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The Role of Subtitles in Creating Teaching Material in EFL Classrooms

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## **Abstract**

The research reported in this paper investigates the role of subtitles as teaching material in EFL classrooms. The purpose of the study was to see if students watching a video in a classroom would benefit the most from content accompanied by English subtitles, Croatian subtitles or the lack of subtitles. The results of the study showed that students benefited the most from English subtitles when it comes to comprehension, whereas those who watched the video with Croatian subtitles achieved highest scores in the vocabulary part of the questionnaire.

**Keywords:** audiovisual materials, subtitles, EFL, classroom

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## 1. Introduction

The English language has gained a lot of popularity in the last few decades and it is nowadays being widely used as well as taught in most countries of the world. Consequently, researchers have become more and more interested in different aspects of the language, which is why they use different names to describe different situations in which English is used. Some of those names are, listed by Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld (2003), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as an International Language (EIL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The one name which best describes the Croatian context in which English is taught and used is English as a Foreign Language (EFL), defined by Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld as the English which is taught or used in a country where it is not a native language (p. 336). Other authors emphasize the distinction between the terms foreign language and second language, adding that the term EFL is only applicable in countries where English is not used for communication or as “the medium of instruction” (Carter and Nunan, 2001, p. 2), but it is still taught in schools (Gunderson, 2009).

The number of users of English in the world is constantly on the rise and it is estimated that there are almost 950,000,000 English speakers in the world at the time, with more than 60% of them using it as a second language<sup>1</sup>. The situation in Croatia is not different from in the rest of the world. English has not only become a language that is used for academic or business purposes, but it has also become a language used for everyday communication. The evolution of the media, especially the Internet, has made it possible for a large number of English vocabulary items to make it into the everyday vernacular of Croats, especially the younger ones, who use multimedia on an everyday basis. Such people are surrounded by the English language on a daily basis, seeing that most of the content on TV, social networks, smartphone apps, and other products of the digital era is in English. That is why an increasing number of people are becoming aware of the importance of the English language, which consequently leads to a rise in the number of people who are interested in learning English. At the same time, teachers nowadays tend to invest more time in coming up with innovative ways of language teaching as a way of attracting their students' attention.

One of the examples of being innovative in a language classroom involves using products of the digital era and introducing materials as well as activities into the classroom, which previous generations of teachers could not use. For instance, teachers sometimes opt to move away from textbooks and workbooks and use audiovisual materials instead. Audiovisual

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/eng>; retrieved on May 31, 2016

materials provide an excellent source of authentic language, which is something learners do not encounter in their classrooms on a regular basis. Moreover, some teachers sometimes also use audiovisual materials combined with different types of subtitles, to enhance the effect those materials have on their students.

Seeing that the majority of programs which are broadcast on Croatian television are in English, but with Croatian subtitles, and since Croats are used to watching TV shows and movies with subtitles, the aim of this thesis was to compare how students react to the use of subtitled and non-subtitled video material in their classroom as well as the results of the two questionnaires they had to do before and after the watching activity.

The first part of this paper aims to give an overview of the theoretical framework that deals with the concept of using authentic audiovisual materials in language classrooms as well as explain the terminology behind it. It also gives an overview of the most important studies of the role of subtitles in the language learning process and serves as a source of useful information for the conducted study. The study, all the procedures, and the analysis of the results are discussed in the second part of this paper. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion that brings the theoretical framework, previous studies, and the result of this study together to offer some concluding remarks regarding the topic in question.

## **2. Teaching English in a classroom setting**

The digital era gives learners a wide range of possibilities when it comes to learning a foreign language. They can do it with the help of a computer, simply by choosing a language and starting an online course, or they can use different programs to find a native speaker and simply start a conversation (e.g. Duolingo, Livemocha, Verbling, and others). However, most learners still start learning some foreign languages, such as English and German, in a classroom-based setting. Croatian students start learning their first foreign language (L2), which is still predominantly English, in the first grade of primary school, at the age of seven, whereas their second foreign language (L3) is not introduced until the fourth grade.

Both academics and teachers have different opinions when it comes to language learning in classrooms. Some of them think that classrooms are the best way for learning foreign languages, whereas others disagree. In order to be fully able to understand the discourse surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of classrooms, one must turn one's attention to the actual learner.

The study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) does precisely that. Nunan (2001) states that it deals with “processes through which someone acquires one or more foreign languages” (p. 87). That involves different strategies, mechanisms, and other factors which influence and therefore facilitate language learning, both in classroom settings and in naturalistic contexts.

### **2.1 Learning vs. acquisition**

When it comes to the debate about the advantages and disadvantages of learning languages in a classroom, SLA researchers also put emphasis on the distinction between the terms ‘learning’ and ‘acquiring’. Stephen Krashen (1982), a prominent linguist in the field of SLA, considers these two terms to be connected to two different ways an individual can reach proficiency in a foreign language. He sees learning as a process which includes rules and conscious attention to form, and acquisition as a process similar to the way children learn their first language, which means that they do not consciously pay attention to language form (p. 17).

Learners, therefore, according to Krashen (1982), know grammar rules, are aware of all the rules and are able to talk about them. Acquirers, on the other hand, are not usually aware

of the fact that they are acquiring a language, but they are aware of the fact that they are using a language to communicate with someone (p. 17).

However, other authors argue that these two terms cannot be separated that easily, since they both describe a similar concept and influence one another. McLaughlin and Gregg (1987 and 1984, respectively, as cited in Zafar, 2009) claim that it is extremely difficult to categorize learning and acquiring as two separate notions without any similarities. They claim that these two concepts cannot be completely separated and defined without creating circular definitions (Zafar, 2009; Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Zafar (2009) concludes that acquisition and learning should not be viewed as two categories, but that one should observe acquisition “as a process enriched by the learned system” (p. 141).

## 2.2 Comprehensible input

Language learning, as defined by Gass and Selinker (2008) should not only consist of memorizing the rules of a language. It should mostly be used to satisfy the learner’s communicative needs (p. 22). In order to make classrooms a place that gives students more opportunities for learning a language they can use for communication and not just for learning its rules, Krashen (1982) suggests that teachers should give their students enough of comprehensible input (p. 22). This term refers to the use of language that students can understand and that can help them advance one step further.

Lightbown and Pinemann (1993) agree that comprehensible input “is an essential part of the learning environment”, but add that sometimes it is not sufficient on its own because learners require “focused instruction to further their language acquisition” (p. 718). Other researchers acknowledge the need for comprehensible input in language classrooms, but criticize Krashen’s idea that comprehensible input on its own is enough for students to make some kind of progress, while also adding that the term ‘comprehensible’ is problematic on its own, since sometimes it is extremely difficult to determine what one means by using that term (Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Brown, 2000). Long (1996, as cited in Brown, 2000) states that comprehensible input is the result of “modified interaction, [defined as] various modifications that native speakers and other interlocutors create in order to render their input comprehensible to learners” (p. 264). He then concludes by saying that language acquisition occurs only with enough input in form of modified interaction.

