprehension: (1) accuracy, (2) comprehension, (3) retention, (4) engagement, and (5) confidence. However, some factors may delineate learning outcomes, such as information overload, overreliance on captions, and poor-quality multimedia materials, among others.

Chapters 4 and 5 are more research-oriented. Chapter 4 discusses existing studies supporting captions' effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary, including a brief review of current findings and three

meticulously illustrated studies. Chapter 5 outlines five tentative research designs to present how to design, conduct, and produce quality research about language learning through captioned viewing. Each research design contains a detailed description of its background, goal, methodology, and potential topics for future research. A checklist is also attached to this chapter for doctoral students' self-reflection on their research designs.

Chapter 6 concludes the book. It reiterates the author's purpose for writing the book, summarizes the previous content that is covered, and suggests future research topics on incidental vocabulary acquisition through captions. Beginners may find learning languages through captions more challenging compared with advanced L2 learners. While encouraging the use of captioned video viewing for beginning language learners, Teng emphasizes that these captioned videos must suit beginners' proficiencies. Teng also provides four suggestions for how to choose suitable captioned videos for different learners.

We recommend this book to EFL teachers and junior researchers. For EFL teachers, the book provides both innovative methods and practical suggestions for L2 teaching. Written in a friendly tone, the book shows captions' effectiveness in incidental vocabulary acquisition and presents concepts, theories, and issues that help EFL teachers "approach incidental vocabulary teaching and learning in a principled, thoughtful way" (Teng, 2021). Besides, the book also provides practical suggestions on how EFL teachers can more effectively incorporate captions into their teaching. For instance, while presenting the captions' benefits in vocabulary acquisition, Chapter 3 concludes by listing factors that may negate optimal learning outcomes, such as learners' proficiency and motivation. In Chapter 6, to make producing captioned videos more accessible, Teng even includes step-by-step guidance and the dos and don'ts of making captioned videos.

For junior researchers, the book also holds value. First, the book offers beginners a basic understanding of incidental vocabulary acquisition through captions with a systematic and succinct review of the related concepts, models, and theories. Second, the book may assist junior researchers in their research designs. For example, in Chapters 4 and 5, intelligible examples of studies or research projects set good examples for research design. Besides, in Chapter 5, suggestions regarding research details such as target word selection, pretest question setting, data analysis software selection, and more are provided. The

“checklist for effective research design” attached to the end of Chapter 5 is also valuable for beginners to examine their research designs.

This book also has its limitations. As mentioned by Teng himself, the book “only provides a brief description of captions and their applications” (p. 95). To make this introductory volume less daunting, some of the content in this book has been simplified. In Chapter 1, perhaps to avoid confusion, Teng cites only Hulstijn’s (2013) definition of “incidental vocabulary acquisition,” which is more methodology-oriented. Chapter 3 discusses captions’ pros and cons for incidental vocabulary acquisition mainly based on students’ feedback from one single study; the quantified effectiveness of captions in enhancing vocabulary acquisition remains relatively unexpanded. In Chapter 4, none of the three illustrated studies of incidental vocabulary acquisition through captions target languages other than English and they are all from a Hong Kong context. For further reading on language learning through captions, we recommend Vanderplank’s (2016) *Captioned Media in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing as Tools for Language Learning*. It may complement readers’ understanding of captions’ functions in a more diverse context besides incidental vocabulary acquisition.

To conclude, *Language Learning Through Captioned Videos: Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition* is an introductory book that provides both informative reviews and practical suggestions about incidental vocabulary acquisition through captioned viewing. The book asserts captions’ effectiveness in incidental vocabulary acquisition and supports this claim with existing studies. Caveats for better instructional application of captions and step-by-step guidance on the research design of incidental vocabulary acquisition through captioned viewing are also provided.

References

- Hulstijn, J. H. (2013). Incidental learning in second language acquisition. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 2632–2640). Wiley-Blackwell.
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