Abstract
This article analyses the role of both reading and producing subtitles as functional activities and didactic tools in foreign language education. Firstly, it examines the need for the educational use of both subtitles and subtitling in the classroom. Then, it provides a sample activity that exploits both tools with the aim of improving oral comprehension skills that is assessed through multi-methodological research. All in all, the didactic application of an activity based on the use of subtitles as learning support and of subtitling as the active production of subtitles by students in front of the computer, entails a series of benefits that are worth noting: it assists students in the development of oral comprehension skills, provides them with different types of support (visual, textual, and technological) for language development, encourages learners to face authentic input, and produces tangible output (the subtitles produced by students) that can be shared with their peers (or even on the web).

1. Introduction

Over the years, some foreign language teachers have criticised the use of subtitles for being a source of laziness. However, according to Rost (2002:151), “[a]lthough many teachers believe that the use of subtitles prevents students from ‘really listening’, judicious use of subtitles can be very effective at engaging learners in the content and motivating them to get as much as possible out of each video they use”. Furthermore, it is important to realise that, no matter what, “automatic reading of subtitles does not prevent the processing of the soundtrack” (Danah, 2004:72). What is more, over time, viewers (more or less intentionally) develop strategies to process subtitles efficiently and increasingly derive more benefits from them.

Living in this modern society, where the visual component is becoming ever more powerful and the majority of the population moves between the computer and the TV and/or DVD on a daily basis, language learners may feel particularly comfortable with a foreign language activity that integrates all these familiar elements with which they interact in their private and professional lives. The fact that subtitling and subtitles bring together old and new technology may act as a motivating factor for students...
to face authentic foreign language exchanges from a much more stimulating perspective.

Subtitleing as a task which entails the actual addition of subtitles to a clip by students, can have a notable impact on the improvement of their foreign language skills. It is, on the one hand, a functional and interactive exercise that allows students to share their work with their peers in a virtual learning environment. The use of subtitles as a support, on the other hand, presents a series of benefits for comprehension and vocabulary development. When they are used, different cues (audio, image and text) assist students in understanding a particular piece of information in the foreign language, particularly where authentic input is concerned. When both subtitling and subtitles are combined in a single task, their benefits are enhanced and they provide further paths for learning and understanding. Obviously, translation is always involved when subtitling and when using subtitles didactically, and this adds one more textual dimension to the picture: “once translation has linked the two verbal systems, viewers have established more paths for retrieval and may benefit from visual traces as well as from two distinct sets of verbal traces” (Danan, 2004:72).

The aim in these pages is to present a sample of possible pedagogical applications of subtitling and subtitles with the ultimate goal of enhancing oral comprehension skills. The potential of these activities has been scientifically assessed through a multi-methodological research design that is summarised below.

2. Subtitling and subtitles in foreign language learning

In Europe, the distinction between dubbing and subtitling countries in terms of foreign language acquisition has been discussed by authors like Dollerup (1974), d’Ydewalle and Pavakanun (1997), Diaz Cintas (2003), Gottlieb (1998), and Caimi (2008) among others. Spain, for example, is traditionally a dubbing country for different political, cultural and ideological reasons (Diaz Cintas, 2003), and this audiovisual translation choice seems to be one of the main reasons behind the poor level of proficiency in foreign languages which Spaniards appear to have. In this context, activities involving subtitling and subtitles in foreign language education are really worth the effort. A recent report by the European Commission (2005) shows significant differences as far as the acquisition of foreign language skills is concerned, based on the traditional division of European countries between dubbing and subtitling. This fact is clearly reflected in the Table 1 below (ibid.:3) where the responses of subtitling countries and dubbing ones are shown in sharp contrast:
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtitling Countries</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dubbing Countries</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The need to promote subtitles and subtitling in foreign language learning has been acknowledged by the European Union itself, within its current agenda in defence of multilingualism: “Subtitling is a spectacular tool for helping people learn languages easily and enjoyably. A series of meetings will therefore take place in order to exploit this potential of the media with regard to language learning” (Europa, 2007:online). Unfortunately, research in this particular topic is scarce, especially when it comes to the use of subtitling as a language learning tool.

2.1. Review of previous research

A number of works have discussed the potential for using subtitles as a support for language learning. Firstly, the benefits of bimodal subtitles (intralingual, subtitles and audio in the same language) has been studied in connection with the following foreign language learning aspects: second language skills (Lambert et al., 1981); overall comprehension (Holobow et al., 1984); motivation (Vanderplank, 1988); phonetics and comprehension (Garza, 1991); vocabulary recognition and association (Borrás and Lafayette, 1994); listening comprehension (Huang and Eskey, 1999); implicit and explicit aspects of vocabulary learning (Bird and Williams, 2002); vocabulary building with listening and reading skills (Caimi, 2006); and listening and speaking for intermediate and advanced learners (Araújo, 2008).

