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Translated Subtitles Language Learning Method: a New Practical Approach to Teaching English

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to present a contrastive audio-textual approach to teaching English which has been made possible with the advance of modern technology. It tackles the problem of how to provide effective learning of English to students with different backgrounds and interests and particularly to those who are unable for any reasons to receive quality on-site English education. The method sees language learning as repetition of chunks of speech based on three ways of perception (audio perception of authentic English, visual perception of parallel English and the learner's native language texts and visual representation of image) simultaneously. Materials comprise specifically prepared video files with English and L2 subtitles. Perception of parallel texts is reinforced by visual representations of events. A special translation technique helps to adapt materials to different groups of learners. The method tackles varied learning needs of students of different age groups. The proposed method is originally designed for teaching English, yet can as well be applied to other languages.

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1. Introduction

A multitude of ELT methods have been proposed for various groups of learners, substantiated by countless moments of reflection on their fundamental educational principles. Nevertheless, there are too many people to whom second language acquisition still remains a serious challenge (Goldenberg, 2006). In this paper the aim is to

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discuss and reflect upon how modern digital technologies may be used to facilitate English language teaching, and to develop arguments for an increased emphasis on a practice-and process-oriented approach to learning materials.

The approach under consideration is an attempt to come up with effective working solutions of the most difficult psychological barrier preventing successful foreign language learning - feeling of boredom. It is generally recognized that if the learner is not motivated, if learning materials lack interest for students, if boring repetitions of collocations and grammar patterns are the core of the teaching process the course will be a failure (Dickinson, 1995).

We would like to focus on some of the problems which are being overlooked by many common ELT courses undermining students' efforts to make consistent progress. To begin with, it is well known that studying any foreign language, including English, requires a lot of work and consequently it is a very stressful process. The experiences of stress, sometimes perceived as physical discomfort or even pain, can cripple learners' efforts to study the foreign language (Lazarus et al, 1952; Park et al, 2001). This can lead to the creation of language barrier, that is a phenomenon when students are so afraid of giving a wrong answer based on their previous experience that they prefer saying nothing at all (Johnson, 1999). Therefore, it is important to create an environment where they would feel safe and would experience pleasure from learning.

Secondly, people in general easily get distracted, in the learning process their attention focus can shift from English to something else (Ellis, 2006; Stadler, 1995). This is probably one of the most serious threats to ELT because when students do not focus on what they are doing they, first of all, do not make any progress, but, what is worse, they tend to forget about their intention of learning English altogether. The threat is especially serious in the environment where there are little external stimuli to learn English, for example, not in an English speaking country. In this case instructors have to encourage students to focus their attention on English and increase their exposure to the language (Batstone, 1996).

Thirdly, people lose motivation (or lack it in the first place) because they are not confident that they are making any significant progress. Having no reliable methods to measure their achievements they do not know how their learning efforts affect the results (Bahous et al., 2011). They rely on instructor's feedback, but that is often not enough. Students do not understand how long learning language is going to take and thus they are not aware of their success. It is vital for learning to develop in learners the feeling of achievement and understanding where they are in language learning process, how long is the distance to their goal and how their efforts contribute to their success (Cotterall, 2000).

Each of the above problems separately or in combination can lead to a failure of learning a foreign language.

The proposed approach tackles these problems drawing on the principles given in the next part of the article. The paper is aimed at establishing a general framework of how subtitles can be more effectively used in ELT and demonstrating some practical implications.

2. Basic principles at the core of TSLM method

Before we pass on to the essence of the method under consideration it is essential to highlight some core underlying principles.

It is common knowledge, that people prefer doing what brings them pleasure and stop their activity (if it is possible) if it causes stress. This is a very basic principle that affects all kinds of human activities, learning a foreign language is not an exception. This is the reason why it is important to make sure that learning is generally a pleasurable experience for students (Caon, 2006). If they experience stress instead of pleasure they are very likely to stop making efforts, and foreign language learning process becomes painful for both learners and instructors preventing them both from achieving their goals (Horwitz et al., 1986).

This is especially true when we deal with adults and particularly those who have choice concerning whether they will continue their language studies or not. Even in the case of people who do not have much of a choice (e.g. pupils, college students) high stress creates subconscious resistance to learning that can cripple their efforts (e. g. in the form of procrastination etc.) (LeBlanc, 2009; Diamond et al, 1996) and impairs brain's cognitive abilities (McEwen & Sapolsky, 1995). Besides, one should always bear in mind that positive emotions on the contrary make

the learning process more effective, for example students memorize new words much easier if they get pleasure from learning (Cho & Krashen, 1994). It should be emphasized in this connection that the proposed approach reduces stress and increases students' feelings of pleasure that keeps them on track.

