



Incidental Foreign Language Acquisition Through Subtitled Audiovisual Materials

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Abstract

Consumption of audiovisual materials (movies, series, shows, anime, etc.) in foreign languages has been a regular practice in our daily life for decades. Today we consume this media wherever we are through our phones on streaming platforms. Many of our favorite titles and genres are in a foreign language, which makes acquisition of the language inevitable. However, the stages at which we learn languages in this are unclear. Moreover, translation techniques used by professional and fan subtitles may influence the process of learning and the accuracy of information. This paper uses subtitled anime as a case study for learning Japanese as a foreign language. A five-stage theoretical model of incidental learning is proposed in order to explain the process of acquisition. Furthermore, the paper discusses how translation techniques influence foreign language acquisition. The findings of this research may help incidental learners understand how they acquire foreign languages through audiovisual materials. They may also help translators become better aware of the tradeoffs they make when they use translation techniques. Finally, the findings may inspire future researchers to empirically investigate the process of learning languages through subtitled content.

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1. Introduction

We live in a time where everyone is connected to everyone; as a result, learning foreign language has never been more inevitable. Foreign language acquisition is no longer restricted to the confines of a classroom, hence the term extramural language learning i.e., learning that happens outside the walls of school. People are not only exposed to foreign languages through travel in a real-life interaction, but also through social media, online games, and more importantly through television and streaming platforms. The latter is referred to as authentic audiovisual input: data that combines audio presented with dynamic or static imagery (Sutton & Webb, 2026).

Authentic audiovisual input (movies and series) are a popular topic of discussions among students; therefore, they can stimulate target language. During classroom discussions, students will show contrasting attitudes regarding the audiovisual material in question. For example, they will comment on what they liked or disliked about a certain movie/television series, their favorite characters, character development, the plot, etc. Authentic audiovisual materials can minimize what Krashen refers to as the affective filter: an emotional state that prevents students from learning (Gálíková, 2025). Students do not hesitate to contribute to the topic by talking about

their favorite show or movie and why they think it is superior to other shows or movies. Others will comment on peers' favorite movies and why they believe it is inferior. In fact, it is difficult to find a student who does not show genuine interest in movies and shows in a foreign language. This interest sparks a negotiation of meaning that authentic audiovisual input brings to the classroom can present great opportunities for foreign language acquisition (Indriyani, 2023).

It is fairly common that beginner learners consume movies and series in two forms of audiovisual translation (AVT): intralingual captioning (source-language text=ST) and interlingual captioning (target language text translated to L1=TT). When learners are exposed to audio-visual input extensively, they may experience incidental language acquisition: the acquisition of linguistic skills as learners focus on understanding and completing tasks that are unrelated to deliberate language learning (Kuppens, 2010).

Subtitled audio-visual material has been known to promote incidental foreign language acquisition as it provides a multimodal learning context that connects imagery, audio, and text. Both Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2005) and Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991) suggest that when audiovisual materials are accompanied by subtitles in L1, a learner develops a better

comprehension and recall of the foreign language in question. Without a doubt, this learning happens in stages depending on the properties of both the target language (source text language) and the learner's L1. This means that although the incidental learner is not intentionally aware of the process of learning, they still learn in steps or stages (possibly from shorter and easier words and expressions). The techniques that are used in subtitling and censoring may also influence incidental learning through subtitled audiovisual materials. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

How do incidental learners acquire language through subtitled content?

How does translation and censorship techniques of subtitles affect incidental language acquisition?

In order to answer the research questions, the paper uses Japanese anime with subtitles as a case study for three reasons:

1/ The Japanese language is fundamentally different from many other languages, especially those with roots in Indo-European Languages such as Romance, Germanic, or Slavic languages and even neighboring Asian languages like Chinese. This is because Japanese belongs to an entirely different language family, the Japonic language family. Learning a language that shares very little with a learner's L1 makes for clearer contrast with

regards to subtitles (Yodgorova, 2025; Miyagawa, n.d.).

2/ Japanese anime has quickly become immensely popular, especially among the youth over the past few decades. This medium has become crucial for the Japanese economy and gave Japan a soft power with which it shapes popular culture that competes with Hollywood and western media. This popularity has sparked the interest of learners all over the world in the Japanese language (Weng, 2025).

3/ Unlike TV shows and movies, anime voice actors make an effort to enunciate and exaggerate their speech which makes incidental learning with anime more effective for beginners.

It should be noted that this paper does not focus on incidental learning of Japanese with English subtitles only. Additionally, the author uses Romaji (transliteration of Japanese in Latin Alphabet) along with original Japanese script whenever necessary.