Secondly, the role of standard subtitles (interlingual, mother tongue subtitles and foreign language audio) has been researched from the following perspectives: to improve linguistic balance in non-equivalent bilinguals (De Bot et al., 1986); to encourage vocabulary acquisition thanks to mediation (Pavakanun and d’Ydewalle, 1992); to develop learner motivation (Ryan, 1998); to promote lexical acquisition in children (Koolstra and Beentjes, 1999); and to enhance listening and speaking in beginners (Araújo, 2008).

Thirdly, the advantages of reversed subtitles (foreign language subtitles and mother tongue audio) have been deemed to be useful when working on second language skills in general (Lambert et al., 1981),
comprehension in general (Holobow et al., 1984), and vocabulary acquisition (d’Ydewalle and Pavakanan, 1997).

Fourthly, subtitles for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing (bimodal subtitles that provide relevant paralinguistic information contained in the soundtrack) have been discussed in relation to the following foreign language learning areas: reading fluency and metalinguistic knowledge (Parlato, 1986), the ability of immigrants to listen and read at the same time (National Captioning Institute, 1990), and motivation as well as oral comprehension improvement in intermediate students (Koskinen et al., 1991; Huang and Eskey, 1999).

Finally, there are also other works that should be mentioned: several studies on the use of English subtitled materials in Japan (Kikuchi, 1998); reversed and bimodal subtitles used together to teach vocabulary (Danan, 1992); the applications of both bimodal and standard subtitles to teach lexical expressions and discourse markers (Davis, 1998); and the use of keyword captions (a summarised version of bimodal subtitles) for comprehension and language improvement (Guillory, 1998).

On the other hand, the use of subtitling software and techniques has been studied by a very small number of authors: Díaz Cintas (1995, 1997, 2008) has suggested the possible pedagogical benefits of subtitling, particularly in terms of lexical development and socio-cultural learning; Williams and Thorne (2000) undertook qualitative research on the benefits of standard and bimodal subtitling to enhance motivation and transferable skills; and Hadzilacos et al. (2004) developed specific software in order to use subtitling as a tool to enhance foreign language learning skills in general.

Most of the studies mentioned above make use of authentic videos. Authentic videos contextualise the learning process because they present complete communicative situations (Lonergan, 1989), including body language, socio-cultural and pragmatic aspects, among other things. Subtitles and subtitling within this setting turn into very efficient tools when used to enhance foreign language education in general and oral and reading comprehension in particular, since they allow students to monitor the input, making it truly comprehensible.

3. Pedagogical applications

After looking at this review of previous research, it follows that the production of subtitles for selected authentic video clips, combined with the use of subtitles as a support, is a fairly novel idea with promising benefits for foreign language students. Focussing on subtitling, it should be noted that the central characteristics of this professional practice, such as condensation, segmentation and synthesis (Botella Tejera, 2007), can help students to
achieve a better comprehension of the oral input, since they need to understand the various communicative messages (not just the words or the grammar rules) in order to subtitle the scene. Besides, learners may also profit from the advantages of using translation as a pedagogical tool. Examples of these benefits include the fact that translation encourages students to think about meaning and form concurrently and that it helps them to notice non-equivalences in terms of form or use (Stoddart, 2000).

Subtitling can be performed in different ways, for instance, either into the students’ mother tongue or into the foreign language, as a word for word transcription of the audio information, or as a summary of the main ideas. Obviously, using subtitling from a pedagogical perspective would require accompanying tasks focussed on the precise skill or issue that occupies the focal point of the lesson. In particular, subtitling as a pedagogical resource can efficiently enhance comprehension of idea units (Buck, 2001), that is, comprehension per se, (somehow free from grammar and lexical problems or interferences) as will be demonstrated in the experiment below.

In order to understand the potential usefulness of the pedagogical applications of subtitling and subtitles in language learning, a series of aspects needs to be defined: (1) software used, (2) subtitling mode, (3) type of subtitles, (4) video clip features, and (5) type of learning tasks. It should be noted that these parameters may vary according to the precise interests, resources and/or goals of the educational context in question:

1. The subtitling software used in this context is Subtitle Workshop (www.urusoft.net/download.php?lang=1&id=sw). Other subtitling programs can also be used. A particularly suitable alternative is LvS (Learning via Subtitling, http://levis.cti.gr/index.php?option=com_docman), a program specially developed in order to apply subtitling as a functional, didactic tool in the language class (Hadzilacos et al., 2004). Both options are freeware and very user-friendly. The only difference between them is that LvS is designed to prepare the activities in advance as complete units, ready for use by the students, including clips, instructions, subtitles, comments, etc. If working with Subtitle Workshop, the in and out times for each subtitle should be selected in advance by the teacher, so that the students’ work can focus just on understanding the main ideas of the scene. As noted before, the goal is not to turn foreign language students into subtitlers, but rather to use these audiovisual translation applications for didactic ends. This software is not designed to store the whole activity in advance and, therefore, it is the role of the teacher to monitor the activity progression and to provide the necessary guidelines for the students.
2. Once the software has been chosen, the subtitling mode must be selected: students can be asked to create either standard, bimodal, reversed subtitles, or even subtitles for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing. Given the inherent benefits of traditional interlingual translation as a pedagogical tool, standard subtitling has been chosen for the present activity. In fact, translation has recently been revitalised in the context of foreign language education thanks to its relevant role as far as mediation (among people, languages, cultures, etc.) is concerned (Cook, 1998; Council of Europe, 2001; Sokoli, 2006).

3. In terms of the type of subtitles that can be used as a support for comprehension, all varieties are possible, depending on the students’ needs and/or goals. In the present case, bimodal subtitles have been selected since they are the most functional in general terms. They can be employed to assist oral comprehension, to develop general receptive skills, to learn about spelling, vocabulary and grammar, and also to promote writing skills.

4. As far as audiovisual material is concerned, the use of two short video clips of one to two minutes in length is a good option. These clips should be related in terms of content and vocabulary, so that students can notice their improvement in terms of comprehension from one clip to the next. The following selection criteria should be borne in mind too: it is preferable if the clips present useful, interesting, and self-contained situations, and the language exchanges suit the corresponding communicative and linguistic goals.

5. Finally, the students’ tasks may take on a variety of forms depending on the didactic purpose of the lesson. In this case, the aim is the development of oral comprehension skills, and summarising and note-taking are the activities selected. These two tasks, in particular, do not guide the students’ comprehension by means of fixed specific questions and answers as is usual with true/false or multiple choice activities. On the contrary, they provide them with enough freedom to select a particular comprehension path. Thus, learners just need to analyse and describe, with the help of notes, whatever they find relevant from the information received.

A sample activity outline is provided in Table 2 below, where the different stages involved are summarised and adapted to both a 60 and a 100 minute class:
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-viewing</td>
<td>Oral discussions: on content, characters, opinions, vocabulary, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/10 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing I</td>
<td>First clip with bimodal subtitles and oral comprehension test or exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/15 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central task</td>
<td>Subtitling (creating standard subtitles) plus final viewing of the resulting product (individual or collaborative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/30 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing II</td>
<td>Second clip with bimodal subtitles and oral comprehension test or exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/15 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-viewing</td>
<td>Oral discussions (on content, characters, opinions, vocabulary, etc.), lexical questions, language analysis, role-plays, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/30 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The previous outline shows a general example of the stages involved in such an activity. As to the tasks that accompany the viewings, the aforementioned summary of the main ideas and messages received, during which students can take notes, has proved to be very useful in the improvement of oral comprehension skills. Nonetheless, other types of test or tasks could also fit within this framework.

As for the video clips, they should be played twice so as to counterbalance the difficulty of facing authentic input, making students’ subsequent tasks relatively easier (Buck, 2001). As discussed above, the in and out timecodes necessary to create the subtitles, i.e. spotting, should be decided by the teacher in advance, so that students can just focus on subtitling the verbal input. This minimises the interference of non-linguistic technical issues, coupled with the fact that specific rules in terms of time and number of characters per subtitle do not need to be strictly followed as they might hinder the progress of the activity. What really matter are both the encouragement provided by the support given by subtitles, and the fact that subtitling a video clip encourages learners to play a very active role, offering them a functional and semi-professional result that can be immediately checked and shared with other students, teachers, and indeed almost anybody through the world wide web. This relates closely to fansubbing (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez, 2006), whereby people create their own subtitles and upload them on the internet, so that they can be shown together with a particular video clip. YouTube, for example, frequently asks users for subtitles whenever a particular video has not yet been subtitled.

4. Undertaking multi-methodological research in the field: a sample

The previous activity was tested through a multi-methodological research design, making use of fifty subjects who undertook similar lessons in a
computer room with their own individual PCs. The lessons were based on the activities described in Table 2 above, and the task accompanying the viewings took the form of an oral comprehension test. The test asked students to write a summary of the main ideas in the clip in their mother tongue, so as to make the research assessment as objective as possible. This choice avoids the interference of external factors (writing skills, grammar and vocabulary knowledge, etc.) that might obscure the results, when it comes to analysing oral comprehension individually.

4.1. Methodology

The subjects, adult students taking general English at B1 level (Council of Europe, 2001), were divided into two groups: a control group (that did not practise subtitling, but did rely on the support of subtitles) and an experimental group (that performed the whole activity). During the time in which the experimental group subtitled, students from the control group received an equivalent amount of foreign language information: they discussed the context and vocabulary in the clip in English, watching the clip three more times without subtitles. Thus, the only difference between both groups was the actual task of producing standard subtitles; that is, the remaining stages were performed by both groups in a similar way.

