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## Foreign language acquisition: the role of subtitling

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### Abstract

The European Commission's policy aims to foster a language-friendly living environment, where different languages are heard and seen, and where speakers of all languages feel welcome and language learning is encouraged. However, the European Survey on Language Competences reveals that Europeans still need to improve their knowledge of foreign languages and there is a wide range of ability across European countries. Besides the formal language learning, there are several informal approaches that can contribute to foreign language achievement. Several studies suggest that foreign language acquisition may be facilitated by watching subtitled television programmes and movies. In this paper we present and discuss the main advantages of subtitling regarding foreign language acquisition, as well as outline suggestions through which foreign language achievement may be enhanced. A bibliographical review about the effects of subtitling on the learning of foreign languages was conducted. Furthermore, some results from cross-national surveys, such as the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) will be presented.

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**Keywords:** Language, foreign language, subtitling, informal learning;

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### 1. Language transfer practices in the media in Europe

In Europe many television programs and movies are imported from foreign language countries. Three main adaptation approaches for language transfer for audio-visual works coexist in Europe: subtitling, lip-sync dubbing (or just dubbing) and voice-over. These practices are used to translate foreign audio-visual works into the national languages. Language transfer practices vary not only from country to country, but sometimes vary within the same

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country depending on the target public (general public, cinema-enthusiast public, young people, public with accessibility problems) or the broadcast medium (cinema or television). Globally, the translation strategy adopted for cinema was later adopted for television, though over time the two advanced autonomously one from another (European Commission, 2011).

According to the *Study on the use of subtitling*, performed in 2011 by the European Commission, the way European countries approach the language transfer issue both in cinema and television programs is presented in Table 1.

|                                               | <b>Cinema</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Television</b>                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtitling countries</b>                   | Portugal, Iceland, Ireland, UK, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Malta, Luxembourg | Portugal, Iceland, Ireland, UK, Belgium, Netherlands, Romania, Greece, Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia |
| <b>Dubbing countries</b>                      | Spain, Germany, Austria, Italy                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Turkey    |
| <b>Both versions (subtitling and dubbing)</b> | France                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Cyprus                                                                                            |
| <b>Voice-over</b>                             | --                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia                                                      |
| <b>Originals</b>                              | --                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Luxembourg                                                                                        |

Two adaptation methods are clearly favourite when foreign-language movies and television programs are made available to domestic markets: subtitling and dubbing (Danan, 2004; European Commission, 2011; Kilborn, 1993; Koolstra, Peeters & Spinhof, 2002; Van Lommel, Laenen & d'Ydewalle, 2006). However, as mentioned by Koolstra et al. (2002) there seems to be a divide between European countries in the use of the two popular methods. Even if there are substantial differences concerning the language transfer methods used for cinema and television, subtitling is the practice used most widely in Europe. Typical 'subtitling countries' are Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia (European Commission, 2011; Koolstra et al., 2002). United Kingdom also favours subtitling, but the translation issue is not as significant there, since the vast majority of imported movies and television programs are American, and consequently do not require any translation. Dubbing is the predominant language transfer practice in Spain, Italy, Germany and Austria. It is also used widely in France. Dubbing is used to different extents in these countries.

As underlined by the European Commission (2011), regarding television, digital broadcasting is starting to change the audio-visual environment, giving TV viewers access to original versions with subtitles as alternative to dubbed versions, or to subtitling in a language other than the main language of broadcast. This option is already a possibility in a number of countries.

## 2. Subtitling or dubbing?

The predilection for dubbing or subtitling has recurrently given rise to enthusiastic debate about the aesthetic value and the linguistic quality of the translated material (Kilborn, 1993). There seems to be an evident dichotomy in translation practices between larger and smaller countries. As shown formerly, subtitling is usually used in smaller countries, such as Netherlands and Portugal, while larger countries, such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain show a preference for the dubbing strategy.

This disparity in the preferences of countries is frequently explained in terms of economic differences (Danan, 1991; Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999). Dubbing, a more costly and time-consuming translation technique, is used in larger and wealthier countries, where the costs are repaid by the popularity of television programs and films (De Grazia, 1989). On the other hand, subtitling is the strategy adopted for the limited public of smaller countries.

However, other reasons can explain the differences found, for instance, the language and cultural policies of the 30s. At that time, these policies were essential to reinforce the nationalism and the standardization of the language of countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain. In these three countries with nationalist regimes at that time, these policies, building concurrently on means such as censorship and quotas on imports of foreign films (Rundle & Sturge, 2010), encouraged national unity (Danan, 1991; European Commission, 2011).

Though, nationalist regimes cannot systematically be linked to dubbing approaches, as demonstrated by the case of Portugal, a subtitling country. Furthermore, in France, a typically dubbing country, the defence of linguistic unity dates back from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the historic process of political and cultural centralization started.

Several studies (Kilborn, 1993; Luykkes, 1987; Luykkes et al., 1991; Spinhof & Peeters, 1999) underline that in subtitling as well as in dubbing countries there is a belief that their own approach is the best. The choice to dub foreign television programs and movies is mainly defended with the arguments that dubbed programs are more appealing and are easily followed because viewers do not have to read while viewing (Koolstra et al., 2002). However, some studies (Danan, 1991) based on television spectators contest the idea that viewers prefer not to read subtitles. Several studies (Danan, 1991; Koolstra et al., 2002; Luyken et al., 1991) show that in countries where subtitling is the norm, people prefer subtitles and do not perceive them as a problem (except for slower readers, such as children or older people). On the other hand, in countries where dubbing is dominant, viewers prefer this language transfer technique. Actually, spectators' preferences for either dubbing or subtitling do not seem to be motivated by economic and aesthetic reasons but by the tradition. It seems that viewers prefer whatever method they were originally exposed to and have grown accustomed to.