Secondly, it is important for people to be able to measure their progress and to actually see their achievements (Chang, 2007; Torres, 2013). In situations when they study without assistance of a qualified teacher this may be critical. The proposed approach has very clear self-evident criteria of accessing success (e.g. percentage of words memorized, percentage of words understood by listening, percentage of words pronounced correctly) which learners understand and can easily apply themselves. This creates feelings of success, confidence and motivation to continue studies. Figuratively speaking, the approach enables students to see the light at the end of the tunnel during the whole process of learning.

One more principle should be brought to the fore – multiple repetitions. They allow students to learn new words and bring them together in the flow of speech without cramming (Ellis, 2009). Seeing and hearing the same words over and over again students naturally memorize them as children memorize words of their native tongue.

Finally, students make progress when the focus of their attention is on the foreign language in question (Schmidt, 1995). Teachers can focus students' attention on the language by giving them experiences of learning, achievement and pleasure. By experience of learning we mean the situations when students are aware of getting a new experience which will enrich their life in some way and is relevant for them. Feeling of achievement is created when they successfully do something that requires effort and concentration. This feeling makes students proud of themselves and increases their self-esteem. Experience of pleasure occurs when students perceive something that gives them positive emotions (e.g. hear a joke they like, see a beautiful picture, etc.) Also, applying the principle of focusing attention we want to get rid of everything that distracts students from learning and to increase their exposure to the language.

The proposed method seeks to apply the principles mentioned above in a simple, but effective and reliable design. An important part of this design is using videos with subtitles as learning materials.

3. Two types of subtitles commonly used in ELT

There are two types of subtitles that are generally used in ELT (Danan, 2004). First, is mother tongue (L1) subtitles in English videos.

Advantage of L1 subtitles is that in this case the student hears English speech and does not get bored (providing the video itself is interesting for the learner), as s/he fully understands the meaning of what is being said. The disadvantage is that unless the student's level of English proficiency is high enough, s/he is unable to correlate the oral and written forms of the words s/he reads. Then the sounds that s/he hears are not chunks of clearly recognizable elements but rather some vague sound sequence in which s/he identifies only separate and not very numerous words.

That is why, even though L1 subtitles are interesting to watch and increase motivation, their overall effectiveness is rather low (Hayati, Mahmedi, 2011). Students can watch videos with L1 subtitles for a long time without making any significant progress. This is the reason why L1 subtitles are typically used as supplementary material, a motivational tool, something to show students the beauty of the language which they want to study.

As far as English (L2) subtitles in English videos are concerned the situation is drastically different. Unlike L1 subtitles, they make it much easier to match oral and written forms of words allowing students to split up the flow of speech into separate chunks. Students hear English words and see them on screen, thus improving their reading comprehension, listening skills, phonetics, spelling and, implicitly, understanding of grammar by seeing grammar patterns they learned from textbooks being applied over and over again in an authentic setting.

The problem with L2 subtitles, however, is that they are of little use for elementary and pre-intermediate students because a great number of new words and grammar structures make it hard for them to understand the video. (Guillory, 1998; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992) This results in them losing interest, the students' attention shifts from video to something else and, consequently, their desire to continue studies disappears. It follows that the instructor needs to wait till students achieve the intermediate level for the approach to yield positive results. It should be borne

in mind that the effectiveness of using L2 subtitles decreases every time when students encounter too many unknown words.

The approach that we named Translated Subtitles Language Learning method seeks to combine the benefits of both types of subtitles by making a step further and to increase students' subtitle learning experience that, in our opinion, can alleviate problems and synergistically multiply benefits of using each of the above mentioned types of subtitles. This step is what makes translated subtitle learning method different from everything that we have seen before. This step is the idea that we can combine both types of subtitles on the same screen for the benefit of the learner, making sure that L1 subtitles translation is accurate enough and allows easy matching of L1 and L2 words.

4. Moving forward: combining L1 and L2 subtitles on the same screen

The main idea of TSLL method consists in combining L1 and L2 subtitles on the screen simultaneously, making sure that L1 subtitles are specially designed to help student to understand L2 subtitles fully, that is to understand every bit of information and each word.

Thus, when applying TSLL method learning materials students look at the screen and at any given moment they (1) see images, (2) hear English speech, (3) read L2 (English) subtitles, (4) read L1 (mother tongue) subtitles and match L1 words with L2 words memorizing the latter. The structure of the text seen on the screen looks like this:

L2 (English)word1+L2w2+L2w3 + L2wn (L1w1+L1Sw2+L1Sw3+L1Swn)

First there are L2 subtitles and then L1 subtitles in brackets follow. Plus symbols represent spaces between words. For purposes of this article we will call all subtitles seen on the screen at any moment a set. Usually there are 2 rows of subtitles on one screen but it, of course, depends on the length of the text. If there is an idiomatic expression, or any complex expression the meaning of which is not clear from knowing meanings of separate words, we first translate single words literally to give learners a chance to memorize them and then give translation of the opaque expression as a whole in an additional set of brackets:

idiomatic expression in L2 consisting of n words(L1word1translation+L1word2translation+L1wordntranslation)
(meaning of the expression in L1)

For example:

to beat around the bush (бить вокруг куста) (ходить вокруг да около)).

