Multimode Delivery in the Classroom

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1

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ABSTRACT

Because of recent technological advances, subtitling is now easier and more versatile than in the past. There is an increasing interest in the use of digitally-recorded audiovisual materials with both soundtrack and subtitles in the same language as a language-learning aid. The full potential of this is not currently attained because of poor-quality subtitling and less appropriate "caption" or "synopsis" rather than "transcription" subtitles. An adaptation of a format successful over two decades in Europe might be of value for South-East Asian language learners.

HISTORY AND CURRENT USE OF SUBTITLES

Just a few short years at the end of the 1920s saw the transformation of cinema from silent films to "talkies", a change normally seen as beginning with *The Jazz Singer* from Warner Brothers. (General note: Terms in inverted commas are technical or have an unusual use of the words involved; film and other titles are given in italics.) This major technological change caused many former stars to fall out of favour, because of their strong accents or incongruous voices. However, it also affected the universality of film. When movies were silent, it was easy for them to be internationalized, because they had very little linguistic content, relying heavily on mime, gesture, expression and pictorial elements. For example, the classic *Battleship Potemkin* (_____ «_____») by Sergei Eisenstein had only around 60 sentences of speech recorded in its approximately 130 titles, almost all of which were displayed between one scene and another, although there were a couple of clever uses of inscriptions on items seen, such as a plate, a lifebelt and a notice. All that was necessary in order for a film like this to be shown in a country with a different language was to change these relatively few (and often mostly narrative) intertitles to whatever language was needed, but with the advent of sound, this rapidly proved unacceptable. The same fate befell the formerly used technique of having a commentator (the French "bonimenteur" or the Japanese "benshi") in the picture theatre to explain the action, although there is still a small trickle of adaptations in which a voice-over by a narrator is used, and this technique is perhaps somewhat commoner for news programmes on television. It has been fairly widely used in former Soviet bloc countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well. For a brief while, films were made in several languages: for instance, in various films by Laurel and Hardy the principal actors read French, German, Spanish and Italian from "phonetic" cue-cards, with alternative native-speaker supporting casts. Perhaps the most famous movie made in this way is the one which launched Marlene Dietrich's career in the English-speaking world: *Der blaue Engel* / *The Blue Angel*, filmed in both English and German, and bringing the German

UFA studio back to profitability by its success.   Even as late as the 1950s *Les carnets du major Thompson* / *The French they are a Funny Race* was filmed separately in English and in French by the same cast.   However, since very few actors have extensive foreign language skills, subtitling and dubbing were both rapidly developed and today constitute the two usually available options.   (For details of the history of adaptations of foreign language films, particularly subtitling, see Ivarsson, 1992, and Ivarsson and Carroll, 1998.   The classic work on dubbing techniques is Fodor, 1976).

A study of the preferences for one or the other of these two techniques in Europe suggests that dubbing is the main choice in the "FIGS" (France, Italy, Germany, Spain) group of countries.   This is partly because the last three had periods of strong political censorship (Nazi, Fascist and Francoist respectively) during early talkie days, and it is far easier to control the information derived from a film if the original voices are replaced.   It is also partly because of attempts to protect (France currently), or encourage the formation of (Italy before the Second World War), a national standard language. (This linguistic reason underlies the requirement in Catalonia that a minimum of 30% of films broadcast on television must be dubbed into Catalan, or the sponsoring by the Irish government of dubbing for broadcast on Telefís na Gaeltacha).   However, in addition dubbing in the four cases first mentioned reflects the fact that this process is more expensive than subtitling (some say as much as one hundred times more costly, others cite a ten- to twenty-fold difference), so only affordable for large linguistic communities able to generate a sufficient flow of cash from films (Szarkowska, 2005).   A preference for subtitling has also been associated in a number of investigations with younger people, members of more affluent social groups, cinema enthusiasts (film buffs) and those with a knowledge of languages.   Furthermore, it seems to be the case that preferences are self-perpetuating, so that, for instance, over 80% of respondents in the Netherlands stated their choice would be subtitles, this probably not being unconnected with almost universal subtitling in that country (see Luyken, 1991).

