

CHOOSING BETWEEN DUBBING AND SUBTITLING IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

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Abstract – Nowadays, audiences worldwide are increasingly accessing audiovisuals in languages different from their own, even in world areas that do not traditionally use subtitling as the mainstream audiovisual translation (AVT) mode. The trend is linked to the rise of new media and viewing platforms, where users are offered multiple and more flexible viewing options. Systematic research on viewers' consumption of different translation modes is scant. The current study follows up on Pavesi and Ghia (2020) and reports on a questionnaire-based investigation conducted among 305 postgraduate students in several disciplines at a middle-sized university in Italy – a traditionally dubbing country. The study focuses on participants' choice of languages and AVT modes, namely subtitling and dubbing, when watching foreign language films and TV-series. Viewers' reasons for their choices are investigated, and different viewer profiles are outlined crossing participants' preferences with data on their academic and L2 learning background. The emerging picture is quite diversified: while many participants show a strong orientation to subtitled media, some still opt for dubbing. Viewers' choices are not primarily driven by (un)availability or an unfavourable evaluation of AVT modes, but mainly result from an orientation to the foreign language or from sociability and watching dynamics. Choices also associate with different viewer profiles, where students' L2 background plays a relevant role.

Keywords: dubbing; subtitling; audiovisual texts; viewing modes; viewer profiles.

1. Introduction

Recent research in Europe and worldwide shows that individuals, especially from the younger segments of the population, are consistently exposed to a variety of media in languages other than their own – primarily English (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Muñoz 2020). Amidst the wealth of resources available, telecinematic texts, i.e. films and television series, occupy a prominent place, and exposure to telecinematic input in English is one of the privileged settings where informal contact with the language takes place, even in traditionally dubbing countries where subtitling is not the mainstream translation option (Socokett 2014; Vanderplank 2020; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Caruana 2021). Viewers' preference for foreign-language and subtitled audiovisuals goes hand in hand with online access, as original and subtitled versions are sometimes available via Internet much earlier than their dubbed counterparts – i.e. as soon as the product is released. Additionally, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime are constantly on the rise, and allow viewers to watch films and TV-series in their original language, with or without subtitles, and in several dubbed versions (Jenner 2018). Access to audiovisuals thus becomes entirely self-regulated, and it's the audience itself who is able to schedule its own viewing times and modalities. Although an increasing number of SVOD contents is being released in several languages, English is still dominant, with the majority of telecinematic texts being US productions (Bednarek 2018).

While exposure to English-language audiovisuals is growing even outside subtitling regions, viewers still access foreign films and TV productions via other audiovisual translation (AVT) modalities, such as dubbing. Systematic research on audiences' consumption of different translation modes and audiovisual languages is scant, but it may be useful to shed light on changing viewing dynamics across geographical areas, social groups, exposure contexts and proficiency levels in the foreign language.

This study offers an overview of viewing preferences among a sample of postgraduate students at a middle-sized university in Italy, and is a follow-up of a wider survey on informal contact with English (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). The investigation is questionnaire-based and explores viewers' exposure to films and TV-series from English-speaking countries looking at preferred viewing modes (subtitled vs. dubbed products, subtitle types) and participants' reasons for their choices. Different viewer profiles are reconstructed, connecting viewing habits, university majors, perceived proficiency level in English as a foreign language and mastery of other L2s.

In what follows, Section 2 reviews recent literature on the consumption of subtitled and dubbed audiovisuals, including studies on perception/reception, attitudes and processing. Section 3 describes the study and provides data on participants' access to audiovisual products from primarily English-speaking areas in their subtitled or dubbed versions. Different viewer profiles are outlined based on respondents' preferences for one AVT mode or specific subtitle types. In the Discussion in 4, questionnaire findings are considered in light of the characteristics of subtitling and dubbing. As also remarked in the conclusive section, the results are set in relation to recent research on viewers' attitudes towards different AVT modes and constantly evolving media and viewing supports.

2. Accessing foreign language audiovisuals: Subtitling or dubbing?

One strong motivation for studying subtitling versus dubbing among young generations lies in the notable implications of audiovisual viewing for second language acquisition. Several recent case studies report on informal EFL learning experiences deriving from English-language audiovisuals and other digital resources among the younger generations in Korea (Lee 2020), Hong Kong (Lai, Lyu 2020) and Morocco (Dressman 2020). In Europe, citizens from Scandinavian and northern European countries are exposed to English media – particularly audiovisuals – since childhood and tend to achieve a high level of proficiency in the language (see Kuppens 2010 for Belgium, Flanders; Verspoor *et al.* 2011, the Netherlands; Leppänen *et al.* 2011, Finland; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018, Iceland; Sundqvist, Sylvén 2016, Sweden). This leads to a notable divide between northern and southern European countries (Caruana, Lasagabaster 2013).

