

Subtitling, literacy and education in South Africa: putting audio-visual media to work in the classroom

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by

Jan-Louis Kruger

(School of Languages, Potchefstroom University, P.O. Box 1174, Vanderbijlpark, 1900, South Africa, E-mail: engjlk@puknet.puk.ac.za, Tel: +27827731320, Fax: +27169103503)

and

Lesibana Rafapa

(Pan South African Language Board, Box 4214, Potgietersrus 0600, South Africa, E-mail: lesibana@pansalb.org.za, Tel: (012) 341 9638)

Jan-Louis Kruger lectures English and Translation Studies in the School of Languages of the Potchefstroom University in South Africa. He holds a PhD in literary translation and is involved in research in the fields of subtitling, literary translation and narrative theory.

Lesibana Rafapa is a deputy director at the Pan South African Language Board dealing with the promotion of previously marginalised languages in the media.

[Quality: Screen translation and language learning]

Introduction

According to the National Research Foundation in South Africa, "the successful acquisition of language and literacy in a multilingual, multicultural and increasingly globalised and technologically driven environment is becoming more critical to educational and workplace success in South Africa" (NRF, 2001). The current crisis in education in the country could well be ascribed to the fact that South Africa has a literacy rate of less than 50%. According to Project Literacy, 16% of the population are totally illiterate

(unable even to read their own names), and a further 40% are functionally illiterate.

It stands to reason that the illiteracy rate is one of the main factors slowing down the economic and political empowerment of people, because it marginalises them in terms of employment and political participation. It is therefore essential to address the matter of illiteracy as a matter of urgency to improve the situation of one of the most vulnerable (and biggest) sectors of the community, the illiterate.

In this paper we will present the outline for a research project that is still in the planning phase in which the aim will be to test the effectiveness of Same Language Subtitling (SLS) in improving literacy and learning in education. Because of the fact that this project is still awaiting funding we will focus on the contextualisation and outline for the study and not present the outcomes of the pilot study as mentioned in the abstract.

Contextualisation

The study of the relationship between literacy and subtitling is fairly new, although studies world-wide seem to indicate that subtitling may lead to a dramatic improvement in literacy. The research conducted in India by Kothari and Pandey on the impact of subtitling on mass literacy is the most notable of these. Studies were also conducted in the USA by Parks as long back as 1994 on the use of subtitling for English Second Language literacy education.

Research confirms that subtitling may be used to increase literacy, to assist children learning to read, and to help in the process of second and third language acquisition. It can also make programming accessible to the Deaf and hard of hearing and it can be a powerful tool in conveying 'difficult' learning contents in education (Cf. VITAC, 1998; Hautecoeur in Anon, 1999; Kothari, 1999; DHHAP, 1993; Clark, 1999; Nicotera, 1999; Kruger et al. 2001; Ivarsson et al. 1998; etc.). Furthermore, subtitling may be an effective and

economically viable way to address issues of language policy, language rights, and cultural diversity particularly in multilingual countries.

The improvement of literacy through the use of subtitling is largely due to the concurrent use of visual and aural channels to convey language, thus reinforcing phoneme recognition and, as a result, sight-reading. This is an exciting prospect, as illiteracy is one of the scourges of the developing world. In 1996 UNESCO Director-General Frederico Mayor said that, in spite of the world-wide decrease in the number of illiterates, the situation is still intolerable and that

Illiteracy is not a fact of life, but a consequence of inaction on the part of governments and societies. Its consequences are pervasive and powerful. If we wish to combat poverty, injustice and the violence that so often results from them, we must begin by mobilising minds through education and literacy” (my emphasis). Illiteracy is one of the major causes of poverty and unemployment. If we truly want to make a difference to the quality of life of individuals, the promotion of literacy is one of the most valuable investments we can make.

Of course, subtitling can be utilised with great effect in the classroom not only for the promotion of literacy, but also for language learning and comprehension in the transfer of difficult content to learners who have to study in a second language.