England is an oddity in having mixed feelings about the two methods.   Groups in favour of each are almost equal in size when surveys were conducted.   The main cause for disliking dubbing was the existence of films in which the lip synchronization was extremely poor, for instance some martial arts movies.   When this was addressed by greater care, dubbing was more acceptable.   In one instance Channel 4 television put on the whole series of episodes from a French "soap opera", *Châteauvallon*, in both formats, subtitled and dubbed, with the outcome being a two-thirds preference for dubbing.   There are a number of developments and features that may favour dubbing.   For example, recent "morphing" techniques allow the lip movements actually filmed to be adjusted by computer so as to match the translated dialogue, although they are rather expensive (quoted as US$5,000 per minute in some sources).   People in general seem to recognize only around ten or a dozen mouth shapes for sounds and about half a dozen facial expressions, as evidenced by animated films (Blair, 1994).   Film-makers sensitive to dubbing tend to avoid close-ups when actors are speaking.   These points imply that some of the constraints placed on translators by the requirement for lip movements to match, or at least approximate to, the sounds used in their translated dialogue will be lessened.   All of this leads to the conclusion that dubbing will continue to flourish in some contexts in

which it is desirable and affordable.

Nevertheless, the main novelty in recent years has been a strong trend in many countries to move to subtitles or to increase their use.   This is in part because digital versatile disks (DVDs) allow consumer choice of language, often both sound and subtitles, almost always at least of subtitles. The technology has moved forward from the optical, mechanical, thermal, chemical (from the 1930s) and laser (from the 1980s) techniques used with photographic movie film, thanks to the availability of subtitling software. Retrieval of sound, image and subtitles independently from one another in digital media is the norm, offering a greater combinatorial choice.   It is increasingly possible to handle such materials on personal computers.   More importantly, though, there are reports from countries as diverse as Iran and China of a new liking for English-language movies with subtitles in the native language or in English as a language-learning method (see, for instance, Hajmohammadi, 2004).

TYPOLOGY OF SUBTITLES

However, there are subtitles and subtitles, and even "surtitles".   This last kind of title is set above the visual area.   Such a technique is common in theatrical and operatic works, but infrequently used in film, although the name might be extended to cover unconventionally spaced titles or captions in films. These include or the side- or top-placed titles that have been sporadically used for some non-Latin scripts, especially when multilingual titling was in effect.   While it is claimed that there were sporadic uses of bottom-of-screen text from as early as 1909, the vast majority of films in the silent era used "intertitles", involving the whole screen being filled by a title inserted between one scene and another. These were so frequent in silent movies, as to lead to a cliché "Meanwhile, back at the farm…   " as a kind of joking way to refer to their use and the whole era of silent movies. (General note: Text in italics within inverted commas represents the spoken dialogue; sans serif text within inverted commas represents subtitles or other forms of title.)

Modern "subtitles", as their name suggests, are set at the bottom of the visual area, perhaps even in the black space below the image in a "letterbox" presentation, although this is often criticized as diverting attention from the images.   The majority of film subtitles are "synopsis-style", with some compression of the original text, e.g. "*I was just wanting to remind you that your plane is scheduled to leave at ten o'clock.*"   might become "Remember your flight's at ten.   ". These are essentially a somewhat selective set of written quotations from the film's dialogue, with considerable rewording. Although these are not useless for educational exploitation, they have some drawbacks. A second common type would be the "caption-style" subtitles mainly aimed at the hard of hearing.   These derive their name from the open and closed captions transmitted in parallel with television programmes using spare bandwidth (for instance "page 888" for United Kingdom television services), which include explanations of certain crucial sound effects.   They are termed "closed captions" when they can be turned on and off at will, like "page 888 teletext", and "open captions" when they are present as a permanent part of the video signal.   Such caption-style titles typically include all, or almost all, the

4

dialogue but add to it information (normally given in square brackets) about crucial sound effects, for instance: "[Noise of gunfire] ". They often use position, occasionally colour, to show to which speaker a given sentence is attributable. Another feature of captions is that this name may be used to describe comic-like words displayed on the screen, for instance, the use of " SPLAT!", "POW!" and so forth in the television series *Batman*. All in all, though, the best sort of subtitle for educational purposes is the "transcript-style", in which all the dialogue is recorded exactly as spoken. Unfortunately, these are not particularly common in ordinary commercially-made materials, although caption-style with sparse sound effect annotations are often very close to them.