In the recent years, audiovisual input is becoming a privileged means of contact with English even in central and southern European countries, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Notably, these countries have a long-standing dubbing tradition and foreign films and TV-programmes are dubbed into the local language for distribution in cinemas and on mainstream television. Sockett (2014) conducted several investigations in France and found that students at different levels and age receive increasing amounts of English input in informal online settings, primarily through exposure to TV-series (Kusyk, Sockett 2012). Kusyk (2017, 2020) found similar results in a large-scale investigation of French and German university students' informal access to English. Bednarek (2018) focused on language specialist university students in Germany (prospective EFL teachers) and their

access to TV-series in English, while Pavesi and Ghia (2020) looked at informal contact with English among postgraduate students in Italy. Muñoz (2020) conducted a large-scale survey among students at different ages in Catalonia, investigating patterns of contact with English through several media based on participants' age and gender. The studies generally show that learner-users spend considerable time watching TV-series and films in their original soundtrack, even when they are not language specialists (Sockett 2014; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). While watching, they usually add subtitles, commonly in their native language. These tend to be progressively replaced by English subtitles when the participants' proficiency level improves (Kusyk 2017; Muñoz 2020), even leading to situations where no subtitles at all are added if the L2 is mastered at near-native or highly advanced level (Bednarek 2018). With respect to northern European countries, viewers in France, Germany, Italy and Spain presumably start to engage in informal activities in English at a later age. However, Muñoz (2020) shows that younger adolescents in Catalonia (aged 12-14) do access English informally nowadays, although the activities they privilege change over time – e.g. older adolescents (aged 15-17) engage in more online activities than their younger peers. The author also found gender differences in students' behaviour, as the female participants reported watching more films and TV-series in English, a tendency that appears to increase with age. In his extensive review of audiovisual input and L2 acquisition, Caruana (2021, pp. 3-5) also mentions several cases in which foreign languages other than English are acquired through exposure to the media, particularly in the Mediterranean area: notable cases include the acquisition of Italian via television in Malta, Albania and the Maghreb region.

While more viewers access foreign language audiovisuals in their original or subtitled version even outside subtitling countries, large sections of the population may still opt for dubbing, which remains a widespread practice in many parts of the world. Among different modalities of language transfer on screen, subtitling and dubbing have been often contrasted from a translational point of view, but have been more rarely compared systematically in terms of audiences' habits and preferences. The studies mentioned above indicate that subtitling is generally increasing in popularity among younger viewers in dubbing countries. Recent research has suggested that, within this part of the population, growing access to audiovisuals via subtitling is accompanied by a decreasing appreciation of dubbing (Casarini 2014; Massidda 2015). Viewers have been reported to complain about the poor quality of dubbing translations, especially with reference to recent TV-series that boast a wide fandom and were often (and still are) fansubbed¹ by the users themselves prior to their official distribution. The decline in the quality of dubbing has been attributed to the increasingly stringent demands by the dubbing industry and the tighter schedules assigned to translators, adaptors and dubbing actors (Massidda 2015, p. 31; InceMedia and UNINT 2019). Moreover, viewers' preferences for an AVT mode over the other are generally linked to individual and social variables – age, degree of familiarity with foreign languages and cultures, general viewing habits, peer group habits (Tuominen 2018), audiovisual genres (Orrego-Carmona 2015) and viewing support (Di Giovanni 2016). Orrego-Carmona (2014, 2015) reports that students from Catalonia often choose AVT modes based on audiovisual genres, since many prefer watching subtitled TV-series but dubbed films. Although dubbing is still the first option among Spanish university students, many choose subtitling as a means to access TV-series online as soon as new episodes are released (Orrego-Carmona 2014).

¹ Although strictly speaking fansubbing and non-professional subtitling are considered an illegal practice, they are still widespread – and still have a considerable impact on viewers' communities and on the visibility of audiovisual products (Čemerin 2021, p. 84; see also Orrego-Carmona 2018).

Furthermore, the continuity of TV-series allows viewers to become familiar with characters' idiolects, leading to a less taxing cognitive experience. Di Giovanni (2016) found that the audience at Italian film festivals generally appreciates subtitling and its quality, and prefers it to dubbing; however, many of the same respondents still opt for dubbing when watching television. In spite of changing scenarios and audience features, viewing habits keep playing a significant role when selecting AVT modes – and are not quick to alter (Di Giovanni 2018). As observed above, viewers' attitudes may largely differ within fan communities or among language and film/TV-series enthusiasts. In these contexts, popular choices in a peer group can affect viewing habits, and sometimes watching audiovisual products in their original version can grant individuals “additional recognition among their peers” (Orrego-Carmona 2014, p. 58). The spread of SVOD services and people's increased access to them similarly affect the choice of specific viewing modes, which can differ from the mainstream trends in a given geographical area.

The differences between dubbing and subtitling also lie in the cognitive mechanisms that spectators activate when engaged with the two viewing modalities. Dubbing is generally claimed to trigger higher immersion and transportation in the telecinematic text, thanks to its semiotic integration, which is not affected by the disruption that subtitling may entail. However, neither mode appears to hinder viewers' enjoyment of audiovisuals, and processing effort is closely intertwined with the audience's habits (Wissmath *et al.* 2009; Perego *et al.* 2016). Subtitle reading occurs quite automatically, and is not always necessarily taxing on viewers. Furthermore, the greater authenticity of subtitled texts can compensate for the increased processing load, granting enjoyment of the experience (Perego *et al.* 2015; Riniolo, Capuana 2020).

