Active audiodescription to promote speaking skills in online environments

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Rebut / Received: 31-7-15
Acceptat / Accepted: 6-11-15

Resum. Audiodescripció activa per promoure les habilitats orals en entorns en línia. La recerca al voltant de l'ús de la Traducció Audiovisual (TAV) en l'ensenyament de llengües estrangeres s'ha incrementat de forma considerable durant la darrera dècada. Tanmateix, ha cobert principalment l'ús de subtítols com a suport i l'ús de subtitulació i doblatge actius com a tasca. Aquest article introdueix l'ús pedagògic d'una altra forma de TAV: l'audiodescripció activa –la descripció oral d'informació visual per als cecs i persones amb discapacitats visuals– per tal de potenciar les habilitats orals en l'educació a distància. En aquest estudi quasiexperimental desenvolupat en un entorn en línia van participar 30 estudiants espanyols d'anglès amb finalitats específiques (nivell B1). Els participants van escriure de forma col·laborativa en aquest entorn l'audiodescripció de dos anuncis turístics i posteriorment van gravar-se les veus usant la plataforma ClipFlair. Es van obtenir algunes conclusions raonablement vàlides que projecten llum respecte als beneficis pedagògics de l'audiodescripció i que demanen seguir investigant en les possibilitats d'aquestes tècniques en contextos de segones llengües.

Paraules clau: audiodescripció, traducció audiovisual, aprenentatge a distància, habilitats orals, anglès amb finalitats específiques.

Abstract. Active audiodescription to promote speaking skills in online environments. Research on the use of audiovisual translation in foreign language education has considerably increased over the last decade. However, it has mainly covered the use of subtitles as a support, and the use of active subtitling and dubbing as a task. This paper introduces the pedagogical use of another AVT mode: active audiodescription —the oral description of visual information for blind and visually impaired people— to enhance speaking skills in distance learning education.

The quasi-experimental study, developed in an online setting, involved 30 Spanish students of English for Specific Purposes (level B1). Participants were required to write the audiodescription of two tourist advertisements collaboratively online and then record their voices using the web platform ClipFlair. Reasonably valid conclusions that shed some light on the pedagogical benefits of audiodescription were obtained and they invite further research on the possibilities of revoicing techniques in L2 contexts.

Keywords: audiodescription, audiovisual translation, distance learning, speaking skills, English for Specific Purposes.

1. Introduction

Up to now, the use of audiovisual translation (henceforth, AVT) as a foreign language learning (henceforth, FLL) resource has been basically focused on two modalities: subtitling and dubbing, especially the former. In terms of subtitling, researchers and practitioners have centred their attention on using the active task of subtitling to enhance pragmatic awareness (Incalcaterra McLoughlin 2009), cultural and intercultural awareness (Borghetti and Lertola 2014), listening comprehension (Talaván 2011 and Talaván and Rodríguez-Arancón 2014b), lexical acquisition (Lertola 2012), writing skills (Talaván and Rodríguez-Arancón 2014a), and integration of subtitling in the FLL curriculum (Incalcaterra McLoughlin and Lertola 2014). In terms of dubbing, the main skill that has been the focus of study and practice is oral production, especially in terms of phonetic competence, intonation and speed (Kumai 1996), as well as fluency, intonation and pronunciation (Danan 2010 and Chiu 2012), and speaking skills in general terms (Talaván *et al.* 2014 and Talaván and Ávila-Cabrera 2015).

This article focuses on the use of a different AVT modality, audiodescription (henceforth, AD), as a didactic resource in the language classroom. The growing promotion of accessibility in the media that has been taking place in Europe and beyond during the last decade has allowed audiodescription (henceforth, AD) to flourish and spread rapidly in the multimedia realm (Díaz-Cintas 2010). Having AD as a FLL tool connected to the idea of making audiovisual materials accessible makes this AVT modality much more attractive in the modern didactic context, since students can produce something useful that they can even share in their social networks or elsewhere to promote accessibility (at different levels) outside the educational context.

2. Audiodescription to improve oral production in FLL using ClipFlair

AD as a didactic resource allows us to exploit two important dimensions that fit the development of FLL skills: the audio and the images. Teachers may use the audio as a

starting point to then turn the students' attention to the description of the images. They are not expected to audiodescribe the clips in a professional manner, but if they are given guidelines (see ClipFlair activities below) and shown professional samples, they can get a sufficient idea of how best to perform the AD of a given clip. In this learning context, students may imagine themselves helping someone who needs to access a particular video, emphasizing the social element of the task and even ultimately sharing the result on the internet or in the students' social networks.

