my polyglot life

How to use subtitles to improve your French listening skills

A step by step guide to start boosting your oral comprehension using subtitled videos

by Cathy Intro
mypolyglotlife.com

my polyglot life

Summary

I. Why you should invest time into working on your listening comprehension

Watching videos with subtitles is a very popular way to learn French. There are **many ways to use videos to work on different areas** of the language.

In this guide, I'm focusing on **how to use videos and subtitles to boost your listening comprehension**.

Training my ears to become familiar with the rhythm and sounds of a language has become part of my language-learning routine (just started my fifth language).

There are **3 main benefits**:
- ❖ It makes everything seem more **familiar**
  → It's **reassuring for the brain** and makes you **feel more at ease**.

- ❖ You're able to pick up a lot of **words and grammar** constructs "on the fly" and **in context**
  → You **learn faster**. You develop a "feel", an **intuition**, of what sounds right

- ❖ You train your ears to **recognize specific sounds**
  → It will help when you're working on your **pronunciation** and also to **understand fast connected speech** spoken by native speakers

Read more about the theory behind these facts on my blog:
How to use Comprehensible Input to learn French

If you already know the kind of series or movies you enjoy using to study French, feel free to quickly read the following section and let's all meet on page 9 to discover the step-by-step method I recommend.

2.   4 tips to pick the right material

If you choose material that's too complex, you may feel overwhelmed and your brain won't be able to focus as well.

Therefore, here are a few things to keep in mind to pick the material you'll use to train your ears.

1. Short & often

- **Work in short sessions.** The exercises will be tiring for your brain. Listen to your body and adapt your sessions, every day might be different.

- **TV series are great** for that because the episodes are shorter than a full movie. On top of that, with TV series, you have time to **get used to how each character speaks**. You'll be exposed to the same kind of **vocabulary over and over**. Eventually, some will stick inside your memory.

  There's also an element of **predictability. So**, even if you don't understand all the words, your brain is able to fill some blanks with the context.

- **Short films** are a good resource because there's often only a handful of actors and the context is pretty straightforward. If you're lucky to find some with subtitles.

Ideas to keep it short & focused:
When you're serious about progressing fast, here are 2 strategies depending on your profile
- Put a timer, **watch an episode in 10-minutes increments** (approx.) to keep your concentration high

- **Watch some key sequences twice or more.** Pick the scenes where you understand between 80 to 90% and try to pick up new details every time you watch.

> **Brain stuff: use your internal "reward system"**
>
> Every time you understand more words, you'll get **a kick of dopamine**.
>
> Dopamine is like a drug: it makes you feel good and your brain will want more
>
> → keeps you **engaged** and **motivated**
>
> **BUT** like all drugs, don't overdo it. Moderate consumption is healthier (hence the timer) :)
>
> Get a regular dose but don't overdose !

2. Adapted to your goals

- Make sure the **type of language** ("registre de langue" like slang, standard, formal, written, spoken) matches your goals (read [this blog post](#) if you're not sure),

- and the **geographic region** where you live or want to go. For example, if you live in Quebec, focus on Quebec French if you need the language for your daily life or work.

  When you reach your goal and feel comfortable in your daily life, you can explore other areas.

Examples:
- If you need **French in the workplace**, series like *Call my agent* (Dix pourcent) and *Emily in Paris* (the few sentences in French they use) will be more helpful than *Family business*.

- If you want to understand **modern rom-com and slang** then *Hookup Plan* (Plan Coeur) and *Family Business* are better, although challenging if you don't have a native nearby to explain the slang.

- Period dramas will be closer to **formal French**.

- If you're studying to **take a French test**, it depends on the level. At A2, B1, slow dramas are great. For anything above B2, I'd suggest focusing on documentaries and resources available on TV5 Monde, RFI and TEdTalks and to just watch series to unwind while still listening to French.

3. Interesting for you: a bored brain doesn't learn

Look further than what you usually like in your language. Embrace the opportunity to discover French pop culture.

On top of being exposed to the language, you'll also be **exposed to the way of life and habits**.

Languages and societies influence each other. Language shapes society to a certain extent and society shapes the language. They go hand in hand. Understanding this will deepen your knowledge and **make it easier to connect with native speakers**.

Even if you prefer to binge watch detective series or thrillers, always pay attention to the relationships between the characters, how they address each other, the social dynamics, etc. You'll **learn a lot even without traveling to the country!**

Sharing my experience:

1. Learning a foreign language is an occasion for me to **indulge in "guilty pleasures"** and to watch series I would never watch in my mother tongue (Mexican dramas and Japanese series).

2. Because I was able to understand more, it boosted my motivation to come back to it. Either by watching every day, or alternating with studying then coming back to the series with new knowledge (then I could understand even more than before!)

