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# Special issue: Audiovisual Translation in the Foreign Language Classroom – Introduction

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## Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has been hailed by many as one of the most prolific and fast-growing areas of research in the field of Translation Studies and as the quintessential translation practice of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is hardly surprising in a society like ours, saturated with screens and mediated by the constant presence of moving images, as we turn to audiovisual productions for entertainment, to secure information, to carry out our work, to keep in touch with our peers, to learn and to study. As a result of the exponential boom in audiovisual texts and formats over recent decades, today's language learners are typically very familiar with a range of digital formats that crop up, and indeed they use, in their everyday life for very many different purposes. This exposure, in which social media and interactions are also instrumental, means that language learners are also versed in the interplay of the different codes on which audiovisual material draws in order to construct meaning.

The added value of exploiting audiovisual productions in educational settings has long been acknowledged by educators since, as highlighted by Díaz Cintas and Fernández Cruz (2008: 201-202):

Video permits students to see and appreciate how native speakers interact in everyday conversation providing them with linguistic cues (regional accents, registers and grammatical and syntactical structures), as well as paralinguistic cues (body language, gestures), allowing them to see language in use in a cultural context.

It is no surprise, then, that the use of videos has become an emblematic feature in the foreign language classroom, particularly since the advent of digitization and the democratization of technology, which have facilitated enormously the recording, editing, distribution and exhibition of audiovisual materials. The more recent spread of online video sharing and social media platforms, whether free, such as YouTube or Vimeo, or commercial, such as Disney+ or Netflix, has opened up opportunities for viewers to watch their favourite films, TV series or documentaries in both their original language and translated versions, be they subtitled or dubbed. This trove of a seemingly endless number of audiovisual productions in their original as well as in their translated versions, together with their on-tap availability, offers teachers and learners a potential repository of resources than can be used inside as well as outside the classroom.

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Rather surprisingly, despite its cross-cultural importance, the role of translation in the foreign language classroom has historically been somewhat ambiguous. For some, this is a direct consequence of the supremacy of educational paradigms, such as the communicative approach, in which the emphasis is placed on the exclusive use of the foreign language in the classroom, *de facto* shunning the use of translation, and leading Duff (1989: 5) to decry: “translation has been generally out of favour with the language teaching community. (Almost, we might say, ‘sent to Siberia’!)”. After a period of being practically banished from foreign language teaching/learning, the value of translation in the foreign language syllabus has proved its worth over the last few decades and the recent literature on language teaching suggests a steady return to the use of translation in the classroom. Arguably, to a large extent, this evolution is due to the implementation of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001: 43), which promotes not just the acquisition of the four foundational skills of language learning – i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening – but also points to the need to ensure that the skills learnt in the classroom are of practical benefit in a multilingual world, by stressing that learners should be “enabled to mediate, through interpretation and translation, between speakers of the two languages concerned who cannot communicate directly”. In this respect, as hypothesized in the report published by the European Commission (2013: 2) on the topic of translation and language learning:

If it is believed that learning languages (by whatever method) enables learner (sic) to undertake these mediation activities, then one might also imagine that explicit teaching of translating and interpreting would lead to enhanced abilities in these as in other areas of language use.

Indeed, having been considered of little communicative traction in foreign language classrooms for many decades, translation, and, in this specific instance AVT, has definitely found its footing in second language acquisition after the turn of the century. Known as didactic AVT (Talaván, 2020), this research path has become a field in its own right with numerous researchers having posited and proved that both subtitling and revoicing audiovisual material is beneficial not only in the acquisition, improvement and polishing of the four traditional key skills of language proficiency but also in the honing of the newly added competence of intercultural mediation. Indeed, these practices have great potential when it comes to boosting learners’ skills in intercultural competence and mediation, two key aspects of the updated versions of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020). This is one of the reasons why the use of AVT in the teaching and learning of (foreign) languages has emerged as a fruitful research avenue. An area mostly characterised by experimental research, foreign-language acquisition and learning via AVT has been expanding at a very fast pace in recent years, with numerous scholars outlining ways in which the various AVT practices (e.g., subtitling, dubbing, audio description) can be of benefit in the foreign-language classroom.

Activities such as producing subtitles for one’s favourite TV series, dubbing a famous actor into another language or making a video accessible to friends with sensory impairments can be arresting and motivating for students, while at the same time being an inviting way to improve their linguistic and intercultural skills and competences. The honing of transferable skills, thanks to the learners’ exposure to digital technology and different file formats (text, video, subtitles), as well as the practice of translation as a mediating and intercultural activity, also contribute to the educational added value of the various AVT practices.

Against this backdrop, and as a reflection of the burgeoning interest in this field in recent years, this special issue of *Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos* has been entitled *Audiovisual Translation in the Foreign Language Classroom*, a testament to its standing in research circles and debates. This volume comprises nine articles, six in English and three in Spanish, and includes studies carried out in China, Ireland, Switzerland and Spain.