With the previous elements in mind, one of the FLL skills that could benefit the most from AD is oral production. According to various authors (Oxford 1993, among others), we spend 30% of our daily time speaking (45% listening, and around 16% reading and 9% writing). Therefore, it is obviously a skill that should receive more attention in the FLL context. Although we can find a considerable volume of literature devoted to oral proficiency, most of the studies are more focused on assessment than on skills development (Luoma 2004), given the intrinsic complexity of this productive skill, as well as to the imperative need to assess it coming from official examination boards.

In the present study, we have focused on the improvement of the students' fluency - since it is one of the key aspects of oral production (Segalowitz 2010). In particular, we tried to assess the improvement of what is known as utterance fluency, related to the act of talking itself (without taking the listener into account), focusing on pauses, repetitions, self-corrections, etc. Even though students were asked to prepare a script of the AD before recording their voices, the instructions they received emphasized naturalness of speech in the description of the images. In fact, the task of AD includes repetition and drama techniques (necessary to achieve the aforementioned naturalness/fluency), two strategies that have already been mentioned by various authors (Dougill 1987and Yoshimura and MacWhinney 2007 among others) as essential for the enhancement of oral production.

The amount of literature devoted to the use of AD in the FLL context is very limited. The active use of this AVT modality as a didactic resource, in the terms presented in this paper[1], has been mentioned by Clouet (2005) as an example of activity and then studied by two authors: Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen. In 2013, they suggested the use of AD to improve lexical and phraseological competence (with encouraging results); in 2014, they researched into its use as a tool to enhance integrated competence development in L2, studied from a descriptive perspective; and in 2015 they presented an interesting first approach to AD as a didactic resource to promote oral skills in foreign language learning through a mobile application called VISP (VIdeos for SPeaking), based on a clip taken from a feature film. In all their works, there is an emphasis on the social dimension and on the authenticity of the AD-based tasks, as well as on the multiple possibilities they bring for students to develop all language competences.

1. It is worth mentioning the study on the passive use of AD as a didactic tool to improve lexical competence (Martínez Martínez 2012), although this path does not seem to have had any continuity.

Hence, the project presented here can be counted as one of the first attempts to use AD to enhance L2 speaking skills, in this case using non-fiction material. Besides, the study has made use of the web-based software ClipFlair Studio, created within the European funded project ClipFlair, and it is also a first approach to the assessment of AD activities in this context. The ClipFlair platform has been specially designed to use any AVT tool to learn a foreign language and is available free of charge for any teacher/student that might be interested in this field. ClipFlair activities can be easily integrated in the language curriculum or be offered as one-off activity both in the classroom and in online language learning settings (Incalcaterra McLoughlin and Lertola 2015). In the example that appears in Figure 1, used for the present project, the clip is visible, as well as the revoicing component (already segmented in the corresponding chunks), as the main elements of the activity, together with a text box with specific instructions and another text component for the students to copy and paste their scripts if necessary.

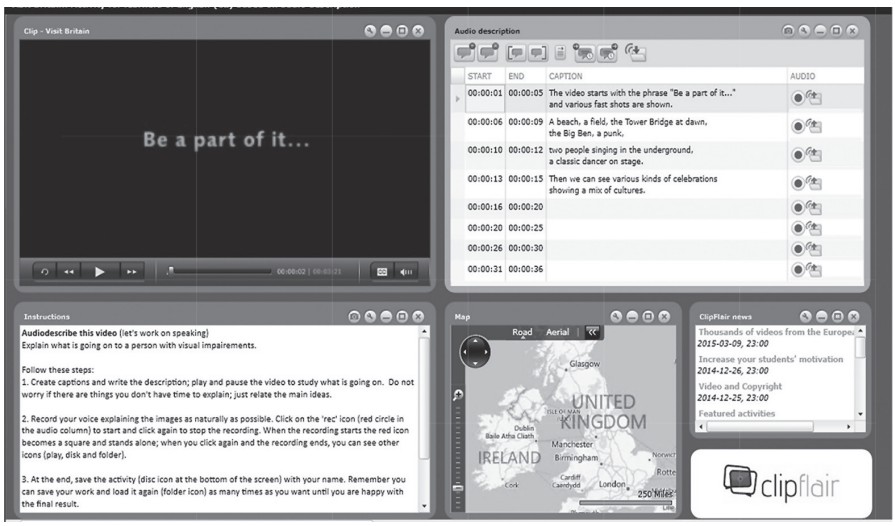

Figure 1. ClipFlair activity screenshot.

