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AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE CASE OF SUBTITLING

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1. INTRODUCTION

Subtitling as a didactic tool has the potential to counterbalance the typical passivity associated with the use of audiovisual materials in foreign language learning (henceforth, FLL). This is so because this audiovisual translation technique provides learners a specific and practical aim to be achieved through an active process that generates a distinct and immediate result.

There seem to be significant differences between dubbing and subtitling countries in terms of FLL levels (Dollerup 1974; Gottlieb 2004; Broddason 2006). According to recent reports (European Commission 2006), dubbing countries (such as Germany, France, Spain or Italy) show low levels of foreign language skills while subtitling countries (such as Luxemburg, The Netherlands, Belgium or Denmark) exhibit the opposite tendency. In figure 1, this bias can be checked in a European map that displays this division (European Commission 2006: 11).

Therefore, it would seem logical to think that the use of subtitling as a didactic resource to enhance foreign language skills could make a difference in this context.

This paper provides a theoretical background to this field of study, presents an example of a FLL strategy based on the addition of subtitles to authentic video clips to improve listening comprehension, and introduces a summary of the results of a recent case study undertaken to assess the benefits of this audiovisual translation technique in FLL.

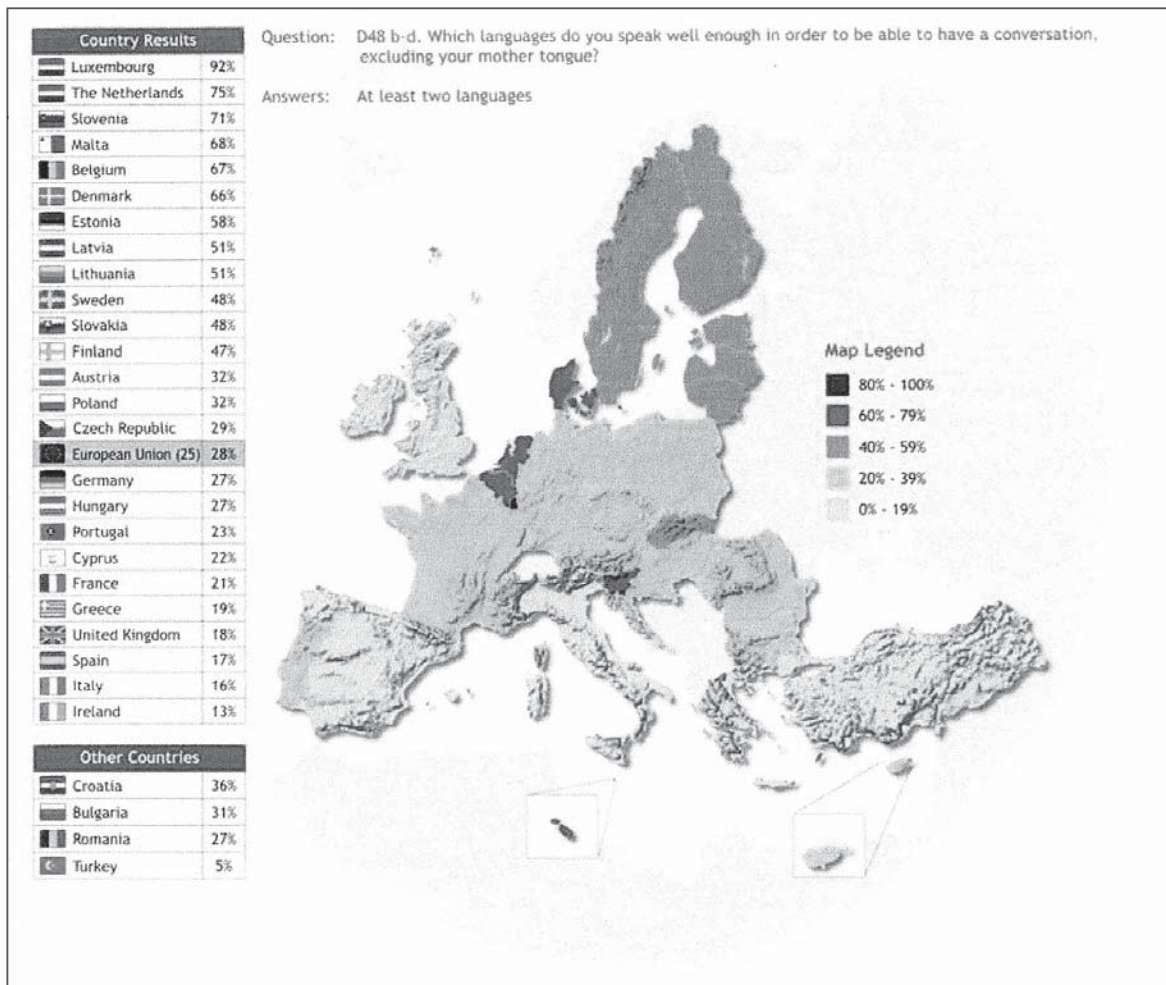


FIGURE 1. Countries able to speak at least two foreign languages.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Subtitling as the creation of subtitles by the students themselves puts together four familiar FLL resources: translation, video, ICTs and subtitles. These tools display different ways of looking at learning and combine various dimensions: image, text, sound, cultural information, mediation, technology, etc. This wholeness can enhance the appeal of subtitling to different types of learners, given that most learning preferences (in terms of multiple intelligences) are covered by this conjunction of dimensions.

Other advantages of subtitling as a didactic tool are the following:

- It forces students to look for the essence of the message because the translation included in the subtitle must be short and concise, containing just the key informative elements. Thus, it helps learners listen in an interpretative way.