Some studies have compared the impact of dubbing and subtitling in terms of required cognitive effort and appreciation by viewers even in typically dubbing areas (Matamala *et al.* 2017; Perego *et al.* 2018). The results generally indicate that subtitling is not always significantly more demanding on a cognitive level, and both modalities lead to similar appreciation and satisfaction, regardless of viewers' habits (Perego *et al.* 2015).

3. The study: Aims, sample, methodology

The current study investigates the dynamics of informal exposure to English-language films and TV-series as part of a wider survey on informal contact with English (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Moving from the survey data, it explores preferences for AVT modes in greater detail and addresses two new research questions: i) What are the privileged AVT modes (dubbing vs. subtitling, types of subtitles) when young viewers access Anglophone audiovisual products in their leisure time? ii) What are the reasons for their choices of viewing modalities?

The survey is based on questionnaires that were distributed in 2016 among second-level degree students from a variety of disciplines at the University of Pavia, Italy. The university context was chosen as students in higher education have been the object of most research on informal contact with English (Sockett 2014; Kusyk 2017) and are often the leading agents of change in language use and trends (Ferguson 2015, p. 15). Postgraduate students were preferred to undergraduates since they are less likely to be attending compulsory English language courses as part of their academic curriculum and were hence believed to be more autonomous in their linguistic choices. The questions analysed in the current paper focus on viewers' exposure to telecinematic products from English-speaking countries (mainly the USA and UK), privileged viewing languages and modalities, and

participants' reasons for their preferences. Data on participants' biographical information and educational background are also included here, so as to provide an overview of the sample composition and outline different viewer profiles in relation to preferred AVT modes.

Questionnaires were administered to participants during regular class hours, and a total 305 questionnaires were collected. 69% of the respondents were female. Mostly non-language specialists were selected, in order to sample as wider a variety of postgraduates as possible, and distributed across several disciplines, including Psychology (48 students), Engineering (47), Pharmacy (45), Biology (40), Economics (33), Chemistry (27), Linguistics (26), Italian Philology (13), Political Science (9), Communication (5) and Mathematics (5). All the students had studied English at school, but most (68%) reported having an intermediate level of competence in the language (CEFR B1 and B2). Only 16% self-assessed as advanced level (CEFR C1), and 16% as beginner's level (CEFR A1, A2). Most of the respondents (71%) reported that they spoke another foreign language or more, although few had been on a study abroad programme (16%).

4. Results

4.1. Watching telecinematic products from English-speaking countries: Participants' preferences and motivations

The first batch of questions that we analyse here focuses on participants' general exposure to English-language telecinematic products in their spare time.² Most of the respondents stated that they watch films and TV-series in their original English version, at least occasionally (216 respondents, i.e. 71% of the sample).³ Their preference goes to TV-series, an activity they engage in quite frequently and extensively: several participants report watching TV-series in English often or very often (41%, once a week or almost every day) and for a prolonged time (56% for an hour or more per session). English-language films are accessed to a lower extent, with 25% of the respondents watching them often or very often. About 30% of the participants say they do not access any audiovisual programmes in English (Figure 1).⁴

² In this section we have reprocessed data from Pavesi, Ghia (2020) by further working on participants' responses and addressing different research questions (Section 3).

³ In this question, no explicit reference was made to subtitles. However, responses to the following questionnaire items show that in nearly all cases respondents access original soundtrack accompanied by subtitles – hence, the generalised use of dubbing vs. subtitling.

⁴ The group of students who do not access any audiovisuals in English does not stand out much in terms of composition and self-reported proficiency level in the foreign language. The vast majority of these students (86%) self-rate their proficiency level in English as intermediate (65%, and 20% out of the entire sample) or elementary (21%, and 7% out of the entire sample). The participants distribute quite evenly among different majors, with a prevalence of students from scientific disciplines.

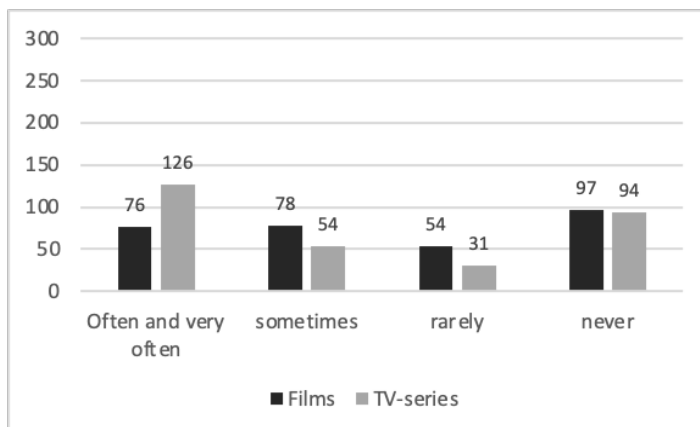


Figure 1
Frequency of access to films and TV-series in English.

Two general questions focused on the reasons for watching telecinematic productions from English-speaking countries, regardless of the language selected in the soundtrack. The questions were structured as multiple-choice items, with options resulting from previous focus-group investigations aimed at identifying and grouping recurring patterns.⁵ Respondents could tick more than one answer and expressed the following preferences for films and TV-series respectively (Figure 2).