OTHER PROBLEMS OF SUBTITLES

At present, learning English through subtitles in South-East Asia is not as fully developed as it might be. This is because effectively all of the English-language film material with English subtitling available commercially is either in the "hard-of-hearing" caption format or has subtitles of the standard synopsis kind. What is worse, many films with the second variety of subtitles have had them added hastily, probably by non-native users of English in virtually every case. Technically, they are not of the best standard, with inappropriate choices of colour, placing, length, size and duration (see Karamitroglou, 1999). Linguistically, they have many faults, often attributable to a lack of cultural background knowledge or poor aural skills on the part of the subtitlers. Sometimes the problem is failure to revise and cross-check. To give an instance of these difficulties in English subtitling, in *Attila*, the Roman Emperor states that his enemies include " Pigs, Golds and Skivians" rather than the correct "*Picts, Gauls and Scythians*"; his sister *Honoria* becomes " Anoria" and " Denoria" at certain points in the film; the *Goths* are mostly referred to as " Guards", even when those depicted are clearly civilians, not soldiers. There are, unfortunately, many similar errors in subtitles not in English. More serious for English is the loss of the distinctions between, for example, *I send* (regular habit in the present), *I sent* (single occurrence or habit in the past), *I'll send* (future intention), and *I've sent* (event in the recent past still affecting the present in some way). These subtle differences in sound and sense are already a problem for learners of English in whose native language both grammar and phonology militate against them. (A number of South-East Asian languages have no tense-endings, frequently not reflecting time relationships overtly at all but rather relying on contextual clues; the phonetics of several languages tend to reduce consonantal clusters in general, but in particular to clip final consonants). If subtitles in English are inaccurate and do not show in writing what may not be perceived clearly from the sound-track, then errors which students have a natural tendency to make will be reinforced, not corrected. There are other errors caused by haste, by lack of access to scripts or even to the films in full, and especially by the pressure to produce materials at the lowest possible cost. All of these factors mean that the choice of films for education has to be extremely carefully made, or even that there is a niche for a new style of subtitling, to be described in further detail later.

It may be asked why poor-quality subtitling, whether into the native language or in English, is of any great importance, other than in this limited case of subtitles specifically

for language classes. Several points may serve as answersThe first is that "subconscious" language learning by absorption without formal instruction (acquisition in the Stephen Krashen sense of the term) is at least a very important adjunct to any specific teaching.   Another is that early exposure to the sounds of any language other than the mother tongue is useful in all later language learning.   With good subtitling, there is a chance to hear English in much larger quantities than are available through the classroom alone and to support it with the written mode, either in the native language or, perhaps even better, in English. Synopsis subtitling is fine for native language subtitles, especially for use that is more like relaxation than language study.   To support this, the European experience yields considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting that learners from "subtitling" countries do better than those from "dubbing" countries when learning oral English: on average, Portuguese beat Spaniards and Italians, Norwegians and Dutch are even better than Germans in terms of spoken skills, whether fluency or accuracy. This would be an effect of their "unconscious" exposure to English through films with native language subtitles.   In addition, watching films is generally perceived by young folk as fun, not as a task.   It is normally much more realistic to hope for this to happen as an out-of-classroom activity that supports formal language instruction than would be the case for other meritorious aids to language learning, such as extensive reading of books or magazines.   The written-mode support in English for extensive contact of this kind with films having soundtracks in that language really does require a transcription-style of subtitle, because otherwise confusions may creep in because of clashes between the spoken and the written dialogue.

EXPLOITATION OF AUDIO AND AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS

There are a number of ways of exploiting texts of all sorts for language teaching and learning. Some of them are appropriate for texts in any format, some are more specifically suited only for recorded materials, not for written; some are exclusively usable for video / audiovisual.   The following comments sketch several sorts of exercise, mostly derived from Dodd (1985).