Subtitling and Literacy

One of the long-term proposals made in the LANTAG report on a national language plan for South Africa states that “illiteracy [has to be eradicated] by giving maximum support for well-planned literacy campaigns and ongoing basic education projects, particularly in the African languages and SASL, which have as their focus the improvement of literacy acquisition methods” (LANTAG, 1996).

Literacy broadly refers to the way in which people are able to use written language to communicate. It can be subdivided into reading and writing, although reading is by far the most important component, for there can be no writing without reading. Literacy can be subdivided into the following testable

elements: phoneme awareness, word recognition, comprehension and spelling. For the purpose of this study, literacy will be defined in its most basic sense as the ability to read. This corresponds with Venezky (1990) who holds that the ability to read is primary to any definition of literacy (writing without reading is mere copying).

According to the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook for 1997, South Africa has a literacy rate of 82% (UNESCO, 1997). However, it seems as if this figure also includes the semi-literate (Kruger and Kruger, 2001:8). South Africa could realistically be said to have a literacy rate of less than 50%. According to Project Literacy, 16% of the population are totally illiterate (unable even to read their own names), and a further 40% are functionally illiterate.

One of the perceived obstacles in the implementation of subtitling is the general conception that subtitling requires a high level of literacy in order to be used successfully. However, practice and research seem to belie this and numerous studies world-wide have indicated that subtitling is in fact a powerful tool for raising standards of literacy among developing communities (Nicotera, 1999; Kothari, 1999). In fact, the World Bank has identified subtitling as one of the most promising ways of eradicating illiteracy in Africa (Taylor, 2001).

Subtitling and language

Language proficiency can be taken to refer to a combination of oral and written language proficiency and will therefore refer both to literacy as written language proficiency (i.e. the ability to access and produce written communication) and oral language proficiency (i.e. the ability to understand and produce oral communication). Academic language proficiency will refer to proficiency in those forms of communication in an academic environment (tertiary for the purposes of this study) that are required for successful academic interaction.

Various studies have indicated the correlation between language proficiency and academic performance for learners at all levels in the educational system (cf. Horne, 2001; Borrás and Lafayette 1994; Stoyhoff 1997; Miller *et al.* 1998). At present, the medium of instruction in education in South Africa is predominantly English, and even when this is not the case, a large percentage of study material is available only in English. Add to this the fact that the majority of learners in South Africa are second- or third-language users of English, and the magnitude of the problem is all the more evident.

Research has also shown that scores of job seekers who complete their undergraduate training enter the job market without the requisite language skills (Horne, 2001). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that English is also the dominant language of business and industry (cf. Beukes, 1996).

Against this background, different ways have to be investigated to promote the language proficiency and by extension the academic language proficiency at educational institutions in South Africa in a manner that will be both effective and accessible. This project therefore *inter alia* aims to determine whether subtitling can contribute towards improving academic language proficiency at educational institutions through extensive and concentrated exposure to subtitled material.

The basic reason for the success of subtitling seems to be the fundamental pedagogical principle of involving more than one of the processing channels in the learning process. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the benefits on comprehension of input delivered through video and sound and subtitles have been demonstrated extensively in research (see for example Garza, 1991; Danan, 1992; Borrás and Lafayette, 1994 and Brett, 1996).

In this regard, Brett (1996) states that “when media which use the different processing channels to convey the same information are selected the

information is more easily processed". This is supported by Garza (1991:246) who demonstrated that subtitles increased scores on comprehension tests. In the same vein, Price (1983:6) found significant comprehension gains with groups who used subtitled video.

As further motivation in terms of the attitude of learners to subtitles in the learning programme, Vanderplank (1988, 1990) demonstrated that subtitles were valued by learners, because they increased comprehension, unlocked accents, dialects and humour and drew learners' attention to unfamiliar phrases and words. This study will attempt to show that these aspects are also facilitated in reversed subtitling with first-language aural and second-language written information. Similarly, in the words of Brett (1996), "it appears that the use of video, of subtitles, and of feedback when used outside of the multimedia environment, provide added value to comprehension of multimedia in language learning".