### 2.3 Authentic teaching materials

Tomlinson (1998) notes that most people associate only textbooks, workbooks, and the like with the term teaching material, seeing that this is what teachers predominantly use in language classrooms around the world. He, however, claims that everything that is used to facilitate learning in the classroom can be considered teaching material: from videos, CDs, and newspapers to food packages and live talks with native speakers (p. 2).

Such materials all fit into the category of authentic materials, which were defined by Nunan (1989) as any material which has not been “specifically produced for [...] language teaching” (p. 54). Taylor (1994) elaborates that authentic materials are good for language classrooms because they feature characteristics of language used by real native speakers, which mostly differs from the information that can usually be found in textbooks (p. 1). Authentic materials are produced “by a real speaker or writer for a real audience” (Morrow, 1977, as cited in Taylor, 1994, p. 2) and they come from a variety of sources including television, radio, newspapers, recorded conversations, etc. (Nunan, 1999, as cited in Bahrani and Soltani, 2011, p. 19).

Authentic language materials are considered a good replacement for the lack of communication with native speakers in language classrooms. Melvin and Stout (1987) claim that authentic materials give learners ample opportunities to practice skills they might need in real-life situations, while simultaneously learning something new about different cultures. Furthermore, Nunan and Gilmore (1999 and 2007, respectively, as cited in Bahrani and Shu Sim, 2012) consider authentic materials vital for the language teaching process because they not only motivate students “by bringing the content and the subject matter to life” but also by enabling them to make necessary connections between the classroom setting and the real world (p. 57).

When it comes to choosing appropriate materials for their language classrooms, teachers should use materials which achieve the most impact. They should attract the learners’ curiosity, interest, and attention (Tomlinson, 1998, p. 7). Provided that they manage to meet all these conditions, there is a greater chance that students will process the given materials appropriately and get something useful from it. Tomlinson (1998) also claims that it should be wrong to constantly use the same type of teaching material. He recommends varying the material and using a lot of different activities to expose students to as much authentic input as possible. Furthermore, materials in language classrooms should vary in “style, mode, medium, and purpose” (p. 13).

### 2.3.1 Audiovisual materials in language classrooms

When it comes to the purpose of teaching materials, Tomlinson (2001) defines three types – instructional, experiential and elicitive materials. Instructional materials give information about the language, experiential provide exposure to the language in use and elicitive stimulate the use of the language (p. 66).

Textbooks, which are used in language classrooms all around the world, mostly fit into the category of instructional and elicitive materials, since they make much of learning language rules and applying that knowledge in different situations. However, the recent evolution of the multimedia gives teachers ample opportunities to introduce more experiential materials into their classrooms and expose their students to as much authentic language as possible. One example of such materials would be audiovisual materials.

Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz (2008) recognize the importance of videos in classrooms, stating that they can be used as an addition to the textbook and adding that teachers can also plan whole lessons based on one or more videos (pp. 201-202). Videos can, among other things, give students the opportunity to see native speakers interact in everyday situations, while also exposing them to different varieties of a foreign language, which is something they are not exposed to often enough, considering that foreign language learners are mostly not given enough opportunities, if any, to communicate with native speakers (Nigoević, Pejić and Pejić, 2014, p. 183).

As reported by Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz (2008), videos are also a great source of comprehensible input since they not only expose students to authentic spoken language, but also convey additional information through images and extralinguistic cues that help students construct the linguistic meaning of the message (e.g. gestures, intonation, etc.) (p. 203). Some studies have also shown that media, especially audio and video, are good for attracting students' attention because they hold their interest, which many consider to be of great importance for teaching the so-called "video generation" (Jonassen, 2000, as cited in Kim and Gilman, 2008, p. 114).

There are, however, also some problems with using videos in language classrooms, and some of those problems are mostly caused when an inappropriate video is chosen by the teacher. Skledar Matijević and Jemrić Ostojić (2009) recommend the use of videos that the students are able understand, that fit into the lesson plans, and also satisfy the students' wishes. If videos are not used properly, then they only become a way of using spare time

before moving on to a new lesson, which can have an unwanted effect and be demotivating to some students. One can also not use videos as a reward because students tend to become passive in that kind of environment. If that were to happen, then students would not be able to benefit from watching the video.

Another problem with using videos in language classrooms is their duration. Teachers mostly have only a few 45-minute sessions with their students per week, which can be a big limitation considering that they do not have enough time to watch the video and do some exercises in the given period. Skledar Matijević and Jemrić Ostojić (2009) recommend using clips in duration from five to 15 minutes, after which there is plenty of time to do additional exercises planned by the teacher. Froehlich (1988) also advises teachers not to use videos longer than thirty minutes and states that short, 10-15 minute videos are best for classroom use because they can also be shown several times if necessary (p. 201).

If teachers come to the conclusion that the advantages of using audiovisual materials outweigh the disadvantages and if they decide to make such materials part of their teaching process, they nowadays have a wide catalogue of different audiovisual materials to choose from. They can use TV shows, commercials, news segments, soap operas, and other similar content (Gebhardt, 1996, as cited in Bahrani and Shu Sim, 2012, p. 57). However, two of the most recommended and most researched types of audiovisual materials for classroom use are motion pictures and documentary films.

Motion pictures, or movies, are mainly chosen because they are thought to be a good source of comprehensible input, seeing that they mostly feature authentic language, while also allowing teachers and learners to make use of the nonverbal and cultural language aspects shown on the screen (Nigoević et al., 2014).

Kovačević (2013), on the other hand, thinks that documentary films are also an excellent choice for language classrooms because they not only have an educational but also a cultural role. By watching documentary films in classrooms, preferably with proper instructions, students can acquire vocabulary and grammar items of the desired foreign language, while also learning something new about a specific topic (p. 105). Stremečki Marković (2005, as cited in Kovačević, 2013) states that the nonverbal communication in the form of pictures, sound, intonation, music, and movement in combination with the foreign language gives students the opportunity to learn a language by watching and hearing it being used in context without having to decode language signs (p. 106). Moreover, documentary films are also

praised because they feature “carefully scripted” Standard English, which makes them suitable for use in language classrooms (Soong, 2012, p. 131).

### 2.3.2 Subtitled videos in classrooms

Lightbown and Spada (2006) claim that students are able to learn only when they are exposed to enough comprehensible input in the form of listening and reading activities (p. 152). Considering that watching videos with subtitles, which can be in the foreign or the students’ first language, offers students the opportunity to watch and read simultaneously, while also being exposed to authentic language situations, this could be a perfect source of comprehensible input in the classroom.

