Using the Technique of Subtitling to Improve Business Communicative Skills

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The purpose of this article is to present a novel Computer Assisted Language Learning activity that can enhance both written and oral skills while providing listening practice and cultural information. With the help of a subtitling software, Business English students, especially those in distant learning environments, can progress on difficult areas related to functional language learning. All this thanks to a novel and highly motivational method: subtitling short business-related video scenes (taken from films, TV series or other sources) related to a particular communicative function with ad-hoc activities.

1. Introdución

This article presents a novel Business English strategy based on Communicative Language Teaching approaches and Task-Based and Content-Based Learning techniques. The strategy looks at the enhancement of both writing and speaking skills within a communicative framework and it consists on the students' production of video subtitles for short and carefully selected video clips.

Nowadays, with the existence of DVD and the increasing omnipresence and power of computers, the traditional use of video in foreign language education is undertaking new paths. The DVD standard format allows students to watch videos in any language they choose; additionally, thanks to this support, learners can also help their understanding of the language contained in the audio with the optional use of subtitles that can be selected to appear in most languages. Plus, video files of different lengths can be watched on the computer online or off-line, and they can be edited and manipulated in different ways, such as with the addition or removal of subtitles at the user's choice.

The strategy described in this article is aimed to be incorporated in multimedia language learning settings, both for online and off-line use, so that it can be used in different instructional contexts, from the classroom to online distance learning campuses. In this sense, the first place where it will be totally available is within the Business English project under construction called I-PETER II, a

project that is based on Intelligent Tutoring Systems and Student Modeling. The evolution of this project can be consulted at www.atlas.uned.es/inter[1].

The student profile that is considered for the purposes of this strategy is any type of adult Business English student, either pre-experience learners, low-experience learners, junior company members, learners who are moving jobs, job-experience learners, etc., of any level, from elementary to advanced or from A1 to C2, following the descriptors established in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). The learning context of the activity can be both online or off-line, and it can apply either to face-to-face classes or to distance settings. All these environments require the appropriate software and a computer lab where students can work individually or in groups, or the adequate technologically based distance learning environment.

- The main goals of this article are the following (organized sequentially):
- To provide an overview of the benefits of using authentic video and subtitles in Teaching Business English.
- To present justified and practical samples of how speaking Business English skills can be enhanced using the computer-based strategy of subtitling.
- To offer justified and practical illustrations of how writing Business English skills can be promoted by using the subtitling technique.

With the help of specific subtitling software, this learning strategy allows Business English students to understand language learning and production from a different perspective. One of the main advantages of this strategy is that it makes students create language within a very familiar and motivating context (audiovisual extracts in a multimedia environment). Besides, the fact that they create language in the form of captions forces them to play an active role in their own learning process, so motivation and language acquisition is enhanced. Additionally, and very significantly, the combination of audio, visual, and textual information

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within a socio-cultural setting makes this technique very comprehensive in terms of Business English education, since Business English students will be needing all these aspects to constantly perform adequately using English in their business everyday life.

Business English is a variety of English for Special Purposes, which differs from the other varieties in that it is often a mix of specific content and general content. The specific content might relate to a particular job area or industry and the general content would relate to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations. One needs to see teaching business communication as a dynamic, context-dependent process where such factors as time, roles, power relations, cultural aspects, and communication methods always affect the message. Teachers should create a context for students that would include real cases and simulations, through which the students' attention could be drawn to the complexities of each situation. This authenticity can be provided by authentic video clips, as it will discussed hereafter.

In particular, the subtitling strategy described in this article can be used to enhance two Business English skills that are typically considered the hardest to acquire and teach, speaking and writing. These two skills require students to make use of their communicative competence, using language to communicate actively and effectively, in contrast to reading and listening that are more passive skills. The special requirements of speaking and writing ask for a realistic and comprehensive environment for its efficient learning, similar to the one students will encounter in their business life. This kind of authentic environment can be provided by carefully selected authentic video. Hence, the technique of subtitling, that enhances even more the benefits of authentic video, as it will be exposed in the course of this article, can be considered a very useful aid to successfully enhance written and spoken communicative competence within real Business English contexts.

2. Authentic video

The use of authentic video in foreign language education in general, and in teaching and learning Business English in particular, constitutes the foundations of the subtitling strategy presented in this talk. In order to be able to understand

the workings and potential benefits of such an strategy, a general overview of these field of study is necessary.