- Vocabulary learning is reinforced through the different channels (images, text, gestures, translation) that convey a single word or expression and also thanks to

the constant search for synonyms and equivalents that students need to perform in order to condense the language of the dialogues into the subtitles.

- It makes learners aware of the relevance of socio-cultural elements (idioms, body language, manners, habits, etc.), and realise that comprehension goes beyond making sense of individual words.
- It encourages the development of both individual and collaborative learning within a learner-controlled framework.
- It is a task in itself, so that it can turn the class into an authentic task-based learning context.

Few authors have considered subtitling to improve FLL skills, some of them have just suggested its use, others have mainly dealt with its benefits regarding translation students, there is a relevant scientific study, and a computer program has recently been designed for this purpose. Díaz Cintas (1995) proposed the addition of subtitles so as to learn about vocabulary and register and to reflect upon the subtitling technique itself. A related suggestion comes from Wagener (2006), who discussed its benefits for autonomous learning. Klerkx (1998), Rundle (2000), Neves (2004), and Pereira and Lorenzo (2005) studied how subtitling could improve translation skills in general, but they also noticed relevant improvements in foreign language skills.

One of the few scientific studies on the field also applied to translation students, but it looked at the ability of subtitling to improve Welsh as a foreign language (Williams and Thorne 2000). This study proved the positive influence of this audiovisual translation technique in terms of oral comprehension, vocabulary, writing skills, cultural and historical knowledge, and motivation in FLL.

Finally, one of the most relevant and recent contributions comes from the research project LeViS (Learning Via Subtitling), sponsored by the European Commission. The members of this project have generated a subtitling software called LvS (it can be freely downloaded from levis.cti.gr), designed to develop and use educational materials for functional FLL based on video subtitling (Hadzilakos *et al.* 2001; Sokoli 2006). Its interface is very user friendly, as shown in figure 2.

3. SAMPLE STRATEGY AND CASE STUDY

The present strategy focuses on the use of interlingual subtitling, that is, the addition of subtitles in the students' L1 to pre-selected video clips. The main goal of the lesson described below is the betterment of listening comprehension skills.