An unintended advantage of subtitling as compared to dubbing is that learning effects may occur. In 1997, Koolstra, van der Voort and van der Kamp conducted a study with primary school pupils. This study showed that reading subtitles on television may enhance the development of children's decoding skills, since reading subtitles provides extensive practice in decoding words. Another learning effect of subtitling movies and television programs is the acquisition of foreign languages. Several studies (Araujo & Costa, 2013; European Commission, 2011) suggest that watching subtitled programs contributes to children's and adults' proficiency in foreign languages. This seems to be particularly true for English, as most subtitled programs in European countries are imported from the United States or United Kingdom.

### **3. Acquisition of a foreign language through watching subtitled programs**

The contribution of subtitled movies and television programs to the learning of foreign languages seems predictable for several reasons:

- (i) Subtitled television programs seem to constitute a rich context for foreign language acquisition. Story information in subtitled programs is presented in different means: in the visual images, spoken in the foreign language and in the subtitles in one's own language. These presentation means will generally complement or support each other. Television and cinema's multisensory presentation of information may offer viewers with auditory, visual and written hints to derive the meaning of the words that are used;
- (ii) Viewers are generally well motivated to understand what is shown and said on television and cinema;
- (iii) Spectators generally have a positive attitude towards the English language, since it is considered to be an appreciated language for international contacts. Particularly young people find English a 'cool' language because it is the language of the most popular music and films (Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999).

Watching subtitled programs may result in different kinds of language acquisition. In addition to word meaning, the viewer may learn the meaning of expressions or standard sentences, and in which situations these sentences may be used. There may also be improvement in the capability to distinguish separate words in the course of spoken language, word pronunciation, and proficiency in constructing correct sentences. As suggested by Koolstra &

Beentjes (1999), viewers may also learn to discriminate between different ways of pronunciation (for instance, British and American) and the attached connotations (for instance, aristocratic and slang).

#### **4. Research on foreign language acquisition through watching subtitled programs**

For a long time, research on the use of subtitled programs in foreign language learning was focused on the effect of captioning (Borrás & Lafayette, 1994). Unlike usual subtitling, captioning is intralingual in the sense that both the soundtrack and the projected subtitles are in the same foreign language. In the last two decades, several studies were also performed aiming at analysing the effect of watching subtitled programs in the acquisition of foreign languages in different contexts. Most of these empirical studies focus on subtitling television programs and not in cinema.

In the 90s a series of studies conducted at the University of Leuven, in Belgium, attempted to measure foreign language acquisition resulting from watching television with subtitles in non-instructional settings (d'Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1995; 1997; Pavakanun & d'Ydewalle, 1992). These studies concluded that adult and adolescent students through watching subtitled television programs might learn foreign language words in informal settings. This learning happens particularly when these programs use a foreign language that sounds familiar to the viewer.

A study performed by Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) with young children concluded that these can acquire elements of a foreign language through watching subtitled television programs. However, an important question arose: how much of a foreign language children must know before they are capable of acquiring elements of this language through watching subtitled movies and television programs?

The European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC; European Commission, 2012) measured the foreign language proficiency of approximately 54 000 secondary education students across 16 educational systems/countries. A multivariate analysis aiming at explaining school internal and external factors of language learning (Araujo & Costa, 2013) shows that there is a positive relationship between foreign language proficiency and the exposure of students to foreign languages through traditional and new media. Whereas the probability of moving from the lowest level of proficiency to an intermediate level is more dependent on watching movies in the original version with subtitles in the mother tongue, but with a little impact in students' achievement. Moving from the latter to the highest level of proficiency is more dependent on watching movies in the original version without subtitles. Main results of the ELLiE study (Enever, 2011), of the ESLC (Araujo & Costa, 2013) and of the study conducted by Kuppens (2010) confirm that watching non-subtitled movies requires a certain language proficiency.

*The Study on the use of subtitling* conducted by the European Commission (2011) involved at least 150 people (divided into three age groups: 12 to 18; 18 to 25; adults over 25) in 33 countries. This study concluded that (i) subtitling helps to improve the mastery of foreign languages (ii) subtitling can raise awareness and provide motivation for language learning, in both formal and informal contexts, and consequently contributes to creating an environment that encourages multilingualism, and (iii) knowledge of foreign languages and university studies encourage citizens to choose subtitling rather than dubbing.

#### **5. Concluding remarks**

Language learning through watching subtitled programs usually happens in informal contexts. However, some studies show that there is a growing interest among foreign language teachers to use excerpts of television programs such as news programs (Vann, 1996), soap operas (Grant, 1996) and music programs (Mason, 1997) for educational purposes. It would be of interest to identify and analyse the existing best practices in the use of subtitling as a tool to promote foreign language acquisition. It is also crucial to promote awareness of the advantages of subtitling over dubbing, regarding language learning and the development of cognitive skills.

Recent research on foreign language proficiency is stressing the significance of successful learning strategies, which can apply to the optimal use of subtitles. Learning can be described as a 'process of successive approximation', which involves creating and testing hypotheses (Danan, 2004), and a deep learner is frequently perceived as an 'active processor of information'. Therefore, guessing, inference, metacognitive questioning, and verification of meaning are essential cognitive competences in the learning process. These cognitive skills can be developed both in formal and informal settings through the use of subtitling.

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