

**DEVELOPING SUBTITLING SKILLS.
ON THE USE OF TED-ED LESSONS AS AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION TOOLS
IN STUDENTS' TRAINING**

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Abstract: *The paper details on the use of TED video-based material as a didactic tool in developing subtitling skills in university students. Focus is laid on the training of language specialists in audiovisual translation courses taught at G.E. Palade UMPHST of Targu Mures, with a triggered civic engagement by means of taking part in a community subtitling project while contributing to making “ideas worth spreading” accessible to viewership.*

Keywords: *audiovisual translation, didactic tool, subtitling, technology enhanced learning, TED videos*

1. Introduction

Part of the 21st century digital revolution landscape which has impacted both virtual and face-to-face environments and has brought into the foreground a wider range of language teaching methods, Technology-Enhanced Teaching (TET) invites to a deep understanding of digital literacy in the field of education. While relying on the use of innovative and enhanced ways of learning and teaching, new opportunities, and practical experiences, TET has a pivotal role in increasing students' motivation for language learning, adapted to societal and professional challenges.

The new learning transformative defines the educational reality of the digital-native learner, integrating a dynamic learner-centred approach which needs to deal with change, to adapt to new circumstances. The educational landscape has the responsibility to evolve and promote itself as an adaptive teaching-and-learning system, constructively embracing technology advancements and offering students better (even accelerated) job-oriented chances.

Being defined by technological advancement, the audiovisual translation landscape is a dynamic one and the training/teaching objectives need to resonate with it, using relevant platforms/software to empower practitioners/students with the skills required to navigate such an intricate and quickly-changing landscape.

2. Community Subtitling Projects as a Didactic Tool

The growing interest in and demand for audiovisual content and AVT products for the media-oriented society to benefit from is also reflected in the increased focus on AVT courses included in higher education curriculum. Students in Translation Studies are trained with a view to the 21st century skills acquisition and the reality of the labour market. One of the tools at hand for AVT classes is the TED Open Translation Project, which invites volunteering as social engagement while also providing a platform for subtitling, a coherent workflow, guidelines and support for their translator community.

Individual and group/collective agency have been emphasised in connection with the active engagement of higher education students in social realities, reflecting “the four C’s” that the teaching process should emphasise (Harari 2018): critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity. In the same line, we mention the 2021 UNESCO report on the futures of higher

education (HE), which lists the need for “greater relevance in the core functions of higher education” (2021:35), which would (re)connect HE at multiple levels with societies/communities.

In my view, the TED subtitling project offers both teachers and students the previously mentioned possibility to connect with the community/society and to make subtitled content accessible to viewership, as well as to engage students in exploring the AVT landscape (i.e. subtitling) through the use of a user-friendly collaborative platform. Leaving aside the controversial use of AI generated subtitles versus human translation, our approach to subtitled TED video material concentrates on subtitles provided by volunteering students alone. This video-based library can be considered a didactic learner-centred tool in the teaching of subtitling and in transitioning from theory to practice. Individual progress can be assessed and tailored feedback provided, making the teaching-learning experience more engaging and effective.

There are three approaches I have employed for the choice of TED videos (narrowed down to TED-Ed lessons – TED’s youth and education initiative) as a subtitling didactic tool, providing answers to basic questions:

1. *Who?*

Who would benefit from the use of this tool? → teachers (pre-university teachers for EFL purposes; university teachers for Translation Studies purposes), students, viewership.

Who can use it? → teachers, students, viewership (as the end users).

Who generates/“creates” the animated lessons? → experts in their field: educators, academic researchers, journalists, screenwriters, animators, designers etc.

2. *Why?*

Why would we consider integrating such tools in the practical application in AVT classes?

→ As far as the content is concerned, these animated lessons are fact-checked and have a high degree of information credibility and reliability, providing a valuable education environment. For the AVT purposes, CaptionHub is user-friendly, allowing subtitlers to focus on the translation process, with simplified spatio-temporal AV constraints of the intuitive subtitling platform facilitating the students’ transition from theory to practical application. Besides developing AVT skills, we can list other learning outcomes: promoting creativity, enhancing ICT skills, building motivation, grammar / lexical / (inter)cultural competence, communicative competence, (AV) reception and production skills, etc.

3. *How?*

How can TED-Ed lessons be used / integrated / implemented? → These videos are curriculum based or off-curriculum materials which can be used in-class or be part of remote learning. There are multiple ways of using the platform, depending on the purpose set. For instance, as a non-audiovisual translation tool, TED-Ed allows teachers to create interactive, customized lesson plans, sets of exercises on the officially subtitled videos; the animated lessons are organized by subject, age/level, video duration, facilitating the teachers’ choices and ways of handling the material. Or – as in the case of university students in Translation Studies – the teacher can challenge the students to create/provide their own subtitles, which go public once they are approved and through which competencies can be improved and assessed. The students learn by doing, they understand better what subtitling implies, and then they can move on to using other tools which require additional effort from the point of view of synchronisation done manually instead of automatically.

