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Learning via Subtitling (LvS): A tool for the creation of foreign language learning activities based on film subtitling

Contents

Abstract

This article aims to portray LvS (Learning via Subtitling), a tool developed by the Laboratory of Educational Material of the Hellenic Open University, which is based on the simulation of a professional activity, that of film subtitling. LvS has been designed for the creation of active learning task-based activities, where cultural elements are involved in an authentic and motivating way and which expose the FL learners to highly contextualized language input. Multimedia is used as the core of an activity - and not as a "nice" add-on - which even when presented as a learning exercise remains a valid real-world engaging task. The student is asked, after some introductory tasks, to create subtitles or complete unfinished ones for a film scene selected according to the teacher's specific pedagogical goals. The outcome of this activity (the subtitled clip), unlike most FL learning activities, provides a hands-on result: the student's work is tangible, viewable, and can be shared with other students and teachers.

1   Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold, namely, to describe the rationale for the use of activities involving the creation of subtitles in a foreign language (FL) learning environment; and to portray LvS (Learning via Subtitling), a tool developed by the Hellenic Open University's Laboratory of Educational Material for the development of such activities.

It is becoming increasingly evident to FL teachers and researchers that there is no one and only guaranteed teaching method and that a variety of technical and methodological resources are needed in the classroom. It is now commonplace to say that audiovisual material with its rich context is a powerful instructional tool known to have a motivational, attentional, and affective impact on viewers, which in turn facilitates auditory processing (Baltova 1994). However, learners need to be trained to develop active viewing strategies for an efficient use of audiovisual material, which very often is not feasible for lack of motivation. Therefore,

tools and methods, such as the ones proposed here, are necessary to counter passivity when working with audiovisual material.

More specifically, this approach aims to cover the need for:

- the creation of active learning, task-based activities where cultural elements are involved in an authentic and motivating way and which expose the learners to highly contextualized language input

- the productive use of multimedia as the core of an activity and not simply as an add-on

- the creation of reusable activities requiring a relatively low level of computer literacy by tutors developing such activities

- the development of a sound methodology and transferability across various languages and educational systems

In the proposed activity the student is asked, after some introductory tasks, to create subtitles or complete unfinished ones for a film scene selected according to the teacher's specific pedagogical goals. The outcome of this activity (the subtitled clip), unlike most FL learning activities used in the classroom, is practical and concrete given that the student's work provides an actual product which can be viewed by and shared with other students and teachers.

The use of such a subtitling activity combines three widely-used methods in language learning: a long-standing one, which is considered "out-moded" i.e. the use of translation in the FL classroom; a "modern" one, which has been used for more than 20 years and which concerns the use of audiovisual material (video); and a "fashionable" and quite recent one, which involves the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

2   The use of translation in the FL classroom

The prevalence of the Communicative Approach since the 1980s (cf. Howatt 1984) led, among other things, to the exclusion of the native language in the classroom. Translation, which was overused in teaching and overvalued in testing foreign languages, came under rightful criticism as a tool for learning foreign languages. For example, Richards & Rogers (1986) maintained that translation as a method may promote focusing on the source text, thus discouraging thinking directly in the language being learned. However, its use has been reconsidered due to the emphasis given to its value as a communicative activity of mediation (cf. Hatim & Mason 1997). Moreover, the inclusion of translation activities in the FL curriculum is bound to be beneficial, since, according to Hurtado (1999), it assists in the development of reading comprehension and written expression, the promotion of linguistic knowledge and the development of cultural competence.

