

Marinella CARUSO and Joshua BROWN

The University of Western Australia

Innovative translation: Dubbing films in Italian with iMovie

Abstract

With the introduction of a new degree structure in 2012 at the University of Western Australia (UWA), the typical characteristics of students choosing to study Italian has changed significantly, with students from the Faculty of Science now accounting for the highest proportion of first year enrolments. This paper discusses the introduction of a multimedia project involving translation and dubbing in the first year advanced stream unit, not only as an innovation aimed at increasing motivation amongst students, but also as a way of meeting the learning styles of students who may have a 'problem-solving' orientation. Students were divided into groups and each group was assigned a five-minute film sequence that they had to translate and then dub into Italian using the program iMovie. The project was an integral part of the coursework and the only take-home assignment for the semester. The evaluation of the project shows that the application of technology to a translation task was a successful learning experience even when, as in this case, students were not familiar with the iMovie application.

1. Introduction

Following the introduction of a new degree structure at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 2012, many learners of Italian now present as a cohort characterised by great diversity in terms of study background, learning styles and motivation. This project was conceived mainly in the context of a need to review and innovate our teaching activities to meet the demands of these present learners. This paper discusses the design, implementation and outcomes of an integrated multimedia project involving the video-editing application *iMovie*¹ in an Italian course at UWA in 2012. The project combined three methodological strategies, namely the use of video materials; the use of translation; and the use of technology.

New Courses refers to the 2012 restructuring of undergraduate degrees at UWA (see Brown and Caruso 2014). Courses were streamlined: in contrast with the 150 or so degrees previously on offer, there are now just five degrees offered at UWA: the Bachelors of Arts, Commerce, Design and Science, and the exclusive Bachelor of Philosophy for students with high entrance scores. In all Bachelor degrees, a major consists of 8 semester-long units in a certain discipline. The other subjects of the degree come in part from one's own area of study and from other areas, with students required to take what are called Broadening Units, whereby students must enrol in at least four units from a different faculty. For example, a student studying a

Bachelor of Commerce may take four units from the Faculty of Arts. This introduction of Broadening Units in all Bachelor degrees removed the restrictive course regulations that had proved the greatest obstacle to students outside the Faculty of Arts wanting to study a language. This change in rules has resulted in first-year enrolments in all modern languages offered on campus doubling from 2011 to 2012, with the number of UWA students taking language units now at its highest level ever, and unprecedented levels of Italian enrolments. Whereas in previous years students studying Italian mainly came from the Faculty of Arts, the cohort now comes from all faculties across the university, which means they come with a different set of needs and learning styles. The introduction of the iMovie dubbing project offered a way of meeting the challenge of catering to this diversity in enrolments and, at the same time, increasing the retention of the students from other disciplines.

1.1 Digital-video technology in second language learning

Before discussing the project in detail, it is important to consider the contributions of digital-video technology and translation to second language learning, as they represent the two major components of the assignment task. Technology has become commonplace in all branches of education, as well as in life, with most of the current generation of students now fitting the definition of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001), since they have been exposed to technology from an early age. In education, the integration of technology has been shown to effectively expand and enhance the learning process, as it supports, among other abilities, active involvement, group collaboration, creativity, problem-solving and links to real-world experiences. Second language education too has benefited greatly from technological advances. For example, video materials, the value of which has long been recognized for their motivational and affective impact on learners, are now more readily available. Multimedia teaching can access an endless array of digital videos through the Internet (YouTube, Web TV and a variety of archives) and exploit them either in their established role of ‘advance organizer’ (Herron 1994; cf. also Porta 2013 for a re-interpretation of the notion), or as texts for students to manipulate creatively by means of computer-editing software. The shift to the digital age thus entails, on one hand, authentic video materials that are flexible, reusable and modifiable, and on the other teaching methodologies that can actively engage the learner as he/she generates a new product.

Film-making has become a widespread and successful way of making students work with technology, and a significant body of research exists on the pedagogical effects of student-generated films.² Research findings indicate, among other benefits, enhanced motivation, autonomy, critical thinking and collaboration (Mohanty 2011; Schuck and Kearney 2006). At the same time, however, difficulties associated with the technical side of the film-making process have been reported (Kojasteh, Mukundan and Shokrpour 2013; Ludewig 2001). More recently, technological advances have allowed dubbing and subtitling to become viable task-based activities for the second language classroom, with student-generated films having the major attraction of

allowing students to be actively engaged with digital video to produce something that is both tangible and new.