> 'Video is a wonderful resource for opening up the English language world and can be used with great pleasure and profit' (Sherman, 2003:1). Since the appearance of video in the 1970s, many teachers and researchers have attempted to apply this useful device to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Although at the beginning, video was made use of in a rather passive way, mainly to help students understand content and to present language models, it soon became a valuable resource for intensive language study (Stempleski, 1990)[2].

Traditionally, two main **uses of video** have been distinguished: instructional video, specifically created to teach foreign languages, and authentic video materials, such as films, sitcoms, TV series, commercials, news, documentaries, etc. The strategy presented in this article will centre on authentic video materials, since students need a great amount of samples of this type of authentic input if they want to perform efficiently in real life using Business English.

Authentic videos are originally created for native speakers, so that they commonly present real language that is not simplified, spoken at a normal speed in real life contexts, and containing different genuine native voices, slang, reduced speeches, and different stress patterns, accents, and even dialects. The use of authentic resources from the native speech community is very useful and necessary so as to help to engage students in authentic linguistic and cultural experiences, that is functionally what they will need to be able to succeed in, so as to gain efficient communicative skills for Business English contexts. Although these authentic sources are normally far from being informal improvised interactions (they are usually scripted), they try to mimic the naturalness of conversation and commonly obtain very good spontaneity effects, showing real spoken language as it is, with its typical expressions, and full of false starts, incomplete sentences, hesitations, etc.

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2   In fact, the visual component of our society is increasingly powerful and video is a very rich source of cross-cultural material.

Authentic video allows for the introduction of any aspect of real Business life into the language learning environment, hence contextualizing the learning process. Besides, given that it presents a complete communicative situation (containing aural and visual information, body language, socio-cultural and pragmatic aspects, etc), video can be used as the basis to enhance all Business English skills. Being able to immerse learners into real and complete communicative situations (Lonergan, 1989), video is the most comprehensive Business English resource, when learners live outside an English speaking society. The particular combination of sounds, images, and sometimes text (in the form of subtitles or captions), together with the socio-cultural information about the social habits, traditions, culture, etc. that video offers, makes it a very comprehensible tool for teaching Business English, particularly in those areas, such as speaking and writing, that are mainly active and involve a significant use of language in context, together with cultural and pragmatic awareness. They are typically among the most challenging for students to acquire.

It is necessary to state, since there have always been judgements on the contrary, that authentic video can indeed be used at all levels, both as a supplementary material for language reinforcement and skills practice, and as one of the major components of a course, provided that suitable materials and activities monitor its use. However, in order to fulfill all these possible goals, video activities need to be reinforced with other exercises at all times, preceding, accompanying and following its use. Besides, the use of video can many times be a take-off for the practice of all the different language learning skills, within an integrative framework.

The introduction of videos as language learning aids has been a crucial addition to the teacher's resources, provided the increase in motivation, the presentation and elicitation of real communication, the constant exposure to non-verbal aspects of communication, and the possibility of cross-cultural comparison (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990). However, it should never be forgotten that 'it is essential to engage students actively whenever they watch video material, and also introduce them to the content of each sequence before studying the language by giving them specific viewing tasks' (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990: 6)

2.1. Video selection

When the use of video in language learning is referred to, some authors and teachers have whole films in mind, but many others mainly think about the viewing of short video sequences or extracts. Short video extracts, of one to six minutes approximately, can be used as the basis and/or support of any type of language learning activity, to teach structures, functions, complete transactions, vocabulary, prosody, etc. Already in 1986, Tomalin stated that:

> Two minutes or so of video is a sufficient basis for one hour's teaching. In planning the lesson, the teacher should select a short extract of video, decide what language is going to be exploited in it, plan for communicative activities around it and plan material for comprehension, intensive study and exploitation of the new language (27).

Being short and self-contained, these clips can hold the students' interest and attention, and basically all the language there contained can be easily analyzed and understood. While the language of a whole film can be too fast or too idiomatic for learners, well selected clips accompanied by the appropriate tasks make up for this difficulty and can enhance Business English learning at all levels.

The selection of authentic video sequences is usually challenging, due to a series of factors that the teacher needs to bear in mind for it to be motivating for learners and to meet the particular instructional objectives intended on each occasion. These factors (following Burt, 1999) include clarity of message, pacing, length and independence of sequence, interest to stimulate discussion, etc. There are many English-speaking films, TV series, sitcoms, documentaries, and commercials that involve business environments, and those are the ones that can be studied by teachers and developers to select suitable scenes to work on different aspects of communicative competence, with the emphasis on one of the most relevant factors involved in Business English, the focus on performance. In order to learn how to perform, students need authentic examples within a motivating setting.