If used as an AVT task-oriented tool, we employ not only a didactic perspective, but also a social one through crowd/community subtitling built on volunteering within the TED community for viewership to access important, valuable information shared in 115 working languages (as listed on TED webpage). The didactic perspective on using TED resources employs technology-enhanced teaching, centered on the digital-native learner and digital literacy. This student-centered approach is a dynamic one, exploring the (socio)linguistic and (trans)cultural components, as well as the technological one.

A further aspect triggered by the choice of subtitling for TED would be translator visibility; moreover, mentorship can be offered, adding its input in the foreign language learning process and AVT skills development.

3. Showcasing Audiovisual Translation with TED in BA and MA Training

Translation crowdsourcing has been avidly debated, issues arising in terms of translation quality (since crowdsourcing implies self-selected contributors), for-profit organisations cutting costs and soliciting cheap or free translations, translations done by ‘amateurs’/non-professional translators versus translations done by language/translation professionals, non-binding nature of the task, ‘mutual benefit’, etc.

In 2011, for instance, O’Hagan stated that “placed in the bigger picture of the powerful trends of Internet technologies advocating openness and sharing, which is feeding through also to the design of translation tools, community translation is far too complex to be treated simply as a dilettante, anti-professional movement” (2011:15). In 2017, O’Hagan (in Kenny 2017:26) – referred to Gaspari’s (2014) and Christensen’s (2020) assertions in that “translation crowdsourcing can arguably be seen as one of the latest manifestations of the deepening relationship between translation and technology” and she also drew attention on the fact that “the controversy surrounding this new model reflects the dynamic nature of contemporary business, including translation, as it is reshaped by ‘disruptive’ technologies and innovation”. “To a large extent” state Diaz Cintas and Nikolic, “AVT has been at the mercy of the twists and turns of technology” (2018:3); community translation is to be regarded as one of these “twists and turns”, eliciting both advantages and disadvantages, pros and cons. It is by no means obvious that translation crowdsourcing initiatives are and perhaps will still be regarded with a certain degree of reluctance as a result of the previously mentioned issues, especially the cases when for-profit organisations are involved; yet, there are also constructive non-profit initiatives that we need to keep in mind, such as TED or Translators Without Borders (professional translators).

As a TED translator and language supervisor, I have been actively involved in TED Open Translation Project, which is a community subtitling initiative made possible by “a global community of volunteers who subtitle TED Talks, and enable the inspiring ideas in them to crisscross languages and borders” (<https://www.ted.com/participate/translate>).

Throughout my AVT teaching years, this community subtitling initiative has proved an efficient and valuable didactic tool in the audiovisual translation courses that I teach, where not only students have the opportunity to learn by using an AVT user-friendly platform and become TED volunteers for their non-profit, nonpartisan foundation (<https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization>), but also viewership can benefit from the provided subtitles. A further important aspect that I keep emphasising with my students is translator visibility; in this vein, TED acknowledges the volunteers’ work (translators/reviewers/language supervisors) by listing their name and role on the officially subtitled video, which I find pretty motivating with students. Besides acknowledging the translator’s right to have their name on their work, this also increases awareness of responsibility on the part of the translator/reviewer with regard to complying with quality standards in translation.

In the case of the AVT courses I teach, the use of TED Open Translation Project has been applied to BA students in Applied Modern Languages programme and MA students in Multimodal Translation programme as part of the larger and more varied practical seminar segment. The subtitles are interlingual and the working languages are English and Romanian (EN → RO). The entire process is a guided learning experience, combining in-class and remote learning. The approach is dynamic and student-oriented, the practical segment building on a theoretical framework. Besides the use of TED videos, students are also asked to complete a number of various assignments (worksheets, subtitling with different software) for their skill development and evaluation.

With regard to the subtitling platforms for their translation initiative, TED used Amara up to 2021 (with 2 quality filters/layers of control in the translation workflow: translation/translator → review by reviewer or language coordinator → approval by language coordinator) and then moved to CaptionHub (1 quality filter/layer of control in the translation workflow: translation/translator → review and approval by reviewer or language supervisor). The access to such a professional platform provides the students precisely the opportunity Diaz Cintas referred to (2008:5) of familiarising themselves with equipment that they are likely to use in real-life situations, as well as they get to collaborate with practitioners and move away from a purely theoretic approach. For a better and smoother transition from theory to practice (i.e. learning by doing), there are several didactic stages that I employ with my students:

1. *intralingual (a comparative approach)*: the students are asked to error correct several transcribed texts not only from the point of view of spelling or even lexical and grammar issues, but mainly from the perspective of following the requirements of the audiovisual medium in what screen translation is concerned: number of characters per line/platforms, reading speed /audience, number of lines, line breaking rules, text reduction strategies;
2. *interlingual (a) → introducing TED*: the students are familiarised with TED programmes/initiatives, the advantages of volunteering, TED guidelines, TED platform, TED workflow; this is also a face-to-face interaction and the students are given individual tasks and individual feedback is provided;
3. *interlingual (b) → performing TED*: the students are given the choice of volunteering and learn the steps of joining the translation community, followed by choosing a claimable video-based TED-Ed lesson of minimum three minutes. The deadline is established and the marking scheme [i.e. evaluation criteria – see, for instance, assessment of linguistic skills in subtitles (Kruger in Cintas 2008:85-86)] is communicated to students. The learning process moves online in that students do the subtitling remotely, at their own pace (meeting the deadline). The platform allows the language supervisor to communicate with the translator, to add notes and provide valuable feedback. Students are given a compare-snapshots access, which can be a highly valuable learning activity as they can compare their submitted version and see the corrections or modifications by the reviewer/language supervisor.
4. *interlingual (c) → analysing TED*: post-subtitling, post-review, post-approval stage; this is an in-class activity built on brainstorming, discussing challenges and strategies, collectively analysing individual tasks, with an emphasis on positive aspects and aspects to be improved; detailing on grammar competence, lexical, cultural and audiovisual competence. In the case of the MA and BA UMPHST students, I provide the review and approval, which allows a direct assessment of subtitle criteria met by the students.

As to the usefulness of such a didactic tool, the students provided feedback reflecting their attitude towards the community translation project and the platform used:

1. What audiovisual translation skills are developed through the use of TED-Ed lessons and CaptionHub as an AVT didactic tool?
2. Name several advantages of using the subtitling platform as an AVT didactic tool.
3. Name several disadvantages of using the subtitling platform as an AVT didactic tool.
4. On a 1-to-10 scale how user-friendly is the subtitling platform?
5. In your view, which is the usefulness of such a community subtitling project/volunteering?

In self-assessing development, the students listed linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary), digital literacy, ability to summarize and/or paraphrase, linguistic creativity, cultural competence, communicative competence.

As advantages in the use of the platform, the students enumerated the following: simplifying the subtitling process; making subtitling less time consuming and more efficient; synchronization is not the translator's task; well-organised workflow; easy-to-use interface; source text transcription provided; signalling errors in AV parameters (number of characters, number of lines, reading speed); all necessary guidelines are provided and they are easy to check whenever needed; full comprehension of the subtitling process.

Unsurprisingly, most answers about disadvantages just read “there are no disadvantages” and one pointed out the fact that the platform encourages the use of technology, which is rather irrelevant since subtitling relies on technology.

The platform was ranked 9 out of 10 or 10 out of 10 by the students. No answers on a lower ranking, with the mentioning that the students emphasised once again that the platform allows the subtitlers to focus on translation while the synchronising task has already been taken care of for them.

As to the usefulness of this kind of community subtitling project, I have selected some of the most relevant answers: “the goal is commendable and at the same time you can contribute by translating a video that relates to your passions – win-win”, “by getting MA students involved, the community benefits from quality translations/subtitles”, “it reaches a large number of audiences through multilingual subtitles”, “a good way of practicing for the novice/amateur subtitling community so as to train their AVT skills, or even the translation skills alone”, “mutual benefits (translators and community)”, “Projects such as these are highly beneficial as they allow speakers of many different languages to access knowledge, research and new concepts originating from all around the world. Translators also have the opportunity to learn about a wide range of topics and improve their knowledge of the source language. Furthermore, they can improve their translation skills by facing specific challenges related to subtitling and they also receive feedback from linguists.”

With all this positive feedback on the part of the students, one cannot ignore a few other aspects that community translation initiatives might trigger not only in their use as an AVT didactic tool, but also when addressing the large community of volunteers. The issue of quality in translation is still present as many volunteers taking on subtitling tasks are non-practitioners, with little or no professional background in translation or they might need improvement in linguistic competence. Yet, in the use of CaptionHub for TED, the layer of control that is entailed by the workflow tries to minimise negative/flawed input. A further issue is the waiting time – it being an initiative relying on volunteering, the waiting time for review and approval of a task depends on the time the volunteers are willing to invest in this activity, which comes to reflect a certain inconsistency in participation. Time is also an issue if community translation is used as a didactic tool, the activity being quite time consuming for the teacher. However, despite the varying drawbacks one might associate such social and teaching tools with, the use of TED-Ed video-based library for the purpose of better understanding and practising subtitling has proved a highly valuable support for the UMPHST students in their study of audiovisual translation.

4. Conclusion

TED video-based material can be seen as a creative and motivating educational experience and a didactic learner-centred tool in understanding the challenges and technical requirements of the audiovisual medium and in connecting HE with the community. The use of such content proves valuable in transitioning from theory to practice and supporting the transformative teaching/learning experience, encouraging volunteers (in our case, university students) to provide their own subtitles, through which competencies can be improved and evaluated.

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