Subtitles are defined by Mustapić (2015) as written translations of the source dialogue and other nonverbal information which is transmitted through nonverbal channels (e.g. the content of an e-mail shown on screen can also be subtitled if it is of importance to the viewer) (p. 198). Each country decides on its own whether foreign television programs and movies shown in cinemas will be subtitled or dubbed (i.e. post-synchronized). It is a common practice that countries with larger language communities use dubbing (e.g. France, Germany, and Italy), whereas smaller countries mostly use subtitling (e.g. Belgium, Portugal, and Sweden) (Mustapić, 2015, p. 198; Koolstra, Peeters, and Spinhof, 2002, p. 326).

It is of great importance if a country in which one would want to use subtitled videos in language classrooms chooses subtitles or dubbing for the foreign language programs broadcast on television and in cinemas. Danan (2004) considers subtitles inappropriate for classrooms in countries where students are not used to watching subtitled programs, because then they often feel obligated to focus mostly on the subtitles and not on the spoken word. As a consequence, they relax too much and stop paying attention to the information conveyed through audiovisual cues on the screen (p. 67). Dollerup and Vanderplank (1974 and 1988, respectively, as cited in Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz, 2008), on the other hand, consider subtitles good for language classrooms with students who live in countries in which most foreign programs are subtitled (p. 217). Watching foreign television with subtitles, according to Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz (2008), activates previous linguistic knowledge of the foreign language and also serves “as a way to practice, expand and maintain that linguistic knowledge” (p. 205). Neuman and Koskinen (1992) also consider subtitled videos to be a good language acquisition mechanism because they combine different audiovisual elements,

which then leads to establishing relationships between words and meanings and acquisition of said words and meanings (p. 96).

Croatia is one of the countries in which subtitles are used for the majority of the foreign language programs broadcast on television and in cinemas, which is established by Croatian law<sup>2</sup>. The only exception are animated movies, which are mostly dubbed, since their target audience are children, who are not yet capable of reading subtitles. That is why Croatian learners, among other learners who are used to watching subtitled videos, should not have problems with focusing on both the audiovisual and written information simultaneously if they were to be used in their language classrooms (Dollerup and Vanderplank, 1974 and 1988, respectively, as cited in Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz, 2008, p. 217).

Most of the criticism of subtitles is pointed towards the fact that viewers might have problems reading and listening at the same time. Opponents of the use of subtitled videos in language teaching argue that subtitles can be distracting and that they can “slow down the development of learner’s listening abilities” (Borrás and Lafayette, 1994, p. 61). Froehlich (1988) contends that it might be difficult for viewers to watch subtitled videos because their reaction to all the information could be that they either ignore the sound or the subtitles (p. 199).

On the other hand, Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz (2008) claim that the use of video materials can help improve students’ listening comprehension skills, which consequently leads to faster language acquisition (p. 216). Other proponents of the use of subtitled videos in language classrooms think that subtitles enable students to become conscious of language that they otherwise might not understand (Borrás and Lafayette, 1994, p. 61). Furthermore, a study carried out in the Netherlands that focused on the eye-movement of viewers who were watching a subtitled video showed that they were capable of switching between the visual image and the subtitles without any problems (d’Ydewalle, p. 60).

Additionally, the European Commission conducted the “Study on the use of Subtitling” (2011) with a sample of at least 150 people in each of the 33 participating countries, divided into three age groups (p. 5). The study used a series of questionnaires which were distributed through various websites and social media sites. The results showed that there is a correlation between subtitling countries and foreign language knowledge similar to that of the mother tongue and that subtitles can facilitate foreign language learning, if used properly (p. 16). Due

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hkv.hr/izdvojeno/tribine/ostali-tekstovi/10639-drmario-grevi-hrvatski-jezik-nije-zakonski-zatien.html>; retrieved on May 15, 2016

to the positive results of their study, the researchers proposed a number of recommendations “to support subtitling and promote multilingualism”, one of which includes increasing “the use of subtitling in both the media and formal educational contexts” (p. 27).

#### 2.3.2.1 Intralingual vs. interlingual subtitles

Whereas a large number of academics agree that subtitles can help facilitate language learning, there is an ongoing debate whether teachers should use intralingual subtitles (i.e. subtitles in same language as the source material) or interlingual subtitles (i.e. subtitles in the language different from the source material).

Mitterer and McQueen (2009) argue that intralingual subtitles have more effect on language acquisition because they indicate exactly which words are being spoken by different characters in the video, which boosts speech learning and leads to better language understanding (p. 1). A study conducted by Vanderplank (1988, as cited in Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz, 2008) found that intralingual subtitles helped students understand unfamiliar words and expressions, recall vocabulary items used in the programs, and learn how to spell names of places and people which appeared in the program (p. 206). Vanderplank concluded that it is easier for students to remember words or phrases that appear on screen in the exact same form and not in the form of a translation (p. 207).

Proponents of the use of interlingual subtitles base their opinion on the fact that subtitling countries always use interlingual subtitles on television and in cinemas, and that here are already some studies that prove that “prolonged television viewing [results] in some language learning” (Froehlich, 1988, p. 199). Bianchi and Ciabattini (2008) argue that one should not favor one type of subtitles over the other, explaining that both subtitle-types can be used, but with different audiences. They carried out a study that showed that beginners benefit the most from interlingual subtitles, whereas intralingual subtitles are most useful in classrooms with advanced students. Their reasoning is the fact that interlingual subtitles are processed automatically, whereas intralingual subtitles require “a higher level of knowledge of the language before they can be processed without interfering (...) with other cognitive processes”, such as listening and watching (p. 87).

## 2.4 Incidental learning

Incidental learning is one of the most important factors mentioned in a lot of research dealing with the use of authentic classroom materials with language learners. In addition to acquiring new information about the foreign culture, researchers think that students are able to pick up vocabulary items unconsciously while watching videos with or without subtitles. This is another great incentive for teachers to use audiovisual materials in classrooms, since various studies show there is a correlation between acquiring vocabulary items and the learner's performance in other skills (i.e. speaking, reading, listening and writing) (Alemi and Tayebi, 2011, p. 81). Gass (1999, as cited in Alemi and Tayebi, 2011) thinks of learning vocabulary as a stepping-stone for learning other foreign language structures. She mentions that other researchers consider vocabulary acquisition to be very important in the process of language learning because it includes integrating other kinds of linguistic knowledge while also gaining the ability to use that linguistic knowledge for communication purposes (p. 81).

Whereas some linguists believe that it is entirely possible for people to learn something without any intention to do so, others think that incidental learning is never entirely incidental. Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld (2003) claim that incidental learning does indeed involve being aware of the learning process because learners are able to notice the linguistic aspect of the given input (p. 338). Huckin and Coady (1999, as cited in Alemi and Tayebi, 2011) also state that learners pay at least some attention to words which are part of the learning material they are working with (p. 82).