2. Stages of incidental foreign language acquisition through subtitled audiovisual materials.

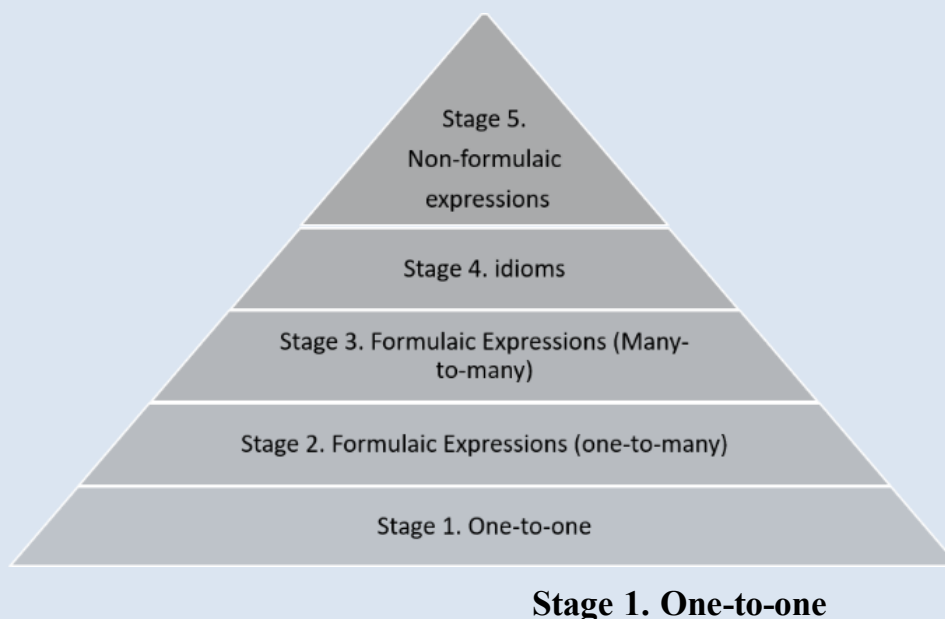
Interest in extramural foreign language learning often begins in early childhood and teenage years as learners interact with foreign audiovisual input such as cartoons, movies, or shows on television or the internet. Learners will watch the material while looking at the subtitles in order to

understand what the characters are saying. In the early stages of this incidental language acquisition, learners may be overwhelmed by the large cognitive load as the sounds of the foreign language may seem like an “uninterrupted wall of sound.” Consequently, subtitles help to lower this anxiety by providing a cross-lingual scaffold that assists the brain in mapping the unfamiliar L2 sounds to the familiar L1 concepts. A study on eye movement and multimedia learning shows that when learners become more acquainted with the source language, their auditory processing skills become more mature, which decreases their dependence on interlingual captioning (translated subtitles). The data obtained from eye movement tracking shows that learners focus less on captions

and require less time to process the text; instead, they rely more heavily on the auditory channel. As incidental learning reaches a specific vocabulary threshold, learners start to prefer unassisted viewing or intralingual subtitles. This is known as the “expertise reversal effect” (Kalyuga, 2009) where a previously effective learning or teaching method becomes a hinderance. More advanced learners may prefer to view media in the source-language captions (intralingual) and train their ears to process the sounds in native speaker speeds.

Hence, this paper proposes the following a hierarchical pyramid model to explain the stages at which incidental foreign language acquisition happens when watching audiovisual material with L1 subtitles.

Fig.1. Theoretical Model for Incidental language acquisition with L1 subtitles



Perhaps individual words are the easiest to remember and understand. These words are conversation openers and closers. Using formulaic sequences such as greetings (hi, hey, hello in English) to start a conversation is a common practice across languages, and therefore requires less cognitive processing. This psychological reality makes the translation of these greetings into L1 stable in structure (the grammar does not change because the words are frozen in a specific pattern) (Serrano, R., Stengers, H., & Housen, A. (2015). One might argue that students may already know these words whether or not they watch shows and movies because these words have become a part of popular culture because of globalization. Possibly the reason most learners know these words is not pop culture alone. Why most people know these words and not other short words is due to their pragmatic utility; conversation openers and closers are what people need most in conversations. They have equivalents in native languages, and therefore, learners find occasions to use them, unlike other short words which are less frequent and less necessary.

Another reason why conversation openers and closers are easy to pick up is nonverbal cues. If a learner takes a liking to another language like Japanese, for example, they don't depend solely on the audio channel and subtitles; they are also watching how the characters move, when and where they are when they move a certain way and what

words they say in that situation. Many words and expressions are usually paired with body language like bowing, waving, entering or leaving a room, etc. an incidental learner finds it easy to map these words to their equivalents in L1. This might explain why anyone with the least interest in the Japanese language might know words like konnichiwa (hello), ohayou (good morning), konbanwa (good evening), sayonara (goodbye), oyasumi (good night) etc.