It had nothing to do with that (Это не имело ничего, чтобы сделать с этим (не имело отношения к этому)).

By using additional sets of brackets when necessary we make sure that our translation is as clear as possible for the learner.

An important component of translating TSLL method L2 subtitles into L1 consists of seeking to retain the beauty of the translation in order to increase learners' pleasure. TSLL translation should not be mechanical, it should be easy to read and give pleasure to students. It is just a little more literal than ordinary translation, which concentrates mostly on semantics. This is why it is strongly recommended to translate L2 subtitles and not just use available common L1 subtitles: in TSLL method we increase learner's pleasure by allowing them to understand everything and experience a feeling of success associated with it that leads to increase in self-esteem.

Thus, by using specially translated L1 subtitles with parallel L2 subtitles on the screen we combine the advantages of using L2 and L1 subtitles separately while eliminating disadvantages.

In addition, new advantages are created. (1) There is no need to look up every single new word in the dictionary as every word is translated on the screen. This saves students time and effort. (2) Consequently, students memorize

words by simply seeing their multiple repetitions on the screen. (3) They can be focused on subtitles all the time, all necessary information is available; therefore, they are much less likely to be distracted.

When we combine subtitles like this, the amount of the text on the screen is more than in ordinary subtitles. Generally, the number of symbols on the screen is doubled making them hard for most people to perceive during ceaseless playback. Moreover, this can make it hard for a learner to match English words with learner's language words. But this matching is essential in this method. Ideally every English word on the screen should be clearly understood by a student and most of the time this is easy to achieve. To this end the sound track is provided with pauses.

5. The role of pauses

Pauses allow the instructor to make sure that students fully understood what is written on the screen. Initially, especially in the case of beginners, it seems a little unusual to read in this way, that is, why pauses are longer. It is even desirable to ask students to nod slightly to signal that they have understood everything that is on the screen. However, soon, usually within ten minutes, they get accustomed to the procedure and pauses can be made progressively shorter and shorter.

With some experience the instructor can detect when to end a pause by seeing the expression on students' faces. Usually pauses are made at the end of a meaningful phrase allowing students to match sounds and words easier, but this may vary depending on what works best in a concrete situation. Generally about a couple of short pauses are made during each set of subtitles.

Pauses are essential because without them text on the screen goes too fast for students to be able to consistently match L2 and L1 words. For absolute majority of students without pauses this method simply does not work, as they experience no significant pleasure from being able to understand all words on the screen, therefore the whole design falls apart. Watching videos with reasonable pauses students get the feeling of satisfaction after each set because they see their success every time. In videos with a lot of dialogues there can be up to 400 instances of subtitles during a 22 minute video. Therefore, the student can observe his/her own progress up to 400 times. It is a great motivating stimulus.

6. The use of TSSL method in a classroom

Learning materials adapted to TSSL method can be used (1) in groups with a teacher, (2) for individual classes with a teacher, (3) for individual studies by students, (4) in self-study groups, and also as homework. Let us consider each situation in detail.

The best group for TSSL method classes consists of up to 10 people so that the instructor could see that every single student understands everything and is not distracted. Groups can have more than 10 students if the instructor is confident in his ability to observe all the students and ensure that their attention is focused on the video. When we determine duration of the pause we look at the student who matches words most slowly and finish the pause only when s/he is ready to continue. This creates one shared field of attention when nobody is distracted. Common field of attention is necessary because if someone's attention wanders, this person distracts all the others.

After watching the video there are different options of what can be done next to increase educational impact. We can discuss the video with students right away or ask them to watch it at home to memorize words better. We can encourage students to watch the video at home several times. At the next class we can ask their opinion of the video or ask them to retell its contents. Another way to check their understanding of the video is to play it again but this time to use only L2 (English) subtitles and ask students to translate them into L1. For non-adapted videos we believe that 85% of successfully translated words is a good result as suggested by Pareto principle.

When it comes to self-study groups which can be useful in places where it is hard to find a skilled English teacher, the most advanced student can take on the role of the instructor, s/he then makes pauses and ensures that everybody understands the text. The advantage of self-study groups are that they are less limited by formal educational environment and can spend more time watching videos if this is the wish of the group. This can be less

efficient than the use of structured study programs, but still allows students to make steady progress without creating too much stress provided many TSLL videos are available to them.