TV series and sitcoms are probably the best choice most of the time due to their simplicity and straightforwardness, their multiplicity of characters (hence,

varied voices and accents) and their variety of typical everyday situations. Scenes carefully selected out of TV series such as 'Murphy Brown', 'Frasier', 'Ally McBeal', or 'The West Wing' can offer good examples of business-like situations. Clips taken from films can likewise perfectly bring the reality of the business world into the classroom through a familiar channel and in a stimulating way. Some examples of somewhat business related films are 'Big' by Penny Marshall, 'Working Girl', by Mike Nichols, 'Wall Street', by Oliver Stone, 'Jerry McGuire', by Cameron Crowe, 'The Firm' by Sydney Pollack, 'American Psycho', by Mary Harron, etc. Clips from all these and many other films can perfectly be used to work on different business-like communicative situations. Finally, news extracts could likewise be used to elicit other type of Business English topics.

For the purposes of the sample lessons contained in this article, three particular sources have been taken under consideration: the TV series 'Ally McBeal', the film 'Bridget Jones' Diary', and the sitcom 'Friends'. These three formats can provide instances of the different sources that can be used for the selection of authentic video for this type of Business English strategy.

2.2. Major benefits

> Teachers have observed how a video sequence used in class makes students more ready to communicate in the target language (Stempleski and Tomalin, 1990:3). When foreign words and expressions are learned in direct association with the appropriate non verbal referents (such as objects, events, emotions or images), the referential interconnections become richer, and this clearly results in a better language recall and in a more appropriate use. This non-verbal support can be easily provided by a short video sequence including visual referents and involving a story line (Danan, 1992).

The major benefits provided by the use of authentic video in Business English education are the following:

- Video is a very versatile and flexible medium, provided that it can be taken from multiple sources, used in multiple ways, and it can be used to achieve

different Business English teaching and learning goals, related to all the different skills.

• It creates a fun and non-threatening learning environment, since it presents language and stimulates the practice of other skills at the same time that it entertains.

• It allows language to be learnt in context, and the context and all the para-linguistic features found in association with the target language help to add clues to meaning, enhancing acquisition. That is, it takes Business English out of the abstract setting in which it is typically learned. Common everyday situations are watched as something concrete and abstract concepts are learned in a tangible setting, linked to visual, audio, and even sometimes textual clues.

• It provides an authentic presentation of culture, making students aware of cross-cultural issues. It brings reality into the classroom, supplying students with a cultural understanding that they can later use to talk or write. Video easily triggers interesting topics of discussion. Hence, video helps to foster the multi-cultural, international perspective that is needed to successfully perform 'in our ever-changing, interdependent business world' (Brooks, 2003).

• It can teach issues related to register, through its focus on attitude, expression, posture, gesture, and environment, that can suggest not only the language used, but also the degree of formality and the degree of emotion (Tomalin, 1986). In this sense, body language and other aspects of non-verbal communication are also conveyed through authentic video.

• Finally, a metacognitive benefit of the use of authentic video is that it can easily motivate students to look for more authentic materials by themselves outside the ordinary language learning environment.

Hence, authentic video allows for the presentation of real language that is not graded, nor simplified, just as the one students will find when they face the real business world in English, whatever the level they profess.

3. Subtitles

Subtitles have existed for several decades in many countries, and they are used originally to help people who do not understand a particular language, understand a film in its original version. Even if the traditional and received wisdom has sometimes considered subtitles in language teaching as distracting and slowing down the development of the listening ability in learners, since they make them rely on the text rather than on the stream of speech, this is not always the case. In fact, many observations have 'suggested that far from being a distraction and a source of laziness, sub-titles might have potential value in helping the learning acquisition process by providing learners with the key to massive quantities of authentic and comprehensible language input' (Vanderplank, 1988: 272-273).

Generally, subtitles have been sometimes used in foreign language classes when video was used, mainly in order to facilitate the understanding of the foreign language to elementary and intermediate levels. Nonetheless, many educators have already recognized the potential of using captions to help students process language in a different way via the addition of the printed word to moving images and sounds. Then, with the advent of DVD, this potential acquired a new dimension, because of the ease of changing the form of that printed word into different languages or take it off altogether for the very same video clip or sequence.