The sequence of the articles included in this thematic edition has been organized according to the specific AVT technique(s) used in each study, starting with subtitling and then moving on to revoicing, which subsumes the

practices of dubbing and audio description for people who are blind and partially sighted. One common thread running through all the contributions is the fact that, as reported by the participants taking part in the experiments, the passive watching of audiovisual material is attractive in itself but the active implication of the language learners in the various AVT practices is a factor that really motivates them, regardless of variables such as their age – participants range from primary- and secondary-school aged children to undergraduates and graduate interns –, the results achieved in the various activities under scrutiny in each study, and whether the teaching takes place in onsite or online learning environments.

In the first article, entitled *Enhancing Communicative Competence and Translation Skills through Active Subtitling: a Model for Pilot Testing Didactic Audiovisual Translation (AVT)*, Cristina Plaza Lara and Alberto Fernández Costales present the results of a pilot study on subtitling carried out with English Philology undergraduates in Spain, as part of their L2 learning process. This activity forms part of the TRADILEX project, which explores the benefits of integrating different AVT modes for foreign language learning. The results yielded by this empirical research suggest that subtitling can foster enhanced communicative and translation skills, as well as raise student awareness as to the importance of mediation, a competence they were not familiar with until participating in the experiment. One of the main objectives of this paper is to provide an integral validation of the subtitling model at the core of the TRADILEX project, in the hope that it can serve to validate the design, development and replication of other didactic AVT sequences.

The second article, penned by Jorge Díaz Cintas and Chengcheng Wang, reports on the first use of active subtitling in China, conducted with science and engineering undergraduate learners of English at Harbin Engineering University. Under the title *The Riches of Hands-on Subtitling in the Foreign Language Classroom*, the ultimate goal of the investigation was to assess the potential improvement in the students' vocabulary acquisition. To this end, and using material from the ClipFair (<http://clipflair.net>) cloud-based platform created by the European Commission, students were divided into three distinct groups. Students in group 1 were entrusted with subtitling from English (L2) to English (L2), while group 2 participants partook in subtitling activities from English (L2) to Chinese (L1), and those in group 3 did not carry out any subtitling activity. Tests administered before and after the experiment revealed the improvement in vocabulary acquisition through interlingual L2-L1 subtitling to be (a) higher than when L2-L2 subtitling was used, and (b) similar to that recorded in the group where no subtitling tasks were carried out. Such results would seem to debunk the idea that no use of the mother tongue should be made in foreign language classes. Constructive suggestions are put forward for future studies with more subjects that last longer and also incorporate more data sources in order to explore the cognitive challenges that come into play.

The third article, *Integración de la subtitulación activa en el aula: estudio de una intervención educativa*, analyses the use of active subtitling in the learning of English for Specific Purposes by undergraduates studying engineering and architecture at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, during the COVID-19 pandemic. With her main focus placed on the impact that the creation of subtitles can have on the students' oral reception and production skills, Pilar González Vera explains that the experimental group initially scored lower than the control group in the pre-tests, administered to assess their listening and speaking skills. However, the tests carried out after the experiment, in which the experimental group participants had engaged in various subtitling activities using the freeware Aegisub, revealed that this group had made up ground vis-à-vis the control group, with most students in both groups scoring 8 or above, out of 10. These quantitative results are complemented by the students' feedback that reflects their enthusiasm regarding not only being exposed to audiovisual material, but also playing an active role in the subtitling process of the videos, thus confirming previous findings that this practice places learners at the centre of their learning process, thereby empowering them (Incalcaterra et al.,

2018). The author underscores the students' enthusiasm for this type of activities, which encourages future, more far-reaching studies in this context.

In *Lo que Juego de Tronos nos enseñó: la traducción audiovisual como recurso para fomentar la competencia gramatical en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera*, Irene Rivera Trigueros and María del Mar Sánchez Pérez focus on how the use of AVT can promote secondary school learners' command of L2 grammar, by judicious selection and use of fragments taken from the world-famous series *Game of Thrones*. To enhance the learning of grammar, one of the key dimensions of language that has been traditionally taught through tedious memorization tasks, an excerpt from the TV series was chosen that included a number of modal verbs in the past tense, and also complemented the thematic area stipulated in the syllabus for the students. The 15- and 16-year old subjects belonged to two different groups: (A) those following the standard syllabus and (B) those following a bilingual programme. Pre-study tests on the grammatical competence levels of the subjects revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the pupils following the standard syllabus scored lower than their "bilingual" counterparts. After both groups watched the fragment in English with English subtitles and subsequently translated some excerpts into Spanish, the results show a moderate decrease in the number of students failing the post-test after the intervention, with students in group A outperforming those in group B. Despite the promising findings, further research is required to validate the results as the bilingual group in question was small and the intervention consisted of only four sessions.