The use of ClipFlair makes this type of activities easier to implement, since students do not need to download a specific software nor do they need the video downloaded in their computers beforehand, thus saving time and diminishing potential technical problems[2].

2. See Gajek and Szarkowska (2013) for a preliminary approach to the use of AD within this platform.

3. The experimental study: the RECORDS Project

The RECORDS (Revoicing to Enhance Oral Production Skills) project was developed at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) within a Teaching Innovation Research Network comprising a number of external partners: Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM), Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), and the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG). The project aimed at developing learners' oral production skills through the online collaborative AD of two short video clips (tourist ads with no dialogue). It was carried out within a first year English for Tourism course at the UNED, where there were about 1800 students enrolled. A total of 50 students applied to participate in this activity, which was presented as an optional course task (students were promised an extra mark in the exam to encourage participation). As it frequently happens in this type of projects, only a fraction of the students completed all the activities: 15 in this case[3]. The 15 participants involved in the project were grouped in the experimental group (EG) and other 15 students from the same course were randomly selected to constitute the control group (CG). The EG was further subdivided into four subgroups (three subgroups of four participants and one subgroup of three participants) to perform the online collaborative AD of the two videos while the CG continued with the regular activities of the course. The project was carried out in a distance learning setting using the virtual learning platform of the UNED, aLF, where most of the university degree courses are offered (Figure 2 shows the aLF community created for this project), so that all learners would be well acquainted with it.

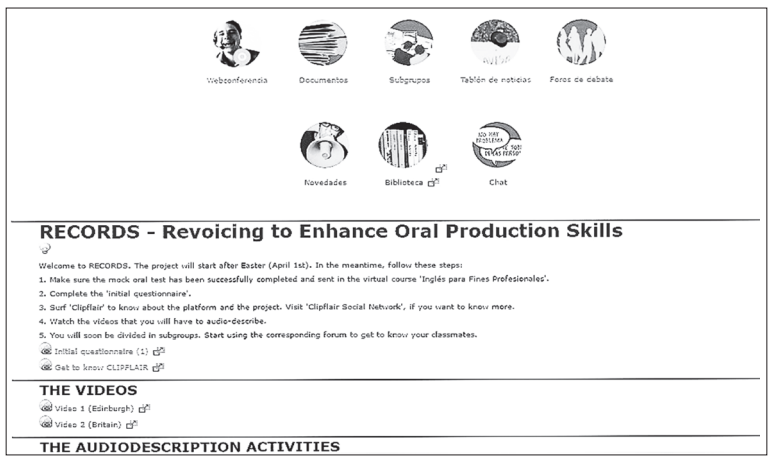

Figure 2. aLF screenshot: RECORDS welcome page.

3. It should be noted that in distance education the dropout rate is very high, as a general rule.

The two video clips last between two and three minutes each; they are tourist ads accompanied by music and they were downloaded from YouTube. The first one announces the city of Edinburgh and the second one advertises Great Britain; both videos show a number of places of interest easily recognisable by the students and were selected on the basis of their duration, the familiarity of the images and the absence of dialogue. The last criterion was essential so as to avoid interferences with the original oral text in order to facilitate the AD (this was the first time such an activity was presented to students) and to encourage linguistic creativity.

Regarding the procedures, the project lasted two months in total and students carried out the AD of the two videos during one month (two weeks per activity). The chart contained in Figure 3 explains all the steps included in the process. Both activities followed the same stages (the mid ladder in the image below): students were first asked to watch the video in detail so as to agree collaboratively on a common draft of the script to use later when audiodescribing the clip; then, they worked individually using the aforementioned common draft to record their voices to create the audiodescribed final products using the ClipFlair activities provided (http://studio.clipflair.net/?activity=Edinburgh.clipflair and http://studio.clipflair.net/?activity=VisitBritain-CapRev-C1-EN.clipflair). Finally, once the individual audiodescribed activities were saved and uploaded in the subgroups, students were asked to check on their classmates' versions, in order to select the best one in technical terms (good pronunciation, well synchronized and containing complete messages to help the visually impaired follow the ads). Hence, in the end, there was one representative version per video and per subgroup to be shared with the other subgroups (in the general community) and to be assessed by the project observers.

