Teachers' Perception on the Use of Subtitles as a Teaching Resource to Raise Students' Motivation when Learning a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of subtitling techniques in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The article focuses on the use of subtitles as a teaching resource in order to raise students' motivation and promote independent learning. Beyond enhancing students' engagement in the classroom, introducing subtitling activities also allows to work with CLIL's 4Cs (Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture): audiovisual products are culture-embedded and they provide specific contents (for the subject being taught, for instance); also, they can contribute to stimulate communication among students and trigger cognition processes.

The use of subtitling as a teaching resource in foreign language learning has been approached by a reduced number of scholars and, so far, its application in relation to CLIL has not been investigated from an academic point of view. Leaving aside the implications of using Audiovisual Translation in order to improve students' motivation and contribute to reinforce the creation of new learning environments, subtitling can also render positive results as long as vocabulary acquisition is concerned. In the particular context of CLIL, code-switching or translanguaging can also be targeted by working with inter / intra linguistic subtitles.

This work reports on data from a research project developed in the University of Oviedo in the academic year 2012 / 2013. The proposal, led by the author of this paper, was intended to assess the application subtitling may have in several subjects (at both, undergraduate and graduate courses), including not only English but also French, Spanish and Asturian. Students taking these subjects subtitled audiovisual materials in order to complete several activities and projects. On a second stage, the project focused on the application of subtitling as a teaching resource in the framework of CLIL by training students of the Master in Content and Language Integrated Learning, who would develop a teaching unit based in the subtitling of video-clips in their school placement period, working with a group of students of Primary Education.

So far, the project has rendered rather good results in terms of students' motivation and commitment in the classroom. Moreover, the perception of the teachers engaged in this research suggests that subtitling as a teaching resource can be particularly effective when teaching content subjects through an additional language, as the 4Cs of Content and Language Integrated Learning promoted and approached with task-based activities in which students assume an active and communicative role.

In order to assess teachers' perception regarding the use of subtitles in the classroom, this research relies on quantitative and qualitative methodology: a 30-item questionnaire and administered after the school placement of the teachers was concluded; in addition, personal interviews were conducted with the teachers to have feedback on the implementation of this experiment and class-observation was carried out by means of visits to the participating schools.

1. Introduction

The use of Audiovisual Translation and subtitling as a teaching resource in foreign language learning has been approached by a –still- reduced number of scholars [1], [2], [4], [6], [10] and it is a field to be further explored and investigated. It can be argued that, in spite of its educational application in the scope of language learning and the new insights and resources for teachers and students, it is only quite recently that the introduction of subtitling as a pedagogical element has called the attention of scholars. In fact, research shows that using subtitles in the classroom may entail sounded benefits in the field of language learning: according to the comprehensive work of Talaván [9], subtitling techniques can be effectively applied to achieve some of the main objectives described in the Common European Framework of Reference for the Languages, as students take an active role in the learning process by producing a practical task, which is the subtitled video clip. In other words, using subtitling techniques in the classroom can be regarded as an example of Task-based Learning and be included in the Communicative Language Teaching Paradigm [8], [9].

Although the benefits of using Audiovisual Translation in Foreign Language Teaching seem to have solid theoretical foundations [1], [2], [6], and taking into account that research has come to prove that subtitling might contribute to improve language awareness [6] and vocabulary acquisition [4], we need to further investigate the possible applications -and also the limits and restrictions- of such approach. In particular, this work presents some preliminary results from an on-going project intended to assess the impact subtitling may have on students' motivation when learning a foreign language in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), where a content (non-language) subject is taught through an *additional* language (a language which is not students' mother tongue). The project relies on two research hypotheses: first, introducing subtitling activities in the classroom increases students' motivation and, second, subtitling might be particularly effective in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning and bilingual education. To the best knowledge of the author of this paper, no research has been published on the application of Audiovisual Translation in the framework of CLIL of English Medium Instruction (EMI) programmes; however, bilingual education is of paramount importance today in Europe [5], [6] and there is a vast amount of publications, conferences and projects devoted to it. Due to the particular characteristics of CLIL, where the use of technology and the active participation of students are essential, the use of subtitles may be particularly suitable in order to achieve some of the key objectives set in this teaching and learning approach.

2. Methodology: the Project *Subtitula2.0*

The project *Subtitula2.0* was implemented in 2012 / 2013 at the University of Oviedo (Spain) by a group of lecturers of the Department of Educational Sciences. The proposal was originally designed as an innovation and research project intended to introduce the use of subtitling as a teaching resource in Higher Education. Besides this main goal, the project included a series of outputs or expected results, namely: 1) Trigger students' motivation, 2) promote the use of ICTs in language teaching, 3) encourage students' participation and interaction, 4) enhance accessibility in higher education, and 5) promote new teaching environments and modalities (i.e. e-learning and blended learning).

In this project, undergraduate and graduate students at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education had to complete several activities and projects in which they had to subtitle video-clips as part of a teaching unit. The methodological proposal was implemented in 8 sessions (6 weeks). The software used was Subtitle Workshop, as it is freely available for students and is rather easy tool to use. The working languages were English, French, Spanish and Asturian (the local language of the Principality of Asturias, in northern Spain); the reason for not focusing exclusively on English was to keep language diversity in the project and allow more lecturers and students to participate.

