

The magic of the moving image

Subtitle awareness

My colleagues and I have often debated whether subtitles should be used in audio-visual teaching. One argument says that students should always watch without subtitles to enhance their listening skills: the other argument says that surely we need to raise awareness of how subtitles 'strip' language of its richness and sub-meaning if we are to convince learners of the value of watching subtitle-free, especially if subtitles are part of their everyday viewing. It is also important to recognise that *never* using subtitles may mean overlooking ways to exploit them creatively in language learning activities.

Time

20 minutes or more

Aims

To raise awareness of the differences between spoken language and translated subtitles; listening practice; oral practice; lexical enrichment.

Preparation

Record a short extract (maximum 50 seconds) from any subtitled soap opera. The scene needs to be fairly action oriented. Obtain a translation of the subtitles and prepare a transcription of the spoken dialogue. Put both on an OHT side by side (as in the box on the right).

Context setting

Ask students what they think the main differences are between subtitles and original spoken language – how reliant are they on subtitles?

Pre-viewing task

Have a brief discussion on the setting of the soap opera and the characters.

While-viewing tasks

1st viewing:

Students watch the extract with the sound down and roughly translate the subtitles. They compare in pairs. Display their work on an OHT and elicit group feedback.

2nd viewing:

Students watch the extract with the sound up and roughly transcribe spoken content (this may need a third viewing).

Post-viewing fluency and awareness-raising task

Get feedback and display both subtitles and original comparatively as in the box below.

Scene: in an expensive restaurant – conversation between male customer and female member of waiting staff (from a popular daytime soap opera)

Subtitles

A: Excuse me.

B: Yes.

A: I ordered a club sandwich and iced tea some time ago.

B: Sorry I'm very busy.

A: Don't worry.

B: OK.

Original

A: Excuse me

B: Can I help you?

A: That's up for debate actually.

B: Well as you can see I don't have time for verbal ping pong.

A: Half an hour ago, I dropped down on one knee and begged you for iced tea and a club sandwich.

B: You're right – I am so sorry.

A: Don't worry about it – I know how it is.

B: Somehow, I doubt that.

Students answer the following questions in groups:

- What are the main differences between the subtitles and spoken content? (details of tone, irony, use of idiomatic expressions)
- What information is missing from the subtitles? (the fact that they obviously know each other, that he comes from a wealthy background and she doesn't)
- How is the sarcasm conveyed in the choice of the expressions underlined? (through intonation)

Exam-style activity

Essay question:

Watching films in the original language helps the viewer to understand the culture of the country – do you agree or disagree with this statement?