Another problem with incidental learning is the fact that many authors contribute the ability for incidental language learning mostly to children, and not adults. Most of them think that children are "more sensitive to foreign-language acquisition in a natural context of implicit learning" (d'Ydewalle, p. 63). However, there is a lot of evidence which proves that even adults can acquire language items incidentally. Rott (1999, as cited in Gass and Selinker, 2008) examined the amount of exposure to new vocabulary items while reading and came to the conclusion that greater exposure leads to better acquisition and retention of previously unknown words (p. 464). D'Ydewalle and Van de Poel (1999) extended some previous findings and carried out a study of implicit foreign language acquisition in children. Their study showed that there was no difference between the amount of newly acquired vocabulary items by children and those acquired by adults in their previous studies. Therefore, all these studies point to the fact that it would be possible to use appropriate materials with adult

foreign language learners and expect positive results in terms of incidental vocabulary acquisition.

According to Ellis (1999, as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld, 2003), there is a wide range of factors which influence the possibility of incidental learning of vocabulary. These include factors such as word pronounceability, length of a word, correlation between form and meaning, frequency, availability of contextual cues, etc. (p. 339). This means that not all materials have the same effect on the learner. It is for example easier for learners to understand the meaning of the word if it appears plenty of times and if it is surrounded with enough context for the learner to decipher the meaning of that unknown word. On the other hand, incidental learning cannot take place when learners are confronted with materials that do not give them enough familiar context which they can then use to subconsciously deconstruct the meaning of unknown words. Materials should therefore be chosen carefully and tailored to students' needs.

## 2.5 Previous research

In the last few decades, considerable attention has been paid to the use of subtitled and non-subtitled video materials in the process of language learning. Some of the studies concentrated on the effects of audiovisual materials on the acquisition of foreign language forms, whereas other studies focused more on the overall linguistic advantages and disadvantages of such materials. In the majority of cases, researchers were mostly interested in the difference between intralingual subtitles and materials without subtitles. There are, however, some studies that shed light on the difference between the effects of interlingual and intralingual subtitles with language learners.

Vanderplank (1992, as cited in Borrás and Lafayette, 1994) conducted a study with fifteen European and eight Arabic learners of English, between high-intermediate and advanced level. The participants watched nine hour-long sessions of different BBC programs with English subtitles. They were given different exercises upon viewing, which showed a high level of retention of language forms featured in the program. Vanderplank stated that the use of English subtitles might lead to “the development of a chunking ability in both reading and listening”, which can then cause releasing “spare capacity for conscious language learning” (1992, as cited in Borrás and Lafayette, 1994, p. 61).

Neuman and Koskinen (1992) carried out a study in which 129 seventh- and eighth-grade students from Hispanic and Asian backgrounds were divided into four groups: the first one watched TV with intralingual subtitles, the second one watched TV without subtitles, the third one had reading and listening, while the fourth one had only reading activities. Through various pretests and posttests and the focus on the ability to recognize and comprehend ninety target words, the researchers came to the conclusion that the group that watched the subtitled program showed a higher retention rate when it came to learning words in context than any other group (pp. 96-103). They did, however, find that intralingual subtitles used in their study also presented an obstacle for some students because they had no chance to review or reread them, seeing that they were shown at a rate of 120 words per minute, which is not easy to follow, even for more advanced students. Moreover, even subjects who watched the program without subtitles were able to gain some new vocabulary knowledge (p. 104).

Not many studies have been conducted to investigate the practice of using subtitles to facilitate foreign language learning in Croatian classrooms or with Croatian learners. Nigoević et al. (2014) observed the influence of subtitles on the learners' language-processing ability. They used 100 Croatian secondary school students of English at B1/B2 level of the Common European Framework. The students were divided into two groups; one group watched an eight-minutes-long movie clip with Croatian subtitles and the other one without subtitles. They were given instructions prior to the watching and they were given 15 general comprehension questions immediately after the watching activity. The results showed that it was easier for students that had subtitles to understand the content and overall meaning of the watched sequence. The group that watched the clip without subtitles had difficulties with understanding the content and later also with answering the questions (p. 185-189).

In the following section of this thesis we present the study of the classroom use of subtitled and non-subtitled video material, conducted with 68 Croatian students attending a high school in Slavonski Brod.

### 3. The study

As it has already been mentioned, various studies have been conducted to see what kind of benefits, if any, subtitled audiovisual materials bring to language classrooms. The study described in the following section is somewhat similar to those studies, inasmuch as it features students of English watching a video clip with or without subtitles, but this study puts the emphasis on the classroom context.

All participants in this study watched a 20-minutes-long clip from the documentary TV series *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*. However, some of them watched it with Croatian, some with English, and some with no subtitles. They were all given two questionnaires with two types of questions – one before and the other one after the watching activity.

#### 3.1 Aim and hypotheses

The aim of this study was twofold: investigate if audiovisual materials are appropriate for use in language classrooms and observe the effect interlingual and intralingual subtitles have on the students' ability to understand the given material and acquire previously unknown vocabulary items specific to a certain topic.

Several hypotheses were formed before conducting this study, based mostly on the theoretical framework presented in the first part of this thesis as well as the results of all the previous studies in this area:

- 1.) Watching the video clip with English subtitles will help the students achieve the best results in the comprehension and the vocabulary part of the questionnaire.
- 2.) Students who will watch the clip with Croatian subtitles will have no problems with comprehension, but some problems could occur with new vocabulary.
- 3.) Students who will watch the clip without subtitles will underperform both in the comprehension and the vocabulary part of the questionnaire.

#### 3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 68 third grade students, 44 female and 24 male, attending *Gimnazija Matija Mesić* in Slavonski Brod. They were all native speakers of Croatian, aged 17 or 18, who had been learning English as a foreign language in a classroom setting for eight years.

The participants were kept in their original school classes. Two classes consisted of 22 and one class had 24 students.

### 3.3 Instruments and procedures

The study consisted of three parts. Prior to the beginning of the study, students were given a consent form (Appendix 1) to state that they were willingly taking part in this study. Instructions and a short description of the study were written on the consent form, but additional instructions were also given to the participants orally. The participants were told that their participation was anonymous.

The first part of the study included a pre-watching questionnaire (Appendix 2) that consisted of two parts. All three groups were given the same questionnaire. They were told that the first part had two exercises with ten questions about general knowledge of the universe, or, more specifically, black holes, whereas the second part had two exercises with eight questions pertaining to some general vocabulary items in English. The first part and the first exercise of the second part were all multiple choice questions, whereas the second exercise of the second part was comprised of four words, and students had to write both a synonym and a translation for each of those four words. They were not told that all the questions are actually based on the video clip they were about to watch. However, they were told that they could just cross off the question if they did not know the answer. The reason for this is high probability that they would have guessed the answer to one of the multiple choice questions, which would have affected the results.