One of the most general uses of textual material of any sort is for **COMPREHENSION** purposes.   Taking into account the nature of video recordings, probably the best sorts of comprehension exercise for use with them are those requiring only limited writing or other responses by students, for instance, true or false; true, false or not given, as a more difficult type; multiple choice; and short answer (single word or at most phrase).   The inverted multiple choice format, in which only one answer is wrong, rather than only one answer right, can sometimes also be used to good effect, although it is not always easy to adapt for this purpose.   One variety of comprehension exercise that may also be possible for some materials would be to require an explanation of the significance of numbers or dates in the text.   If these are not too many, they can even be given in order of magnitude or of date, rather than in the order of appearance in the text, adding to the level of concentration required.

In a sense, production of a **SUMMARY** is also essentially a comprehension exercise. Obviously, "*verba volant, scripta manent*" [words fly away, writings remain] as the Romans used to say.   Hence, detailed summaries are not really possible with an audio or a video recording unless, unnaturally, it is played several times or is naturally repetitive, like a song or a poem with a chorus or refrain.   However, it is feasible to use video recordings to produce brief summaries.   It may also be useful to show an unsubtitled version, then a subtitled replay, or vice versa, or to use a subtitled version with weaker students.   The second pass with subtitles may also be for correction purposes, or for reinforcement only, with correction done later.   One particular type of summary involves use of key detail questions, sometimes being termed a Quintillian grid, after the Roman Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (or Quinctilianus), who wrote about oratory, rhetoric and the logical organization of materials.   This involves the "WH-" words of English, and was hinted at in poetry by Rudyard Kipling in his *Just So Stories*:

> "I keep six honest serving-men:
>   (They taught me all I knew)
> Their names are What and Where and When
>   And How and Why and Who."

In the Quintillian grid, some or all of these six interrogatives are one side of the grid and the sections of, say, a news broadcast are the other, allowing very short answers to be inserted in a strongly guided form of note-taking:

	Who	What	When	Where	(Why)	(How)
Section 1						
Section 2						
Section 3						
………..						

Somewhat similar to a Quintillian grid and on the borderline between comprehension and transcription are the various sorts of exercise requiring **COMPLETION**   of a chart, table, plan or map with information from the text.   In all these cases, video materials with transcription-style subtitling can have significant advantages of flexibility.   The same video can be used with the same questions for students of different ability levels by turning off subtitling for those with higher competence, but allowing dual-mode presentation for those who have not progressed so far.   In either case, for a correction phase the availability of full transcription on screen is of evident value.

There are a number of pure **TRANSCRIPTION** exercises that can be constructed around almost any sort of recording in a foreign language, but for video texts they would obviously involve turning off the subtitles initially.   For instance, it is possible to use a recording for a dictation-like exercise, in which students are expected to write down word for word the whole of what is said.   This is probably more easily done with a plain audio recording, since the possibilities of individual control of rewind and replay are more fully developed in an audio language laboratory than they are in the case of video reproduction

equipment, although personal DVD players may change this.   When it comes to a cloze-type transcription, the advantages of audio are no longer obvious, since if students are simply required to fill in a limited number of blanks they may well be able to do so in a single pass, without any need to listen several times.   The blanks can be selected to reflect a range of items requiring practice.   For example, they may refer solely to morphological endings if pupils are having difficulty with the correct forms of words to use.   They might involve certain types of form word, like prepositions.   They could also be for certain crucial full words, such as nouns or verbs which are hard to spell or easy to confuse.   If the classic mechanical cloze technique of eliminating words at fixed intervals is used, then a longer interval will be better for video material than for written.   The presence of the visual images in a video recording may help students grasp the text better.   If there are transcription-style subtitles, then the correction of such work is rendered extremely easy, merely requiring them to be turned on, and even synopsis of caption subtitles might be useful at points.

Various sorts of **VOCABULARY** exercise can be based on a recording more or less as well as on written text. These may involve finding words in the material for which a definition is given.   They can also be based on spotting antonyms or synonyms.   It is clearly useful to ensure that these cues are listed in the order of appearance in the text, especially if there are many of them or the recording is long or the students not particularly competent.   Again, with a sufficiently limited task, it can be possible to expect students to cope in a single pass, or perhaps two, without subtitles, these being shown in a final pass for correction purposes.   Alternatively, with difficult questions or weak students, dual-mode presentation may be adopted from the start, to reinforce their route to the answers that are desired.   The presence of the visual image may once again assist in recognition of the sense of the text, here perhaps even more than in comprehension work.

