

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Study on the use of subtitling

The potential of subtitling to encourage language learning
and improve the mastery of foreign languages

EACEA/2009/01

This study was requested by the European Commission, Directorate-General Education and Culture



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The team wishes to thank all those who participated in the survey as well as the experts who took part in the Brussels workshop for their generosity with their time and the quality of their contributions.

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Subtitling to learn foreign languages

Can the use of subtitles on television and at the cinema help viewers to learn foreign languages?

A study ordered by the European Commission in the framework of its policy for multilingualism analysed the potential of subtitling to encourage language learning and improve the mastery of foreign languages.

A sample of 6 000 persons covering a total of 33 countries (European Union and Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Croatia and Turkey) as well as 5 000 students from this same zone were asked about their viewing habits, their preference for dubbing or subtitling and their language skills.

According to this survey, subtitling helps to improve foreign language skills and can also create awareness and provide motivation to learn languages, in both formal and informal contexts, thus contributing to the creation of an environment that encourages multilingualism.

The circulation of films in Europe: prospects for the impact of subtitling

To have a better grasp of the potential of subtitling, it is important to be familiar with the context.

In Europe, foreign works (films, televised fiction, documentaries, films and animation series) are released in either dubbed, subtitled or voice-over versions. Audiovisual translation practices vary not only from one country to the next, but also sometimes within the same country, depending on whether the work is for box-office release or television, or in terms of the target public (general public, cinema enthusiasts, young viewers, population with accessibility problems).

In cinemas, subtitling is used in 26 countries and in two regions in two countries (Flemish-speaking Belgium and German-speaking Switzerland), but also exists in certain dubbing countries like France or Germany; on television, subtitling is the technique used in 15 countries and one region (Flemish-speaking Belgium).

However, to measure the potential impact of subtitling, the number of foreign-language works circulating in each country has to be taken into account: for example, in 2009, in the United Kingdom only 35% of box office releases needed translating, which explains why the presence of subtitling in this country is not very visible. At the opposite extreme are countries like Bulgaria, Belgium, Croatia, Estonia and Iceland, where more than 90% of films have to be translated. For television, the percentage of programming time requiring dubbing or subtitling also differs from one country to the next: it is very low in the United Kingdom (around 23%) and much higher in Flemish-speaking Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, where it is upwards of 90%.

It is essential to note that the number of languages to which the population can be exposed through subtitling depends first and foremost on the origin of films in circulation. Today, in the near majority of European countries, box office releases of films are dominated by North American productions in English. As a result, English is the language with which viewers from subtitling countries are likely to be most familiar, at least in informal learning contexts.

The advantages of subtitling

The results that emerge from this year-long study demonstrate the complexity of the correlation between subtitling and knowledge of foreign languages.

In terms of language mastery, in countries with a tradition of subtitling, knowledge of foreign languages (and of English in particular) is close to that of the mother tongue of the population

surveyed, whereas in countries with a tradition of dubbing the majority of respondents evaluated their skills at a level of 3 on a scale of 5.

In terms of preference for dubbing or subtitling, there is a correlation with age and the number of languages spoken. The study shows that the younger the respondents (aged 12-18 and 18-25) and the more languages they speak, the more pronounced is their preference for subtitling over dubbing. This correlation between knowledge of languages and preference for subtitling is also confirmed for students: once they have begun university, most young Europeans change their audiovisual habits and prefer subtitling to dubbing, for reasons of semiology and language learning. The only exception in this category is students from non-language faculties in dubbing and voice-over countries, who still seem to prefer dubbing to subtitles, primarily out of habit.

Subtitling also presents strong potential in educational contexts: it can reduce the anxiety experienced by foreign language learners. It can also serve as a useful support, in its intralinguistic version, and can be used to help make it easier for immigrants to learn the language of their host country.

The European population is confident on the whole in the educational potential of subtitling (nearly 72% of respondents, and in particular the population aged 12 to 25) and also expresses willingness to view films in the original with subtitles if this choice is made available by television channels.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the European Commission initiate a dialogue with teachers, researchers and media professionals, in order to consider actions that could be taken to increase the use of subtitling.

It should also encourage the creation of networks of language teachers and professors at European level for the purpose of pooling best practice and should launch a study of existing best practice not only in schools and universities but also in the media.

The media could play a key role and the study shows that they should be encouraged to create and/or make available subtitled versions of quality European films, particularly those from countries with linguistic areas of limited scope.