After the first questionnaire, all students watched a 20-minutes-long clip from the documentary TV series called *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*. The majority of the students from all three groups had not heard of that TV series, but there were some students that said they had already watched an episode or two. This particular TV series had been chosen due to an interesting and somewhat unusual topic (the episode in question deals with black holes, wormholes, and the aspects of light), as well as because of the language used throughout the episode, which was likely to be understandable enough for students in their eighth year of studying, but also had some new vocabulary items and concepts that they had previously not encountered.

The first group (G1) consisted of 22 students. This group watched the program with English subtitles. The second group (G2) also had 22 students, but this group watched the

series with Croatian subtitles. The third group (G3) was comprised of 24 students. This group watched the program without any subtitles. All students were told that they could take notes if they wanted to, but only a few of them decided to do so.

After the watching activity, the students were given the second questionnaire (Appendix 3), which was the same as the questionnaire before the watching activity. This was done on purpose, to see if the watching activity helped them in any way, either with the comprehension exercises or vocabulary acquisition. The only difference between the two questionnaires was that the second questionnaire had three parts, with the third part consisting of two questions to check the students' attitude towards the watching activity. The first question was the same for all three groups – they had to write a short answer to elaborate if the watching activity had been difficult for them. The second question was somewhat different in various groups, in accordance with the audiovisual material they watched (e.g. G1 had the following question: “Did English subtitles help you understand the topic and the specific vocabulary used in this documentary? Would it have been easier if you had had Croatian subtitles or if you had watched the clip without any subtitles? Elaborate your answer in a few sentences.”).

### 3.4 Results

The analysis of the questionnaires focused mostly on the difference between the success rates in the first part (i.e. the comprehension part) and in the second part of the questionnaires (i.e. the vocabulary part). Considerable emphasis was also put on the progress individual students made after they had watched the video as well as on the differences between the groups.

The third set of questions of the second questionnaire was also thoroughly analyzed to see how students reacted to the use of audiovisual materials in their language classroom, if they found it interesting or not as well as what they thought about different types of subtitles used for the watching activity.

Some aspects of the results supported the hypotheses formed before this study was conducted, whereas others proved some of the initial hypotheses to be incorrect.

### 3.4.1 The group with English subtitles (G1)

The first group was comprised of 22 students, 13 female and 9 male. None of them had previously heard of the TV show used in this study, and many seemed uninterested in the study before they saw the topic of the video.

Out of all three groups, this group had the lowest average score in both parts of the first questionnaire (as can be seen in Figure 1). The students' average score was 31.4% in the first part and 19.6% in the second part. More than 50% of the students had a score of three or lower in the comprehension part of the questionnaire and none of the students managed to answer all ten questions correctly. Two of the best students from this group got six and seven questions correctly in the first part of the first questionnaire.

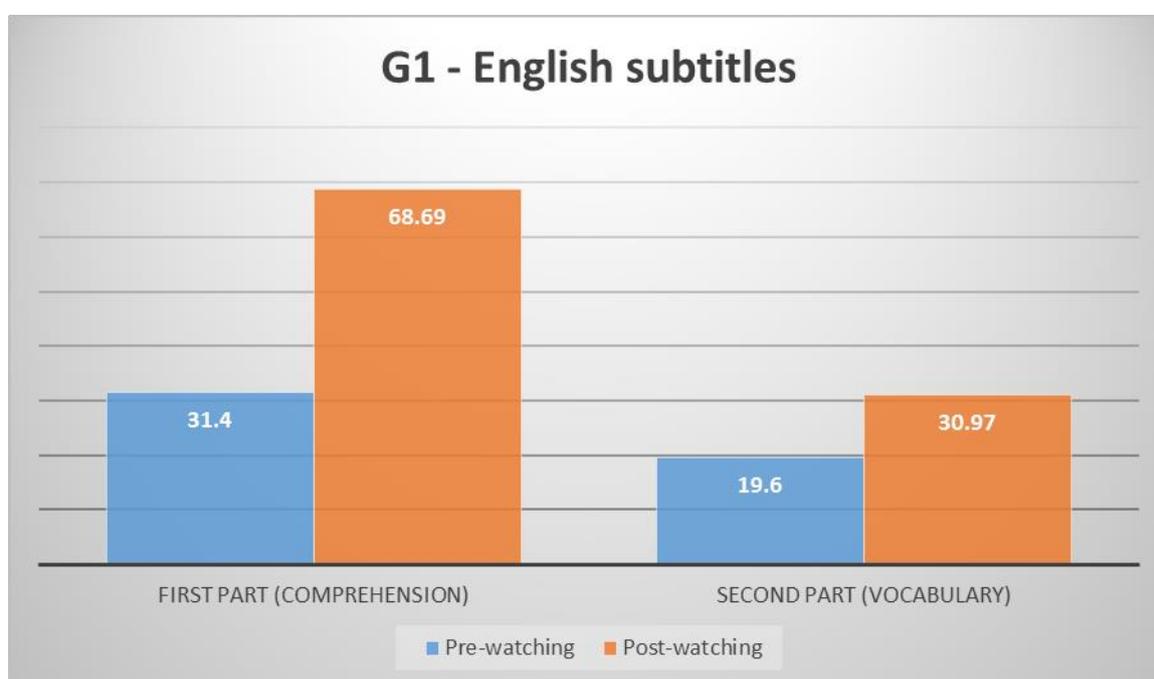


Figure 1 - Analysis of the questionnaire for G1 – the group with English subtitles

The second part proved to be even more difficult for G1. 27% of the students did not answer any of the questions correctly, whereas 41% of the students answered only two questions correctly. Two students had the highest score of 3.5 correct questions (the half point was awarded to those students who wrote either a correct synonym or a translation in the second exercise of the second part).

However, the results improved greatly after the watching activity. This group achieved the highest score in the comprehension part post-watching, 68.69%. Only one student in all

three groups got all ten questions correctly and it was a student from G1. More than 60% of the students had a score of seven and higher in the first part.

They also achieved better results in the second part of the second questionnaire, with an average score of 30.97%. That score, however, is the lowest out of all three groups.

Regarding the third set of questions and the student's general attitude towards the subtitled audiovisual materials used in this study, 77% of the students found the video interesting and the language understandable. They found it good that the language used in the video was not entirely scientific, but perfectly suitable for laypeople. Some were also satisfied with English subtitles because they gave them the opportunity to see how various words are spelled. However, 50% of them did say that they would have preferred having Croatian instead of English subtitles because according to them, that would have helped them understand some concepts better, while also learning some new vocabulary items both in Croatian and English.