Finally, there are **PREDICTION** exercises.   For some of these, only a video format makes sense, for instance, showing a film without sound and asking students to guess what is being said.   For this approach, subtitles could be turned off initially, then turned on for a correction or review stage, during which they would support the spoken dialogue.   The opposite, running without picture and asking students to guess what will be seen when the recording is replayed, also is sensible only with video.   In this case, unfortunately, the technical capacities of current equipment do not enable subtitles to be displayed without the picture as a reinforcement of the sound track, although this may become feasible in time.   A properly subtitled version could be used without sound so as to elicit subtler details, such as the voice quality of characters or sometimes even whether they take orderly turns in speaking or interrupt each other.

All of these types of exercise can be quite flexible in their match with a particular level of linguistic competency on the part of students. The presence of an optional written transcript on screen expands and enhances such flexibility.

A POTENTIAL INITIATIVE?

It is perhaps significant that one very striking exception to the European local preferences noted earlier is the now nearly twenty-year-old series of English movies with English subtitles published in Spain (but marketed in other countries such as the "dubbers" Italy, Germany and France, as well as "voice-over" Poland and "subtitling" Portugal in Europe, and Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina in America) by RBA in Barcelona under the *Speak Up!* label.   The subtitles used by RBA are a complete transcript of the dialogue of the film.   They are further supported by a printed booklet, containing a plot synopsis, details of the cast and other notes, but particularly translations of, and comments upon, important vocabulary items, keyed to the film by scene numbering discreetly noted by figures in the top left-hand corner of the picture.   The sorts of supporting written material that are used in the RBA series include a brief account of the actors and their biographies and filmographies, usually with pictures.   There is a synopsis of the whole film, together with notes and glosses, usually arranged on a scene-by-scene basis.   The vocabulary coverage is often quite extensive and indicates regionalisms, colloquialisms, archaisms, collocations, quotations, proverbs and similar.   Sometimes there are suggested exercises; usually there are questions for discussion.   When a film is based on a work of fiction, appropriate details of this are given, such as date, author, place within the literary tradition and the like.

What are the possible implications of all the above for English language teaching in South-East Asia?   There is perhaps an opportunity for the production of purpose-made subtitled films like those of the RBA series on digital media for language learning, together with supporting printed matter. One advantage of doing this through an appropriately co-ordinated consortium of teaching establishments would be that materials could be more closely adapted to the different levels and interests of local pupils, without the heavy load of preparatory work being carried by only one person.   Another would be that the works chosen could be of intrinsic value, for instance dramatizations of great works of literature or documentaries with local relevance.   This sort of material would have the added bonus that copyright cession by the original makers would probably be easier to obtain than in the case of "blockbusters", at a time when international trade agreements are stressing the highest standards of compliance in matters of recognition of intellectual property.   A third advantage might be that the output could have subtitling to the very best international technical standards, with use, for instance, of "ghost boxes" to ensure clear legibility of all subtitles (see Karamitroglou, 1999) or of different colours to identify different speakers or to highlight words included in the notes, rather than the uniform white or yellow that often is impossible to read.   The advent of relatively cheap and simple subtitling programs for personal computers makes this and the adding of scene numbers with division of the film into far more sections than the usual "chapters" of DVDs reasonably accessible. Finally, work of this sort would yield products of relatively high value for their weight and bulk that could find quite a large market in the case of some language, hence potential useful exports.   For instance, the number of speakers of one form or another of Bahasa is of the order of a quarter of a billion (in the American sense).   Moreover, they live in countries that are developing steadily and already are beginning to have an appreciable penetration of digital reproduction

equipment for television.

The area has a particularly valuable set of human and other resources, in the event that this opportunity is seized. On the receptive side, an appreciable number of people in the region have a good comprehension of English, while there are also resident expatriates for whom this is a native language. Many of these people have heightened linguistic awareness through involvement in language teaching. The expatriates come from a range of English-speaking countries, so that regional variations occurring in films could be correctly understood and explicated, with high-quality subtitling in English of English-medium films as a result. On the productive side, there is a solid core of language teachers who would be able to provide insightful notes and comments for the related printed matter. Collaboration should also result in this including useful exercises for class or individual use. In addition to these language-related resources, there are pools of capacity and equipment for video production, as also for designing and printing auxiliary materials.

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