Exploiting films in detecting semilingualism among multilingual speakers in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

In the era of globalization and international communication speaking a few languages has become rather a necessity than an advantage, and multinational multilingual Kazakhstan is no exception. However, proficiency in the verbal communication is sometimes neglected by bilingual speakers which results in code-switching and semilingualism. According to Hansegard, semilingualism is a concept, where individual has deficit in six language areas: size of vocabulary, grammatical correctness, automatism, language creation, mastering functions of language and in meaning and imagery. By using film extracts in this study, we attempted to detect areas in which Kazakhstani multilinguals experienced insufficiency. To accomplish our research goals we had two groups of multilinguals watch film clips in the original English and dub them into Russian and Kazakh. Afterwards, we checked their works with the studio dubbing and compared the quality of their translation. The research showed that dubbing from English into Russian was easier owing to several factors such as similar structure of the languages and settled technical terms, while translating into Kazakh was more difficult due to the learners’ deficit size of vocabulary.

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1. Introduction

Despite its pitfalls such as difficult language and fast pace, film is generally welcomed in the EFL classroom both by teachers and students. Reasons for this positive attitude are many, the most popular of which are authenticity, varied language and visual clues that aid understanding (Stempleski, 2010). Moreover, films are enjoyed by most students, and, as Maley (2010) states, ‘film attracts students through the power it has to tell a story. It contextualizes language through the flow of images, making it more accessible’.

Another advantage of film is that it enables non-native speakers understand stress patterns through the image and rhythm in various situations (Cunning, 2001). What is more, the moving image and sound in video trigger dual-channel learning in students, who employ both verbal and visual means to comprehend native speech from
contextual clues. King (2002:2) summarizes well, ‘Films are invaluable teaching sources for many reasons; they present colloquial English in real life contexts rather than artificial situations, and they expose students to a wide range of native speakers, each with their own slang, reduced speech, stress, accents, and dialects’.

The last but not least strength of video is the emotive charge students feel while working with film clips. Due to the ability to evoke students’ feelings through image and sound, films can serve as a motivating tool and enhance affective learning. Learners eagerly take part in all activities and are open for conversation. As Maley (2010) points out, ‘motivation to engage with a narrative, especially one with a high affective charge, is enhanced’. Stempleski agrees that film ‘is very effective at bringing the outside world into the classroom and providing a stimulating framework for classroom communication and discussion’ (2010:1).

With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to use films extracts in the EFL classroom, under the hood of a motivating activity with authentic discourse, to detect semilingualism among multilingual students in Kazakhstan. The paper centres on insufficiency in language competence that multilingual speakers experience while dubbing film extracts in English into Russian and Kazakh. The study asks (1) in which language areas students have deficit most and (2) which language is easier to dub into and reasons for this phenomenon. This work adds to the field of multilingualism and film discourse, investigating the difficulties multilinguals face while dubbing films.

1. Literature review

The ground for the controversial concept of semilingualism was first prepared by Bloomfield (1927) who observed indigenous minority population in North America, Wisconsin. He noticed that one 40-year-old Menominee Indian, unlike his fellow tribesman and tribeswomen, could neither speak his native language nor English tolerably well. This man had a small vocabulary, used incorrect inflections, and used only simple grammatical structures. Bloomfield suggested that it was probably due to the effect of the dominant language in the country, namely English.

A few decades later the term semilingualism was first used and defined by Hansegard (1975) who did an extensive qualitative research on bilingual speakers, ethnic minorities in Scandinavia. Hansegard defined the term as a concept, where bilinguals have a defective command in six language areas: size of vocabulary, linguistic correctness, the degree of automatism, ability to create or neologize, mastery of cognitive, emotive and volitional functions of language, individual meanings and imagery (Hansegard, 1975:8). Hansegard adds that a bilingual individual can be regarded as semilingual, if he has quantitative insufficiencies (size of vocabulary), makes more mistakes than normal while speaking both languages and has a lower degree of automatism, unlike a monolingual, who speaks his only language on a very good level in spite of the fact that he has a similar background, such as education and social group (Hansegard 1975:8). What is more, from observation and contact with Tornea Valley Finns for a long period, Hansegard notices (1975:8) that in spite of speaking Swedish fluently bilingual individuals had difficulty with feeling emotional experience behind the words (aspects 4 and 5 in his definition) due to scarcity of individual semantic experiences (aspect 6).

In his popular work ‘Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children’ Jim Cummins suggests that a child’s first language must be well developed in order to achieve highest results in academic and linguistic performance in the second language (1979). In his paper Cummins introduces two theories, first of which, the Developmental Interdependence Theory proposes that progress in L2 depends on a well-developed L1. Second theory, the Threshold Hypothesis suggests a bilingual has to pass two thresholds in order to gain the thinking advantages of ‘balanced bilinguals’ and avoid the negative outcome of two underdeveloped languages, i.e. semilingualism. In addition, Cummins proposes that low linguistic competence in a bilingual child’s both languages can also influence his cognitive development and academic success in other areas.