Vanderplank's findings in particular seem to point to the possibilities held by the subtitling of popular television, since this mode has the potential to expose students to various aspects of language in use. Furthermore, using popular television may very well improve the accessibility of academic language proficiency programmes, and consequently provide support for content aimed more specifically at academic language proficiency, register and terminology.

Aims and objectives

Against the above background, the proposed research project will address the following questions:

- What role can subtitling play in language and literacy training at different educational levels in South African educational institutions?
- How can subtitling be implemented in language proficiency and literacy training at different educational levels (primary, secondary, tertiary and adult) in South Africa?

The aims and objectives of the project will therefore be the following:

- To determine the role subtitling can play in language and literacy training at different educational levels in South African educational institutions.
- To investigate the ways in which subtitling can be implemented most effectively in language proficiency and literacy training at different educational levels (primary, secondary, tertiary, adult) in South Africa.

Approach

The project will be a longitudinal as well as a cross-sectional and comparative study of subtitling as a tool in enhancing language proficiency and literacy in education in South Africa as developing country.

Methodological orientation

- The interdisciplinary project will firstly involve an extensive review of the existing literature in the fields of language proficiency, academic language proficiency, literacy, academic literacy, subtitling and audio-visual translation.
- The study will also involve a substantial empirical component. To this end, a number of instruments for collecting data on language proficiency and literacy will be evaluated in order to select an instrument for use in this study. The selected test will then be used as **instrument** for collecting data on the target groups' language proficiency and/or literacy levels prior to and after the intervention.
- The data collected will be subjected to **statistical analysis**, more specifically an **ANOVA**, to test the **null hypothesis** that there is not a statistically significant difference between the experimental groups' language proficiency and/or literacy and that of the control groups. The

alternative hypothesis is that there is a statistically significant difference in language proficiency and/or literacy for the two types of groups.

- A **Scheffé test** will be computed to identify the direction of the difference and **Cohen's effect size** (d) will also be used to determine the degree of significance. An attempt will also be made to show that biographical variables explain some of the differences in language proficiency and/or literacy between the two types of groups. The findings will be written up and recommendations for future research will then be made.

Research management

1. Initial data collection (first collection for purposes of assigning subjects to the control and experimental groups): February 2003
2. Screening of videos: February 2003 - June 2003
3. Second data collection: June 2002
4. Reading and writing up the literature study: February 2002 – November 2002
6. Intervention: November 2002
7. Third data collection: November 2002
8. Data analysis and first draft of report: January to June 2003
2. Revisions and finalising the report: July to October 2003
3. Submit final report: November 2003

3 SIGNIFICANCE

In South Africa's multilingual educational institutions, language and literacy is becoming increasingly important as factors impacting on successful achieving of outcomes. Subtitling offers a way in which both these aspects can be approached by means of affordable technological innovations that will contribute towards accommodating globalisation optimally. Since learning in a second language creates a situation in which assimilation of

knowledge is severely impaired, subtitling can make a substantial contribution towards the academic success of learners at all educational levels in SA. In this sense, the project focuses on the significance of language as a tool for empowering learners. Very little research has been done in this particular field in South Africa.

4 BENEFITS AND BENEFICIARIES

The benefits of the above project are fairly self-evident in that it will address aspects related to language rights, cultural diversity, literacy, multilingualism, education and language status. The project's beneficiaries will therefore include people from all official language groups in South Africa as well as the Deaf and hard of hearing. Apart from the direct "clients" of the research, junior researchers from all the language groups will benefit as they will be involved in the research and will as members of the team learn how to undertake this kind of research.

5 IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

The project will promote language and literacy in all educational spheres in SA as well as the value of multilingualism as a national resource. It will also include the participation of researchers, junior researchers and post-graduate students from historically disadvantaged institutions, races and gender groups. One of the main advantages of the project is also that it will create networks and partnerships locally, regionally and internationally. The findings will be distributed within the discipline of translation studies as well as across the disciplines of education, language planning, communication studies, and literacy training.

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