Digital tools, in particular, facilitate an active, collaborative, student-centred approach to language teaching. It must be remembered however that they still remain tools and must not be over-emphasised at the expense of pedagogy and content. In his book on digital technologies in education, Pegrum (2009: 5) reports the warning called out by two scholars and educators, Gary Motteram and Sophie Ioannou-Georgiou, in a technology conference session in 2007: “It’s essential that we remember the three Ps of e-learning: pedagogy, pedagogy and pedagogy!” and concludes, “[t]hat the point needed to be made so forcefully shows it hasn’t always been as obvious as it now seems; and what’s more, that it may still not be obvious to everyone”.

1.2 Translation and second language learning

Since the multimedia dubbing project discussed in this study involved translation of film sequences, a brief historical background of translation in language education will help to contextualize our project. Before the introduction of the direct method in the early 20th century, translation was widely used both as a learning and a testing tool (Balboni 2010; Malmkjær 2010). Learning a language was primarily associated with learning the grammar of that language, which was achieved by translating texts from the original language into the target language. As Pavan (2013: 132) explains, learning a language “consisted in working with highly artificial sentences which, by ignoring spoken language, encouraged false notions of equivalence, with sentences divorced from purpose, context and actual use”.

Translation came under strong criticism and was rejected by later methodologies, which followed the direct method, especially the communicative approach. The latter focuses on spoken language and communicative competence. However, after being discredited for many years, translation is now being re-introduced in the classroom as a useful didactic tool (Pym, Malmkjær and del Mar Gutiérrez-Colón Plana 2013), as a growing body of research shows that translation can be used effectively to develop linguistic and cultural competence (Pavan 2013; Pym et al. 2013; Sokoli 2006). One of the first innovative attempts to integrate translation back into language learning came from the Hellenic Open University, which developed a computer environment (*Learning via Subtitling*, or LvS,) for activities involving the creation of subtitles in a second language environment (Sokoli 2006). Building on the success of LvS, a group of European researchers developed *ClipFlair*³, a “web platform for foreign language learning through interactive voicing and captioning of clips” (Zabalbeascoa 2013). ClipFlair offers a series of activities that promote the development of all language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) as well as cultural awareness. Our project found inspiration precisely in these types of task-based learning activities, in which learners are motivated through stimulating materials to become engaged in an active way and create their own new product.

2. The project

2.1 Background to the project: Previous uses of iMovie

The first experimentation with iMovie in Italian courses at UWA began in 2004,⁴ with students from the first year advanced stream⁵ and the second year *ab-initio* stream. These students were required to make, in groups, a five-minute film using iMovie. This task was fully integrated into their course and counted towards their assessment.

Since the feedback received at the end of that year was positive, it was decided to repeat the experience in following years, when the project was evaluated in more detail. In 2005 students appreciated the type of task, as we can see from the following comments (elicited through the formal *Students' Perceptions of Teaching evaluations*) in answer to the question 'What were the best aspects of the iMovie project?':

Doing a different type of project such as this iMovie is always fun as it strays from the monotony of essays, translations etc. Interactive learning is very productive and fun!

Working with people – making new friends.

Opportunity to be creative.

Editing is an enjoyable task.

The fact that we created a unique film.

Group work was enjoyable – was an achievement when the project worked, was satisfying.

The freedom to film the iMovie the way you want to.

Being able to use Italian in a group.

It also gave us good skills to use in future.

However, students also identified difficulties with the technical side of the project, and suggested some changes:

More training with iMovie.

More assistance.

It seems a bit unfair to expect language students to have to use a computer program and cameras.

More help with the editing side of the project as I found that the hardest.

Technical side was difficult – more available help on hand.

I did not enrol in an Italian language unit to be forced to use technology.

In 2006, feedback on the approach was not as encouraging as we expected, despite our attempts to improve its overall design. The project was evaluated through a student survey, using a five-point Likert scale where scores above 4 indicate agreement with a given statement. The results of the evaluations were all below the mean score of 4 (the highest score being for 'I'm proud of the short film I have produced'; mean 3.71), and some rating below 3, such as:

I spoke Italian during the meetings of my group. (mean: 2.11).

I have found the iMovie application easy to use. (mean: 2.69).

In light of this feedback, and the difficulties related to the students' computer literacy, the idea of a student-generated digital film was set aside, and we adopted different approaches to the integration of technology into our curriculum.