Critics of semilingualism and the Threshold Hypothesis (Edelsky, et al, 1983; Wiley, 1996) argue that academic success is different from linguistic achievement (Edelsky, et al, 1983:8). What is more, the researchers
assert that semilingualism has a humiliating connotation and is rather the result of socially, economically and politically deprived situation of ethnic minorities than their language skills and abilities. The researchers also claim that monolinguals could experience the same educational problems, if they were in the same circumstances (Edelsky, et al, 1983; Baker, 2006). As a result, Cummins (1994) admits that classifying someone as a ‘semilingual’ is exceedingly negative and might be harmful to children’s learning, and suggests referring to them as ‘limited bilinguals’.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

For this study, the participants were 24 multilingual undergraduate senior students studying English as a foreign language at Suleyman Demirel University ELT Department. The students had completed 3 years of study and are upper-intermediate level learners. The means of instruction throughout the whole period of study was English, for this reason the students are communicatively competent and are able to follow conversation between native speakers without much effort.

Demographics for the participants were classified as 15 female and 9 male between ages of 21 and 23. Ethnicity proportion was 22 Kazakhs, 1 Greek and 1 Turkish student of local origin.

3.2 Research design

The research was conducted in two different groups of 12 students in each, who had a different first language: Kazakh and Russian. The instructors for these classes were two fluent multilingual speakers, one male and one female. It was felt that having a multilingual speaker was important for aims of the research, as they could observe students and their reactions. In addition, the multilingual instructors could evaluate the quality of the learners’ translation and ensure that they do the task individually, i.e. without hinting and exchanging phrases with each other while dubbing the film extracts.

In order to accomplish our study goals, we requested the cooperation of the experts, our colleagues and instructors at the translation department to evaluate the quality of the students’ dubbing. What is more, their professional advice and feedback on procedures was also provided.

3.3 Research procedure

a. The experts selected 4 scenes from the film, based on several criteria: topics, colloquial vs. technical language, semantic and lexical complexity.
b. The experts organized the film clips from the easiest to the most difficult one.
c. The students first watched the film extracts in English once.
d. The students were given printed scripts of the film clips so that they would not feel stressed while translating. Subtitled watching of video was not welcomed due to time restrictions and impracticality.
e. The students dubbed the film extracts into L1. The learners were allotted enough time for translating but could not use dictionaries or ask for the help of their group-mates. This way we attempted to assess student’s size of vocabulary and grammatical competence in English.
f. The students watched the film clip with a studio dubbing in their L1 and corrected their mistakes with a different colour pen so that the researchers could see their mistakes and make notes for evaluation.
g. The students translated their corrected dubbed extract into L2. This way we tried to evaluate students’ size of vocabulary and grammatical competence in L2.
h. The students watched the film clip with a studio dubbing in L2 and corrected their mistakes with a different colour pen so that researchers could see their mistakes and make notes for evaluation and discussion.
i. The experts collected the papers and evaluated the quality of the dubbing, on the base of the following assessment methods: meaning of the text, its intrinsic content, accuracy and fidelity to the original.

3.4 Data collection

The movie selected for the research was a science fiction, comedy and action film ‘Men in Black 3’, one of few motion pictures with a high quality dubbing in Kazakh so far. The extracts selected were of different situations, had dialogues and sometimes puns, so that we could check students’ creative abilities (aspects 4 and 5 by Hansegard). Whenever students didn’t get the meaning of words or phrases due to culture issues, instructors assisted them but only in English so that students would find the correct equivalent in Kazakh or Russian by themselves and dub the clips individually.

3. Results and discussion

Two groups were evaluated separately in order to obtain more reliable data for comparison and further research. For the assessment of dubbing the table below was used.

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<th>Table 1. Dubbing evaluation form: Kazakh group</th>
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<td>Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kazakh (L1)</td>
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<td>Russian (L2)</td>
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The biggest challenge that Kazakh-speaking learners encountered in our research was translating formal and upper-level words and phrases in English, such as ‘apprehended, commendation, clearance, rogue, etc.’ What is more, the Kazakh group inappropriately used inflexions in Russian, and confused gender of some words, the category the Kazakh language does not have.

Nevertheless, the research showed that Kazakh-speaking multilinguals dubbed the film clips into both L1 and L2 quite successfully despite some minor mistakes in inflexions and category of gender. No representative of semilingualism was detected. Students speak both L1 and L2 quite fluently and converse in English on a good level. What is more, one female student showed outstanding performance in neologizing and invented some new words in Kazakh, such as ‘бейтараптандыруши (neutralizer)’ for ‘neuralyser’, a device used by Men in Black to erase the memory of witnesses, and ‘баскесер (headcutter)’ for ‘assassin’.

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Dubbing evaluation form: Russian group</th>
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<td>Russian (L1)</td>
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Russian-speaking learners had the same difficulty with translating formal and upper-level words and phrases into English. Furthermore, some learners could not appropriately translate relatively easy words and phrases,
such as ‘hidden roof, concealed weapon, power seats and power windows’. Instead of trying to use their suitable equivalents in Russian, the students preferred to translate them literally without giving much thought to the context.