#### 3.4.2 The group with Croatian subtitles (G2)

The second group also consisted of 22 students, 15 female and 7 male. Two of them said they had previously watched some of the episodes of this series.

With an average score of 31.8% in the first part of the first questionnaire before the watching activity, this group had just a slightly better average score than G1 (as shown in Figure 2). Students from this group were, however, better when observed individually. 50% of them had a score of four or more and only one student did not answer any of the questions correctly.

G2 also achieved better results in the second part of the questionnaire before the watching activity than G1. Students from this group had an average score of 26.14%, with almost 50% of them answering only two questions correctly and two students answering six and seven questions correctly.

Students from G2 also showed signs of improvement after the watching activity, similar to G1 students. This time they had just a slightly lower score in the first part after the program than G1, 67.7%. None of the students succeeded in answering all the comprehension questions correctly, but 91% of the students had a score of six or higher.

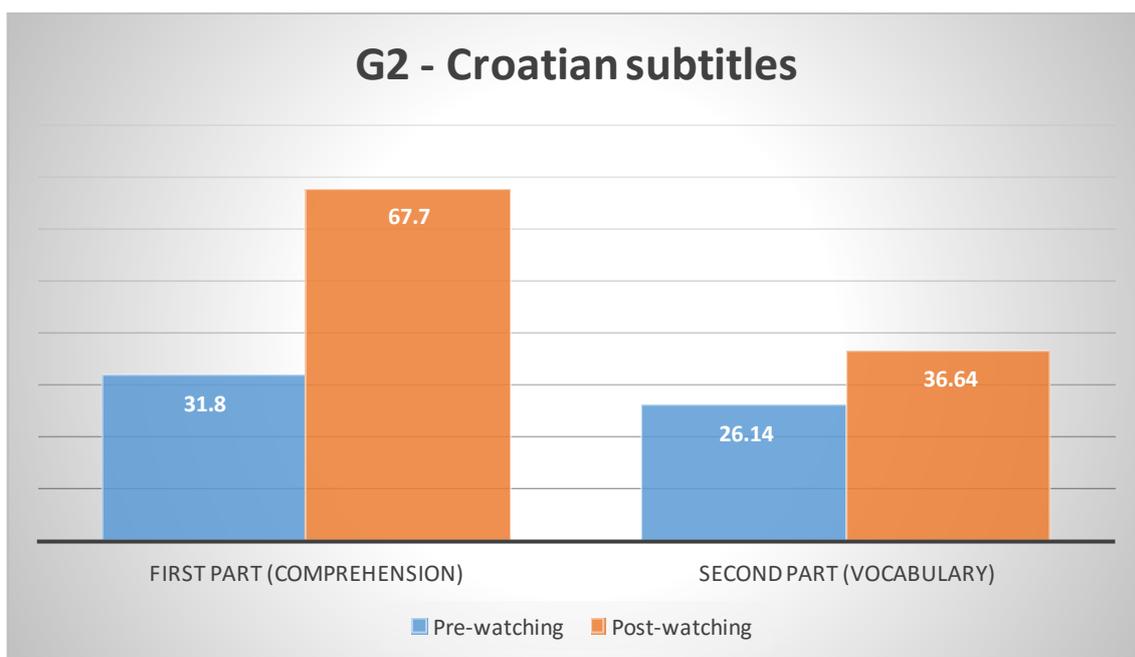


Figure 2 - Analysis of the questionnaire for G2 – the group with Croatian subtitles

The results were also better for the second part of the questionnaire, with the average score of 36.64%. All students from G2 answered at least one question correctly, and two of them had six and seven correct questions.

An overwhelming majority of the students from G2 (86.63%) described *Cosmos* as easy to understand with Croatian subtitles. They were satisfied to have been able to hear new words and also see their translation simultaneously. According to them, the translations gave them the opportunity to acquire two new words at the same time - one in Croatian, by reading the subtitles, and one in English, by paying attention to the presenter. However, 55% of them would have also been satisfied with English subtitles. They claim that, with English subtitles, they could have maybe understood more unknown concepts connected with black holes, considering the amount of new information conveyed through both the audiovisual cues and the subtitles. Some students also said that it would have been almost impossible for them to understand anything had they watched the clip without any subtitles.

### 3.4.3 The group with no subtitles (G3)

The third group had 24 students, 16 female and 8 male. Only one student from this group had previously heard of the TV series used for this study.

Students from this group had the best average result in the first part of the questionnaire in the pre-watching activity, 40.45% (as pictured in Figure 3). None of the students answered all questions correctly, but there were also no students with a score of zero or one. 62.5% of the students from G3 had a score of four or higher in the first part of the questionnaire.

With an average score of 20.74%, G3 was only slightly better in the second part than G1. 33% of the students had only one correct answer and only one student in all three groups answered all eight vocabulary questions correctly, and it was a student from this group.