The goal of the study was to analyse whether oral comprehension skills improved thanks to the didactic use of subtitling and/or to the support of subtitles. Among the few studies that deal with the use of subtitling to enhance foreign language skills, Williams and Thorne (2002) highlight the fact that their students reported a considerable improvement in their listening skills. On the other hand, using bimodal subtitles as a support already involves one obvious receptive skill: reading comprehension. The close connection between listening and reading skills, i.e. the use of similar strategies for the comprehension and the decoding of language (Vandergrift, 2006), makes working on the development of oral comprehension particularly suitable when bimodal subtitles as a support are involved. Reading (subtitles in the foreign language) and listening (to foreign language oral output) make use of similar comprehension strategies which interact and assist one another in a single goal, that of improving general comprehension skills.

4.2. Results

In order to assess the validity of these audiovisual translation tools, the results of the two oral comprehension tests accompanying each of the viewings need to be compared. Apart from the tests, other assessment tools,
such as observation and questionnaires, were used so as to confirm and expand the quantitative information provided by such data. Focussing on the tests, the grading was based on the number of idea units (Buck, 2001) that the students could extract from each clip.

The comparison between the results obtained by both groups in the two tests provides information as to the relevance of using subtitles as support. Figure 1 shows the general starting level of both groups and Figure 2 presents the level of progress in oral comprehension achieved by the whole group in the second viewing:

![Figure 1: Test 1 – all subjects](image1)

![Figure 2: Test 2 – all subjects](image2)

In the first test the group average grade was 5.8 and the standard deviation 2.48, while in the second test the average was 6.6 and the standard deviation 2.98. Although the standard deviation increased in the second test, the average rose considerably and, statistically speaking, the distribution of results was much more natural. Therefore, it can tentatively be inferred that the use of subtitles as a support has a positive effect on the development of oral comprehension skills.
The second fact that needs to be highlighted concerns the results of test 2. On this occasion, the experimental and the control groups were treated separately as only the former made use of subtitling as a didactic tool. Figures 3 and 4 show this contrast:

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3**

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4**

The control group obtained an average mark of 5.9 in the second test and the standard deviation was 3.2, while the experimental group got an average grade of 7.3 accompanied by a much lower standard deviation, 2.6, and showing a more natural distribution of results. This contrast lead to the assumption that a significant improvement in terms of oral comprehension occurs when subtitling is used as a pedagogical tool in foreign language education.

These preliminary results were subsequently confirmed through a hypothesis test that statistically proved the validity of both assumptions. The qualitative part of the research included a thorough analysis of observation and an exploitation of the results collected from the questionnaires and the oral comprehension tests. The data obtained provided the necessary triangulation to corroborate and expand the quantitative results. The following points can be said to be the main pedagogical implications derived from this research:
The production of standard subtitles by students (subtitling as a task) helps to improve oral comprehension within a multimedia environment and following a task-based approach.

The textual support of bimodal subtitles (subtitles as support) used when students watch authentic videos improves the comprehension of later similar viewings.

This type of activity (that includes subtitling as a task and subtitles as a support) can foster the acquisition of a series of ‘can dos’ related to audiovisual comprehension, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

The use of these tools encourages autonomous learning both inside and outside the classroom.

From a didactic perspective, subtitling as a task and subtitles as support both strengthen the role of mediation in foreign language education.

5. Conclusion

All in all, the use of subtitling and subtitles combines a series of qualities that motivate, foster, and facilitate the development of oral comprehension: it is recreational, familiar and dynamic, utilises multiple codes, and makes the achievement of this receptive skill easier, both individually and collaboratively.

It is important to emphasise here Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis, whereby we acquire language by receiving comprehensible input or by understanding messages. Authentic videos can be challenging for the average foreign language student, but the language can be understood with the help of subtitles, either by having them already available on the screen or by creating them. In this sense, it can be stated that audiovisual translation allows students to improve foreign language acquisition. Another of Krashen’s (ibid.) posits was that we should learn a foreign language in the same way we learn our first language. This would necessarily involve the use of authentic videos – once again accompanied by subtitling or subtitles for better understanding – as samples of authentic communication and as familiar manifestations of everyday life.

Nowadays, new technological resources such as digital and satellite TV, DVD or Blu-ray, allow the audience to choose the soundtrack and the subtitles that they want to watch. Likewise, the ever growing presence of computers nearly everywhere makes the production of subtitles by students a realistic task that can be performed both inside and outside the classroom context. Not using this type of technology to improve foreign languages in general, and English in particular, could be seen as a real waste of resources.
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Subtitling as a task and subtitles as support: pedagogical applications

*Proceedings of the Marie Curie Euroconferences MuTra: Audiovisual Translation Scenarios.*