However, the greatest setback for Russian-speaking learners was dubbing the film clips into Kazakh because of insufficient vocabulary, in spite of the fact that Kazakh is the learners’ mother tongue. 4 students out of 12 could not translate quite easy words such as ‘roof, drugs, senior agent, suspect’ into Kazakh. However, grammatical accuracy of the learners was comparatively better and students did not make global mistakes that could change the meaning of the phrases or cause misunderstanding.

As a result, the study shows that majority of Russian-speaking students speak both L1 and English fairly well. However, Russian-speaking multilinguals dubbed the film clips into L1 much better that in L2. Unlike the Kazakh group, Russian-speaking Kazakhs had problems with conveying the message in L2 because of limited vocabulary.

In addition, as it seems from papers, one representative of recessive bilingualism was detected. A 23-year old male student, a representative of Turkish ethnic minority, and a graduate of Russian school, could not convey the message from English into Russian. His dubbing into Russian seems to have no sense at all and looks like a random collection of words and phrases that do not ‘match’. The student has limited vocabulary both in Russian and English, incorrectly uses inflexions in Russian and has appalling grammar. However, dubbing into Kazakh was way better due to the cognate languages: Turkish and Kazakh. Thus, in this particular example, we can say that we witness recessive form of multilingualism, where the speaker is gradually losing competence in one language, namely Russian, because of disuse.

4. Participant observation and focus group interview

The participant observation and focus group interview with the students revealed that Kazakh-speakers prefer to translate film clips into Russian first, as well as their Russian-speaking counterparts. The reason for this phenomenon, given by the subjects, was the ease that learners feel while translating into Russian and the fact that Hollywood films dubbed into Kazakh are often ignored for their low quality translation or inability of the audience to understand Kazakh.

From observation in the classroom we may also assume that both groups of the participants found the Kazakh dubbing amusing and even humorous. Once the students heard Agent J talking Kazakh, they burst laughing, in spite of the fact that particular studio dubbing was of high quality, employed appropriate language and proper accent. The respondents explained their amusement by the trend in Kazakhstani cinemas, which screens Hollywood pictures with Russian dubbing only. As a result, it was unusual for the learners to hear an American actors speak Kazakh. However, one female student mentioned that she laughed because the extract was humorous, not because of the language. She also stated that she cries or laughs accordingly, when watching Turkish or Korean soap operas dubbed into Kazakh, and language does not make a difference in this case.

Two participants found conveying the message quite difficult because it was difficult to select appropriate equivalents. Another female learner agreed and stated that the extract from the context was too fragmented, so students didn’t have the whole picture of the film and could not translate it correctly. The fact which made comprehension and dubbing easier, mentioned by the subjects, was seeing gestures and facial expressions of the characters, contextual clues, and image as a whole.

The students also noticed that both dubbings were a bit different, and Russian version sometimes used totally different equivalents, for example ‘звездочет’ for ‘fabulist’, whilst ‘звездочет’ in Russian means ‘astrologer’. In addition, the same phrase ‘доступ запрещен’ was used for two similar, though, slightly different English phrases such as ‘access restricted’ and ‘access denied’. The participants saw these two different phrases on the TV screen but heard the same phrase which drew their attention. However, as students noticed, Kazakh dubbing was better, concerning these details. Two different phrases were used such as ‘рұқсат шектеуін’ and ‘рұқсат жок’, and a
better equivalent of the word ‘fabulist’ was used: ‘жазушы’, which means ‘a writer’. The reason for such deviation was explained by the subjects as an attempt of translators to adapt phrases and jokes to the local way of thinking, which facilitates conveying meaning and makes comedy films even more amusing.

Nevertheless, in one case the Kazakh-speaking learners found it inappropriate and offensive to hear the word ‘негр (negro)’ instead of ‘қара (black)’ in Kazakh translation. However, the participants might be unaware of the fact that the word ‘негр’ in Kazakh and Russian do not have offensive connotation as in English. The precise translation of ‘nigger’ with a negative humiliating shade in Russian is ‘черномазый’, while ‘негр’ has a neutral meaning and identifies the race of a person only. The participants of the research also noticed that the studio translators did not use the Russian dubbing in order to dub the film into Kazakh, the usual trend in Kazakhstan. In contrast, the original English version was used and it was warmheartedly welcomed by the learners as a positive change in the cinema industry of the country.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed that Kazakh-speaking students speak several languages comparatively better than Russian-speaking Kazakhs, who had difficulty speaking their mother tongue. What is more, some Russian-speaking learners have a tendency to translate phrases ‘word for word’ without giving much consideration to the shift of meaning, while Kazakh-speaking students are well-aware of the negative effects of this phenomenon and attempt to translate the meaning rather than the phrase only. However, both groups faced difficulty while translating upper and advanced-level words from English into their L1. This fact might be due to students’ inconsistent extensive reading, disorganized self-study habits and lack of life experience.

The research also exposed one case of recessive bilingualism. A representative of local ethnic minority is believed to be losing competence in Russian due to disuse and conversing mostly in Turkish in his community, and in Kazakh at university and everyday life.

References