However, these words may translate to more than one word in the subtitles. This means that the order in which learners build vocabulary goes from foreign or source language to native or translated language. In other words it is easier to remember one word or unit of sound that translates to many words than it is to learn many words or units of sound that translate to one word. The following example shows this difference.

Stage 2. Formulaic expressions: One to many

Possibly learning one foreign language word that is translated to many words in L1 subtitles is the second stage of incidental learning with subtitles. In the examples below, we see Japanese conversation openers that consist of a single chunk or unit or sound. This means that when the Japanese use these openers, they do not make pauses as is the case where expressions that are made up of more than

one unit of sound. It is important to note that some of the words here may consist of more than one etymological root that may carry a certain meaning on its own. Hence, we will be looking at the example chunks of sounds rather than individual words.

Table 1. One-to-many mapping

Japanese Subtitles	English subtitles
Ohayou おはよう	good morning
よろしく Yoroshiku	nice to meet you
Hisashiburi ひさしぶり	long time no see

The examples above are quite common in Japanese shows, movies, and anime because they carry, as discussed earlier, a pragmatic utility. However, another reason

is that they are a single unit of sound, and for this reason they may be treated by the learner's brain as one word. This makes mapping them to their equivalents easy even when the equivalent is more than one unit of sound.

Stage 3. Many-to-many

Perhaps the third stage in incidental learning with L1 subtitles is a group of words that translates to a group of words (be it shorter or longer). Nevertheless, it may be harder to learn a longer phrase or sentence that translates to a similar or close number of words L1 than it is to learn one unit that translates to many. This is because a longer phrase or sentence in a foreign puts a heavier cognitive load on a beginner. The examples below show some formulaic expressions that a learner is likely to encounter in Japanese shows, movies, and anime.

Table 2. Many-to-many mapping

Japanese formulaic expression	English subtitles
Nani o itteiru no ka wakaranai 何を言っているのかわからない Sonna koto o itte iru bai janai そんなことを言っている場合じゃない	I have no idea what you're saying.

Konna tokoro ni nani shiteiruno こんなところに何しているの	This is no time to be saying things like that!
Omae ni dake wa iwaretakunai お前には言われたくない	What are you doing in a place like this?
Nani ga atte mo ore wa akiramenai 何があっても俺は諦めない	You're the last person I want to hear that from.
Mou nidoto surana もう二度とするな	No matter what happens, I won't give up.
	Don't you ever do that again

Stage 4. Idioms

Idioms may be harder than formulaic expressions discussed above. As a result, they can present many problems for incidental learners. Translations to L1 can obscure the literal meanings. This may leave the learner feeling confused when he sees words that he already knows being translated differently. Idioms and expressions related to body parts in Japanese can also cause confusion when

translated in subtitles. Usually in Japanese, expressions related to body parts have a hidden figurative meaning that gets lost in translation. The following examples show how idioms can be confusing. Another problem with translating idioms in Japanese shows and anime is that they get translated to their equivalent idioms in L1. The incidental learner may find it hard to map the words to their literal equivalents or make mistakes in mapping that will take a long time to fix.

Table 3. Mapping of idioms.

Japanese idioms	Equivalent in subtitles
Hara ga tatsu 腹が立つ	Literal: My stomach stands up. Actual meaning: I am angry
Mimi ga itai 耳が痛い	Literal: My ears hurt. Actual meaning: truth hurts/ truth is harsh
Mimi hayai 耳が早い	Literal: fast ear Actual meaning: tattletale/ someone who spreads news and secrets quickly.

Sometimes the target language and L1 can share very close idioms, and this happens for many reasons. Calques or loan translations is used to describe the act of adopting phrases or expressions from a dominant culture by translating them word for word. Global mass media can also have an influence on languages through television, movies, the internet, etc. Shared religion and literary texts are another reasons why different languages seem to have shared idioms. For example, ancient Chinese and Greek philosophies were translated to many languages, and therefore, idioms were transferred from the source to foreign languages. Proximity is also a factor here because countries with close borders will likely be in constant contact which causes language to blend which creates shared idioms. Lastly, shared human experiences may produce similar

idioms. For instance, humans everywhere, regardless of what language they speak, will observe “birds that flock together” and watch the sky as it “rains cats and dogs” in English or “rains spears” in Japanese.

When idioms are shared, mapping them to L1 may not create problems for incidental learners. For this reason, shared idioms are likely to be acquired in the early stages of incidental learning. The table below shows some examples of shared idioms between English and Japanese.

