

THE EDUCATIONAL USE OF SUBTITLED VIDEO
MATERIALS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE
INSTRUCTION

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Abstract: Being regarded as a highly specific means enabling the acquisition of the receptive skills, subtitling is gaining acceptance among educators and learners. Accordingly, teachers consider that it plays a significant role in shaping students' success, irrespective of their language capacity. Extensive arguments can be put forward to prove that Subtitled Video Materials (SVMs) are key instruments that influence positively the FL learning process, motivating the students and language instructors to diversify their repertoire. The purpose of the present article is to clarify the assumption that using SVMs enhance students' language skills leading to substantial progress. Whereas today there are many tools that assist educators in designing SVMs, only a few have become popular. Given the great diversity of educational IT platforms, it is of paramount importance to examine what approaches in the English language teaching are most appropriate and effective nowadays. Hence, it is imperative to examine what changes occur in the developing and using SVMs and how they eventually affect the final outcomes.

Keywords: video materials, video subtitled materials (SVMs), intralingual subtitles, interlingual subtitles, FL classes.

In the last few decades the field of foreign language (FL) teaching has moved towards a more communicative methodology. It has become evident that within the communicative approach to language teaching/learning teachers should use the authentic target language, give preference to listening comprehension activities, as well as encourage student interaction and reshape meaningful classroom activities.

In order to reach these goals a number of educators try to restructure their lessons using specific language resources (e.g. real-life situations and dialogues) via introducing video materials (VMs), with or without subtitles, into their lesson projects, as using videos in the language classroom may undoubtedly bring advantages to the FL acquisition process.

This topic has been thoroughly studied by Rubin (1990), Vanderplank (1990), Feyten (1991), Herron and Hanley (1992), Secules et al. (1992), Herron and Morris (1995), Kovačič (1995), Nord (1998), Guillory (1998), Williams and Thorne (2000), Baldry (2002), Danan (2004), Díaz Cintas & Fernández Cruz (2008), Pavesi and Perego (2008) and many other researchers.

In this article we intend to focus on the efficiency of using interlingual and/or intralingual subtitles in the EFL class and we will talk over some key issues that might influence the quality and pace of the FL acquisition processes, along with some ideas to be considered while developing subtitled video materials (SVMs).

First of all, well-selected SVMs can be put to use in various ways aiming at improving the FL skills. Moreover, if smartly chosen, SVMs can become an additional asset that comes together with the textbooks, workbooks, and other teaching materials. Secondly, SVMs definitely give learners the opportunity to comprehend better the way native speakers interrelate with each other in daily discussions. Besides, SVMs provide learners with such up-to-date *linguistic hints* as local accents (e.g. British, American, Australian, the accents from the Midlands, Scotland, Wales, etc.), the use of certain registers, vocabulary, and appropriate grammatical structures. Furthermore, attention should be also paid to the *paralinguistic hints* (e.g., body language), thus the learners can easily retain how language is used in a specific situation and cultural environment.

Even though lots of FL teachers admit that using SVMs has got many benefits, they (teachers), nevertheless, do not risk to use them on a permanent basis claiming that the students who overuse video-based learning materials might not acquire the essential reading and writing

skills properly. They explain this point of view by the fact that learners will mostly focus on their listening skills disregarding the other ones.

For the purpose of clarifying whether using SVMs while learning a FL has got any impact (positive or negative) on the quality of language acquisition we have explored the available data, as quite a lot of research on this topic has been carried out by scholars. We presume that the use of SVMs should significantly improve all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), not only listening. For instance, Jorge Díaz Cintas & Marco Fernández Cruz (2008) refer to J. Rubin's (1990), Herron and Hanley's (1992), T. Secules, C. Herron and M. Tomasello's (1992) data on the beneficial influence of SVMs resulting in students' considerably ameliorated listening comprehension skills, enhanced "retention of cultural information" that subsequently led to higher scores as opposed to those "who had received no video support". Furthermore, Secules et al. found out that those learners who got access to SVMs showed better results "on questions regarding main ideas, details and inferences" (Secules et al., 1992, p. 483) than the control groups. At the same time no noteworthy "difference was found in the tests that were conducted with the aim of comparing the different groups' reading comprehension and writing abilities, suggesting that these skills can also be taught successfully through videos" (ibidem, p. 483).