3. Progressively, as my listening comprehension got better, I was able to expand the type of content I was consuming (quiet podcasts, TedTalks, real conversations with natives)

Reflection time

Make a list of possible series you are using or could use.
Check out this list if you need some inspiration.

TV series name	Adapted to my goals? Yes/No	% I can understand

4. Clearly separate "fun" and "study"

Watching videos must remain a "fun" activity, otherwise you will lose motivation.

For example, some series I watch in order to improve the language, so in this case **I alternate fun and study** in the same episode. It's a combination of intensive and extensive listening.

To use the full potential of your brain, you need to **engage your thinking brain** for **short focused** periods of time and, at other times, to let your **subconscious absorb** and do some work in the background.

How does it work?

- **Intensive listening, short & focused:** concentrate to try and catch all the words and pay particular attention to vocabulary, conjugations and/or pronunciation depending on what you want to work on most at the time. Play a scene 2, 3 times or more to hear it well. These are very short moments (less than 1 minute, a few occurrences in each episode).

- **Extensive listening, most of the episode:** enjoy the story by listening and reading the subtitles quickly when you need to (the next section of this guide is about the language of the subtitles)

If you prefer to watch the whole episode at once : write down the scenes you want to review and go back to them later, during your active study sessions. Feel free to discuss this with your tutor afterwards.

Reflection time

Go back to your list of potential series to work with and select the ones that contain a few scenes in each episode where you understand most of what is being said.
When you finish one series, replace it with another one or another type of material.

Those are the resources that fall within your i+1 range of "Comprehensible Input" (How to use Comprehensible Input to learn French).

Spend time actively using these videos and you'll start to see progress.

The other series on the list, where you understand too little at the moment, feel free to **binge-watch** with subtitles and that's okay too.
They may not make you actively progress, but when you do this in addition to other learning actions, it **helps to further reinforce unconscious learning**.

Disclaimer: I don't think you can learn a language by binge-watching alone (or it will take many years and you won't be able to write).

Of course, you can **apply what I explained about intensive and extensive listening to any audio** that also provides a transcript. Check out my tips " [Les meilleurs podcasts pour apprendre le français](#) " (some of them provide transcripts).

3. My method to use subtitles to really progress

Disclaimer: **this will not happen overnight. You need frequent repeated exposure.**

You also need to **reflect upon your progress** :
- do **not get stuck** in a routine ☐

- **celebrate** your small wins 🎉

- learn to **trust yourself** and your capacity to move up a level 💪

1. Useful tools

- A pair or earbuds or headset and a quiet environment to lower the amount of outside noise.

- If you don't want to always switch the subtitles on/off, and if you can't yet stop yourself from reading the subtitles all the time, **find a way to mask the bottom of your screen** so you can choose when to read or not.
  → Ultimately, the goal will be to train your eyes and brain to stop reading systematically

- **When you get to the last steps of the method**, add this [Chrome extension](#) (NtflxMultiSubs) that allows Netflix to show double subtitles (put your target language bigger)

- General templates (at the end of the guide):

  - Progress tracker

  - Worksheet while watching and post-session self-evaluation

  - A sample video to practice

2. How to use subtitles (especially on Netflix or DVD)

I am often asked: what language should I use for subtitles when I watch a French video?
Short answer: it depends.
Many people say you should watch videos in your target language with subtitles in your target language. However, my process is slightly different.

Why watching with subtitles in your target language or no subtitles at all isn't the ideal solution?
It comes back to the principles of Comprehensible Input I explained earlier.

In my opinion **the "best" method depends on your level** and I think it depends **partly on personal preferences**.

But there are **also new habits you can implement**. Because I've found what works for me, I'll explain my method. I hope it will inspire you to find the effective way FOR YOU to learn French with videos using subtitles!

This method may not work if you have dyslexia or other reading issues preventing fast reading at a glance.

My method is **a gradual progress from subtitles in the native language to subtitles in the target language**. Then, if I have no choice (or when I listen to an audio or real life conversation) I do not use subtitles.

a) The base: train your eyes to look away from the text !

It is important, **from the beginning**, to **train your eyes to look at the middle and top of the screen**. Learn not to be attracted by the moving text.
It's up to your brain (not your eyes) to choose when you want to look at it.

It's hard not to read subtitles **at first, but it's a habit**. As in all habit-building processes, repetition is key.

The end goal is to **catch what you need** from the subtitles **with your peripheral vision**. It's one of the techniques speed readers apply to read more pages per minute. When your brain combines what your ears and peripheral vision catch, it should be able to piece it together to create meaning.

Baby steps to train your eyes and brain:
- Try with a movie in your native language with subtitles in your native language.

My own experience with that: If there are subs on a French movie I'm watching, I tend to read them although it's my mother tongue and I can understand the dialogues perfectly. So, if you manage to train your eyes to look away, you're starting to build the habit for when you'll be watching a foreign movie.