When we think about the massive quantities of authentic language that we have at our disposal in films, TV shows, commercials, and other video formats, of a variety and quality that is not easy to find in most instructive audio and video materials, we can ask ourselves why should we should deprive learners from such an opportunity to learn out of real communicative situations. And it is precisely here where the use of subtitles can play an important part in Business English education, in order to support learners in the understanding of authentic speech, which is not at all simplified in terms of pace and complexity, and to guide them in learning those challenging skills that deal with using language to perform successfully in the business world.

3.1. Benefits and limitations

It is necessary to bear in mind the major effects of visual associations in memory and the mnemonic power of imagery, when dealing with the potential usefulness of authentic video subtitles in foreign language learning (Danan, 1992). A subtitled video provides a triple connection between image, sound in one language and text, normally in another, sound and text being typically linked by translation, and this connection generally encourages strong associations for retention and language use. If we consider the additive effects that both visual images and translation typically entail for foreign language learning, this combination is potentially very powerful. Canning-Wilson (2000) reaffirms this statement when she suggests that 'images contextualized in video or on its own can help to reinforce language learning, provided the learner can see immediate meaning in terms of vocabulary recognition', since the best way of providing this immediate meaning is in the form of subtitles.

Some of the major benefits of using subtitles are here summarized:

• Subtitles can reinforce the understanding of English context-bound expressions, and allow learners to acquire new vocabulary and idioms.

• They offer students the possibility of learning to pronounce certain words, consciously or unconsciously.

• Learners can develop word recognition (King, 2002).

• Students can learn to process text rapidly and improve rapid reading, so that they can keep up with the subtitles that accompany the dialogues.

• Captions allow learners to follow the plot easily.

• They can motivate students to study English outside the classroom context, especially by trying to listen to the dialogues in original version films.

• Students can understand jokes that would be hard to get without the help of the captions, and enjoy with the experience. Humor can be a difficult, but rewarding subject for the language classroom (Lonergan, 1989), and subtitles help to understand humor.

Leaving the enumeration of benefits aside, it must be admitted that there are two main common limitations of using captions in foreign language education.

One is that learners may happen to concentrate so much in reading the captions that they forget about the dialogues. However, this problem can be solved by preparing specific tasks that force learners to pay attention to the dialogues, so that they can get used to do both activities, reading and listening, at the same time or alternatively. The second problem is harder to solve; it deals with the difficulty to break the habit of constantly reading the captions once students are used to do it. This is a habit that many learners already possess, even if they listen to the dialogues, since the captions make them feel safe and confident; in these cases, it is the task of the teacher to prepare tasks that combine the use of captions with the absence of them, so that students can feel equally secure with or without the support of subtitles, and begin to abandon them.

King (2002) claims that 'learning English using films compensates for all the shortcomings of EFL learning experiences by bringing language to life'. It is a refreshing activity for students that immerses them into something realistic, something that is missing from the textbook oriented traditional teaching. The use of captions enhances this experience even further, improving the students' overall listening comprehension, thanks to the textual support, with the subsequent increase in motivation once students see they can understand better than they thought they could, avoiding the common feeling of frustration that usually appears as a result of a lack of total understanding when learners deal with authentic language.

All things considered, the use of video subtitles provides a rich and dynamic source of communicative Business English in use, vocabulary and idioms. It is dynamic because languages in general, and the business world in particular, are in constant change, never fixed, and the best way to reflect this is through video, TV and other media. And it is rich because the resources are endless. Subtitles give learners a subjective support that they need many times to feel more comfortable and motivated when learning Business English, and an objective aid in terms of recognition, maintenance, and production of new and already known linguistic items, thanks to the multiple associations they provide and the context in which they appear.

4. The technique of subtitling

A novel and truly profitable way of acquiring Business English is the production of ad hoc subtitles for selected video clips by the students themselves, either in class or in a distance or self-learning environment, that is so generalized nowadays. In this type of activity, the subtitling is performed either to the learners' mother tongue or to the original language with or without the help of a written version of the textual information (Díaz Cintas, 1997b), the audio being in English.