Considering the idea that SVMs facilitate the development of all four language skills, Herron and Morris's (1995) research results are presented. They have investigated whether there is a "direct developmental relationship among the various learning skills" and concluded that for certain reasons students' speaking skills, for instance, both in the experimental and in the control group, were very much alike. As for the reading skill, C. Herron and M. Morris claim, even if the experimental and control groups spent a different amount of time on reading, the results were again pretty much the same. They assumed that SVMs gave students a "supportive context for reading, possibly by increasing comprehension of language and vocabulary" (Herron and Morris, 1995, p. 790). It should be mentioned that any big

dissimilarity between the test results performed by the above-mentioned groups in terms of grammar accuracy has not been identified. However, the research outcomes showed that their initial supposition that the writing skills of the learners from the control group would be better than in the experimental group was not demonstrated, more than that, there was an opposite tendency (*ibidem*).

C. Feyten (1991) affirms that the students who have got extensive exposure to SVMs in a SL (in our case in a FL) have visibly and more rapidly increased their listening comprehension skills than those who have not been instructed by means of SVMs, and it is thought that there is a direct interdependence between students' listening ability and general FL acquisition (Feyten, 1991, p. 180). It is fairly certain that the progress in learning occurs without influencing the advancement of other language skills.

We would like to highlight the issue of subtitling, as it is evident that most language teachers underestimate its value and outcomes. Subtitling itself is a specific type of translation that should be explained. According to Diaz Cintas and Aline Remael (2007), subtitles are a "translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavors to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image and the information that is contained on the soundtrack" (Cintas, Remael, 2007, p. 8). Another scholar, H. Gottlieb (1992), considers subtitling "a 1) written, 2) additive (e.g., new verbal material is added in the form of subtitles), 3) immediate, 4) synchronous, and 5) polymedial (e.g., at least two channels are employed) form of translation" (Gottlieb, 1992, p.162). As for Shuttleworth and Cowie's *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (1997) subtitling is defined as "the process of providing synchronized captions for film and television dialogue" (Shuttleworth, Cowie, 1997, p. 161).

Consequently, the concept of *subtitling* and *written translation* might seem similar and yet they generally differ from each other. Analyzing the main differences, we have concluded that *inter-textual translation* requires the translation of a written text into another written

text, while *subtitling* requires the transferring of the spoken language into its written form. It should be mentioned that a written translation is not limited in space and can give any additional information and clarifications to make a text understandable for the foreign speakers aiming at avoiding cultural misunderstandings. Generally, it is more accurate than subtitling, because the meaning in subtitles is more important than the form of the utterance. It can mainly be observed in subtitling for commercials. Therefore, some of the language or cultural peculiarities, specific for interlingual subtitling, in most cases, must be omitted or condensed, so as to fit in the time of a dialogue and to achieve an adequate reading speed.

If we consider the linguistic dimension of the subtitles, they can be *intra-lingual* (within the same language), *inter-lingual* (from one language into another) and *bilingual* (from one language into two other languages simultaneously). This variety of possibilities could be explored by the teachers in different combinations, depending on the necessities and goals.

The use of a subtitled audiovisual material has several advantages, such as:

- it provides simultaneous exposure to spoken language, printed text and visual information all conveying the same message (Baltova, 1999, p. 33);
- it promotes content and vocabulary learning even in relatively inexperienced learners (*ibidem*);
- subtitles may bridge the gap between reading and listening skills (Borrás & Lafayette, 1994, p. 63).

As technology development never stops and improves really fast, new kinds of opportunities appear on the market. We consider that teachers can profit from the available modern technologies in order to design appropriate subtitled videos.

To understand whether our students watch educational videos in English we have carried out a survey with the students from Alecu Russo Bălți State University and Ion Creangă Pedagogical College. The results of the survey have proved that nearly half of our students

(45,1%) watch videos in English on a daily basis, 19,7% watch them twice a week, 21,1% do it once a week, and 14,1% of respondents selected the option *other*.