Japanese	Equivalent in subtitles
Te o kashite 手を貸して Literal meaning: end me your hand Said to as a request for help Kuchi ga warui (adjective phrase) 口が悪い Literal meaning: bad mouth Said to describe someone who is highly critical of others in a severe manner. Sushi-zume (adjective phrase) 寿司詰め Literal meaning: packed like sushi Said to describe a state where people or things are crammed tightly into a space Yūben wa gin, chinmoku wa kin (proverb) 雄弁は銀、沈黙は金 Literal meaning: Eloquence is silver, silence is gold.	give/lend a hand Used to as a request for help Bad-mouth (verb) = to severely criticize someone Sharp tongue (noun phrase) = used to describe someone who is highly critical of others in a severe manner. Packed like sardines (adjective phrase) Said to describe a state where people or things are crammed tightly into a space. Speech is silver, silence is golden (proverb)

Stage 5. Nonformulaic expressions

Non-formulaic expressions can be the most challenging for incidental learners to comprehend and acquire for many reasons. Nonformulaic expressions are not common or frequent in daily life; therefore, memorizing them does not benefit the

learner. An incidental learner may never find themselves in a situation where they can say the following:

The artifact we sought was secretly relocated to the northern capital under the cover of yesterday's storm

Romaji: Kinou no arashi ni magirete oretachi ga sagashite ita ibotsu wa hisoka ni kita no miyako e hakobareta n da

Japanese: 昨日の嵐に紛れて、俺たちが探していた遺物は密かに北の都へ運ばれたんだ

Another reason why nonformulaic expressions are harder is that the structure of the sentences may be completely different from the translation in the subtitles. The following example shows how the order of the words in Japanese is different from the English language.

Japanese: 私は寿司を食べます

Romaji: watashi wa sushi o tabemasu

Structure: (subject -> topic marker particle -> object -> verb)

English equivalent: I sushi eat

English subtitle translation: I eat sushi.

Other times, this mismatch of sentence structure is followed by elision. Native speakers often remove the pronoun completely as it is understood within the context as is shown in the following example:

Japanese: 寿司が好き

Romaji: sushi ga suki

Structure: (subject (omitted) -> topic marker particle (omitted) -> object -> verb)

English equivalent: sushi like

English subtitle translation: I sushi like

It is clear how a simple sentence is problematic, especially for beginners. The structure is completely different, and this difference grows even larger if the sentence is longer.

[I] [read] [a difficult Japanese book] [with my friend] [at the library] [yesterday]

(Subject -> Verb -> Direct Object -> Manner/Company -> Location -> Time)

Japanese: 私は昨日、図書館で友達と一緒に日本語の難しい本を読みました。

Romaji: Watashi wa kinō, toshokan de tomodachi to issho ni Nihongo no muzukashii hon o yomimashita.

(Subject -> Time -> Location -> Manner/Company -> Direct Object -> Verb)

I yesterday, library at friend with together japanese of difficult book read.

English Translation: I read a difficult Japanese book with my friend at the library yesterday.

The mismatch in structure is clear in the example above. When an incidental learner encounters a similar situation when watching anime with interlingual subtitles (L1 subtitles), their brain is likely to

experience a heavy cognitive load. According to cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) the working memory of the human brain is limited; therefore, if the workload is too heavy, the brain struggles to map foreign speech to L1 in the correct order. For example, the verb in the English translation is the second word, while the verb in the Japanese audio is the last word. In this case, the brain is likely to make compromises and seek the path with the least cognitive load. The brain here does not try to match and synchronize the subtitle text with the audio; instead, it may prioritize the visual text (subtitles) because it is easier to read over the audio input, which is difficult to break down into its basic elements at the same time. Then it memorizes the entire Japanese sentence as a whole and matches it to the L1 translation as a whole (d'Ydewalle & De Bruycker, 2007).

3. Risks of incidental learning from subtitles

Problems relating to polysemy (one word with more than one meaning) can arise when watching media with subtitles. In the Japanese language, some words can have different meanings depending on the context. For example, the word “やる / yaru” can mean, “to do”, “to give,” or “to kill.” Homonymy may also cause problems for incidental learners. Homonymy is when many words share the same pronunciation. Some examples of the are “紙 / kami =

paper,” “髪 / kami = hair,” and 神 / kami = God.” When an incidental learner encounters homonyms, they are likely to recall the last meaning they saw in the subtitles, and store that in the short term memory. As the meaning changes in the subtitles, it gets overwritten over the old one in the short term memory. For example, a learner memorizes the word “kiru /” in a shonen anime as “to cut”, later he sees a different anime, for instance a school anime, and hears the sound “kiru,” this time however, the subtitles read as “to wear” In this situation, the student's brain may replace the old meaning with new one in the short term memory.

Misrepresentation of culture

Incidental learning from shows can present a false image of the target culture. For example, the Japanese in real life have “keigo” which are politeness rules; however, anime shows may distort that image. Since most anime shows take place in a high school, the language used can be rude and characters sometimes drop the formality that is expected in real daily life of the Japanese people. For example, an anime character may walk into a shop and say “mizu wo kore” which means “give me water” whereas in real life, the Japanese customers treat staff with respect and are like to say “mizu wo itadakimasu ka?” which means “may I have some water please?” A learner in this case may unknowingly use this type of requests with a native speaker and possibly offend them.