In such an activity, one or more communicative 'warm-up' activities or pre-tasks are needed as an introduction. These can include oral questions suggesting conversations related to the topic, brainstorming activities, regular exercises that can bring about ideas about the topic, or even some kind of language focus chart if the linguistic structures presented are brand new to students. Then, the subtitling takes place with constant monitoring on the part of the teacher when he is present. When he is not present, students need to count with a correct version of the subtitles, so they can check theirs at the end. Once the main task finishes, the answers are checked in groups and then by the whole class. As a final step, depending on the focus of the activity (oral or written), one or more comprehensive post-tasks need to trigger the use of similar communicative strategies in the students. These can include creative fill-in-the-blanks exercises, acting-outs, role-plays, or guided writing tasks.

The current spread and progress of computers is slowly leading most language schools to have computer laboratories where each learner or group of learners can use computers to work on learning activities of all sorts. In this context, this novel language learning strategy can prove to be very profitable and worthwhile. Also, in self-learning distance contexts, we can normally count on the appropriate equipment, given the rapid and generalized technological spread of the last decade.

One of the most important characteristics of Business English exchanges is the 'sense of purpose'. Language is used to achieve an end, and its successful use is seen in terms of successful outcome to the business transaction or event' (Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 7). To understand this transactional intrinsic nature of Business English, students need 'real life' examples, that can show them this use

in real situations, just as they will need to use it. This subtitling activity has a sense of purpose in itself, to create the subtitles, and the accompanying tasks also look for a sense of communicative achievement that can allow learners to transfer these performance-oriented learning experiences to real life business situations in which they take part. In this sense, when students subtitle, they 'perform' a task, and the accompanying activities usually lead them to actually perform real business-related tasks, so that the strategy has a clear focus on performance (with is also a very significant concept within Business English) with a 'sense of purpose'.

Business English learners need to look for foreignness and otherness in communication. It is not enough to know the language as a formal linguistic system. 'Language use is always contextualized, purposeful and interactive communication that involves negotiation between the participants, the tolerance of ambiguity and respect for diversity' (Kohonen et al., 2001: 3). A perfect place to encounter this contextualization that emphasizes the original language in its foreignness is video, and subtitles help students to understand this otherness and make them lose the fear to face it in the real world.

Living in this modern society, where the visual component is increasingly powerful, with the majority of the population moving from the computer to the TV and/or DVD and vice versa on an everyday basis, language learners usually feel particularly comfortable with an activity that integrates all these familiar elements (audio, visual, and textual) with which they constantly co-exist. Subtitling is such an activity, and this fact provides the present strategy with important extra motivation.

4.1. Avalaible software

There are several software programs for professional audiovisual translators that make subtitling of video files relatively simple and straightforward and can be perfectly applied to Business English. One of them is Subtitle Workshop (2005)[3], and it is the one that the demonstration of this strategy will use. The

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[3]   Its complete version is available as freeware at ttp://www.urusoft.net/products.php?cat=sw&lang=1 or http://subtitle-workshop.uptodown.com/

user-friendliness of this program makes it suitable for the average computer user. Its functioning is rather easy to master with little practice, so that the system can be perfectly adequate for any kind of Business English learner with a basic command of computers.

The user of Subtitle Workshop needs to load the video file he wants to subtitle and then select the time in which each subtitle should be entered and the time in which each subtitle should vanish. Once the times are selected, he can type the corresponding captions. Simultaneously, the text is combined with the images in the form of regular subtitles, according to the times previously established, and the combination can be watched integrated at any stage.