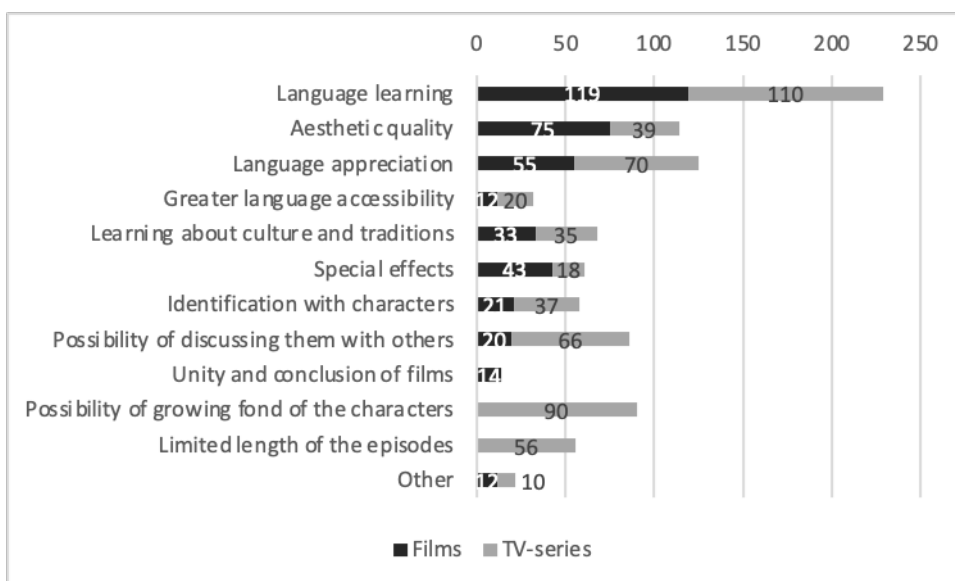


Figure 2
Reasons for watching films and TV-series from English-speaking countries.

Participants indicated several reasons for watching telecinematic productions from English-speaking countries; most, however, are language-related, thus implying the frequent viewing of both films and TV-series with the original soundtrack. Importantly, more than half of the students who access these products in English report doing so out of

⁵ Additional answers not ascribable to the other sets were grouped under the category ‘other’ – their amounts being too low for them to be listed separately.

an interest to learn the L2. A strong language orientation thus emerges among respondents,⁶ in light of the discipline diversification in the sample, which did not primarily include English language specialists. Many respondents mention that they like listening to English-language dialogues, and few appreciate dialogue accessibility.

Another dominant factor affecting respondents' viewing choices is represented by the hedonic component and viewers' involvement in the narrative. This category includes answers referring to the aesthetic quality of films and TV-series, their special effects, and viewers' identification with characters, which is linked to immersion and transportation (Wissmath *et al.* 2009; Kruger, Doherty 2018). The sociability factor was also mentioned by some respondents, who access English-language telecinematic products as a means to later discuss them with others – offline or on forums and social networks. Some genre specificities emerge for both audiovisual genres: some viewers appreciate the 'compact' nature of films, which are characterised by their own diegetic wholeness. This factor reflects users' tendency to immerse themselves in films and their appreciation for the experience. Features of television series that appear to particularly appeal to viewers include the feeling of fondness developed for characters as the series unfolds and the limited length of single episodes. The affective dimension is thus particularly relevant in triggering continuous access to TV-series even in their subtitled version.

4.2. Privileged viewing modes: Dubbed and subtitled dialogue

A second set of questions contrasted preferred viewing modalities, namely subtitled vs. dubbed version. More than half of the respondents who say that they at least occasionally watch audiovisuals in English report watching films in both modalities (54% – and 38% out of the whole sample).⁷ Fewer students watch exclusively subtitled (15% of the whole sample) or dubbed (14%) English-language films. The situation is slightly different for TV-series: 33% watch both subtitled and dubbed TV-series. However, while 11% of participants opt exclusively for dubbing, 23% only access the subtitled versions. The percentage of viewers choosing to watch subtitled TV-series is thus slightly higher than for films. All results are summarised in Figure 3, which illustrates the raw numbers of students' preferences.

⁶ It should be pointed out that, although the questionnaire was anonymous, the data collection instrument and the university setting in which questionnaires were filled out may have inflated the declared language learning motivation.

⁷ Presumably, also those 29% participants who reported not accessing audiovisuals in English opt for dubbing, given the prevalence of foreign films and TV-series released on television and online.

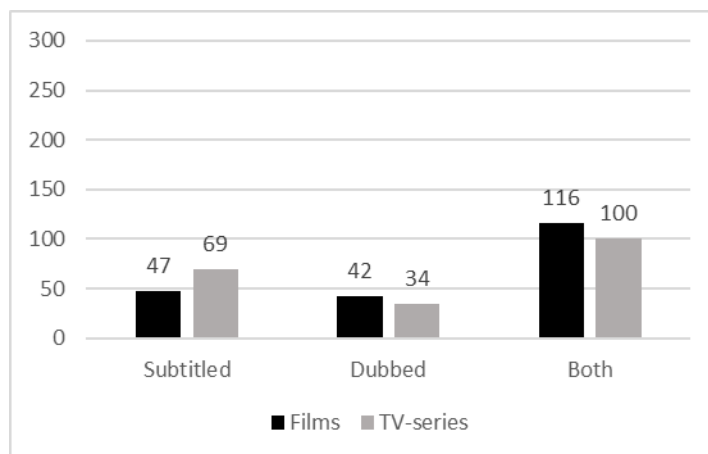


Figure 3

Respondents watching films and TV-series from English-speaking countries in their subtitled version, dubbed into Italian or both.