Anime-inspired Japanese language can also promote hyper-gender stereotypes. Anime can have highly gendered vocabulary where females speak feminine language, and males use gruff and domineering language. This happens because many popular anime shows are set in feudal or samurai eras, where gender roles and expectations were different from the more egalitarian Japan that we see today. In addition, characters in anime shows behave in a manner that is too dramatic. It is common in fantasy anime to see characters shout attack names and be aggressive. Characters may behave like cats too and sometimes finish every sentence with “nya” or “nyan” (which is the Japanese version “meow”) in order to sound playful, cute, and innocent, which is not how actual Japanese people behave in real life. Lastly, the Japanese in real life pay close attention to how others feel and want to make sure not to bother anyone. This means that it is impolite to be loud and obnoxious even in public. Anime characters on the other hand distort this image, where you see character shouting “ore wa zettai ni akiramenai”, meaning, “I will never give up!”

Learning from shows can make learners sound unnatural and strange. Voice actors in anime may change their pitch to give their characters a distinct personality and add drama. This can make learners sound cartoonish and melodramatic; as a result, it can make native speakers feel confused and

possibly uncomfortable when they interact with an incidental learner. Furthermore, anime characters may use character-specific pronouns like “ore” which is a masculine and rough way to say “I”. In a formal situation, like a business meeting when speaking to a professor, it will sound strange and disrespectful. Moreover, when learners acquire language from anime, they may learn grammar that is outdated and role language “Yakuwarigo”. This can make the learner sound like a samurai or an ancient martial arts, when referring to one self with “sessha” (which means this unworthy samurai) master instead of a normal Japanese “boku/watashi”. Also, anime voice actors may over enunciate and over pronounce words in order to sound clear. Nevertheless, real life Japanese people can make contractions and blend sounds together, for example, they may say “wakannai” (I dunno) instead of “wakaranai” (I don’t know). If an incidental learner enunciates every sound like an anime character, they run the risk of sounding robotic. Lastly, anime can normalize aggressive language and pronunciation. Characters of criminals, for instance gang members or bullies, may use pronouns like “temee” or “kisama” (which are aggressive ways to say “you”) or use exaggerated endings like “yare yare”. This language however, is rarely used in real life because the Japanese prefer harmony and politeness as opposed to confrontation and rude language.

Censorship

Media censoring is common as it is distributed across different countries with different religions, values, beliefs, and norms. Censoring includes blacking out scenes (editing out scenes with violence, drug use, or sexual acts), using CGI to cover inappropriate content (nudity or revealing outfits, alcohol, drug, or blood scenes), and editing dubbed dialogues and subtitles in order to censor taboos or politically and ethically inappropriate (Grine, 2025).

Grime (2005) outlines two types of subtitle censorship. Government censorship, which is politically motivated, seeks stability and security. Government censorship can also be religiously motivated as it filters out dialogue language that may not be religiously appropriate in a particular country. The second type of censorship is self-censorship. This is primarily driven by the translator's own beliefs and ideology as he attempts to make the translation of subtitles acceptable to the viewer.

4. *Subtitle censorship techniques and how they impact incidental language learning.*

There are many techniques that are practiced when censoring subtitles, and many of these techniques can affect incidental learning. Samir (2003) draws on Davoodi's model of translation (2009) in order to explain how taboo languages are censored in subtitles and dubbing. These

techniques include but are not limited to the following: omission, substitution, euphemism, and taboo for taboo.

Omission

According to Montero Perez et al (2014), captions and subtitles help learners detect words that are not familiar to them, and these words are what they acquire first. Vulgar words like “くそ / Kuso” or “野郎 / Yarou” are quite common in Shonen anime; as a result, the streaming platform or TV channel may delete them completely in order to keep a certain PG-rating. Davoodi (2009) warns of the dangers of omission because the taboo is sometimes a key word in the source text and deleting may distort the meaning. Also, the brain may ignore the word completely if the learner hears the audio without a subtitle to decode its meaning.

Omission technique is also used when professional subtitles try to balance the target language with L1. Personal honorifics (as is explained in substitution techniques below) sometimes are removed as is shown in the following example from subtitles of Tokyo Godfathers:

Japanese: でも、ハナちゃん困ってるなら、どうしてうちに帰ってこなかったの？

Romaji: Demo Hana-chan komatteru nara doshite uchi ni kaette konakatta no?

Retention: But if dear Hana was in trouble, why didn't [dear Hana] come back to us?

Natural with omission and substitution: But if you were in trouble, why didn't you come back?