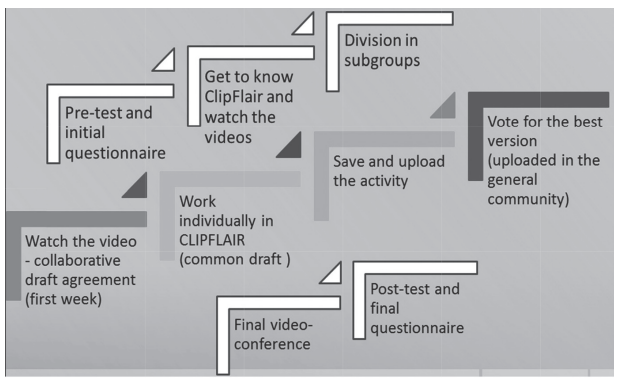

Figure 3. Experimental procedures.

It should be remembered that no strict AD guidelines were provided; students were explained the role of AD in society at present, a sample of AD was provided and they were told to act 'as if' they were audiodescribers. Therefore, it could be said to be a very flexible and creative task, with special emphasis on the social dimension (helping the visually impaired access these videos) of the activity itself.

4. Research design: Tests and questionnaires

The study applied a quasi-experimental design which included language assessment tests, questionnaires and observation made by two observers during the whole process (forums, chats, assessment, and a final video conference) with the EG participants.

Regarding the language assessment, all participants took an oral pre-test one week before the project and an oral post-test right after completing the last AD task. Both oral pre- and post-tests were carried out online using a videoconference software used at the UNED virtual platform (called AVIPRO). In the oral tests students had to listen to an audio file containing a series of questions related to tourism; they were given five minutes to prepare their monologue on the topics provided and then they had to record themselves discussing them during 3-5 minutes.

Also, the participants of the EG filled out an initial questionnaire (http://tinyurl.com/q6wu5da) before starting the project; it was basically designed to collect background information about the participants. Likewise, at the end of the project, participants were required to complete a final questionnaire (http://tinyurl.com/k8esxvl) that aimed at eliciting attitudinal data. The final video conference also took place at the end and was conducted by the two observers in order to integrate the feedback obtained with the final questionnaire.

5. Data analysis

This analysis is divided into two sections, according to the main data gathering instruments used: the language tests and the questionnaires. Observation will be analysed in the discussion, so as to complement and ratify the quantitative data provided below.

5.1 The language assessment tests

The language assessment tests, oral pre- and post- tests, were rated by two observers according to an assessment rubric which comprised a number of criteria (pronunciation/intonation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar) on a 2.5-point scale (Figure 4). The average of the marks provided by the two observers was considered the final mark of the oral tests and then used in the data analysis. The main objective of the analysis was to

test the improvement of the EG after using AD as a didactic resource and the differences in performance between the EG and CG in the oral tests.

Skill components	Descriptors	Comments
Pronunciation / Intonation 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 *(circle one)* low high	**Pronunciation / Intonation is correct** __ Always __ Most of the time __ Much of the time __ Sometimes __ Rarely	
Fluency 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 *(circle one)* low high	__ Uses native-like flow of speech __ **Uses fluent connected speech** __ Uses fluent connected speech, occasionally disrupted by search for correct form of expression __ Speech is connected but frequently disrupted by search for correct form of expression __ Uses simple sentences	
Vocabulary 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 *(circle one)* low high	__ Uses sophisticated vocabulary in a variety of contexts __ **Uses varied and descriptive language, possibly including native-like phrasing and / or idiomatic expressions** __ Uses vocabulary sufficient to communicate in most social and academic contexts __ Uses vocabulary sufficient to express needs and feelings and responds in familiar contexts __ Uses only basic vocabulary with possible use of first language	
Grammar 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 *(circle one)* low high	**Uses appropriate tenses, pronouns, gender and number agreement, negation, articles, prepositions and adjective placement** __ Always __ Most of the time __ Much of the time __ Sometimes __ Rarely	

Figure 4. The rubric used to assess the speaking tests.