Viewers' further reasons for watching subtitled films and TV-series especially relate to language, as illustrated in Figure 4.

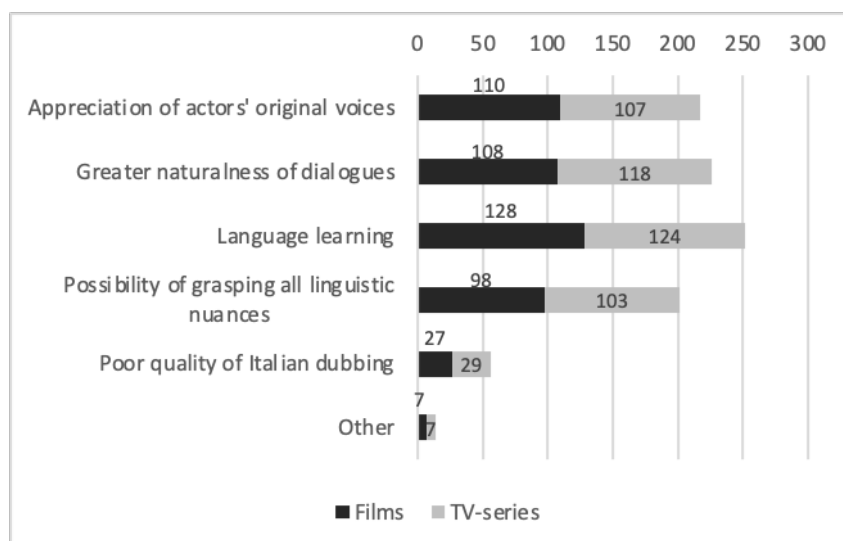


Figure 4

Reasons for watching subtitled films and TV-series from English-speaking countries.

Many students choose to watch subtitled telecinematic products because they want to learn English. Participants' choices are affected by a search for naturalness and authenticity, and a combination of language-specific and hedonic factors. Partially related to a linguistic sensitivity is their appreciation of actors' original voices and the naturalness of dialogues, as well as the possibility of grasping all linguistic nuances in dialogues, such as accents and registers. Importantly, the poor quality of dubbing is only a minor aspect, as only an average of 28 respondents gives this motivation as the reason for not watching dubbed audiovisuals.

Dubbing is preferred for a variety of reasons (Figure 5). The primary factor is lack of comprehension of audiovisual dialogues in their original version: a considerable share of the students who opt for dubbing do so because they are not able to grasp all the contents of foreign language films and TV-series in their original version, hence

acknowledging that watching AV products in English requires adequate knowledge of the language, even if the product is subtitled. This indexes a persisting view of subtitling as an aid to comprehension when viewers already have a good grasp of the language, and not as a fully-fledged translation alternative to dubbing. It also highlights the cultural difference between traditionally dubbing and subtitling countries. In the latter case, subtitling is typically viewed as the only modality for accessing foreign language products. Another relevant aspect is the high quality of Italian dubbing, largely appreciated in the sample and contributing to the enjoyability of films and series. Sociability also plays a relevant role: about a quarter of the respondents choose the dubbed versions of foreign films and TV-series to be able to watch them with friends or family – who may not speak or understand English. In his survey of L1 Spanish viewers, Orrego-Carmona (2014) found similar trends when the choice of AVT modes was concerned. The social factors driving viewers to opt for dubbed audiovisuals differ from those at the basis of their choice of subtitling. Dubbing is chosen to grant better accessibility (and a lower cognitive effort) to the entire peer or family group. On the contrary, subtitling can be selected for recognition and conformity to a peer group (Locher, Messerli 2020).

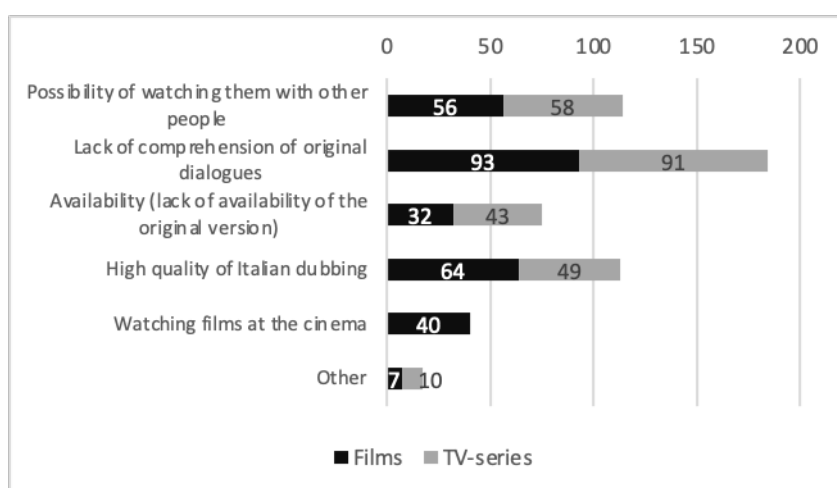


Figure 5

Reasons for watching films and TV-series from English-speaking countries in dubbed Italian.

