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Audiovisual translation as a tool for teaching English Language to French-speaking students in Cameroon

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The process by which people acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate is known as language learning. The present study aimed at assessing whether intralingual subtitling can be used to effectively improve on the learning of English language by French speaking Cameroonian students in the country. It involved exposing French speaking students to a film without subtitles over a period of two weeks during which they viewed the film six times and subsequently to the same film with English intralingual subtitles over the same period and length of time. Prior to the exercise the students underwent a diagnostic test which was aimed at evaluating their level of the English language which was an essential component in the subtitling of the film. The students then underwent pre and post tests after viewing the film without and with the subtitles respectively. Analysis of the results of these tests using statistical methods (t-test and ANOVA) showed an improvement in their language elements namely: comprehension, vocabulary, word formation, sentence structure, sound speech, meaning, and usage depending on the context. The improvement average mark increased from 9.5/20 in the pre-test to 12.0/20 in the post-test, thereby confirming the fact that students can effectively improve on language learning through the use of intralingual subtitling which can therefore be considered as an important tool of audiovisual translation.

Key words: Audiovisual translation, linguistic elements, language learning, language teaching, French speaking students.

INTRODUCTION

The term audiovisual translation (AVT) is defined by Agost (1999) as ‘a type of specialized translation based on texts conceived for cinema, television as well as video and multimedia products’. This term which appeared in the academic circle in the 1980s and late 1990s, is widely used today and has witnessed a variation in appellation. This goes to buttress the assertion of Cintas and Remael (2007) that ‘AVT, despite its popularity, is not the only term used as some scholars prefer other terms such as “film translation”, “screen translation” or “cinema translation” ’. However, AVT is the most common of the terms used.

AVT in general and subtitling in particular is therefore a branch of translation study which has been neglected

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by translation scholars until very recently (Nfor, 2011). There has however, been some improvement recently owing particularly to the contributions of the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation. Gambier (1996) stated that ‘AVT has benefited from the rapid development of research interest and of institutional commitment, even though the field remains essentially European’. This is no longer the case today since much work has been carried out in AVT in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular (Obia, 2010; Nfor, 2011; Ako, 2013; Ayonghe, 2014). In Cameroon nowadays as well as anywhere in the world, the audiovisual media is becoming part of everyday life. We live in an era where AVT is establishing itself and offering the opportunity of reaching out to larger audiences. In the multimedia world (television, radio, internet, etc.), and in Cameroon in particular, changes are evident in the quantity and quality of audiovisual media productions, thus making information and entertainment readily and widely accessible to many people (Obia, 2010; Nfor, 2011; Ako, 2013).

Cameroon is a multilingual country, comprising 281 indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2013), one lingua franca (Cameroon Pidgin English) and two official languages (English and French) with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Echu, 2004). There is therefore need to render information accessible to as many people as possible no matter their educational and societal status. Accessibility being the key word in screen translation (Gambier, 2000), many television stations and other film production houses in Cameroon are making use of various audiovisual modes like dubbing, subtitling and voice-over in order to reach these different groups of people. AVT, besides helping the audience to better understand a movie, documentary, the culture of other nations, etc., may also help viewers to learn a new language.

According to Karamitroglou (2000), AVT is a communicative mode in which the acoustic channel and the visual channel are used simultaneously. It could therefore be seen as any language and cultural transfer which aims at translating the original dialogues of any acoustic or visual product. The combination of the acoustic and the visual channel together with the verbal and non-verbal elements result in four basic components making up the audiovisual text: the acoustic-verbal (dialogue), the acoustic-nonverbal (score, sounds), the visual-nonverbal (image) and the visual-verbal component (subtitles) (Stavroula, 2006).

AVT generally encompasses subtitling, dubbing and voice-over. Subtitles in any language are a wonderful way to let people enjoy films from other cultures and countries, but for language learners, subtitles might offer a new path to language learning and comprehension. According to Cintas and Remael (2007), subtitling may be defined as a ‘translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavours to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards, and the like), and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off)’. Subtitling includes all modes of translation dealing with sounds and images such as movies, documentaries, TV shows, advertisements, video games, instructional or educational videos, interactive software, and theatre translation, among others.