3   The audiovisual text

The text to be translated in the activity proposed here differs from "traditional" written texts normally used in translation exercises by the following features (Sokoli forthcoming):
- Reception through two channels: acoustic and visual
- Significant presence of non-adverbal element
- Synchronization between verbal and non-verbal elements
- Appearance on screen – Reproducible material
- Pre-determined succession of moving images – Recorded material

The combination of the acoustic and the visual channel together with the verbal and the non-verbal elements results in four basic components making up the audiovisual text: the acoustic-verbal (dialog), the acoustic-nonverbal (score, sounds), the visual-nonverbal (image) and the visual-verbal component (subtitles)[1]. The spatio-temporal relationships between these four components are portrayed in Figure 1, where the arrows represent the existing relationships in an audiovisual text and the dashed arrows represent the relationships established by the subtitler:
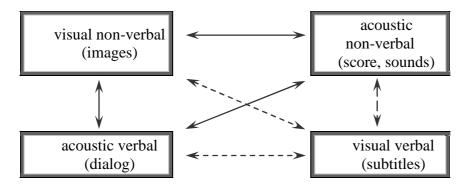

Fig. 1   *Relationships between the basic components of the subtitled AV text (ibid)*

The requirement for synchrony between these components imposes certain time and space constraints, which make a literal, word-for-word translation impossible. Thus, the student/subtitler is liberated from the "requirement for faithfulness" and forced to focus on the core of the utterances heard. Moreover, in the case of audiovisual translation, the visual context (e.g. facial expressions and movements, intonation) is explicit and needs to be taken into consideration when translating.

4   The use of subtitled audiovisual material in the FL classroom

Various kinds of audiovisual material have been exploited in different ways for many years in order to support student learning. Several authors (e.g. Bates1985) have described particular attributes of video that render it a powerful medium for learning, such as abstracting information, narrative visualization, recognition and identification by the student. More specifically, the use of 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: 33)

- it promotes content and vocabulary learning even in relatively inexperienced learners (ibid)

- subtitles may bridge the gap between reading and listening skills (Borrás & Lafayette: 1994)

LvS aims to overcome the shortcoming of passivity by engaging learners in an active way: they have to add subtitles to the material, thus creating a new product.

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[1] Delabastita (1989: 101) calls these four basic components "four types of film sign: verbal signs transmitted acoustically (dialog), non-verbal signs transmitted acoustically (background noise, music), verbal signs transmitted visually (credits, letters, documents shown on the screen), non-verbal signs transmitted visually".

5   Subtitling as an activity for translation students

The benefits of subtitling for translation students have been described by a number of researchers, e.g. Klerkx (1998) and Rundle (2000). According to Neves (2004: 127), students of translation attending subtitling courses gained skills and language awareness that reflected itself in their performance in other courses and activities. It is believed that this is due to the junction of two elements – translation and audiovisuals – that have been accepted as assets to language learning in general; and to the fact that subtitling calls for a variety of skills that can be improved through well staged activities covering the different steps of the subtitling process.

However, up to now the advantages of subtitling in FL learning as an activity have only occasionally been observed and no specific software or material has been designed to promote this kind of language learning. The Information and Communication Technologies offer new tools which allow the projection of audiovisual material with synchronized subtitles, the creation and edition of subtitles, as well as the preparation of the necessary language learning material without the requirement for advanced computer skills on the part of the teacher.

6   The LvS environment

The user interface of the software comprises three areas: i) the video clip (film) area (upper left corner), ii) the instructions/text area (upper right corner), and iii) the subtitle editor area (bottom), as shown in Figure 2 below:
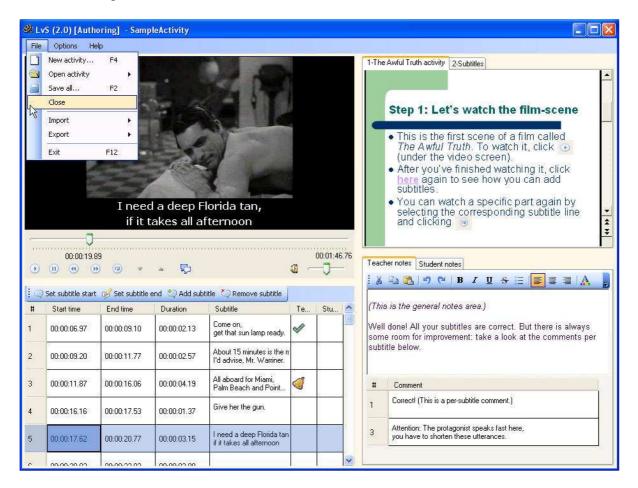