The descriptive statistics of the oral pre- and post-tests of the EG and the CG can be appreciated in Figure 5. The mean, which is the average of the scores, is on top and below is the standard deviation (SD). At first sight, an improvement from the pre-test to the post-test in the EG can be clearly appreciated (it should be noted that only two months had elapsed between tests). It needs to be pointed out that the SD scores are high if the sample is heterogeneous and contains extreme scores, whereas they are low in a homogeneous sample with all the scores clustered around the mean. In this case, the SD is high enough both for the EG and the CG, which suggests that the sample is heterogeneous and contains the expected extreme scores. The oral post-test mean of the EG (7.65) is higher than that of the CG (6.76), as expected (since the CG did not perform the AD task), and the SD has dropped for the EG showing that the sample is more homogeneous in the post-test, once the variable (the AD task) has been applied.

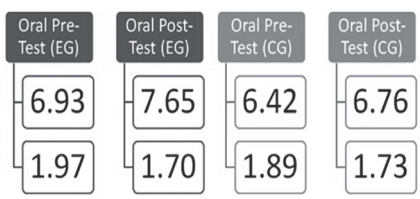

Figure 5. The descriptive statistics of the oral pre- and post-tests of the EG and the CG.

The CG's SD also drops, as expected, since they also continued studying and advanced accordingly; however, it does not drop as much, so it can be tentatively derived that the variable applied to the EG facilitates a more global group improvement.

To confirm and validate the previous data, the following analysis between subjects (two Independent sample T-tests) and within subjects (two Paired-sample T-tests) were carried out:

- An Independent-sample T-test to compare the scores of the EG and CG in the Oral Pre-test; there was no significant difference in scores for EG and CG: $t(28)=.727$, $p>.05$.
- An independent-sample T-test to compare the scores of the EG and CG in the Oral Post-test; there was no significant difference in scores for EG and CG: $t(28)=1.408$, $p>.05$.
- A Paired-sample T-test to compare the scores of the EG in the oral pre-test and the post-test; there was significant difference in scores for pre-test and post-test: $t(14)=-4.119$, $p<.05$.
- A Paired-sample T-test to compare the scores of the CG in the oral pre-test and the post-test; there was no significant difference in scores for pre-test and post-test: $t(14)=-2.097$, $p>.05$.

These results reveal that there was no difference in test performance between the EG and CG in the oral pre- and post-tests. However, there was a significant difference between the scores of the EG in the oral pre- and post tests showing that the experimental treatment, i.e. the AD tasks, positively influenced the EG oral post-test performance, confirming and validating the previous analysis.

5.2 Initial and final questionnaires

The initial questionnaire was anonymous and was taken by all EG participants. The first part of the questionnaire gathered background information about the participants (age, gender, languages spoken, experiences in an English speaking country, etc.). The questionnaire revealed that the age ranged from 20 to 47 with a mean age of 32 and that the majority of participants were female Spanish native speakers who had spent time in an English speaking country mainly on vacation. The second part of the initial questionnaire focused on attitudinal data such as participants' knowledge and opinion about AD, their expectations about the upcoming AD tasks and their attitude towards language learning. As much as 88% of the participants did not know what AD was and once informed about it, 80% agreed that it seemed a "very useful and necessary" task. 90% of the participants expected to improve oral production thanks to the project. It is important to point out that 63% of them considered their oral production either very bad or bad. When asked about self-learning, in particular what they usually do in order to

improve their own learning, 80% of the participants affirmed to use audiovisual material (films and TV programs in English), 46% written material (newspapers, magazines in English, etc.), and 29% social media and networks (Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, etc.). This final aspect is particularly relevant for this project, since most of the subjects were familiar with the use of audiovisual input in FLL.

The final questionnaire was filled out by the EG participants after completing the project. It aimed at eliciting participants' attitudinal data. With respect to the improvement of language skills, the project met the expectations of all the students involved. As shown in Figure 6, oral production was definitely the skill that participants felt to have improved the most, followed by writing (it should be remembered that they had to collaboratively write the script of the AD), oral comprehension (it should be noted here that they had to listen to their classmates ADs), and reading comprehension (they also read during the project, since they used the forums and chats in English and they had to read the script to agree on a final draft).