It is not always easy to exactly state the various modes of AVT and subtitling because scholars have never agreed on all the modes. According to Bartolomé and Cabrera (2004), Chaume (2004), Gambier (2003), Chaves (2000), Agost (1999), De Linde and Kay (1999), Luyken et al. (1991), 16 modes of AVT so far have been identified. Serban (2004) divides AVT into two groups: intralingual and interlingual. With intralingual translation, the source language is the same as the target language. Gottlieb (1997) categorises two main classes of subtitles from a linguistic perspective: intralingual (within same language) and interlingual (between two languages). Language learning is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate (Acosta, 2012). It could also refer to the scientific discipline devoted to studying that process.

Subtitling is accordingly one of the tools that can be used for language acquisition. This scientific discipline focuses on the cognitive science, which is the interdisciplinary scientific study of the mind and its processes (Cognitive Science Program, Indiana University, 2012). Each foreign language student has a unique intelligence profile and a unique way of approaching learning. Consequently, a pluralized teaching approach is needed to tap into a wide range of learners’ needs and preferences. As concerns the linguistic factor, the learner needs to learn elements dealing with sound speech (phonetics), sentence structure (syntax), vocabulary (lexicon), word formation (morphology), meaning (semantics), and usage (pragmatics). All these elements involve four basic skills of language learning which are: reading, speaking, listening and writing.

Learning a language is linked to the learning environment which also plays a vital role in the language acquisition. It is believed that many people communicate basic information through a conversation in the target language, and Cameroon being a bilingual country with two official languages (English and French) presents a good opportunity for the French speaking students to learn English since they are exposed to that language. Thus, with the help of intralingual subtitling which enables the learner to visualize how words are spelled and to listen to how they are pronounced, such
exposure to subtitles will eventually result in productive language skills.

Bird and Williams (2002) established from experiments that same language subtitling can qualitatively change the phonological representation of the word in the student’s mind that is the text serves to improve the recognition of that auditorily presented word, even when the text is not present in later presentations. Similarly, Caimi (2006) proved that subtitling could be used as an accessibility aid for a target audience which is deaf or as a didactic aid for those who are not familiar with the language spoken in the audio-visual text. Ayonghe (2014) equally investigated the impact of audio-visual translation (subtitling) on the academic language proficiency of English speaking university level students. Her results showed higher improvement in the academic language proficiency of those who watched the film with subtitles. However, no such work has been done on the French speaking students in Cameroon who are all striving the learn the English language which is more universal than French.

The objectives of this article were therefore to (i) assess whether exposure to intralingual subtitled films can be used to improve on the learning of English language by French speaking students; and (ii) determine those linguistic elements such as lexicon, morphology, syntax, phonetics, semantics and pragmatics that can be learnt via subtitling.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The research methods adopted in this study were experimental and descriptive. We first subtitled a Cameroonian English movie titled Troubled Kingdom (Neba, 2012) into the same language via the intralingual translation mode. The constraints of subtitling require that the choice of subjects be done based on their level of education and this was taken into consideration during the subtitling of the film. Fifteen French speaking students aged between 17 and 31 from the University of Yaounde 1 and the Higher Institute of Translation and Interpretation, Yaunde were selected based on their linguistic backgrounds for the experiment.

The subjects (9 females and 6 males) viewed the video twelve times over for a period of one month (3 times a week for 10 min) before the final assessment. The pre and post tests which were especially tailored for the study were prepared by the authors and approved by the authorities of the two Institutions.

These students’ levels of English were tested before the start of the experiment. The methods used were the diagnostic, formative and summative assessments (Dumit, 2012). The diagnostic assessment (also known as pre-assessment) is that which is often undertaken at the beginning of a study to assess the skills, abilities, interests, experiences, levels of achievement or difficulties of a person or a group. This involved reading a text and asking them to reproduce orally what was said in order to assess their listening reading and speaking skills. This was then followed by a dictation to test their writing skills all aimed at knowing what they would have learned at the end of the exercise.

The formative assessment refers to the practice of building a cumulative record of learners’ achievement and it usually takes place during day to day learning and involves observations throughout the period of study. Here, the teachers and the researchers viewed the video with the learners and from time to time paused the film to see if the learners were really following up. This was done especially when difficult words were identified in order to ease the learners’ understanding. The learners all had notebooks in which they had to jot down all those words they found difficult for them to understand. This was to enable them carry out research on the words in question and to see in what contexts such words are used. It is known that words can change meaning depending on the context.