Fig. 2:   Screenshot of an LvS learning activity

The video clip area allows learners to play, pause and stop the clip, to view it both with and without subtitles by clicking on the button [Watch clip with subtitles], and to check the total and the elapsed time. Moreover, they can create new subtitles in the subtitle file below by clicking on the buttons [Start subtitle] and [End subtitle] in order to establish the time when they want the subtitle to appear and disappear respectively. However, this function is not intended to be used in a standard type of activity, since in and out times will normally be provided by the teacher. It is suggested here, that the technicalities of subtitling are reduced as much as possible, since the purpose of the activity is language learning and not the training of professional subtitlers, the technicalities of subtitling should be as reduced as possible. Nevertheless, this function might be useful, for example, if the teacher wants students to practice listening: the students are obliged to listen to the fragments over and again in order to insert the in and out times correctly.

The subtitle editor area allows the students to edit and manage the subtitles: insert text in the 1st or 2nd line, add or delete subtitles, move them up or down and save the subtitle file. If the language used in the subtitles requires a different encoding, e.g. Greek, it can be selected here. The font of the subtitles can also be modified, e.g. Arial, Verdana etc. Moreover, an algorithm calculates the number of characters introduced in each subtitle and if it exceeds the time constraint (established by the developer of the software), the color of the text turns red. This does not affect the appearance of the subtitle on the video player above and the subtitle file can still be used and saved. Also, if the number of the subtitle (first column) is double-clicked, the "current time" of the player will be placed on the equivalent time-point of the clip, thus enabling the learner to view only the fragment where the selected subtitle appears.

The instructions/text area provides guidance and other supporting text, such as the synopsis, information about the film, the script, grammar exercises (e.g. fill-in the blanks) etc.

The files needed for the creation of an activity (input files) are:

a.   A video file: any file which can be reproduced by Windows Media Player® (.mpg, .avi, .vob, and others)
b.   A hypertext file: any file which can be opened by Internet Explorer® (.html)
c.   A subtitle file (.srt, .tts or other text files). This file must contain the timing (in and out times) of the subtitles, and it may contain some subtitle-text to be completed or no subtitle-text at all.

The output of the activity, i.e. the subtitle file created by the student, is in a standard format supported by authoring tools which enable students to create their own subtitled DVD with the help of tools such as Maestro, Scenarist, Adobe Encore, DVDStyler, etc.

Conformance with the latest eLearning standards should be taken into consideration. Activities created with LvS can be adapted to the emerging eLearning standard SCORM, so that issues like interoperability and reusability of learning activities and objects can be successfully addressed. LvS provides the tool for the design and creation of activities whereas SCORM provides an added functionality to the activities as far as their delivery mode is concerned (delivery by any Learning Management System).

A possible self-study LvS activity can be outlined as follows:

a.   The learners read the instructions and start the activity. In the "instructions" window they can be involved in pre-viewing activities, such as reading the film's synopsis and answering relevant open or multiple-choice questions. Exercises, such as cloze tests, can also be included in this area, which is consulted by the learner throughout the activity.
b.   The learners watch the clip (pausing, restarting, skipping, etc) any number of times they wish. They add or edit the subtitles and view the clip with their subtitles, save the subtitle file and send it to the teacher.
c.   The teacher makes comments and sends feedback.
d.   The learners load the subtitles with the teacher's corrections and watch the film again.

7 Teaching / learning environment

The LvS software environment and the produced activities can be used in existing Foreign Language learning environments. They are designed to promote active and highly motivated learning. Implementing the activity requires a PC. It can be performed in the classroom, at the school/university lab, or at home. The activity outcomes (e.g. subtitle files) are assessed by teachers or by peers, depending on the competences to be evaluated (language correction, style appropriateness, etc.)