The fifth article, *Moving Online: Using Zoom and Combined Audiovisual Translation Tasks to Teach Foreign Languages to Children*, explores the potential of exploiting both captioning and revoicing activities in the online version of an Italian course for children, offered through the University of Galway, Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic forced this learning experience to take place online and the author, Francesca Nicora, details the challenges posed by the new learning environment, which required some theoretical reframing in terms of the technology used and the need to ensure a safe, child-friendly learning environment on Zoom. Revoicing activities were carried out online, in a synchronous manner, while captioning tasks were included as homework in order to consolidate the learning process. The results show that the participants preferred working on the revoicing activities, perhaps because of the emphasis placed on humour, which enabled children to overcome initial shyness and enjoy imitating cartoon voices, and also because of the fact that revoicing was perceived to be an activity that prevented isolation and fostered sociability. Captioning was less popular amongst the participants, who perceived it as being more difficult and challenging, largely as a result of their not being familiar with the subtitling programme used, Aegisub, which led to some technical glitches and the need for parental support at home to get to grips with the software.

In the sixth article, entitled *Proyecto de investigación PluriTAV. Estudio cuasiexperimental de la aplicación de una secuencia didáctica centrada en el desarrollo de la competencia plurilingüe y pluricultural*, Beatriz Cerezo and Beatriz Reverter provide an overview of the theoretical framework of the PluriTAV research project, focused on didactic AVT for the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Using dubbing as their main AVT mode, the scholars also present the implementation of a didactic sequence consisting of four sessions, carried out with a group of Spanish undergraduates studying English for Specific Purposes. As part of this intervention, and using the software VideoPad, students in the experimental group were asked to individually dub a given scene from English into their various mother tongues, which was later projected in class and evaluated by their peers, while the students in the control group focused on activities that covered the same topics but did not involve the use of translation. The pre- and post-experiment tests revealed that the initially weaker experimental group subsequently outperformed the control group in pluricultural competence, particularly in

terms of knowledge of similarities and differences between languages, verbal and non-verbal language and cultural differences.

In article seven, *Didactic Audiovisual Translation in Teacher Training*, Jennifer Lertola and Noa Talaván underscore the key role given to teachers in the TRADILEX research project and argue that experiments on didactic audiovisual translation should also accommodate the contribution of teachers as active participants, given that they are key stakeholders in the educational setting and can then act as multipliers in the classroom. The two scholars present an online teacher training experience conducted with foreign language trainee teachers studying at a high education institution in Switzerland. The subjects participated in a one-day session consisting of a theoretical explanation of didactic AVT, accompanied by examples of revoicing activities, and followed by an introduction to the TRADILEX project, after which they were required to submit their own lesson plans for dubbing (English, B1 level) and audio description (AD) (English, B2 level). Qualitative and quantitative data gathered through various research instruments reiterated the participants' perception of didactic AVT as an effective tool for developing integrated language skills in the foreign language classroom. Of the two revoicing modes, dubbing was perceived to be easier than AD, partly because the language level required was lower, but AD was seen by the would-be teachers as more rewarding as a didactic resource. The potential domino effect of foreign language teachers trained in the benefits of incorporating different AVT modes into their teaching practice could help increase the use of revoicing activities in a wide range of settings. The authors point to the need for further research involving teachers in other revoicing modes, such as voiceover and free commentary, as well as in interlingual and intralingual subtitling.

Articles eight and nine explore the didactic potential of audio description (AD) in the foreign language classroom. In article number eight, entitled *An Action-oriented Approach to Didactic Audio Description in Foreign Language Education*, Alejandro Bolaños García-Escribano and Marga Navarrete present an action-oriented approach to didactic AVT as part of the TRADILEX project and offer guidelines for specific lesson plan validation. As in the case of the previous articles, the scholars advocate a wider integration of AVT in the FLE curriculum, thus fostering visual literacy and mediation skills, whilst promoting an active use of AVT practices and technologies in the classroom. In this respect, they cast the learner in the role of a mediator in charge of bridging communication between a given audiovisual production and its potential viewers, or listeners, whose access to the material is restricted by linguistic, cultural, visual or auditive impediments. Under this prism, they posit the concept of “mediating a clip” as a subcategory of the CEFR/ CV (Council of Europe, 2018), attuned to the more general one on mediating language, thereby paving the way for the development of further subcategories in the future.

Article nine closes this special edition with a study carried out within the PluriTAV research project. In a contribution entitled *Audio Description and Plurilingual Competence: New Allies in Language Learning?*, Anna Marzà, Rocío Baños Piñero and Gloria Torralba firstly explore the complex nature of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, drawing on descriptors from the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (Candelier et al, 2010) as well as those included in the CEFR/CV (2020). They subsequently present their findings from initial research carried out in the field of AD with first year undergraduates of English Philology in Spain. On the one hand, promising results were obtained regarding the role played by the use of AD to enhance skills related to adapting and facilitating communication. On the other hand, the scholars also highlight the benefits reaped by students when adapting utterances to the recipient's cultural background, analysing resemblances and differences as well as exploiting lexical proximity among languages. In both cases, the authors point to the need for further research with larger sample sizes and including tasks that combine different AVT modes.

The selected articles in this special issue cover some of the main areas being explored in this vibrant and novel field of research. A wide range of themes closely related to the role played by didactic AVT in the foreign language classroom, including vocabulary acquisition, grammar reinforcement, plurilingualism, multiculturalism, and intercultural mediation are discussed from a variety of angles, providing answers to some current questions, while at the same time opening new avenues for future debates.

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