1. How often do you watch videos in English?

71 responses

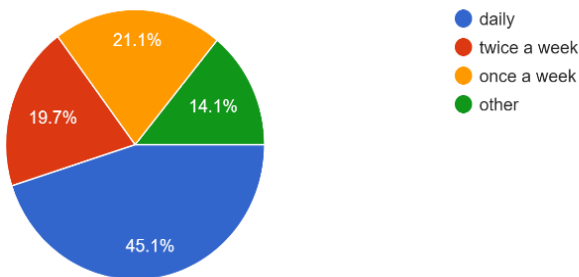


Chart 1. Frequency of watching videos in English

Being asked if they use subtitles while watching videos, 80,3% of the respondents answered affirmatively, and only 19,7% claimed they do not switch on the subtitling option.

2. Do you use subtitles?

71 responses

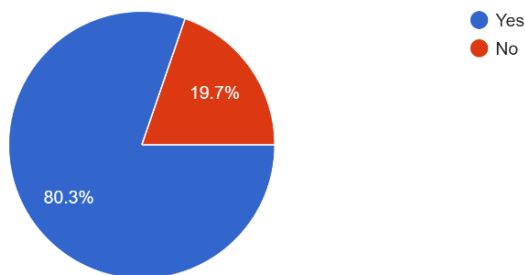


Chart 2. The use of subtitles

Answering the next question, aimed at identifying the preferred language of the subtitles, 60,6% of the participants opted for the

intralingual (English) subtitles, while 33,8% gave preference to interlingual subtitles (18,3% - Romanian, 15,5% - Russian). It should be noted that 5,6% of the respondents chose the option *other*. We assume their first language is one of the other languages spoken in Moldova (Ukrainian, Bulgarian, etc.).

3. What subtitles do you use?

71 responses

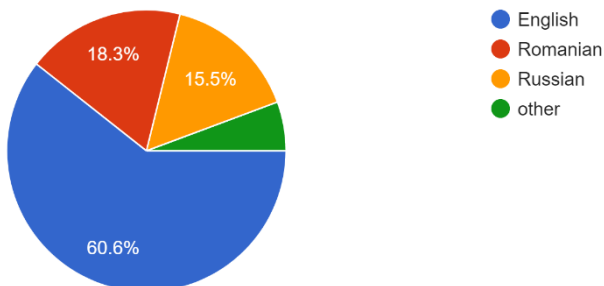


Chart 3. The language of the subtitles

One of the most valuable parts of the survey were the answers to the question *Why do you use subtitles?* Depending on the type of the chosen subtitles (*intralingual* or *interlingual*) the answers were quite varied. Those students who gave preference to the *intralingual subtitling* mostly affirm subtitles are useful for the following reasons:

- They can see the spelling of the words.
- English subtitles make it possible to write down unfamiliar words and then look up in the Oxford Dictionary.
- They can hear the words / phrases pronounced in real life contexts.
- It is easier to tell one word from another (in cases of homophones).
- The oral and written content can be compared.
- English subtitles allow learners to improve their reading skills.
- For better concentration and it makes understanding easier.
- Some students need time to get used to English, then they usually switch off the subtitles.
- Some use English subtitles now and then, when they cannot catch the accent of the speaker.

- Students want to listen to how the native speakers talk, but sometimes, as they speak very fast, some words seem incomprehensible, and / or due to their accent.

- The students who have chosen *the interlingual subtitling* option claim subtitles are beneficial for the next motives:

- Some students do not know the translation of certain words and they want to make sure they have grasped the meaning properly.

- To understand better what the video is about, even the smallest details.

- It facilitates the perception of the material.

- To practice simultaneous translation.

- To see the correct translation (not to guess the translation).

All in all, subtitles give accessibility. They are essential for people with hearing impairment, as they provide a way to follow the dialogue and understand the content without relying on the audio. They also help to overcome language barriers when used to translate the videos into another language, making its content accessible to a wider audience. Subtitling is helpful when the quality of the video / audio is rather poor, particularly if there is background noise or if the speakers have strong accents. In these cases, subtitles can aid to clarify what is being said and improve comprehension. Besides, it is much easier to perceive information from subtitled videos, no matter what subtitling option has been chosen, as it helps to comprehend better. It is thought that subtitles improve comprehension of the VMs, develop students' attention and listening skills, enrich students' vocabulary making it easier to understand and memorize words. Occasionally, subtitles contain extra information about what is happening on the screen, e.g., comments, slang, description of sounds, noises, etc.