Although people spend 45% of their communication time listening, listening comprehension has been a rather neglected skill in FLL for a long time (Rost 2002). The difficulty in dealing with it arises because of its complexity: several and distinct mechanisms (neurological, linguistic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic) take place when a person faces an oral text and these intangible processes turn it into a very complicated ability to define, teach and research. The studies on listening comprehension are rather scarce and this fact can be considered a problem when we take into account that no communicative interaction is possible without comprehension. Therefore, new

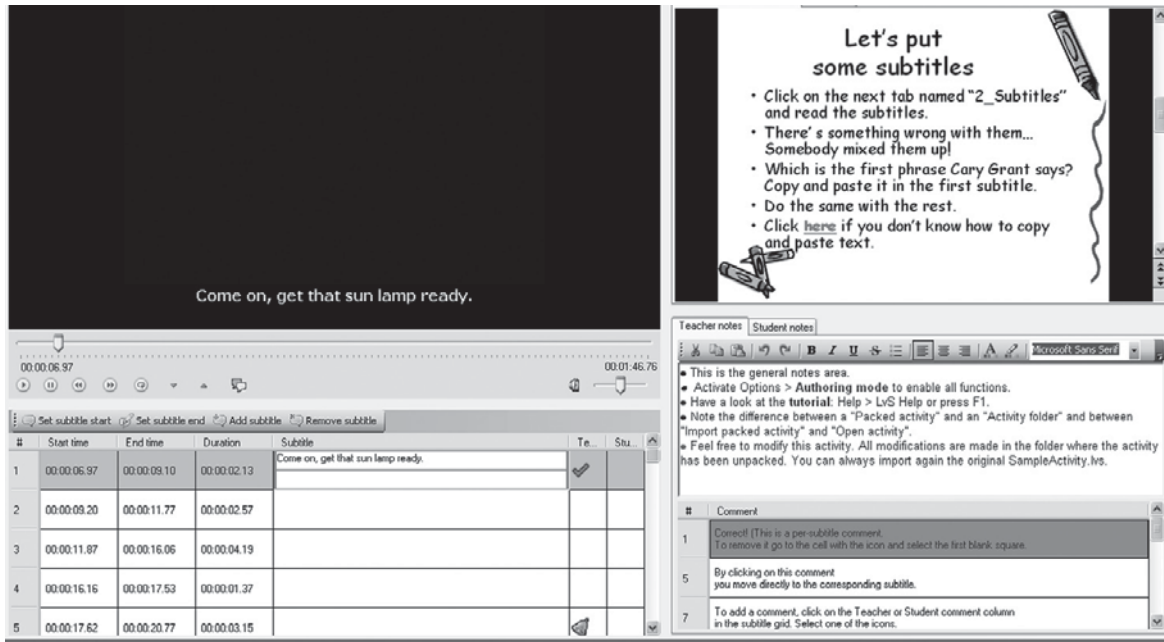


FIGURE 2. Screenshot of an example of a subtitling activity using LvS.

methodological proposals are always needed to promote this skill and, if they contain familiar resources, such as video, subtitles and ICTs, they will make it easier and more motivating for students to enhance this long-forgotten skill.

The present strategy makes use of two short authentic video clips (from 1 to 2 minutes long). Authentic video offers learners real communicative situations, deprived of any simplified or adapted language. It is typically preferable to use authentic materials in FLL because they present the kind of language learners will need when they take part in real communicative situations outside the didactic context. Besides, videos in particular are accompanied by visual cues that provide an important support for comprehension and retention.

Going back to the strategy, these pre-selected clips should be related in terms of content and vocabulary, such as two scenes belonging to the same story within a single chapter. That way, students will be able to count on previous knowledge in terms of context, vocabulary and characters from the first clip and so comprehend the second clip better.

The software requirements to prepare and perform this lesson are the following:


- Flash DVD Ripper (www.dvd-ripper.com/) and DVD Shrink (www.dvdshrink.org/). These two programmes can be used to edit the clips, that is, to extract the clip from the DVD, whenever the teacher cannot find the exact extracts he/she needs available on the Internet.
- Subtitle Workshop (subtitle-workshop.uptodown.com/). It is one of the possible subtitling programmes that can be used to subtitle. Although its interface is very

user-friendly, the teacher should carry out the spotting of the clip in advance, so that the students can focus just on transferring the main ideas of the scene into the subtitles.