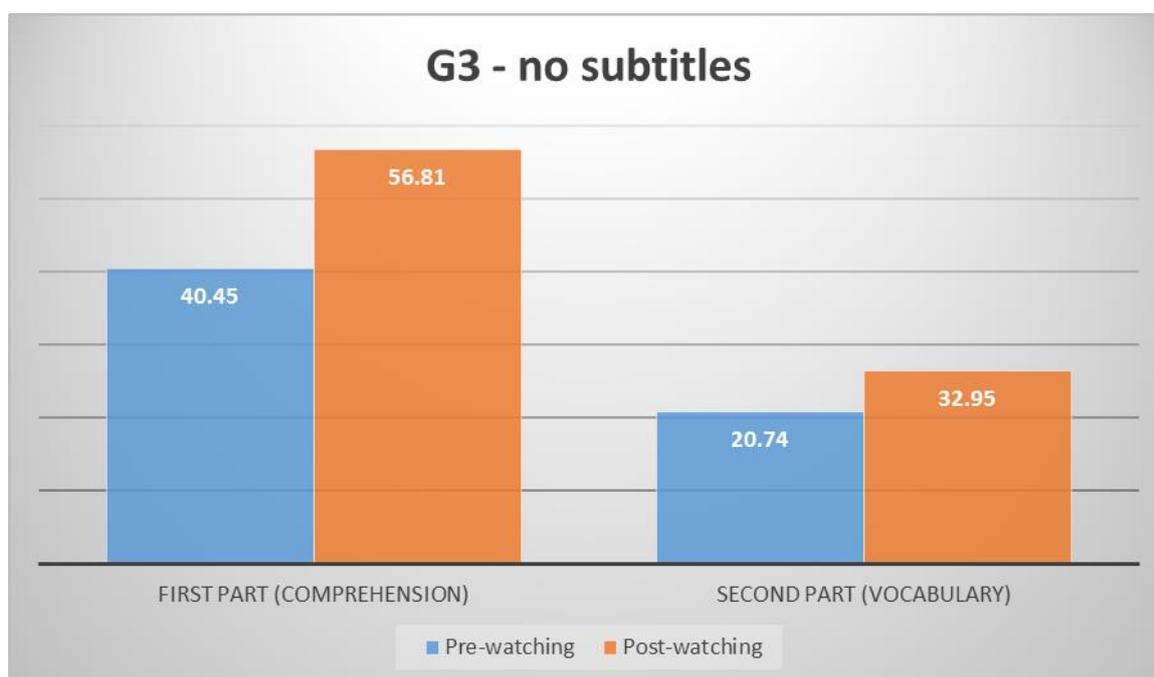


Figure 3 - Analysis of the questionnaire for G3 – the group with no subtitles

G3 had the smallest improvement rate after the watching activity, when their results for the first questionnaire are taken into consideration. Students from this group had an average score of 56.81% for the first part. None of the students answered all questions correctly, but 33% of them answered at least six questions correctly.

This group also achieved a better average score than G1 in the second part of the questionnaire, 32.95%. Once again, only one student managed to answer all eight questions correctly, and 33% of them had a score of at least three or higher.

Even though the students from G3 watched the program without subtitles, 87.5% of them considered the video easy enough to understand. In spite of the fact that the material had quite a lot of unknown words, they used contextual clues from the video itself to construct meaning.

According to 54.16% of them, it would not have been easier for them if they had had Croatian or English subtitles, because this type of exercise gave them the opportunity to focus only on what was going on the screen, without any distractions. However, the remaining students would have preferred Croatian or English subtitles in order to understand the topic and unknown words more easily.

### 3.5 Discussion

As mentioned in the literature review in the first part of this paper, various studies have proven the existence of a positive correlation between subtitled and non-subtitled audiovisual materials and the performance in a foreign language. The study conducted for the purpose of this paper mostly confirmed that correlation, but with some unexpected findings.

One of the findings that should have most implications for the future of foreign language teaching is certainly the fact that the majority of students reacted positively on the use of audiovisual materials in the classroom. Most of them were satisfied with the topic and only a small percentage of the students had real difficulties understanding the material. Students that watched the program with subtitles, either English or Croatian, reported almost no problems with paying attention both to the video and the subtitles at the same time, stating that subtitles only helped them understand the information conveyed through the audiovisual channel even better. Interestingly, only a small number of students from the group with no subtitles thought the program was difficult to understand without the written input. They did, however, get the lowest average score in the comprehension part of the questionnaire after the watching activity.

As was expected, based on the data from previous studies in this area, G1 achieved the best average result in the comprehension part of the questionnaire, followed very closely by G2. But contrary to the initial hypothesis, this group was not as successful in the vocabulary part of the questionnaire. Even though all three groups underperformed in the vocabulary part of the questionnaire, G1 had the poorest results of them all. They got a better result post-watching, as did all the groups, but even then they only had an average score of 2.5 questions out of 8. This finding is unexpected, since various studies show that English subtitles should affect the students' ability to acquire unknown vocabulary items the most (Vanderplank, 1992, as cited in Borrás and Lafayette, 1994; Neuman and Koskinen, 1992). One could maybe argue that this group had problems with the second exercise in the vocabulary part, where

they were required to write a translation of the given word and that, unlike the group that watched the video with Croatian subtitles, they were not able to see the answer written on screen during the watching activity. However, this does not make these results any less disappointing, considering that they would have been awarded six out of eight points if they had answered all the other questions correctly. On the other hand, the fact that 50% of the students from G1 said they would have preferred Croatian subtitles points to the fact that they are maybe not used to watching English programs with English subtitles. As observed by many scholars, when viewers are not accustomed to subtitles, this can lead to tuning out the subtitles and not having any benefits from them (Froehlich, 1988, p. 199; Díaz Cintas and Fernandez Cruz, 2008, p. 217).

The initial hypothesis was that students from G2 would have no problems with comprehension, but that they might have some problems with the vocabulary exercises. The first part of that hypothesis was proven to be correct, since G2 was almost as good as G1 in the comprehension part of the questionnaire. The other part of the hypothesis proved to be wrong, considering that students from G2 achieved the best results in the vocabulary part, which is somewhat surprising. However, they could have benefited the most from their classroom context, considering that the way they watched the clip from *Cosmos* corresponded to the way they usually watch TV series and movies at home and in cinemas – only with Croatian subtitles. Nevertheless, these results should be interpreted with caution, since students from this group also achieved the best results in the vocabulary part before the watching activity. That could indicate that some of them knew this topic better than the rest of their colleagues from other groups, which could have helped them understand the episode better and therefore get better results. Most of them were satisfied with Croatian subtitles, as was expected.

Contrary to expectations, G3 achieved decent results in the vocabulary part of the questionnaire. Students from this group were better than those from G1 by almost 2% and had only 4% worse results than students from G2. This is surprising because almost no other study showed that audiovisual materials benefited participants who watched it without subtitles, which is why it was initially expected that the students from this group would not be as successful as their colleagues from other groups. Some authors, however, find that subtitles can sometimes just be a distraction for viewers and that some can benefit even from audiovisual materials without any kind of subtitles (Neuman and Koskinen, 1992; Kovačević, 2013). Given that the students from G3 achieved good results in the second part of the

questionnaire after the watching activity, and that they had the best results in the first part of the questionnaire before the watching activity, it is somewhat surprising that they did not achieve better results in the comprehension part after the watching activity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the research that has been carried out for the purpose of this paper, it is possible to conclude that there is enough evidence of the benefits that both subtitled and non-subtitled audiovisual materials can have on a learner of English as a foreign language. Participants in the study reacted positively to the use of audiovisual material in the classroom. However, the results of the study show that they did in fact learn something, even if they did not exactly perform as expected.

Audiovisual materials, with or without subtitles, are an excellent example of authentic materials teachers could use to make the learning process easier, more interesting, and also more natural. This type of materials gives students the opportunity to see the language being used in real-life situations, and not only in carefully scripted texts written for classroom use only. They are also a great source of comprehensible input, something students can understand with ease, but also something that provides them with ample opportunities for using the knowledge they already have to learn something new.

In conclusion, even though the results corroborated some of the initial hypotheses, there are some findings which proved to be surprising. Seeing that not many studies like this one have been carried out in Croatian classrooms, further studies of the issue could be very useful to shed some more light on the classroom application of different types of audiovisual materials. More evidence of the benefits of subtitles could encourage teachers to implement more audiovisual materials into their classrooms and use that together with either intralingual or interlingual subtitles to their students' advantage.