The time limits selected for each caption or subtitle should be established by the teacher or program developer in advance. These limits are important and students need to be informed that they cannot write too many characters per subtitle, since they need to bear in mind the maximum number of characters and spaces that the human eye is able to read without losing the visual information of the scene. If necessary, they can be told about a general rule commonly applied (although not universally agreed on) in these cases; it is known as the 'six seconds law'. This 'law' establishes the human capability of reading two lines containing 35 characters and spaces each every 6 seconds (Díaz Cintas, 2003). Therefore, it is advisable that the work of the student is reduced to the audiovisual translation or transcription of each textual segment, but they need to know that the caption needs to be concise and to the point, and not a word-for-word translation (to their mother tongue) or transcription (into written English).
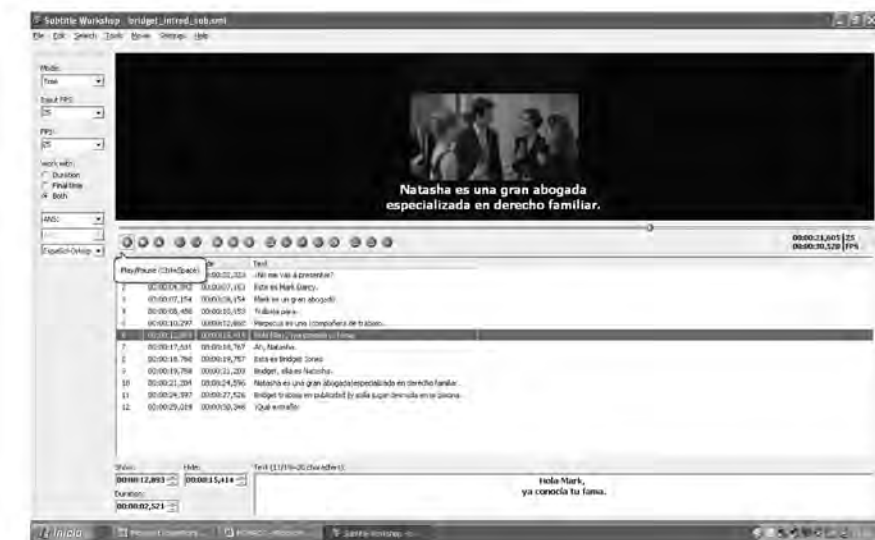
**Figure 1. Subtitle Workshop working interface. Each section
of the interface is easily recognizable: the film view screen
and its option buttons are at the top, and the subtitle
editor and its option buttons at the bottom**

Using a software program such as Subtitle Workshop for this type of Business English acquisition activity, it should be relatively easy for students to manage the equipment. The optimal situation would be that a series of short (no more than two or three minutes) well-selected clips would already be loaded into the system, together with their corresponding subtitles time limits, so they can be used according to the linguistic or communicative topic needed on each occasion. Thus, learners can concentrate on the subtitling and on the specific linguistic and communicative aspects there contained that are underlined by the accompanying tasks aforementioned, that similarly need to be prepared in advance to accompany each clip.

4.2. Methodology

This strategy is equally valid for face-to-face and distant learning contexts, since it is always technologically-based, and it will simply need more detailed instructions and guidance in the latter case, to make up for the absence of the teacher. In this sense, it is interesting to note that speaking and writing, two performance oriented skills, are typically the ones that are more difficult to acquire in distant learning environments, given the necessary constant samples and feedback. This strategy attempts to overcome this handicap to a certain extent. In fact, this pedagogic strategy, based on the use of subtitles, is specifically designed to enhance Business English speaking and writing skills.

The theoretical basis of this methodology are the communicative Content-Based and Task-Based approaches to EFL. 'The general aim of Content-Based language teaching is the integration of language learning and content learning' (Tammelin, 2004: 46). This methodological tendency, also known as Content-Based Instruction is not very straight forward to explain, given that it can refer to a number of different approaches, methods, and perspectives. However, typically, a syllabus or strategy that follows Content-Based Instruction consists of three dimensions, according to Striker and Leaver (1997): it is based on a subject-matter core; it uses authentic language and texts, and it is appropriate to the needs of specific groups of students. Thus, it is a very suitable approach for an area such as Business English and for a strategy such as the one presented here. The perfect combination for this approach is Task-Based Learning or Task-Based Learning, that looks at providing students with the appropriate purpose-oriented and problem-solving tasks, so that they can be useful for them in the real business world.

The main methodological focus is the practice of communicative functions related to the business world. According to Ellis and Johnson (1994), the different Business English communicative performance areas can be broken down into five sections: giving information, discussions and meeting, telephoning, business correspondence, and socializing. Any specific function included within any of these sections, such as opening a meeting, balancing points of view, giving background, showing understanding, greeting, getting attention, taking messages, writing e-mails, making an enquiry, complaining, thanking, making introductions,

following directions, or even dealing with taxi drivers, can be studied within this frame.

The strategy offers a certain degree of flexibility, in that it can be performed in two different ways, according to the specific goals of the teacher/learner: from English dialogues to English subtitles and from English dialogues to subtitles in the learner's mother tongue.

In the first instance (English audio to English captions), the activity could be performed to practice writing skills. When students create subtitles, they normally need to condense the aural message to create the captions, working on paraphrasing and thinking about synonyms and the like. These practices are essential to succeed in writing good compositions in English. When there is no need to condense the message, the practice of writing, even if it is only in terms of spelling, is likewise undertaken with this English-to-English format. Besides, the clips selected for this type of writing practice should have the extra feature of dealing with more formal topics that may be used to perform post-subtitling activities that may enhance the writing skills. Examples of these topics can be situations involving complaints, handling friction, formal apologies, demands, writing reports, etc.