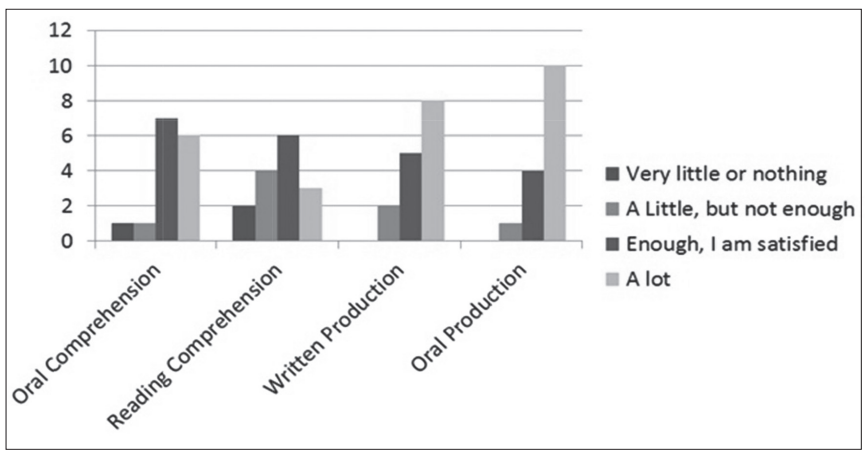

Figure 6. Participants' opinion of their language skills improvement after the AD tasks.

In addition, participants felt they had improved their knowledge of grammar, had greatly increased their vocabulary and had gained confidence in their English proficiency. They also appreciated the use of authentic material and acknowledged that the AD tasks had helped them to reflect upon their language learning process. In terms of cooperative learning, most participants (78%) expressed satisfaction for the constructive criticism they both provided and received from fellow students about

the AD tasks and found this type of work highly motivating, since they were working together towards a common goal. Also, most subjects found using the forums and the chats available in the virtual platform aLF particularly helpful in carrying out the tasks. The online use of ClipFlair Studio was also positively assessed by most of the participants (80%).

According to the final questionnaire responses, the majority of participants (86%) would like to audiodescribe again. In particular, participants suggested to continue with tourism related videos, similar to those used for the project, and movies. When asked whether they would like to try other types of revoicing such as dubbing, voice-over and narration (a definition of each type was provided), answers were encouraging: most of the participants would try narration (66%), dubbing (60%) and voice-over (60%). Therefore, one can assume that the practice undertaken in this project was very challenging, motivating and fruitful for most students, so much so that it even made them wish to try out other AVT modalities.

6. Discussion

The project observation was performed directly (constantly monitoring the work in the virtual platform) and indirectly (via the assessment of the final representative AD activities). The two observers' notes agreed on the increasing motivation and positive feedback of the students; this was confirmed by the very encouraging comments gathered from the final questionnaire, such as "This was an amazing experience for me and I would love to continue with audiodescribing. The tasks weren't difficult at all and I really enjoyed being part of this project. Thank you so much for this amazing opportunity to improve my English skills". In the course of the project, students completed the AVT tasks with a great degree of interest; the work performed was intensive and they considered the tasks both challenging and rewarding.

As mentioned above, indirect observation focused on the assessment of each subgroup's representative AD tasks. The final marks of the AD tasks were calculated through the average of the marks assigned by the two observers. In Table 1 the rubric designed for this purpose is provided; it focuses on accuracy, synchrony, effectiveness of communication and register, which were evaluated on a 4-point scale. Each assessment criteria could be evaluated within a point range and the total possible score was 10. It should not be forgotten that the AD tasks assessed were the representative ones per video and per subgroup, since subjects had previously selected the best representative AD activities of their subgroup to be shared with the rest of the groups and to be submitted for evaluation.

Table 1. Rubric for the assessment of the AD tasks

Number of points	**Explanation**
0	No evidence
0,5	Partial evidence
1	Sufficient
1,5	Good
2	Excellent

Task assessment	
Accuracy	
Effectiveness of communication	
Speed	
Naturalness	
Synchrony	
Total points (out of 10)	

Following this assessment guidelines, subgroups 2, 3 and 4 had similar high performances (between 8-9 points), as shown in Figure 8 below. However, it can be noted that two subgroups (1 and 3) performed better in the AD of video 1-Edinburgh, while the other two subgroups (2 and 4) did slightly better the AD of video 2-Visit Britain. One of the possible reasons why this happened is that video 1 is easier compared to video 2; this was a conscious choice so as to make the initial approach to AD slightly easier. This feeling of imbalance in terms of difficulty was confirmed by the students both in the forums and in the final video conference. The conclusion that can be derived here is that even though the second AD task was more challenging than the first, most groups improved their performance thanks to just one previous practice. Hence, it can be tentatively derived here that a frequent use of AD as a didactic resource in FFL can rapidly have very positive effects in the students' skills enhancement (at least in terms of oral production).