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## 6. Appendices

Appendix 1 – the consent form

### IZJAVA

kojom ja, \_\_\_\_\_, učenik/učenica  
(ime i prezime)

\_\_\_\_\_ razreda \_\_\_\_\_ u  
(razred) (naziv škole)

\_\_\_\_\_ dajem pristanak za sudjelovanje  
(naziv grada)

u istraživanju u svrhu pisanja diplomskog rada na temu *The Role of Subtitles in Creating Teaching Material in EFL Classrooms*.

Sudjelovanje u ovom istraživanju u potpunosti je dobrovoljno.

Istraživanje obuhvaća gledanje isječka iz dokumentarca *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* u trajanju od 20-ak minuta te ispunjavanje anonimnog upitnika prije i nakon gledanja tog videa.

Istraživanje je u potpunosti anonimno te ga ispunjavate pod vlastitom šifrom, a rezultati će u diplomskom radu biti prikazani kumulativno, ne pojedinačno.

U Slavonskom Brodu, \_\_\_\_\_  
(datum) (vlastoručni potpis)

## ISTRAŽIVANJE ZA DIPLOMSKI RAD

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(šifra ispitanika)

Pred Vama se nalazi upitnik za istraživanje za diplomski rad. Prije ispunjavanja upitnika osmislite vlastitu šifru i napišite je na ovaj upitnik.

Upitnik se sastoji od dva dijela. U prvom dijelu ispituju se činjenice vezane uz temu *svemir* i pojam crnih rupa, a u drugom se dijelu ispituje poznavanje nekoliko riječi iz engleskog jezika.

Ako na bilo koje pitanje ne znate odgovor, nemojte pogađati i zaokružiti bilo što, već prekržite redni broj tog pitanja.

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### PART I

#### A. Is the statement true (T) or false (F)? Circle the correct letter.

1. Svjetlo najbližih zvijezda do Zemlje putuje stoljećima. T F
2. Svjetlo putuje brzinom od 300.000 kilometara u sekundi. T F
3. Astronom William Herschel u 18. je stoljeću otkrio da je potrebno određeno vrijeme da bi svjetlo zvijezda stiglo do Zemlje. T F
4. John Michell osmislio je naziv *tamna zvijezda*. T F
5. Prostor se može širiti, skupljati i izobličavati bez ograničenja. T F
6. Einstein je otkrio da su prostor i vrijeme dva aspekta *prostor-vremena*. T F

#### B. Choose the correct answer. Only one answer is correct.

1. The Moon is about \_\_\_\_\_ away from Earth.  
a) 0,5 light-seconds      b) one light-second      c) two light-seconds      d) three light-seconds
2. The gravitational pull on Earth is called:  
a) one-g      b) five-g      c) eight-g      d) nine-g
3. The boundary between the black hole and the rest of the universe is called:  
a) invent horizon      b) intent horizon      c) event horizon      d) extent horizon
4. The scientist who coined the term *photography* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is:  
a) William Herschel      b) John Herschel      c) William Michell      d) John Michell

## PART II

### A. Select the most appropriate definition of these items. Only one answer is correct.

1. **complexion** (n)
  - a) the natural color, texture, and appearance of the skin
  - b) a system of interrelated, emotion-charged ideas, feelings, memories, and impulses
  - c) an intricate or complicated association of related things
  
2. **to enter uncharted territory**
  - a) to do something forbidden
  - b) to do something new
  - c) to do something dangerous
  
3. **fend off** (v)
  - a) to escape something or someone
  - b) to avoid something
  - c) to ward off, to avert, or to repel
  
4. **eon** (n)
  - a) a chemically inert element in the earth's atmosphere
  - b) an electrically charged atom
  - c) one billion years in astronomy

### B. Write a synonym and a translation for the given verbs.

1. to perish \_\_\_\_\_
2. to gobble up \_\_\_\_\_
3. to stroll \_\_\_\_\_
4. to warp \_\_\_\_\_

## ISTRAŽIVANJE ZA DIPLOMSKI RAD

(šifra ispitanika)

### PART I

#### A. Is the statement true (T) or false (F)? Circle the correct letter.

1. Svjetlo najbližih zvijezda do Zemlje putuje stoljećima. T F
2. Svjetlo putuje brzinom od 300.000 kilometara u sekundi. T F
3. Astronom William Herschel u 18. je stoljeću otkrio da je potrebno određeno vrijeme da bi svjetlo zvijezda stiglo do Zemlje. T F
4. John Michell osmislio je naziv *tamna zvijezda*. T F
5. Prostor se može širiti, skupljati i izobličavati bez ograničenja. T F
6. Einstein je otkrio da su prostor i vrijeme dva aspekta *prostor-vremena*. T F

#### B. Choose the correct answer. Only one answer is correct.

1. The Moon is about \_\_\_\_\_ away from Earth.  
a) 0,5 light-seconds      b) one light-second      c) two light-seconds      d) three light-seconds
2. The gravitational pull on Earth is called:  
a) one-g      b) five-g      c) eight-g      d) nine-g
3. The boundary between the black hole and the rest of the universe is called:  
a) invent horizon      b) intent horizon      c) event horizon      d) extent horizon
4. The scientist who coined the term *photography* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is:  
a) William Herschel      b) John Herschel      c) William Michell      d) John Michell

### PART II

#### A. Select the most appropriate definition of these items. Only one answer is correct.

1. **complexion** (n)  
a) the natural color, texture, and appearance of the skin  
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- a) to do something forbidden
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4. **eon** (n)

- a) a chemically inert element in the earth's atmosphere
- b) an electrically charged atom
- c) one billion years in astronomy

**B. Write a synonym and a translation for the given verbs.**

- 1. to perish \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. to gobble up \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. to stroll \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. to warp \_\_\_\_\_

### PART III

1. Je li Vam bilo teško pratiti ovaj video? Ukratko obrazložite svoj odgovor.

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2. Jesu li Vam engleski titlovi pomogli u razumijevanju teme i specifičnog vokabulara ovog dokumentarca? Mislite li da bi Vam bilo lakše da ste umjesto engleskih imali hrvatske titlove ili da ste video gledali bez titlova? Ukratko obrazložite svoj odgovor.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Jesu li Vam hrvatski titlovi pomogli u razumijevanju teme i specifičnog vokabulara ovog dokumentarca? Mislite li da bi Vam bilo lakše da ste umjesto hrvatskih imali engleske titlove ili da ste video gledali bez titlova? Ukratko obrazložite svoj odgovor.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Je li Vam bilo teško pratiti video bez titlova? Smatrate li da biste ga lakše pratili i razumjeli više stvari da ste imali engleske ili hrvatske titlove? Ukratko obrazložite svoj odgovor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This question was used only in G1.

<sup>4</sup> This question was used only in G2.

<sup>5</sup> This question was used only in G3