- If it's too hard, try placing an obstacle obstructing your view of the subtitles (but not entirely so your eyes will still want to read and you'll direct them back up)

- Switch to easy videos in your target language and practice listening, subtitles on but you're not reading (or hide them).

- When you don't understand something, watch again, authorize your eyes to scan the subtitles, looking for information (meaning, context, 1 or 2 words you couldn't grasp).

- Now, if you understand the content, listen again, subtitles on but not looking at them.

- At the beginning, feel free to pause after a scene to reflect: have I understood what's going on? If yes: congratulate yourself! This will boost your self-confidence. You'll learn to trust your perception. If no, keep practicing :)

b) Step 2: Subtitles in your native language + exercise

When I learn a language **at the beginner or intermediate stages**, I'm **too slow** to be able to both listen to the actors and **read fast enough** in my target language. As a consequence, I'm frustrated and learn nothing.

So I've decided to **put the subtitles in my native language or English and to feel good about it**. I can focus on listening and watch the subtitles quickly to make sure I understand and to identify in the dialogue words I have learned.

Quickly **use the subtitles to give you some context** but **focus on listening** to the audio and **watching** the images.

The idea behind this is to **associate the meaning** you got from the subtitles **to a mental representation** (composed of the sounds you heard and images you saw). When you can't be in full immersion, this is how you internalize more efficiently than by learning lists of words or doing grammar exercises.

Accept the fact you can only control a small fraction of what happens in your brain and let the magic happen!

An exercise you can do while watching with your native language subtitles

First, make sure you're using a scene within your Comprehensible Input range.

In the subtitles, **when you see a word, expression or sentence you know you've learnt but you can't hear it, pause and rewind**.
Look and listen again and again, **listening closely** to try to catch the words you know.
If need be, you could switch the subtitles to the target language to check what they say.
You're fine-tuning your ears, reinforcing what you're learning by other means.

One "problem" with subtitles in the target language is that, very often, **they don't reproduce exactly what the actors say** because there's limited space on the screen.

Therefore, when working on listening skills, it's ok to use subtitles in your native language. It allows you to focus on what you hear and not be troubled by differences between what you hear and read.

c) Step 3: Subtitles in your target language

Over time, as you grow your overall skills (grammar, vocabulary) through various methods, and you've **developed your reading skills** in your target language, **now comes the time to switch the subtitles** to your target language and to use them to check the parts you haven't heard.

1. Now your eyes and brain are **used to not systematically read** the whole text.

2. You've learned to **trust your judgement**, you know that you can understand a lot of things.

3. You're able to hear when the **dialogue and the sub are different**. You've learned to **not focus on that difference but to scan the text** for the piece of information you need to fully understand what is being said.

This is when I switch to subtitles in my target language. **My focus then isn't so much on listening comprehension rather on seeing grammar and vocabulary used in context** (go from B2 to C1 level)**.**

Netflix Chrome extension

With a lot of practice and **if you're a fast reader (or if you're ready to press pause and rewind)**, you can use this Chrome extension that **lets you show subtitles in 2 languages at the same time** on the screen.

I love this feature! I always choose my target language in the larger font and my mother tongue as a back up below in small print.

d) No subtitles

After a few months of targeted practice, you should be able to understand most of the movies in standard French although you'll probably still struggle with slang unless that was part of your practice.

Unless you have no choice but to watch without subtitles, there's no harm at keeping them on, especially if you've learned to use them as backup only when you need.
Personally, I want to enjoy the plot and the subtleties of the characters and learn more vocabulary so I like leaving the subtitles on in the background for the scenes where the dialogue isn't so obvious.

my polyglot life

Recommendations of French series to work on your listening skills

My TOP 3 on NETFLIX. Tested and vouched for by many French learners

- **The Circle France**. A kind of reality TV show. Each participant lives alone in an apartment in the same building and only uses a social media-like platform to communicate (photos and text only) with the other players. As a result, only one person speaks at a time, and they dictate what they're typing so you can listen and see the words appear on the screen (sometimes the typer "corrects" the spoken French).
  They use a lot of argot but you can find the meaning online or ask a tutor or professor.
  Because they use text communication, the speaking style is not 100% spoken French, they use a rather standard French, especially the candidates from higher social class and older ones.

- **Dix pour cent** (Call my agent) - The setting is an office and characters are mostly colleagues so they speak casual French similar to what you could encounter in your daily life in France. They use common slang but usually not too vulgar. It's a great series to get familiar with the rhythm and intonations of the language and to practice understanding faster spoken French.
  This blog post on Parisoclock.com explains some vocabulary

- **Au service de la France**. A period comedy set in Paris in the 1950 and 1960. We follow a few secret service agents in these troubled times (post Second World War, decolonization, Cold War, Women's liberation movements). The way they speak is more similar to what you learn at school or in French manuals compared to "Call my agent". It's more formal and often a little slower. There are a lot of cultural references that you may not understand but absurd situations are funny even if you don't get the full joke.