However, in 2012, with the introduction of the *New Courses* at UWA, and the subsequent new cohort of Italian students, we felt it was the right time to return to iMovie. We were also reasonably confident that the incoming cohort would be much more IT-literate than their predecessors from ten years ago, and that they would possibly be familiar with the iMovie application. (As discussed above, the technological advances of the last ten years have been enormous, and portable and mobile technology has reached a high level of integration in many high schools of Perth, with iMovie featuring as a basic application of portable iMac and iPad devices.)

2.2 Project description

The project was designed for first year students from the advanced stream. It was important that students possessed a level of linguistic competence that would allow them to engage meaningfully in the challenges of translating and dubbing. In contrast to the previous projects with iMovie, this one did not involve the making of a digital film but rather the simpler task of editing of a film sequence.

The project had several objectives. First, it aimed at increasing motivation amongst students by offering a different and innovative way of developing Italian language competence. The fun element of working with films was aimed at lowering the students' affective filter (as defined by Krashen 1982) and supporting their motivation. We were hoping that a multimedia team project would appeal especially to those students who had chosen Italian as a Broadening Unit, and were thus potentially less interested in continuing with Italian in the following year than the 'traditional' BA students enrolled in the Italian major. Furthermore, considering the increased diversity of students' backgrounds and learning styles as a result of the new degree structure, the project was aimed at introducing an element of 'problem-solving', which we believed students from the Sciences (possibly more used to analysis-oriented tasks) would particularly appreciate. Pavan (2013: 135) insists that translation involves analysis, while leading to a broader understanding of the target culture, because it "allows for proper choices (...). Translation must be considered a means of analysis and socio-pragma-cultural comparisons". At the same time,

however, we were hoping that all students would consider working with technology and translation as a personal challenge that would motivate them further in their learning.

The project was conceived as an integral part of the semester course (13 weeks in total), with all stages clearly detailed in the unit guide. The project consisted of first translating, and then dubbing, a five-minute film sequence from English into Italian using iMovie. Students were to work collaboratively, in groups of three, and revoice their version of the chosen sequence. Films were preferred to other multimedia texts, such as documentaries, monologues, commercials or television news, in that they feature dialogue, and can be considered “psychologically relevant texts; thus making the translation a feasible task” (Pavan 2013: 136). In addition it was important that all students had the possibility of contributing to the revoicing process, rather than just one student recording the ‘voice over’ narration. The choice of films consisted of the science-fiction *Star Wars* (1977), the drama *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and the animated film *Finding Nemo* (2003). We thought these films would offer some variety, suit the personal tastes of most students and therefore be motivating texts to work with. However, despite the potential choice of three films, most groups (11 out of 15) opted for the animation *Finding Nemo*. Two groups chose *The Shawshank Redemption*, and two chose *Star Wars*. When asked to explain their choice, students simply answered that they chose a film that they knew because they thought it would be easier to work with something they had already seen.

Each group was assigned a five-minute sequence of their chosen film, which they first had to translate and then dub using iMovie. We felt a sequence of five minutes would provide a significant amount of translation work, although we could not ensure that all sequences contained exactly the same number of words to translate. Students were given the choice of translating the original dialogues or creating completely new dialogues. Most preferred to translate the original script, but one group, who chose *Star Wars*, decided to re-write the script, thus creating largely original dialogues. Students also had the choice of adding subtitles (in Italian) to their film sequence. Three groups out of 15 did so.

Precise guidelines and technical assistance were given to the students to ensure that the work would run smoothly. By the third week of the semester, students were expected to have formed a group. Their written translation was due in week 6, while their final project was due in week 12. Before the revoicing took place, the translation was checked by their tutor, who provided suggestions for further editing or corrections. It must be noted that the translations were only partly corrected by the tutor, as (following Balboni 2010), we did not want to overemphasise the activity of translation *per se*, nor the product of translation, but rather let the students engage in the process and progress smoothly to the dubbing, and enjoy the pleasure of participating in the project. Students were also instructed to speak Italian throughout their meetings.

The work involved minimum technical equipment—a hard drive containing the selected film sequence in iMovie and a computer—nor did it require advanced

computer skills. Training on the technical aspects of the project was offered by the Multimedia Centre of the Faculty of Arts. Students were required to attend one of two training sessions scheduled for the second week of semester, during which they were taught how to switch to the Italian version of the iMovie application, manipulate an audio file in iMovie, record their own voices, and add them to their video clip. Once submitted, all the film sequences were combined to make new dubbed versions of the original film, which were then viewed at the end of the semester in class, as an opportunity for the students to showcase their product and experience a sense of accomplishment. Since students had a choice of three films, the end result was not a single 'new' film but consisted of parts, of different length, of the three different films. The project was worth 20% of the students' total mark and included a component of peer assessment,⁶ whereby each student had to judge the contributions of their group members and communicate their mark to the tutor. This aspect of marking was introduced to encourage better collaboration and fair distribution of the work.