Quite predictably, viewing supports also affect viewers' choices: students explicitly report watching dubbed films at the cinema. Availability is also mentioned by some respondents, with some students declaring not to easily find audiovisuals in their original English-language version.

4.3. Subtitles

The following set of questionnaire items focused on participants' preferences in terms of subtitle types.⁸ More than half of the students prefer to use subtitles when watching both films and TV-series in English, respectively 62% and 59% of the entire sample. If calculated out of the students watching audiovisuals in English (216), the percentages rise to 87% and 83%. Viewers report adding both bimodal and interlingual subtitles, with a slight preference for bimodal ones when watching films (Figure 6).

⁸ Trends about subtitling are also described in Pavesi, Ghia (2020).

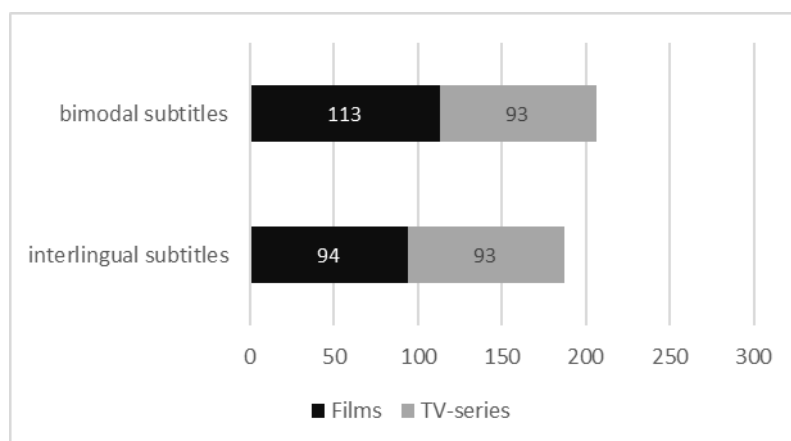


Figure 6
Participants' choice of subtitles when watching films and TV-series in English.

Only few students (14% out of the entire sample) add reversed subtitles, watching (dubbed) Italian films or TV-series with English subtitles. Among those who do, only 13 (4%) use them on a regular basis, almost every day or at least once a week.

To sketch a more detailed picture of viewing habits in the sample, the reasons behind participants' choices were investigated. Table 1 summarises participants' reasons for preferring bimodal subtitles, interlingual subtitles, or no subtitles at all, accompanied by the number of total choices and the corresponding percentage out of the whole sample.

Bimodal subtitles		Interlingual subtitles		No subtitles	
Reason	Number of preferences and percentage	Reason	Number of preferences and percentage	Reason	Number of preferences and percentage
Comprehension	133, 44%	Comprehension	124, 41%	Distracting role of subtitles	80, 26%
Possibility of matching written and spoken forms	83, 27%	Interest in translation	75, 25%	Greater learning potential	44, 14%
Greater learning potential	77, 25%	Ability to read faster in Italian	54, 18%	Lack of correspondence between subtitles and dialogues	29, 9.5%
Possibility of learning new forms and expressions	57, 19%	Greater complexity of English subtitles	21, 7%	Excessive length and pace of subtitles	26, 8.5%
Possibility of checking and remembering word spelling	47, 15%	Earlier availability	21, 7%	Other	13, 4%
Earlier availability	15, 5%	Other	8, 3%		
Poor quality	12, 4%				

of Italian subtitles	
Other	1, 0,3%

Table 1
Reasons for preferring different subtitling options.

Students often report choosing bimodal subtitles as they offer an aid to comprehension. Answers related to language processing and learning follow: bimodal subtitles enable viewers to match the written and spoken form of words and to check word spelling; overall, they are attributed a greater learning potential than L1 subtitles, and make it possible to learn new vocabulary and patterns. Factors like the earlier availability of English subtitles and the poor quality of Italian ones are only marginally selected by the respondents.

Interlingual subtitles are similarly added to ensure a better comprehension of telecinematic texts. Students also mention an interest in translation as a reason for choosing this subtitling modality, and the lower processing complexity as compared to bimodal subtitles: interlingual subtitles are faster to read, being in the viewers’ L1, and are overall less difficult.

A small portion of the sample regularly watches non-subtitled films and TV-series in English, while others access non-subtitled audiovisuals only occasionally. The main drawback of subtitles is their distracting role while watching, as subtitle reading makes the whole experience more taxing in terms of cognitive load and required processing effort. Other reported hindering factors include the length of subtitles and the fast pace at which they appear on screen, as well as the lack of correspondence between dialogue and subtitle lines. A few students remove subtitles for language learning reasons. As reported above, a small percentage of the students occasionally accesses audiovisuals in reversed subtitling mode. Although pertaining to a limited number of respondents, this behavior confirms that autonomous viewers are fully aware of the learning potential of subtitling and choose a viewing modality also in relation to language learning goals.