In the second case, when students have to put English dialogues into captions in their mother tongue, the strategy can be applied both to written and oral Business English enhancement. When compared to traditional translation activities, a different perspective and technique is employed in this type of subtitling activity. Here, students feel much more motivated (thanks to the computer and the audio-visual component) to analyze both languages trying to understand their workings as much as possible. This is so because this type of exercise, putting audio into text in the form of subtitles within time limits, makes them go right to the essence of the message, that is, it avoids a word for word translation, while aiming directly towards a semantic and pragmatic transfer between both languages and cultures. This forces and enables the learner to better understand the inner workings of both languages, and hence perform better in their Business English post-subtitling tasks, that is, making a good use of the communicative competence just acquired.

The role of the teacher consists on selecting and loading the authentic video scenes into a technological framework, and on breaking them up in time seg-

ments so as to establish the appearance and disappearance of captions. The clips selected should present short, simple and straightforward situations involving various characters, since the combination of these elements can prove highly helpful to develop different Business English communicative skills. Then, each particular clip should be selected depending on what the teacher considers necessary for learners to practice in terms of language acquisition at a given moment: situations involving presentations, ordering meals in a restaurant, job interviews, buying and selling, negotiating contracts, giving firm speeches, presenting demands, writing memos, etc.

This strategy on the whole may appear somewhat complicated for teachers at the beginning, because of the former preparation required on the use of the specific software and of the selection of appropriate clips. However, once these first steps are overcome, the preparation of the activity proves to be relatively easy to be performed. Then, each educator can make different clips and dialogues fit different student groups, and diverse communicative needs to be accompanied by different activities, making the strategy, in the long run, a very motivating and worthwhile exercise for Business English learners[4]. As far as the teacher's role in the class is concerned, he needs to act as a guide and helper, that learners know is always there. In distance learning settings, the instructions and key answers perform that role, so they must be carefully designed.

An ideal situation would for the scenes to be selected, loaded and prepared in advance, with particular interactive activities attached, divided into levels, making up interactive CD-ROMs or online courseware; this would significantly facilitate the teacher's work, and could easily be used both in face-to-face and in distance language learning environments. Two examples of how this can be done without much effort or time will be offered at the end of the next two sections.

The integration of the present activity (in any of the two formats described) in the syllabus of a certain Business English course can be done in different

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[4] Business English does not need to cover all the complexities of grammar and vocabulary idioms, but some structural areas (such as conditionals for negotiating or modals for evaluating) may require more attention than in conventional use. It is important that teachers and designers are particularly selective with the clips and with the language focus and tasks accompanying them.

ways, depending on the context and on the students' needs. For instance, this activity could be undertaken once every three or four lessons, as a comprehensive way in which students can work on the foreign language in a different and attention-grabbing manner. The most appropriate time for such an exercise is probably towards the end of the session, since the students Business English schema is already active, with information flowing in different directions. Thus, students can feel more confident and ready to practice this activity that integrates skills in a novel and purpose-oriented communicative way: listening, writing, speaking and reading, together with cultural knowledge and paralinguistic features.

5. Subtitling to improve speaking business english communicative skills

'For most of its history, language teaching has been concerned with the study of the written language' (Brown & Yule, 1983: 1). Thus, speaking has been considered secondary for many decades. However, with the arrival of Communicative Language Teaching, a radical change took place, and a major theoretical emphasis was placed on oral communicative competence from the very beginning, leaving written language and most of all grammar somewhat behind. However, it has not been until very recently that a greater focus has been placed in really centering foreign language education in the study of spoken language interaction. In fact, the more recent Task-Based Learning is making great efforts to promote the practice of the oral skill and a great deal of advances are being achieved, thanks to the communicative authenticity of the tasks and their division into meaningful sections, which motivates students in a different way, so they feel more ready to interact, to speak, and to perform communicatively in the other language.