It is clear in the literal translation above that the Japanese sometimes refer to the person they speak to as if they are absent. Koskinen (2024) explains that a word-for-word translation in this case is utterly confusing for the viewers. In English, people in conversation do not refer to each other this way, which means that the only sensible option for the translator is to delete the honorifics and endearment words like "Chan = dear" and use the second person pronoun "you" instead. While the deletion of chan in the subtitles makes for a less rich cultural experience, it avoids the heavy repetition of the word "chan" and makes the subtitled version more natural.

Substitution (replacement)

Substitution (often referred to as cultural substitution, adaptation, or domestication) is another technique that is used to tone down taboos in subtitles. Instead of deleting a subtitle text completely as is the case in omission, lines that are considered harmful or obscene are substituted (Halloul, 2022). For instance, when Islamic countries broadcast anime, scenes with alcohol are problematic because it is *haram*. These scenes are sometimes deleted completely, and other times labels on

alcoholic beverages like (*Sake* 酒) are substituted with religiously acceptable alternatives like *Juice* عصير. Illegal relationships and dating (especially in dubbed anime) are domesticated, where words with romantic implications like *girlfriend* (彼女 / *kanojo*) and *boyfriend* (彼氏 / *kareshi*) are adapted to as *fiance* or *husband* as is the case in the Famous anime *Detective Conan* with Sinichi and Ran (Mohammad Maki, 2016). Sometimes words describing romantic relationships outside of marriage are adapted to platonic words like *sister* أخت for *kanojo* (Al-Abbas & Haider, 2023) and *brother* أخ for *Kareshi*.

Substitution is not always used to filter out taboo terms as it can be used for cultural domestication. According to Ibrahim, M. A. E. S. (2025), substitution technique is most effective when the goal is to achieve cultural relevance. A good example of this comes from the *Pokemon* series in the 1990s where western cultures were not familiar with Japanese culture. Words like *Onigiri*/御握り (rice balls made from white rice) were translated to *donuts* or *snacks* (Parini, 2012). Other forms of substitution are discussed by Pederson (2007) that outline the following extra linguistic cultural elements:

- Name of real people: famous pop culture icons, classical authors, etc. For example, in Rumiko Takahashi's *Maison Ikkoku* (1986),

kendama (a traditional cup and ball game) is adapted to Yo-yos, and frisbees (Howell, P. (2004)

- Entertainment and media titles: famous movies, famous lines from movies
- Police ranks, military rank, government bodies, etc
- Public institutions (e.g., in Japanese 高校 / *Koukou* means *high school*, but it is often translated as *secondary school* المدرسة الثانوية)
- Education systems
- Foods and cuisine elements
- National holidays and cultural festivals and traditions
- Everyday conventions and customs (e.g., in Sakata's (1994) DNA² anime, the character says “うれしい / *Ureshii*” when she receives a compliment, which means (I am) happy, but it is translated as oh thank you!)
- Units of measurements

Substitution may have a positive and negative influence on incidental learning. A study using Pederson's model (2017) to test the effects of techniques used in translating culturally specific items (CSIs) on comprehension, shows that substitution was the most common technique. It also

shows that substitution and generalization scored highest in terms of readability and stayed cognitively manageable especially in fast-paced dialogues (Tsani & Rahardjo, 2026). However, there is a great risk of meaning distortion that ultimately leads the learner to confusion. For instance, when the word *wine* is replaced with *juice* or *water*, the learner sees that the character drinks juice or water too much and gets dizzy (drunk); here, the learner may get confused (Davoodi, 2009).

Substitution can also result in a loss of knowledge about the target culture. Sometimes words are domesticated in subtitles, where *Youkan* is translated as Fudge cake or Lemon pie to make the item less foreign. This shows that translators do not prioritize informing the viewers about the target culture. Also, translators sometimes aim for absolute universalization by deleting foreign connotations; however, they may make the experience less authentic. For example, a translator may replace yen with dollars, which makes the work too familiar, reduces the cultural authenticity, and prevents the viewers from experiencing the “otherness” of foreign cultures (Heller, 2025).

Substitution can reduce the speed at which an incidental learning acquires vocabulary. A research that compares professional subtitles to fan subtitles in vocabulary acquisition shows a statistical difference in learning speeds between the two.