4.4. Dubbing or subtitling? Different viewer profiles

With a view to examining students’ behaviour in more detail, we outlined the profiles of different viewers in the sample based on preferences between dubbed and subtitled telecinematic products and the choice of different subtitle types. In particular, viewer groups were explored in terms of perceived proficiency level in L2 English, plurilingualism and number of foreign languages spoken, study abroad experience and university majors. Table 2 gives an overview of viewer profiles. Percentages are an average of data collected for films and TV-series, and are calculated out of all respondents answering each specific question.

Viewing preferences	Self-perceived proficiency level (average)	Percentage of respondents having had a study abroad experience (average)	Foreign languages spoken (average)	Main majors
Only dubbed films/TV-series	Elementary: 23% Intermediate: 75% Advanced: 3%	19%	One: 23% Two: 57% Three: 21%	Engineering, Pharmacy, Chemistry, Economics



Only subtitled films/TV-series	Elementary: 10% Intermediate: 48% Advanced: 42%	31%	One: 20% Two: 50% Three: 17% Four: 15%	Linguistics, Psychology, Engineering
Both dubbed and subtitled films/TV-series	Elementary: 10.5% Intermediate: 73% Advanced: 17%	12%	One: 33% Two: 43% Three: 13.5% Four: 10.5%	Pharmacy, Biology, Psychology, Engineering, Chemistry

Table 2
Viewer profiles in relation to preferred AVT modes.

The students who watch exclusively dubbed films and TV-series generally self-assess as intermediate level. However, a good number of respondents who watch dubbed programmes rate their proficiency level in English as elementary. Only one respondent who watches solely dubbed products self-assesses as advanced level. On average, more than half of these students speak two foreign languages (including English), especially those who only view dubbed TV-series (49% for films; 64% for series). Averaging trends for films and TV-series, 23% only know English besides Italian, and 21% speak three foreign languages. The majority of these respondents have never had a study abroad experience and mostly major in Engineering and other scientific subjects.

On the opposite pole, respondents who watch films exclusively in their subtitled version almost equally self-assess as intermediate (47%) or advanced level (45%) in L2 English. The gap is slightly wider for TV-series (49% intermediate, 39% advanced), which are more appealing in their original soundtrack even to elementary level learner-viewers (12%). On average, half of these students speak two foreign languages, including English. However, more speak three or even four L2s altogether. Although most of these viewers have similarly never been on study abroad programmes, the percentage of those who have is higher. These respondents come from various disciplines, but the largest group is majoring in Linguistics, followed by Psychology.

Most of the participants report watching both dubbed and subtitled films and TV-series. Among them, most self-rate as intermediate-level in English and speak one or two foreign languages. The great majority has never had a study abroad experience and comes from scientific disciplines.

The students who privilege bimodal subtitling tend to self-assess as intermediate level in L2 English (64%), but a good percentage perceives their level of competence to be higher, i.e. C1 (for both films and TV-series; 31%). Many of these viewers speak two foreign languages (44% on average), but generally there is more variation as compared to those who prefer watching audiovisuals with interlingual subtitles (23.5% speak one foreign language only, 19% three and 13.5% four). Out of all these respondents, 29% have had a study abroad experience. They are mainly Linguistics students, followed by participants majoring in Engineering, Economics, Chemistry and Biology.

Viewers who choose interlingual subtitling mostly self-rate as intermediate level in EFL (73.5%), but some perceive their level of competence to be lower, i.e. A2 (22% for both films and TV-series). These students generally speak two foreign languages (51% on average) or just one (33%). Most of them have never had a study abroad experience (92%) and are majoring in Psychology, Pharmacy and Engineering, followed by Biology and Chemistry.

5. General discussion

The results of the current survey show quite a divide between students who have a strong language orientation and privilege subtitled telecinematic products and those who prefer their dubbed version. In particular, the Italian postgraduate students in the sample like watching films and TV-series in English as a means to acquire or improve their L2 skills – with a preference for TV-series. Additionally, original language dialogues appear to facilitate immersion in the audiovisual product as they allow for a ‘naturalistic’ viewing experience, unveiling the actors’ actual voices and the whole palette of different shades and nuances of meaning. These factors are also linked with a strong hedonic component and the pleasure of listening to lines delivered in the original language. Sociability is another crucial factor likely to affect viewing modes. While dubbing is privileged by students who are not proficient enough in the L2 to comprehend original English dialogues, it is also undeniably selected for social reasons. In general, peers affect the selection of in-group viewing modes, AVT modes and video service providers. Furthermore, “watching a certain type of product also becomes a social instrument [for viewers] to interact with their group of friends” (Orrego-Carmona 2014, p. 56) and engage in online and offline discussions – as is most often the case with TV-series (Sockett 2014). In- or post-viewing discussion involves “the communal negotiation of sense-making processes of the fictional artefact” and may act as “a process of translating the cultural other to themselves and each other” (Locher, Messerli 2020, p. 20). The different formats in which telecinematic products are available partially affect viewing modes, with different implications for cinema, TV and online viewing. Despite the overall preference for subtitling, the students surveyed tend to appreciate the quality of Italian dubbing, contrary to what was observed in other studies. These more appreciative, lenient attitudes towards dubbing may be attributed to our sample’s composition. Unlike previous studies, which mainly relied on language enthusiasts (see Section 2), students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds took part in our survey – and did not express the evaluative, sometimes censorial attitudes previously reported and sometimes appearing on the internet.