Once the clips are selected, the strategy progresses as follows. First, there are a series of pre-viewing activities based on general oral group discussions on the show/film and characters, to set the students' minds in the appropriate context (5 minutes). Then, both clips are watched twice with intralingual subtitles (L2) while students carry out a listening comprehension test (10 minutes per clip and test). The intralingual subtitles are used as a support for comprehension; this help is needed given the difficulty added by the use of authentic video when students' skills are not advanced enough. In between each test, the first clip is subtitled (to L1), be it by the students individually or in pairs (15 minutes). Finally, there are a series of post-viewing activities, such as oral group discussions about the main ideas of the clips, role plays, predictions of possible follow-ups, etc. (10 minutes). Thanks to this structure, learners can check how the viewing and subsequent subtitling of the first clip helps them improve their listening comprehension of the second one. This progress in comprehension can be due to the visual support, the active task of subtitling and/or the previous knowledge gained with the first clip.

It should be noted the subtitling conventions (such as the limited number of characters and spaces per line and per subtitle, ortotypographic rules, etc.) do not need to be strictly followed in this didactic context, given that average FLL students are not usually familiarized with the technique, and their main concern should be the enhancement of their language skills.

The effective possibilities of such a strategy were evaluated in an empirical study that took place in a computer lab and utilized two interrelated clips taken from the TV sitcom *Friends*. It employed fifty subjects; they were adult Spanish students of English as a foreign language, level A2 studying B1 (Council of Europe 2001) divided into two groups: an experimental one (25 subjects, group E), that performed the whole lesson, and a control one (25 subjects, group C), that was exposed to every aspect of the lesson except subtitling. While group E subtitled the first clip, group C discussed the content and vocabulary of that first clip and watched it without subtitles three more times, in order to level the *input* and information received by group E, when they added the subtitles to the clip.

The average grade obtained by all subjects in the first test was 5.8 and the standard deviation, 2.48. In the second test, group E improved this average considerably, since it went up to 7.3, while the standard deviation was 2.6. Learners in group C, on the other hand, did not ameliorate their grade in a relevant way; their average mark was 5.9 and the standard deviation raised to 3.2. Besides, group E's distribution in the second test became much closer to normal, statistically speaking () , than the general distribution of both groups in the first test, as shown in figures 3 and 4.