The results of this experimental project were rather positive, specifically regarding student participation and their engagement in the classroom, and it encouraged the researchers to go a step further and apply it into a more specialised context: the Master in Content and Language Integrated Learning for Primary Education. The main reason for this was to have a more homogeneous group of students and assess the introduction of subtitling activities into an approach that welcomes the proactive participation of students and, specifically, using the language to learn contents. Hence, in the year 2013 / 2014, a second stage of the project was implemented.

The sample of the study was composed of 30 student-teachers of Primary Education who had recently completed their undergraduate studies. The working language was English and the methodology of the previous project was followed with slight adjustments: first, there was an introductory stage in which the tool was presented and students were taught some basic contents on subtitling techniques; in the second stage, several examples were provided and classroom activities were performed, with students subtitling short videos which had bee previously selected by the lecturer; in the third stage, students delivered several activities online and individually; in the fourth stage students had to subtitle longer video clips as a group project.

Within the Master's Degree, students had to complete a three-month teaching placement in a School of Primary Education, so students were asked to implement a teaching unit based in the use of subtitles with their group of students at the school. With this methodology, the students of the Master were trained in the use of subtitling techniques and, subsequently, they had to put them into practice in a real situation in which they were going to be working from the perspective of the teacher.

In order to assess teacher perception on the use of subtitling as a teaching resource, a questionnaire was designed and administered after the Practicum of the students was completed. The questionnaire was composed of 30 items distributed in three scales: the first one enquired about teachers' perception on students' attitude and motivation towards completing the activities of the subtitling module; the second scale focused on teachers' perception on the participation and the work of students in this teaching unit; finally, the third scale included items specifically addressing CLIL

questions, such as the benefits of using inter and intra subtitles in classroom activities, as translanguaging or code-switching (the use of the L1 and the L2 in the classroom) is a relevant element in this approach.

Respondents answered the survey according to a Likert Scale in the following format: 1 – Strongly Disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Agree; 4 – Strongly Agree. Data were processed using SPSS 21. Reliability analysis showed that the internal consistency of the questionnaire was appropriate for research purposes, as the validation of the scale revealed a Cronbach' alpha result of .870, showing a good level of homogeneity in the items. Finally analysis of descriptive statistics, analysis of differences according to respondents' features and non-parametric tests (Pearson's chi-squared) were conducted. In addition, classroom observation was carried out, as student-teachers were monitored in one of their lessons (in which they implemented the subtitling teaching unit) and a 10 minute interview was organised after the visit to the school.

3. Main results

The results of the survey show that, according to the teachers answering the questionnaire (n = 30), student motivation is clearly favoured by the introduction of subtitling activities in Primary Education, with 87% of respondents stating they "totally agree", while 13% "agree" to this statement. The most relevant results of the questionnaire also suggest that subtitling activities promote participation and interaction of students (85% totally agree and 15% agree), vocabulary acquisition is improved (80% totally agree and 20% of teachers agree), and subtitling can be effectively integrated into teachers' methodology (with 87% of respondents answering "totally agree).

The feedback of the teachers in the interviews, together with the classroom observation, also provide very interesting insights in relation to the use of subtitles in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning. Most teachers confirm that using subtitling activities encourages students to use the language to learn something else (using the software, vocabulary on the selected video-clips, etc.); it also fosters communication among students and triggers cognitive processes. If the teachers select suitable videos and there is a well-planned exploitation, the cultural element can also be easily approached, so the 4Cs of CLIL can be effectively covered. It is worth mentioning that most teachers consider using subtitles in the classroom has enriched their teaching methodology and provided them with new insights and resources for their teaching practice.

4. Conclusions

The results obtained so far suggest that motivation can be effectively increased by using subtitling in the context of teacher training and in Primary Education. According to the lecturers engaged in this project, students show higher levels of motivation when approaching subtitling / translation activities. Besides promoting better attitudes to the learning of a foreign language, these techniques render positive outcomes in the specific field of vocabulary acquisition according to the lecturers participating in the study. Hence, it can be hypothesised that subtitling might be a powerful tool in the particular case of Content and Language Integrated Learning (or any bilingual education context), where students need to acquire contents from a curricular subject at the same time they improve their competences and skills in an additional language. Also, the possibility of using inter and intra linguistic subtitles can also be relevant as long as code-switching activities are concerned.

It is necessary to underline that the results of this research provide us with teachers' perceptions and, hence, further investigation is required in order to analyse students' point of view; in addition, future research lines might focus on the possible effects of using subtitling on students academic performance, and on the integration of subtitling techniques in the framework of CLIL methodology. Also, the development of a specific language teaching methodology that includes subtitling deserves further attention by scholars and practitioners alike. All in all, according to the results of this paper, it can be concluded that this is a research line that deserves further attention from academy, as it might contribute with new insights to the fields of foreign language teaching / learning, teacher training, and applied linguistics.

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