Professional subtitles, which usually prefer substitution, lead to a faster reading speed and better comprehension. On the other hand, fansubbing, which favors retention/foreignization (keeping the original word) or specification (adding an explanatory note) is more effective in passive vocabulary learning (Van Tonder, 2018)

Furthermore, substitution can hide the social characteristics of the language. The Japanese are well-known for the use of honorifics such as *san*, *kun*, or *chan* when referring or talking to other people to show respect and maintain a social balance; nevertheless, these honorifics may get adapted to proper names or pronouns in L1. This makes it harder for the incidental learner to make different honorifics to one pronoun (e.g., *you*) (Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Koskinen, 2024; Ruunaniemi, 2025). It also makes it difficult to understand the social status of the characters in the show. Furthermore, professional subtitles tend to adapt the idiosyncrasies of the original text (dialects, accents, and role language) with more grammatically correct or standard language to make the text more readable. This ignores the deliberate characterization that the author intended and makes the dialogue bland, and “stylistically flat” (Sanders, 2025). In this regard, Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) note an interesting example of this type of substitution. In the professional subtitles of the anime *DNA²*,

the main character is addressed by his first name “Junta” whereas in the fan subtitles he is addressed as Momonari-kun (his family name + teenage boy suffix). Here the authors argue that the viewers of the fan-subbed anime are better able to deduce the social status of the main character. More importantly, they can experience how social status works in Japanese culture as the Japanese prefer to address one another with their family names. Here addressing one another with the first name often signals that the characters are close.

Moreover, substitution trades off readability for learning. Since fansubs are known for adding side notes to explain references that may go over the viewers head, substitution considers the new viewers (such as children) by lowering the “entry cost.” This means it replaces terms that are too foreign with words that the viewer knows, which makes reading the text faster and easier, and frees the viewer from having to research the foreign words or references (Wan, 2026; Heller, 2025) . Avoiding substitution on the other hand may require a higher cost for entry level incidental learners, but eventually will lead to more knowledge of target culture and larger vocabulary that in turn leads to deeper understanding. Granted, it made more sense in the 80s and 90s to use substitution since the viewers had no means of doing the research necessary to understand. Today, retention/foreignization (Venuti’s, 1995 as cited in

Yonamine, 2022) appears to be the more sensible decision because viewers have the ability to pause and take their time to read the reference and can use the internet to look up the references. Therefore, substitution in this day and age may be discouraged and unnecessary, especially since a large portion of the audience are lovers of anime and will take the time to do their research. The comment section in many of the anime platforms provide a space for “collective memory” where the viewers share the experiences and answer questions (Wan, 2026).

Taboo for taboo

The third technique in Davoodi's (2009) model is replacing a taboo with another taboo. This works by matching the taboo or culturally sensitive language from the source text (ST) to the closest taboo language in the target text (TT).

Fansubbing are more likely to use taboo for taboo technique than professional subbing. According to a study by Jiang (2023), fansubbing used a vulgarizing approach 55% of the time while professional subbing used it only 46% of the time. Fansubbers avoid the “deodorizing” techniques of professional subbing that make the text too homogeneous and sterile; instead, they choose to retain the characters' voices and idiosyncrasies (Sanders, 2025). Although vulgarization may make the content too embarrassing for some viewers, incidental learners have a better chance of mapping

the taboos in the source text to the taboos in L1. Despite the offensive nature of taboos, learning the meaning of these words may be necessary. This explains why fans prefer taboo for taboo when viewing anime because it makes for a “thick” translation experience and an authentic feel that is closest to the intent of the original film (Sanders, 2022; Sanders, 2025).

Naturally, professional subbers are known for adhering to industry norms. This means that the audience is considered when making the subtitles. Therefore, they follow the “Code of Good subtitling” regulations. This was more common before the internet where TV stations had to take into account many types of audiences.

In some cases, translators use autonomous insertion: this means adding a taboo word or phrase in the subtitles even when it is not present in the source text (although more common dubbing). In doing so, the translators are trying to match the mood and emotions of the characters; therefore, they add a vulgar word that is supposed to match an otherwise neutral Japanese word. This “fifteening” strategy was used in the 1980s by distributors such as Manga Entertainment to avoid G, PG, and PG-13 rating. Hence, they were commercially motivated to get an adult or “R-rating” which they believed increased appeal among the target audiences (aged 15 to 25) (Howell, 2004).

Euphemisms

A euphemism is a softer term that is used as an alternative of the taboo word in order to avoid unpleasant or embarrassing topics (Chen, 2022). While substitution can give an entirely different translation to source text (ST), for example, beer => juice, euphemism means choosing a close, albeit milder word in order to moderate or soften the impact of profanity or vulgar language. Euphemisms are used in many different ways:

Softening language related to anatomy. For example, in Turkish subtitles of many anime series like Chainsaw man, the vulgar word “boob” is softened as “göğüs”: a more polite word meaning “chest” or “breast” (Dolmacı & Ulaş, 2024)

Softening sexual insults: in the anime Steins Gate, Makise Kurisu calls the main character Okabe Rintaru, “hentai” if he makes a suggestive remark. The word hentai, literally means pervert, but it is often softened in the subtitles as “creep!”

Softening threats: the phrase Bukkoroshite yaru? Which literally means, “I will beat you to death” is sometimes translated as, “I will take you down!” or, “you are finished!”