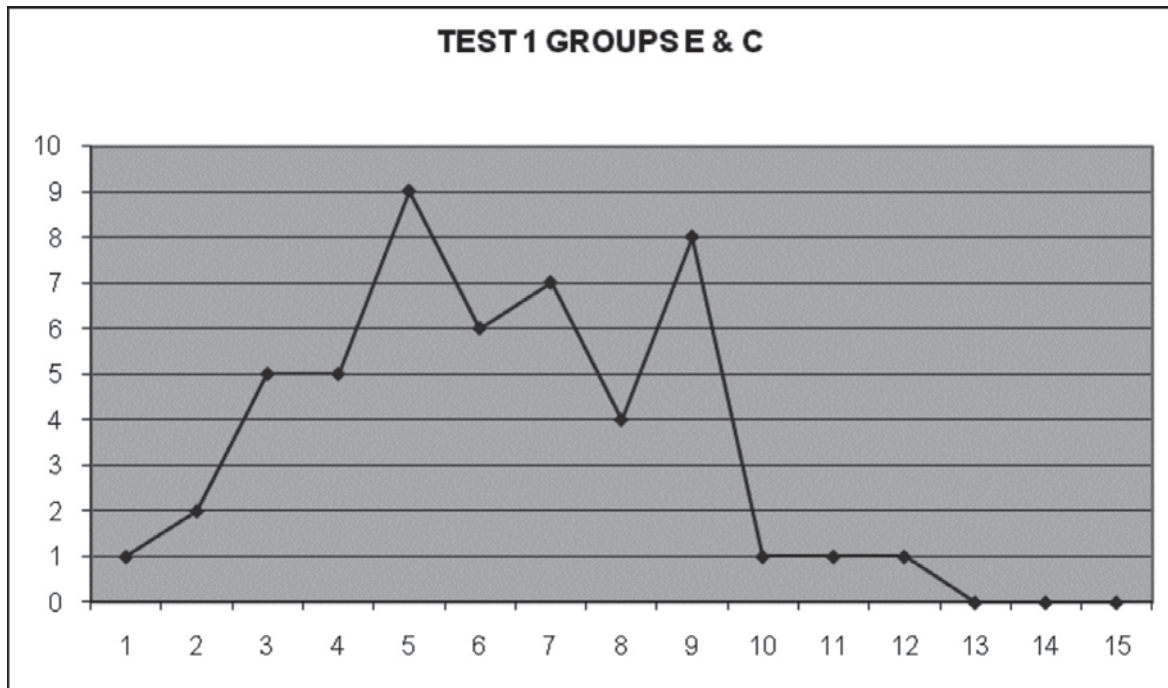


FIGURE 3. Average grade of both groups in the first test.

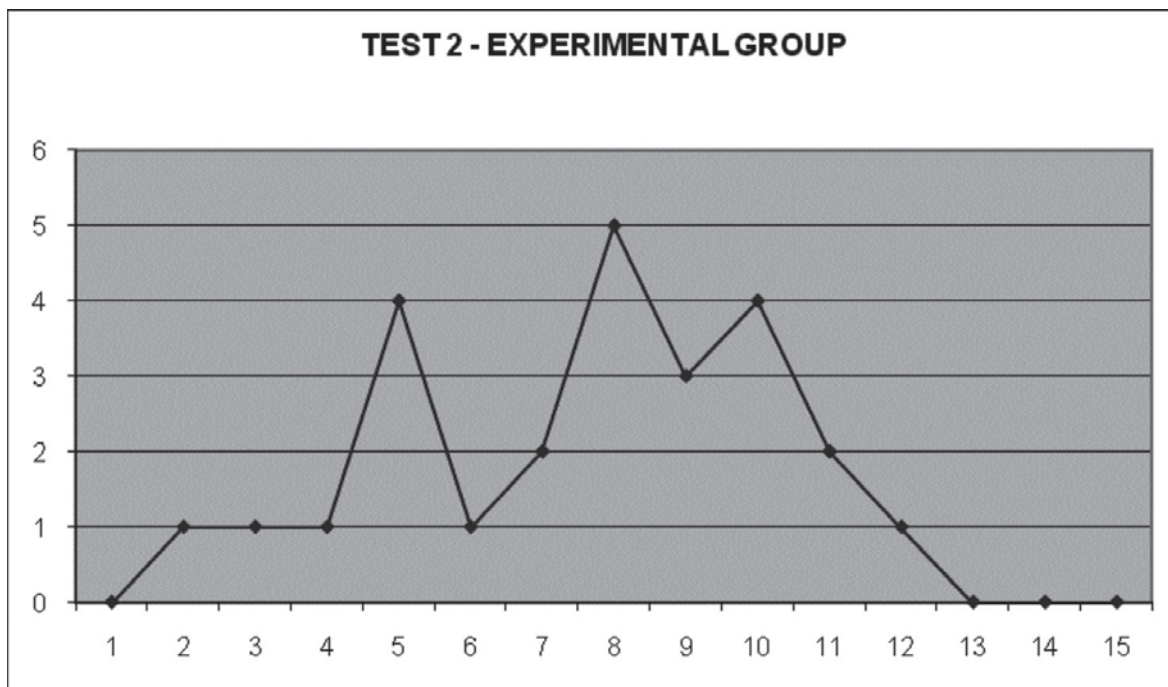


FIGURE 4. Average grade of group E in the second test.

Given that both groups were engaged in similar activities except for the audiovisual translation of the first clip through the addition of subtitles, it can be derived that group E's improvement in listening comprehension is directly caused by the use of subtitling as a didactic resource.

From the previous data (that constitute just a small summary of the results obtained in the study undertaken) the main conclusion of this paper can be drawn: audiovisual translation in the form of subtitling can be perfectly applied to FLL and its practice can positively improve listening comprehension skills in students of English as a foreign language.

The basic characteristics of subtitling (such as condensation, segmentation and synthesis) force students to look for the main ideas of the communicative message, as well as to paraphrase and/or summarize the content in order to subtitle the scene. Thus, this practice can teach students relevant learning strategies that they can subsequently exploit to improve their listening comprehension skills.

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