As for individual classes, all ways of using the videos mentioned above apply to them. It should be noted though that individual classes can be especially good for elementary and beginner level students allowing them to make really fast progress using TSLL videos.

Another effective way of applying TSLL is to use it for independent studies of students that have high motivation to learn English, but do not have access to a good language school. In such cases students can make pauses themselves and improve their English just by watching a lot of TSLL videos and matching L2 and L1 words. Their progress is slower in comparison with classes with the instructor, but it is still reliable and still can be substantial because of their continuous exposure to the language. For example, if some 22 minute TV show has 100 episodes and they are all converted into TSLL learning materials, it is 2200 minutes of exposure to the English language.

7. TSLL learning materials

One of the obvious advantages of TSLL approach is its flexibility. Learning materials can be made out of various source videos thus offering a wide range of topic and varieties of English depending on the needs of learners. Practically any English video can be converted into a TSLL learning material.

It should be emphasized in this connection that films are one of the possibilities. Films can be studied as a whole and watched many times until their vocabulary is memorized and most grammar becomes clear for students. Cartoons are a good source for TSLL learning materials in the case of young learners. The approach under consideration then takes advantage of the natural inclination of children to watch videos they like over and over again.

TV series, and especially situational comedies are, probably, the best source of TSLL materials for several reasons. For one thing, students watch the same actors in the course of many episodes, getting used to their characters and their voices. As a result they want to see more of their favourite heroes and hear more of them. Secondly, they provide both stability and diversity in terms of content. Thirdly, the topics discussed are often familiar and interesting to students because sitcoms tend to focus on everyday life. Fourthly, they are designed to give viewers positive emotions that can increase significantly students' rate of learning new words. Last but by no means least, (this is also true for films and cartoons) actors, in a sense, become teachers of English for students, contributing to learning with their acting talents.

Cultural diversity and language variety represented in TV serials and sitcoms are so great that it is always possible to find a video which would be of interest to a specific group of learners. It is especially valuable in the case of ESP students. "Doctor House", "Law and Order", "Teachers", "The Cooks" and many other TV series describe the professional environment and activities of various vocational groups. They are informative and entertaining; they illustrate the use of genuine ESP and appeal to viewer's emotions.

In the case of ESP students one should always bear in mind that these are grown up people who frequently have very little time for studies in a language school. Therefore, the learner's autonomy becomes especially important in this case. As has been shown above TSLL approach makes it evident that the instructor is not the primary source of information but only a resource person. The moment the student is provided with learning materials adapted to TSLL approach s/he can study independently and consciously build his/her own learning process.

It is of vital importance for the instructor of the ESP student to do careful preparation of materials and present them to the learner in such a way that s/he gets an insight into the learning procedure. Besides, the instructor should provide the learner with the methods of evaluation of his/her progress. Then the student will be always able to keep his/her progress under control irrespective of whether the instructor participated in the immediate learning process or not.

8. Use of electronic appliances (smartphones and tablets)

TSLL learning materials are very convenient in the sense that they are portable and can be effectively used on smartphones and tablets so that students can study English in places where previously they could not study English effectively. A case in point is transport: underground, buses, trains, planes etc. Here students can continue their studies instead of just being there and (in many cases) not knowing what to do with their time. Use of the materials on smartphones and tablets also makes them always available for people who prefer carrying them with them all the time.

9. Further research

TSLL approach is based on the assumptions which make it quite practicable. The approach in question has been checked with different groups of learners and proves to be successful. Its efficiency is high because it improves all 4 major language skills: reading, listening, speaking and, indirectly, writing.

Of course, very much remains to be done, first of all, in the field of the evaluation of its effectiveness. Special research can be conducted to test, for example, the increase in vocabulary of students that are using TSLL materials in their classes, improvement of their grammar, reading, and listening comprehension over a period of time compared with the students using standard textbooks. We intend to carry out such study ourselves and we invite international community of researchers in the area of ELT to test effectiveness of TSLL method to allow it to let more students know English better.

10. Conclusion

TSLL method provides a flexible basic framework for a new kind of subtitle language learning, which may have many different applications. It gives learners more control over their learning and increases their confidence. It is simple enough to be able to be used by not very experienced instructors. It is easily shareable and may give many people who are currently beyond the reach of educational organizations and people teaching languages around the world an opportunity to learn English and other languages too.

Wherever there are devices that can play videos, internet access and people sincerely wishing to know English well, it can help them to significantly improve their skills. English has become a way for different cultures to communicate with each other and to resolve their differences. The global challenges that the world is facing now require better understanding between the nations. We hope that the proposed approach can be one of the instruments increasing this understanding through making learning English easier and more available for people.

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