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# Captioning to Support Literacy

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## Center for Technology Implementation

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### Overview

Captions can provide struggling readers with additional print exposure, improving foundational reading skills.

In a typical classroom, a teacher may find many students who are struggling readers, whether they are beginning readers, students with language-based learning disabilities, or English language learners (ELLs). One motivating, engaging, and inexpensive way to help build the **foundational reading skills** of students is through the use of closed-captioned and subtitled television shows and movies.

These supports can help boost foundational reading skills, such as phonics, word recognition, and fluency, for a number of students. Given the wide (and inexpensive) availability of captioned and subtitled media on broadcast television, on DVDs, and online, it can be a valuable addition to your teaching of diverse learners.

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### Using in Your Classroom

Presenting information in multiple ways can help address the diverse needs of learners in the classroom and engage students on multiple levels.

The use of captioned or subtitled media can be a great tool for teachers looking to differentiate classroom instruction. Consider using captioned or subtitled media whenever and wherever you use video in your teaching; turning on captions during class has considerable benefits for boosting the literacy skills of all students, especially those with print disabilities or ELLs.

Many struggling readers avoid text, and so have minimal exposure to print. Imagine the many additional hours of print exposure your students would get if captions were turned on every time they watched a video at home and at school!

### Provide Multiple Means of Representation

- ▶ For students who are learning English, captioned media can help improve vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and word recognition and decoding skills. Using captioned videos can help ensure that these students access important material.
- ▶ For students who are struggling readers, seeing and hearing unfamiliar words can help improve their understanding of the material and important vocabulary words.

- ▶ If your students are very low-level readers, consider using videos aimed at a younger audience or those that relate to their areas of interest—for example, an animated action series or film or pop culture content, such as interviews with musicians and actors. Entertaining, brief videos tend to have less challenging vocabulary and your students will still receive the literacy benefits of reading while listening.

## Provide Multiple Means of Engagement

- ▶ Providing information both textually and through the use of video (where appropriate) can be motivating for your students. Because we naturally read text that appears on a screen, using captions and subtitles can help boost literacy skills in a fun and engaging way.
- ▶ Consider recommending that students (and caregivers) turn on captions or subtitles at home to maximize exposure to print.

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## What the Research Says

Several studies (e.g., Bowe & Kaufman, 2001; Evmenova, 2008; Linebarger, 2001; Rickelman, Henk, & Layton, 1991) indicate that captioning and subtitles can help strengthen the following reading skills of students with learning disabilities, ELLs, and struggling or beginning readers:

- ▶ Reading speed and fluency
- ▶ Word knowledge
- ▶ Decoding
- ▶ Vocabulary acquisition
- ▶ Word recognition
- ▶ Reading comprehension
- ▶ Oral reading rates

Research has shown that watching videos appears to have a positive impact on comprehension skills, and combining viewing with text or captions appears to boost vocabulary acquisition, addressing skill deficits of struggling readers (Koskinen, Wilson, Gambrell, & Neuman, 1993; Koskinen, Knable, Markham, Jensema, & Kane 1995; Linebarger, 2001). Although most students do well with captioned media, the speed of captions could potentially pose a problem for very young children or struggling readers (Koskinen et al., 1993). For particularly low-level readers, teachers may want to consider using captioned television or movies where vocabulary is less likely to be difficult, such as those where the main characters are children or teenagers, animated movies, family programs, or movies with young children in the cast (Goldman, 1993).

For students who are learning English (or another language), captioned and subtitled media also can have benefits. This strategy has been shown to be more effective at improving overall listening comprehension than noncaptioned movies. Students who watch captioned videos to learn a foreign language have shown improvement in reading and listening comprehension, word recognition, decoding skills, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition (Evmenova, 2008; Goldman, 1993; King, 2002; Koskinen et al., 1995; Neuman, 1990; Shea, 2000). The use of multimedia to teach a foreign language can also help motivate students and remove some of the anxiety of not knowing the language (Huang & Eskey, 1999; King, 2002; Neuman, 1990; Shea, 2000).

Students consistently report increased engagement and enjoyment of captioned media over other options (e.g., print, uncaptioned media). Even in studies that have not found a significant improvement in academic objectives when using closed-captioned media have still determined that students report preferring captions (Evmenova, 2008; Holmes, Russell, & Movitz, 2007; Koskinen et al., 1993; Linebarger, 2001; Rickelman et al., 1991; Spanos & Smith, 1990).

Because of this finding, captioned media also may have an effect on students' nonacademic skills such as time-on-task, motivation, and behavior as they find classroom reading activities to be more enjoyable (Evmenova, 2008; Koskinen et al., 1993).

Researchers have found that the reading of captions or subtitles is fairly intuitive, so the use of captioned media requires little extra training or instruction for students. When watching subtitled media, viewers will typically attempt to decode the text, even if they are struggling or beginning readers (Kothari, Pandey, & Chudgar, 2004). Another benefit of the addition of captioned media to classroom instruction is that it shifts watching typical classroom videos from a “dominantly picture-viewing activity to a dominantly reading activity” (Kothari et al., 2004, p. 29), providing struggling readers with additional reading practice.

Because lower level readers may tend to avoid reading activities, their exposure to print is minimal and development of literacy skills continues to fall behind that of their peers (Koskinen et al., 1993). Maximizing print exposure through the use of captions, both at home and at school, can add many hours of reading practice and literacy skill development (Koskinen et al., 1993; Kothari et al., 2004).

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