Euphemisms in anime subtitles have a similar impact on language learning as substitution. When sensitive or offensive language is censored, many aspects of the language and culture are lost. Learners must understand how language works in

real life to gain a better understanding of the target culture. Although taboo language is offensive, it helps learners see how different cultural groups interact using different dialects, customs, and taboos (Setiawan & Irawati, 2018). Another risk of euphemisms in subtitles is that they prevent learners from “noticing” which is one of the necessary steps of language learning (Green, 2021). When a taboo word is sanitized, learners may fail to comprehend the intentions behind the use. Moreover, advanced learners may notice the difference between the audio and the euphemistic subtitles. This can cause confusion and distract them from the film’s content as they start questioning why the subtitles are incorrect (Rolph, 2014). Additionally, The use of euphemisms gives incorrect information about the character’s social class, region, and register (Rolph, 2014). As a result, learners may misinterpret the relationship between the characters and may mistake humor for abuse (Khalaf & Md. Rashid, 2019). Finally, euphemisation limits the authenticity of the cultural experience as it drops “the lingua-cultural voltage” and masks the spontaneity of native speaker interactions (Antonini, 2007 as cited in Rolph, 2014)

Conclusion

This research paper started out with the intention of proposing a model that explains how incidental foreign language acquisition happens when consuming audiovisual materials with L1 subtitles. We have seen pragmatic utility and stage of difficulty decide the order in which a learner incidentally acquires a foreign language with subtitles. The model suggests that learners initially acquire single words with single-word equivalents. These words are conversation openers and closers that are often accompanied by gestures and body language cues. What makes this the earliest stage of acquisition is (a) length (one-word), (b) frequency (words are repeated often which reinforces recall, and (c) these single words are communication practices that are shared between cultures which makes mapping them to L1 culture straightforward.

The second stage is learning short formulaic expressions with an equal number of word translations or having a longer translation. Since formulaic expressions are fixed, they do not require heavy processing. They are also quite repetitive; as a result, they are easy to recall.

The third stage in the model is learning longer formulaic expressions. These expressions can have a shorter, equal, or longer translation depending on the learner's L1 and the translator's decisions.

They have a medium stage of difficulty because they are longer than short formulaic expressions. Nevertheless, their frequency in conversations slowly builds better recall.

A more advanced stage in incidental foreign language acquisition through subtitled audiovisual material is stage 4: idioms. While idioms are fixed like formulaic expressions, they are not as repetitive. The meaning of the words in the source text may be completely different from the translation in the target text. They also require the learner to be deeply immersed in the culture in order to be able to decode their hidden implied meaning. Nevertheless, since they are fixed and used together as a single unit, the learner does not need to dissect them or break down into their basic words, therefore, the cognitive processing may not be as heavy as stage 5.

Stage 5 is the most advanced stage in nonformulaic expressions. Nonformulaic expressions do not possess any of the properties that make the first 4 stages easier. They can be long, unrepertive, non-fixed, and without any pragmatic utility. As a result, they impose the heaviest cognitive load on the learner. However, as the learner is exposed to the language through subtitled audiovisual material extensively, they start recognizing the linguistic patterns of the source text. Perhaps, it is at this stage that the incidental learner starts to experience the "expertise reversal effect" where subtitles in L1 are no longer

useful and start to slow them down. Here, the learner may prefer captioned viewing (source text subtitles) or unassisted viewing as they can now process the language in native speaker speed.

The paper also discussed the risks and challenges that subtitling techniques present for the learner. Firstly, omission of words that are offensive or do not have an equivalent for L1 may create confusion in the learner especially when it comes to register and hierarchical relationships or social status of characters. Substitution adaptation can also cause problems of comprehension and possibly result in a minimization or loss of authenticity that the consumer of a specific media is looking for. Replacing a taboo with another taboo or sanitization through euphemisms may decrease the intensity and the emotion and intensity that was intended by the creator of the work. They may also distract advanced learners as they notice the mismatch.

These subtitling techniques can have an impact on the learning stages proposed in

the model. Although subtitles in L1 may help beginner viewers with a low “entry cost”, techniques like omission, substitution, taboo-for-taboo, and sanitization may cause the learner to make inaccurate mappings of foreign words to L1. These inaccurate mappings might make it more challenging for the incidental learner to advance to stage five.

It should be noted that the proposed five stage model is purely theoretical as they based on the author’s own observation and experience with incidental learning through subtitled audiovisual material; therefore, it requires empirical evidence to validate or disprove its claims. Future research may conduct experiments with eye tracking movements and progressive tests for incidental learners to validate critique, and hopefully advance the model. Experiments can also be conducted to investigate how professional subbing is possibly different from fansubbing when it comes to accuracy and speed of incidental language acquisition.

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