Other series and mini-series:
- **La Mante** (detective series about a serial killer)
- **Le chalet** (*The Chalet*, mystery)
- **Ressources inhumaines** (*Inhuman resources*, thriller)
- **Into the night** (science-fiction post-apocalyptic)
- **Marseille** (politics and corruption drama). The story and acting could use more *finesse* but many learners like that the subtitles generally match what they say quite accurately.
- **Zone Blanche** (*Black Spot*, thriller, mystery, Twin Peaks-like atmosphere)
- **Mythomane** (*Mythomaniac*, drama, a suburban housewife gets trapped into her own lies)
- **Plan Coeur** (*The hook up plan*, rom com/drama). This is fast Parisian French, with a lot of slang. Overall hard to understand for non-natives but you could use some scenes for short focused work sessions when you're at an advanced level
- **Family business** (comedy, kind of like *Weeds*)
- **Le bazar de la charité** (*The bonfire of destiny*). A period drama set in the 19th century. They use standard modern French (but no slang).
- **Miraculous: Ladybug et Cat noir.** A cartoon made for middle- and high-schoolers. Useful to hear modern standard French related to daily life and relationships.

And also animated movies dubbed in French.

Québec (subtitles in French):
Tou.tv
District 31
Hubert et Fanny
Maman Mommy

About the author: Cathy Intro

- From France
- Exchange student in Ireland
- Immigrated to (anglophone) Canada in 2009
- Traveled through Asia for 7 months, learning bits and pieces of local languages and training my ears to a variety of accents in English
- Moved to French-speaking part of Canada in 2019

I remember my first experience as an expat, an exchange student at the time, in Ireland where the accent wasn't the standard British accent I had been exposed to at school. I had scored band 7 at IELTS but it surely didn't feel that high when locals were speaking to me. And using the phone was like torture.

Compared to now, there wasn't as much available online in terms of language learning so it was a bit "sink or swim", learning on the job. Yes, learning like that sticks with you forever…

However, now, with modern tools available, we can speed up the process and also, we don't necessarily need to live in full immersion. You can practice before getting to the country.

I wish I had done that before moving abroad. It would have made my integration easier instead of turning to other French students to socialize.

Since then, I've always made sure to expose myself a lot to the language before going somewhere. Even just learning a few words and their correct pronunciation when I go on a trip.

I help French learners learn more efficiently while enjoying themselves.
mypolyglotlife.com

my polyglot life

Copyright © 2020 Cathy Introligator

Templates

and sample video to try

Progress tracker template
Listening comprehension with transcription or subtitles available

Name of the series or movie: ……………………………………………………………….

Episode 1

Scene #1 (timing: …..)	Type of speech (dialogue: slow/fast, monologue, many characters…)	Subtitles (yes, no, language)

1st time listening:
% accuracy (you can hear what they say event if you don't understand the meaning of all the words)
without subs ___   with subs ___

Max repeats *(plateau, even if you listen more you can't pick up more)*:
% accuracy
without subs ___   with subs ___

Scene #2 (timing: …..)	Type of speech (dialogue: slow/fast, monologue, many characters…)	Subtitles (yes, no, language)

1st time listening:
% accuracy (you can hear what they say event if you don't understand the meaning of all the words)
without subs ___   with subs ___

Max repeats *(plateau, even if you listen more you can't pick up more)*:
% accuracy
without subs ___   with subs ___

Repeat for each scene and episode, at least until you're familiar with the process.

Worksheet template
while watching/listening and session self-evaluation

Name of the series or movie: ………………………………………………………….   Date:

Personal notes: Episode 1

1. **Intonation, pronunciation observations**

2. **Grammar related observations**

3. **Vocabulary: useful words & expressions**

4. **What I find difficult**
   a. what prevents me from identifying all the words

   b. what prevents me from understanding the meaning although I can hear all the words

5. **How can I work on ONE thing I find difficult? Who or what could help me?**

6. **Celebrate a small or big win. What I am most proud of about this session is...**

my polyglot life

Sample video

Short film : J'attendrai le suivant"

Pick a short sequence from the movie, some parts are easier than others
1. → watch without subs a few times : write what you hear
https://youtu.be/KW8T6-FR3Ec

2. → watch with English subs : does context help to get more words?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqwgeZooUmQ

3. → watch with French subs: how much can you understand now?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57OfpjO_ZUA

4. → take notes about the spoken French you hear and the difference with written French (use symbols, colors, etc)

---

[1] *"red car syndrome". I'm not sure who invented the concept but here's how it goes. You buy a new car, and suddenly, you start seeing that same car everywhere you go. The others were always on the road, but they didn't have specific meaning to you, so you didn't notice them before.