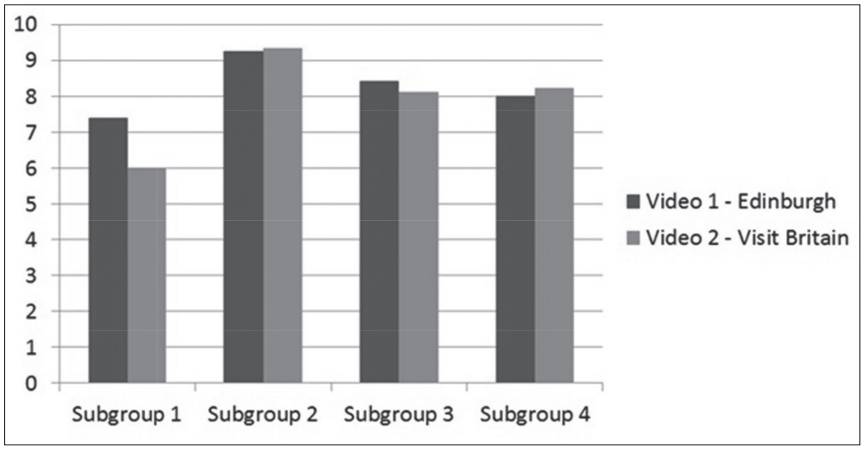

Figure 8. Subgroups' performance in AD tasks of Video 1-Edinburgh and Video 2-Visit Britain.

One more element of (direct) observation that could confirm and complement all data previously exposed was the final video conference. At the end of the project, EG participants were invited to take part in a final video conference with the researchers. Six out of the 15 EG participants attended the video conference and provided comments both orally and in writing via the chat. One of the most repeated remarks was that the project had been a great opportunity to practice English and that this was a new language learning task to them. Participants generally agreed that the second video was more difficult to audiodescribe. Text condensation, describing every scene in a limited amount of time, and video synchronization (the voice to the images), were marked as the most challenging aspects of AD tasks. In general, students were enthusiastic about the project and asked for a follow up.

As it can be derived from the previous data and discussion, the initial questionnaire provided us with an encouraging starting point, with most subjects almost entirely new to AD and more than willing to try this AVT modality out so as to improve their FLL oral production. Then, as the data analysed in the oral production tests have shown, this skill was considerably enhanced thanks to the use of this innovative didactic resource. The feedback provided by the participants in the final questionnaire confirmed these findings and even supplemented them in terms of other skills enhancement. Finally, observation supported the previous analysis in qualitative terms, triangulating the results. Hence, we can tentatively conclude that the potential benefits of AD used actively as an

educational tool in FLL have been validated, both to improve oral production (fluency) and in terms of integrated skills enhancement.

7. Conclusion

The present study reveals the great potential of AD tasks for FLL and the validity of this AVT modality used as an active didactic task to improve oral production skills in distance FLL contexts; even if it is only a preliminary approach with a limited number of participants, the outcome has been very encouraging. The study has also proved ClipFlair Studio to be an ideal online instrument for carrying out this type of AVT tasks in FLL. The validity of these conclusions, though, cannot be generalized and must be understood in their context. It should be noted that, although the number of participants was limited, the triangulation of data and the use of diverse data gathering instruments has created a relatively solid design with a certain degree of scientific reliability that may allow for good chances of positive replication and generalization.

In terms of further research, this study invites to test the benefits that AD can bring to other individual and integrated FLL skills: writing production, oral and reading comprehension, and language content (vocabulary and grammar). This type of tasks should also be tested on a long-term basis and involving a larger number of participants, and with different language combinations. In addition, researchers could employ other types of clips with the presence of brief dialogues (to facilitate AD), try the resources with different FLL levels, and even merge AD with other revoicing modes, namely narration, dubbing, or voice-over. In particular, the combination of AD with narration, in order to give more freedom to the students, who are not professionals and can find their own ways of making videos accessible, could be a good starting point for future research following the path opened by the RECORDS project.

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