As regards the general teaching/learning environment, LvS can be used in intermediate or advanced levels, in any real or virtual classroom and within any curriculum, as it does not imply any change in the methodology used. It needs to be underlined that the products and the pedagogical model proposed here concern the insertion of an activity in the foreign language course and not a modification of the curriculum. These activities may be a minor change in the overall learning environment but their potential for introducing new concepts in foreign language learning is substantial. LvS is also adequate for use in autonomous learning environments, given that its "instructions" component can provide all the necessary steps for self-study.

8 Innovative aspects

The flexibility in the use of LvS is evidenced in that it can be used for live or distance teaching, for any number of students, with unlimited (cultural) choice of video content (film scenes, educational material), for any suitable duration of video segment and adaptation to the level of students (beginners, intermediate, advanced) their age and interests. Moreover, extending the tool for use in any European language is obvious in the light of multilinguality.

From the technical viewpoint the main innovation in this proposal is the fact that no other open-source educational tool has been developed in the past. Up to now, only existing professional subtitling tools have been used, with all the shortcomings originating from the fact that these tools are not specifically designed for the purposes of FL learning. Moreover, existing, common and inexpensive technology is utilized in an innovative integrated manner.

9 Pedagogical and didactic approaches promoted

Giving learners an authentic version of a professional environment, not for the purposes of training a professional but for the side benefits of associated fundamental skills is widely practiced in education. From a pedagogical perspective, the platform works equally well in both the self-learning, distance-learning or self-access format (where the foreign language tutor's participation is either minimal or unnecessary) as well as the traditional teacher-fronted format. With regard to the language skill-oriented pedagogical approaches implemented, the process of translating the interactions of the viewed film/video sequences involves learners in a series of micro-activities, such as i) taking notes or summarizing parts of entire monologs or interactions, ii) prioritizing information in a way that meets the criteria of subtitling (e.g., viewing space, informational cohesion and coherence), iii) integrating top-down processing (extensive listening, or listening for gist) with bottom-up processing (intensive listening, or listening for detail). Films/videos that belong to different genres can be selected for their genuineness, relevance and inherent complexity. Depending on the teaching situation, the very process of viewing and subtitling can be used for informational, appreciative, critical or empathic listening purposes (Rost 2003: 158). Moreover, through this

process learners become aware of and make decisions about language-specific matters of communication, such as speakers' delivery style, speed and accent, information and language density and visual support of verbal messages.

10 Future work

For the time being only the learner mode of the software is available, which means that activities can be prepared only with the help of the developers. A teacher mode is planned to be developed to enable teachers with a low level of computer literacy to create their own activities with the use a user-friendly interface, e.g. through a wizard, supported by a tutorial etc.

The creation of a web portal is also considered a necessary step for the promotion and dissemination of outcomes (e.g. presentation of results, links to related initiatives, best practice material). This web portal will include a discussion forum for the dissemination of relevant know-how among LvS users and will also serve as an eLearning platform providing facilities and tools for course management and class management, Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), storage, sharing and publishing.

The use of the platform will be enriched with the construction of a library of video clips suitable for subtitling as exercises in various languages and for various levels of language proficiency. The nature of the video clips will depend on the outcome of a report on Intellectual Property Rights concerning the use of film for educational purposes which will be elaborated.

LvS is freely available for use by teachers of foreign languages (for more information, visit http://levis.cti.gr).

11 Note

A proposal related to this work, which was submitted within the framework of the European Community action program Socrates – Lingua 2 (Development of Language Tools and Materials), has been recently selected for funding. The project, called "LeViS: Learning via Subtitling: Software & Processes for Developing Language Learning Material based on Film Subtitling", is expected to start in October 2006 and be completed by September 2008.

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