3. Project evaluation

The evaluation of the project was undertaken by means of a simple, anonymous online survey that was made available through the course's Moodle page at the conclusion of the course. We adopted the format of the commonly used five-level Likert scale and included the following seven statements, seeking to gain the students' evaluation of the project in terms of enjoyment, collaborative work, amount of Italian language use, type of assessment task and use of the software:

1. The iMovie project has been a positive learning experience.
2. Working on the iMovie project was fun.
3. I enjoyed working in a group.
4. The project involved a good amount of Italian language use.
5. The iMovie project was a good alternative to a traditional assessment task.
6. With the support I received at the workshop I attended, I have found the iMovie application fairly easy to use.
7. I had previously used iMovie

The survey included opportunities for the students to write comments at the end of each question, but these were not required.

Twenty-one of 47 enrolled students filled in the survey, making the response rate of 44.7% lower than we anticipated (although the average response rate to online surveys tends to be around 33%; Nulty 2008). A higher participation rate may have been unlikely given the timing of the survey (at the conclusion of the project and course, when students were preparing for their exams).

Most respondents thought that the project was a positive learning experience, was fun, involved a good amount of Italian and was a good assessment task (Figure 1). Also, most students indicated that they enjoyed working in a group and found

the software easy to use. The highest rating was for the statement ‘Working on the iMovie project was fun’ with 80% ‘strongly agreeing (SA)’ or ‘agreeing (A)’. This was followed by ‘I enjoyed working in a group’ (75% SA/A). Overall the experience was considered positive, supported by comments included in the surveys:

Best assessment so far!

Overall it was really fun.

It was a great mix compared to traditional assignment, it was fun.

Had a positive experience with my particular group.

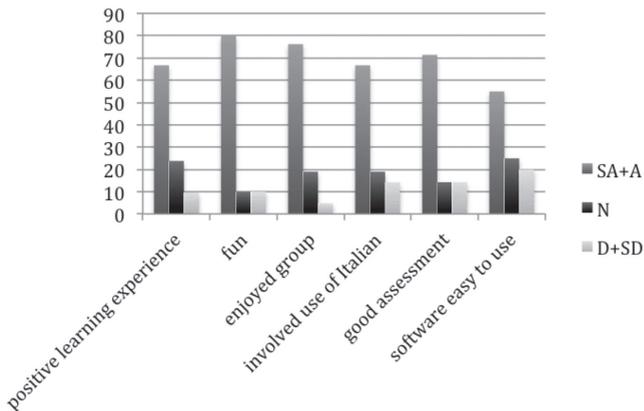


Figure 1: Students' evaluation of the iMovie project

However, there was a spread in the responses (Figure 1) that suggested that not every student appreciated the activity. For each statement, between one and four students provided negative feedback, with 4 students out of 20 ‘disagreeing’ or ‘strongly disagreeing’ with the statement ‘With the support I received at the workshop I attended, I have found the iMovie application fairly easy to use’. The relatively few students who chose to include comments in their survey tended to confirm some of the sources of dissatisfaction. Despite iMovie being a very simple and straight-forward application, one difficulty seemed to have been of a technical nature, as the following comments illustrate:⁷

The iMovie application was extremely difficult to use and proved an extreme consumption of time and effort.

The workshop was useless and didn't help me at all.

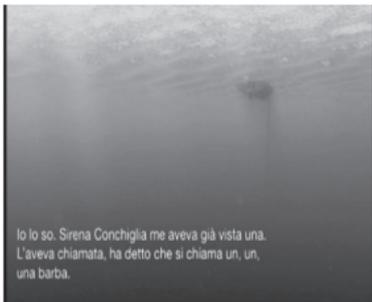
One other negative comment referred to the lack of teamwork within the group:

Some group members don't pull their weight.

The survey also showed that, contrary to our expectations, a large majority of the students (76%) had never used iMovie before. This may reflect a smaller proportion of Mac users among our student group (non-Arts faculties at UWA tend to use PC- rather than Mac-platform computers), or simply indicate that students had no previous interest in this software or no opportunity for using it..