The choice of different subtitling modes is dictated by similar reasons: bimodal subtitles are privileged for language learning and practice, in addition to comprehension. L1 subtitles are selected for comprehension, but also because of an interest in translation. According to respondents, these subtitles have greater accessibility and are easier to process as compared to bimodal ones. The few respondents who prefer watching original English audiovisuals with no subtitles at all primarily mention the distracting or disrupting effect of subtitles, no matter what language they appear in. Only few students are familiar with reversed subtitling, and only use it on rare occasions. Yet, the behaviour is reported, pointing to a remarkable motivation to learn foreign languages as the subtitles do not add to comprehension and are only chosen due to an interest in language.

The participants who opt for dubbed or original language products and who pick different subtitling modes have quite different profiles. As for the choice between dubbing and subtitling, learner-viewers who perceive their competence level as more advanced (up to C1 and C2 level) generally access audiovisuals in their subtitled version, with a preference for TV-series over films. They show a greater interest in languages, as suggested by their majors (humanities and social sciences) and the total foreign languages they speak, and have more commonly spent some study periods abroad. Conversely, dubbing is privileged by students at a lower proficiency level in English, even if many of them speak another foreign language besides English. They only rarely have had a study abroad experience and are prevalently majoring in science and technology.

Different student profiles emerge also in relation to the choice of different subtitling modes. Bimodal subtitles are preferred by a higher number of advanced learner-viewers (up to C1 level), who show a greater degree of plurilingualism than those who opt for mostly L1 subtitles. Slightly more of the students who choose bimodal subtitling have participated in study abroad programmes. No relevant differences emerge where university majors are concerned, but Linguistics students overall prefer L2 subtitles. As seen above, viewers' access to the subtitled versions of films and TV-series is not only driven by a search for entertainment, but also by a frequent desire to increase proficiency in a foreign language while engaging in a motivating, meaning-oriented activity (Caruana 2021).

Although they tend to associate with different viewer profiles, dubbing and subtitling appear to go hand in hand in the sample, and postgraduate students do not generally express a strong bias against either modality. The contrast with previous Italian studies (Antonini, Chiaro 2009; Casarini 2014; Massidda 2015) may be related to the focus on different audience groups – by age, interests and experience with the L2 – and time of data collection. In our data, the choice of subtitling over dubbing mostly points to language learning awareness and L2 competence related reasons rather than a dislike for the audiovisual modality traditionally opted for in Italy.

Generally, exposure to subtitled video input in a foreign language is especially common among viewers who are already proficient in the L2. These findings corroborate previous research showing that video watching is a very strong predictor of advanced L2 proficiency (Winke, Gass 2018). More in detail, our study suggests that participants' specific viewing choices are affected by self-perceived proficiency in the L2: students at more advanced competence levels in English tend to prefer watching subtitled and original language vs. dubbed audiovisuals. Among subtitle types, these students show a preference for bimodal ones – which, along with non-subtitled material, are particularly popular among viewers who have an advanced knowledge of the foreign language, as they require high-level reading and vocabulary skills (Kusyk 2017; Bednarek 2018). Students' language orientation also associates with their university majors and may extend to exposure to audiovisuals in other foreign languages.

6. Conclusion

Recent research has been focusing on the perception/appreciation of different AVT modes by the audience, and has generally suggested that the younger sections of the population increasingly orient towards subtitling, while dubbing tends to be dispreferred by these same viewers. The current study showed that, even within a sample of young viewers (postgraduate university students from several disciplines), both dubbing and subtitling are considered viable options when accessing films and TV-series in English.

In a recent blog (Silvera 2020 on blog.docety.com), the question is asked why Italian young people appear to favour subtitling over dubbing nowadays. The responses to the questionnaire firstly suggest that it is a matter of choice and that Italian youths still appreciate and rely on dubbing. Concurrently, when they choose subtitling they do it out of a general orientation or intention to improve their competence in English, especially, but not only, when their proficiency in the language is good. They also enjoy the fuller immersion they say they experience when they access the authentic dialogues and hear the actors' original voices. Other factors appear to play a role in encouraging them to opt for one or the other translation modality. The preference for one modality tends to be affected by individual viewers' involvement in the film/TV-series, and the viewing context – e.g.

alone or with others. For sure, Italian dubbing does not seem to be the target of harsh criticism as sometimes reported in the literature when young audiences are investigated, or vented on social media, especially in the past. Rather, our results are more in line with a possible reconsideration of dubbing (see Ferrero 2020 on <https://www.tomshw.it/>), and with a general, wider appreciation for the multiple viewing options that today's media can offer – see Sandrelli (2018) for a study on a sample of UK-based viewers approaching dubbing.

All in all, variability in viewers' choices crucially testifies to the dynamicity of new audiences and the increased flexibility of present-day viewing supports and modes. Further studies are needed to monitor the evolving dynamics of viewers' preferences and explore the habits of wider sections of the Italian population – and of other traditionally dubbing countries.

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