Summative assessment was used to bring out results at the end of the learning period. This was to assist the teachers in their view or decision about learners’ achievements at certain relevant points in the learning process. This assessment consisted of exposing the learners to the subtitled film and analysing their reading speed, and how they could associate it with images while listening to the dialogue at the same time. The results of these assessments of the two sets of data (the pre and the post tests) were analysed using statistical (t-tests and ANOVA) methods.

In order to know whether this improvement was as a result of watching the subtitled movie or it was by chance, the data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. According to DeCaro, (2011), the descriptive statistics provides a mean which describes the data by showing a difference in meaning but one just can’t be too sure that it is reliable, given that the results may change if the group of learners is also changed.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The pre-test is the diagnostic test and as its name indicates, was done at the beginning of the exercise to know the language level of participants. The learners were evaluated on aspects such as vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension and the results of each of them graded on 20 (Table 1).

The post-test, also known as the summative assessment, was aimed at evaluating the learners to see what they must have acquired at the end of the exercise. This was to check if subtitling had any effect or not on the language learning of the viewers. The results (Table 1) showed an overall improvement though not in all cases. There was a drop in the results of three learners (subjects No 3, 7, and 13) out of the fifteen. This drop could possibly be associated to the fact that these subjects showed little interest in the exercise and as a result did not improve their performance after viewing the film with subtitles while the others who produced positive results must have shown much interest by being attentive and concentrated throughout the exercise. The increase in the results of the majority of the learners could also be due to the fact that they viewed the movie over a period of one month, and the repeated exposure to the film automatically led to this improvement in language acquisition. The percentage improvement from pre to post-test is shown in Figure 1.

The inferential statistics on the other hand, are statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA that allow one to make inferences about the population beyond the data.
In order to proceed with this analysis, the definition of the hypothesis was given. In this case, the null hypothesis which refers to a default position, states that the two means are not significantly different and the alternate hypothesis which states that the two means are significantly different.

In order to accept or reject a hypothesis, one needs to use the probability (p) value which measures the strength of evidence against the null hypothesis. Generally the p value is always placed at 90, 95 or 99% interval of confidence (p= 0.01, 0.05, 0.1 respectively) but what is mostly used is the 95% interval of confidence (p=0.05) as in the case in this study. If the p value is less than or equal to 0.05, then the null hypothesis is rejected. But when the p value is greater than 0.05, then the alternate hypothesis is accepted. For the mean to be statistically significant, one needs to use the t-test which is a statistic test that checks if two means are reliably different from each other.

Since one test is never used alone, ANOVA which checks two or more means was used to actually confirm the results obtained in the t-test. Microsoft excel software was used to obtain the p-value. The t-test critical is a value which is proportional to a particular probability and in this study the probability was 0.05 while the t-test critical was 2.16 and the t-test calculated was 3.96 (Table 2).

The calculated t (P) is always compared to the critical

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**Table 1.** Results of pre-test and post-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of learners</th>
<th>Pre-test Marks/20</th>
<th>Post-test Marks/20</th>
<th>Difference Marks/20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** A representation of percentage improvement in mean.
The interval of confidence of mean (average) for the lower and upper bound simply states that if any student’s mark falls within 6.85 and 12.15 during the pre-test, and 9.09 and 14.98 during the post-test, then the student can actually learn English via subtitling. Looking at both the pre and post test result tables, it is noticed that more than 95% of subjects’ marks fall within that range thus confirming with a 95% degree of confidence that English can be learned via subtitling. To make the work more interesting and convincing, another test (ANOVA test) was made still with the use of Microsoft excel software (Table 3).

Contrary to the t-test which depends on the T ratio, ANOVA depends on the F ratio. Just as explained above, if the F calculated is greater than the F critical, then the null hypothesis should be rejected. Table 3 shows that the F calculated is worth a value of 6.67 and the F critical is 4.20; once again the alternate hypothesis which states that subtitling brings a significant difference in language learning is accepted but if both Fs were equal, an alternative test would have been required.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the present study are similar to those of Bird and Williams (2002) who conducted a similar study based on word learning and word recognition. The subjects involved were 16 native speakers of English and 16 non-native speakers of English (12 Spanish and four Italians). The researchers concluded that same language subtitling improves listening comprehension and facilitates word learning and comprehension and that simultaneous presentation of soundtrack and written text improves memory tests.

Even though the present study is similar to, and adds to previous studies, it is however different in that it took place in the Cameroonian context which is composed of 247 indigenous languages, two lingua franca (Cameroon Pidgin English and Camfranglais), and two official languages (English and French). Consequently the subjects who took part in the study come from diverse cultural backgrounds and accordingly speak at least one of the indigenous languages, one of the Lingua Franca, and French which, in this case, is their second or third language. Therefore, the English language was their third or fourth language.