3.1 Language learning

The validity of our project was further proved by the quality of linguistic practice demonstrated by the students through the dubbing process. As teachers and linguists, we were particularly impressed with the students' creativity and great abilities in manipulating language. An example of this can be seen in how one group of students managed a particularly challenging translation involving a play-on-words. In the original English version of *Finding Nemo*, at one point in the narration we see the characters discovering a boat for the first time. They do not know what it is, but one of the little friends says "I know what that is, Sandy Plankton saw one, he called, he said it was called a, a butt!". Soon after, Nemo goes to touch the boat and one of the sea creatures calls "He's touched the butt!". In the official Italian dubbed version of the film, this humorous play-on-words, created through the opposition *boat/butt*, is expressed by the Italian pair *motoscafo/motoschifo*, where *scafo* corresponds to *boat* and *schifo* is Italian for *disgusting/pigsty*. For their project, the students were able to come up with their own play-on-words by resorting to the pair *barca/barba*, where *barba*, Italian for *beard*, translates the original 'mispronounced' *butt* (Figure 2).



"Io lo so. Sirena Conchiglia me (sic) aveva già vista una. L'aveva chiamata, ha detto che si chiama un, un, una barba"



"Ha toccato la barba"

Figure 2

The scene described above provides a further example of the usefulness of translation in developing the students' interlinguistic awareness, as the students translated the name of the character Sandy Plankton as Sirena Conchiglia (lit. 'Mermaid Shell').

The fact that they purposely opted for a non-literal translation suggests that they reflected on the concept of linguistic equivalence and were encouraged to make choices. This opportunity for, and quality of, language use, we believe, can only have resulted in further progress for the students' language acquisition process (although this was not verified objectively).

4. Discussion and conclusion

The evaluation of this teaching innovation shows that the application of iMovie technology to language learning can be a successful learning experience even when students are not initially familiar with the application. We found that the combination of translation/dubbing with technology offered a good balance of challenge and motivation in the students' language learning. Suggestions for change concern the choice of the films and the length of the film sequence. The selection of the films to be dubbed needs to be made with care, particularly when jargon features heavily in the dialogues (as it does in *Star Wars*, for example). We also think that shorter sequences (three minutes instead of five) would still give students sufficient dialogue to translate, and that making the subtitling compulsory would give the students further language practice. Recommendations for the future also include a new final stage in which the students would have the opportunity to reflect on the challenges of translation, and their improvements in terms of linguistic sensitivity and intercultural awareness. Our experience, based on class discussion with students during the project, seems to support the view that "[i]t is thanks to the translation process that students become aware of the quantity of culture, world vision, and cultural values that are intrinsic in every word" (Pavan 2013: 139).

We intend to continue to use iMovie as a tool in our language courses (but with better technical support) and are exploring other ways of utilising its great potential for the development of linguistic and intercultural competence. For example, the lip-synchronization process involved in dubbing could be exploited to support the development of oral competencies in Italian. Alternatively, getting students to subtitle authentic Italian videos would provide a suitable task in terms of developing their intercultural awareness, given they would be working with highly contextualized language input.

In conclusion we think that our innovative approach to translation through the use of iMovie improved the format of our Italian course and motivated students with their learning of Italian. The project was integrated in the first year advanced level unit in second semester 2012, with almost three quarters of those students going on to enrol in the second-year Italian unit in 2013. Given that many of these students are studying a degree other than a Bachelor of Arts, this retention rate is very encouraging, and suggests the possibility that their positive learning experience through the film-dubbing project played a role in motivating them to continue with their studies of Italian.

Notes

1. iMovie is a trademark of Apple Inc. (as are iPad and iMac used elsewhere in this paper), registered in the US and other countries.
2. For a review of research on learning through digital videos see Schuck and Kearney (2006).
3. See <http://clipflair.net>.
4. At UWA, a pioneer in the application of iMovie to language learning was the German programme; cf. Ludewig 2001.
5. The first year advanced stream consists of students who sat the Italian exam in their final year of high school; the so-called post-WACE (Western Australian Certificate of Education) stream.
6. The project was the only take-home assignment (20% of the total assessment). The other assessment items consisted of: 4 in-class tests (45%), contribution to tutorials (10%), 1 oral exam (5%) and 1 written end-of-semester exam (20%).
7. It must be noted that several of the negative comments on the technical difficulties of the project came from the same student, who obviously did not appreciate the experience.

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