On the whole, the results of the survey show the effectiveness of subtitling and students' eagerness to use this option on a regular basis.

The importance and potential of SVMs in the field of linguistic education have been highly appreciated by the European Commission, thus several research projects have been carried out so far. The most known are Learning via Subtitling (LeViS) (2006–2008;

<http://levis.cti.gr/>) and ClipFlair (2011–2014; <http://clipflair.net/>).

The LeViS project (<http://levis.cti.gr/>) aimed at developing the “educational material and tools for active foreign language learning based on video subtitling” (Socoli, 2011, p. 224). So, the members of the project satisfied the need for “active learning through task-based activities, cultural elements become authentic and motivating, and learners are exposed to highly contextualized language input” (ibidem). In such a way, the members of the LeViS project managed to design very attractive software, as well as tasks and activities aimed at learning languages. The final assessment of the project showed that practically all students find the subtitling tasks motivating and facilitating the development of various language competences. Likewise, the majority of respondents stated they would like such tasks to be used regularly (Socoli, 2011, p. 239-240).

Another project, ClipFlair, based on LeViS, was launched in 2011 and it offered an inspiring, accessible online platform to learn a foreign language through revoicing (e.g., dubbing) and captioning (e.g., subtitling) (<http://social.clipflair.net/>) This project aimed at offering a maximum of interactivity while working with audio-visual material. So, ClipFlair became a web platform that united learners, teachers and even designers to cooperate (<http://social.clipflair.net/>).

The platform provides a Gallery that offers more than 350 activities to be used to help the learner to advance in writing, speaking, listening and reading. In addition, most of these activities develop both learners’ audiovisual speaking and audiovisual writing (<http://gallery.clipflair.net/>).

Another valuable section of the platform is the Studio that allows the teachers to create and use FLL activities to increase students’ interest by presenting inventive activities. The developers of the application made ClipFlair Studio very flexible and easy to use, providing a large variety of indispensable components. FL teachers can either easily adapt a ready-made activity, transforming it according to their needs or create their own (<http://social.clipflair.net/>).

Unfortunately, after the completion of the LeViS and ClipFlair

projects, research in this area is gradually coming to naught. Nevertheless, these examples consolidated and paved the way for new research, projects and applications to come.

During the pandemic, teachers discovered a large variety of featured websites for editing videos online. Some of them had existed before, but their utility was highly perceived in the period when other tools seemed not very effective. Though some of the most popular are Veed, Wofox and Flixier, other platforms as Canva, also have video editing features incorporated, that can be explored by the teachers while planning their lessons. All these websites permit not only to trim, place various sound effects and subtitles into the videos, but also to edit the subtitles in the most appropriate way to get the teachers' desired goal. Consequently, teachers should make use of this interest for the achievement of their educational goals. They could ask their students not only simply to add subtitles, but also to change them in a large variety of options. So, they can be asked to re-arrange the subtitles, to fill in the missing words, to find the mistakes in the subtitles, etc.

All things considered we can resume that SVMs are gaining popularity among FL teachers, as this tool has already proved its positive impact on students' motivation to study, due to its diminishing stress factor, as they watch videos at their own pace, checking comprehension while reading subtitles.

We are convinced that FL teachers should make use of the existing platforms, develop their own SVMs together with their students. It will contribute to the promotion and implementation of the modern technologies in the EFL class. We support Jorge Díaz Cintas and Marco Fernández Cruz's belief that "In a society ruled by the power of the image and flooded by audiovisual programmes, it seems only natural that audiovisual subtitled material should play a more prominent role in foreign (and native) language instruction, and we hope that this chapter contributes to promoting the use of these materials in the classroom as well as to encouraging more research into the field" (Díaz Cintas, Fernández Cruz, 2008, p. 214).

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