Caimi (2006) carried out a study on fifteen pre-intermediate university students of English on intralingual subtitled videos. The general analysis of their answers showed that positive results are achieved only if the quality of the product (intralingual subtitles) is linguistically loyal to the source dialogue and appropriately tailored to the semantic and pragmatic markedness of the plot, speed of images and scenes. Ayonghe (2009) demonstrated that subtitles can be used to acquire Cameroon’s local languages in a bilingual/multilingual context.

A considerable number of studies from Vanderplank (1988; 1990), Huang and Eskey (2000), Markham and Peter (2003), Bird and Williams (2002), Caimi (2006), and Ayonghe (2009), based on observations and feedback from students of English as a foreign language, showed the positive effect in language acquisition of monolingual subtitles on viewer-learners. According to Caimi (2006) “every act of understanding involves an act of translation of one kind or another, and monolingual subtitling used for learning purposes represents one of the many ways through which second language learners are helped to overcome the challenges of listening comprehension”. In an intentional learning context, this type of screen translation helps
viewer-learners in the language acquisition process by providing them with comprehensible written input, which adds confidence and security, thus creating a low affective filter (Krashen 1982). This motivates them to continue watching subtitled films and documentaries and encourages them to extend their intake of the language which is the raison d’être of the present study.

Huang and Eskey (2000) also revealed that subtitled television improved the English as a second language (ESL) students’ general comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Markham and Peter (2003) equally assessed the effect of subtitles and captions on 169 students’ video comprehension and revealed that captions had a significant effect on improving comprehension. The results equally showed that students watching the film with English or Spanish subtitles achieved significantly better results than the group that watched the video without subtitles, with the English (native language) subtitle group achieving the best results.

However, according to Danan, (2004), one has to be cautious because subtitling may hinder the development of receptive skills if not well administered. Therefore, audiovisual material used for learning should be introduced based on the linguistic level of the learner. In the present study, the learners were from the tertiary level of the educational system of the country and this was taken into consideration during the subtitling of the video. In the same vein, Vanderplank (1988, 1990) adds that learner’s exposure to subtitled programmes may be insufficient for language acquisition and suggests that paying attention to the language used in programmes through note-taking could be implemented in combination with subtitling to obtain the desired results.

Kvitnes (2013) explored the use of subtitles in second language acquisition for Norwegian learners of English and found that subtitles aided comprehension of plot in the initial round of testing in addition to the participants’ vocabulary size, which was established through the use of a simple comprehension questionnaire. Long term effects of learning were also tested by using a word definition task and a lexical decision task and it was discovered that the subtitles were not predictors of performance. According to Martello (2015), “subtitles in any language are a wonderful way to let people enjoy films from other cultures and countries, but for language learners, subtitles might offer a new path to language comprehension. And paying attention to subtitles can boost language learning, if you know how to use them”.

Mbele (2010) focused on the role of subtitling in local language learning and stated that subtitling is crucial for language learning and the promotion of Cameroon languages. She used a sample population of Bamoun-speakers to prove and confirm that subtitles were effective for language learning. Ayonghe (2014) demonstrated that AVT played an important role in the enhancement and promotion of the English language in Cameroon.

All these studies show that subtitling which is also a mode of translation, is vital for language learning, and that there are many applications for their use depending on the context of the learners themselves which in turn calls for creativity and adaptation.

Conclusion

The main problem this study sought to investigate was to find out if and how intralingual subtitling could improve on the English language skills of French speaking students in Cameroon. It has therefore been established that constant exposure to intralingual subtitling will help French speaking students in Cameroon to improve on their reading, listening, speaking and writing skills, word recognition and vocabulary acquisition in English.

It is evident from these results that subtitling had a significant positive impact on these learners but one has to consider note taking by the learners while watching the film, the context, and background of the learners. Given that the inferential analysis of the results does not only deal with the present but also with the future, and since it has to do with probability which is the best statistical method so far, it is evident and conclusive from the results of this study that the exposure of the learners to the subtitled video actually helped in their improvement of language learning.

Thus, in addition to the fact that subtitling is a translation mode, this study has clearly demonstrated that it is also an important tool for learning/teaching the English language to French speaking students in Cameroon.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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