Speaking foreign languages has always constituted a major problem for students. In Brown & Yule's words (1983: 25), 'spoken language production, learning to talk in the foreign language, is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning for the teacher to help the student with'. Typically, many Business English learners, who can probably write, read, and even understand English rather efficiently, perform relatively badly when maintaining spoken communicative exchanges. This is so because, first of all, language in general, and spoken language in particular, needs to be considered functional in

the learners' minds, and this is not normally the case. The primary function of spoken language is *interactional*, to establish and maintain social relationships, and another significant function of spoken language is *transactional*, i.e., to convey information (Brown & Yule, 1983). These two functions need to be taken into account by students, and teachers need to help them understand that the same interaction and transaction they perform in their native language in terms of communication, has to be performed when they communicate orally in the foreign language.

One of the main features that differentiates Business English from General English is the marked transactional nature of language, since one of the main communicative purposes in the business world is trying to persuade other on different grounds. Another distinctive characteristic is the objectivity of business language versus the common subjectivity and evaluations of everyday language. Also, in this type of language, information tries to be conveyed with the minimum risk of misunderstanding.

The main Business English speaking communicative skills include job interviews, meetings, telephoning, conferences, presentations, and common English formulas related to socializing. These and other skills can be practiced both before and after the subtitling activity, using accompanying tasks prepared in advance by the teacher or program developer. Another aspect of oral language that can be intensively practiced thanks to the subtitling technique is prosody. Different aspects of prosody (that are not so easy to learn elsewhere) such as intonation, stress, or the basics of phonetics, can be systematically practiced departing from the language that appears in the clips.

Video seems to be nowadays a very helpful resource that can motivate learners to practice speaking the way they are supposed to, given that it encompasses all the relevant aspects of this skill: pronunciation, intonation, fluency, register, socio-cultural features, language in context, interaction rules, etc. Pragmatics and cultural learning in particular are essential to learn to perform appropriately in Business English. The understanding of real interaction in a foreign language necessarily involves the cultural context of daily speaking conventions such as forms of address, greetings, farewells, offers, apologizing, giving and receiving compliments, etc., and all this means much more than the ability to produce correct grammatical sentences suitable for these functions; 'it means knowing what

is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language' (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Hence, pragmatics and socio-cultural features, being amongst the most vital components of Business English learning, need to be constantly tackled. And this can be easily achieved thanks to this subtitling approach, since it is a very comprehensive way to teach spoken English with all its constitutive elements when the learners do not live in a English-speaking country.

5.1. Sample unit: guidelines

To illustrate this technique, here follow the guidelines of a sample unit that makes use of a clip taken from the TV series 'Ally McBeal'. This clip can be found in chapter 6 (Season 1), timing from 00:45 to 01:58. Examples of other clips that could be used as the basis of oral business English lessons using the subtitling technique are detailed in Appendix I.

The lesson looks for the acquisition of socializing skills, including greetings, introductions, and making and responding to invitations. It can be used both for A1 and A2 levels according to the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). All the activities included in the lesson can be performed in class or in a distance self-learning environment.

It begins with two pre-tasks in the form of warming-up activities. The first one consists of a series of question that try to refresh these skills and/or introduce them for the first time, e.g. *How do you normally greet or say hello others?, Introduce a classmate or a work colleague to someone else; Invite him/her to go to the cinema this weekend.* The second pre-task consists on a fill-in-the-blanks exercise of a conversation containing the three skills.

The lesson continues with the task itself. It consists on subtitling, a short clip taken from Ally McBeal, following a list of basic instructions. The subtitles are created in the students' mother tongue. They are supposed to complete the subtitles departing from the aural information, but they can check the script in case they find any problem.

After the task, there is a section devoted to 'theory', i.e., a language focus on the main points studied, so that students can have a series of guidelines they can follow to review the three socializing skills presented. This section is accompanied by another fill-in-the-blanks activity, in which learners have to complete a similar conversation to the one contained in the clip. However, this time, there is room left for creativity on the part of the learner.

To finish the lesson, there is a post-task section divided in two parts. In the first one, learners will practice reading and pronunciation by acting out the dialogues contained in the clip. This task also asks them to record their acting-outs to check on their own sound in English. The second activity requires them to role play a similar situation with a partner; in distance learning environments, students need to perform it through voice or video chat or messenger communication. Thus, from three possibilities given, they choose one, role play it, record it, and self-evaluate it taking into account the structures studied and practiced in the course of the lesson.

6. Subtitling to improve writing business english communicative skills

Writing skills, like speaking, refer to production skills and are typically more difficult to acquire than the other two skills, listening and reading, that refer to understanding, which is a more passive activity. Although all skills need to be learnt in an integrated way, those that commonly offer more acquisition problems, given their active and performance oriented nature, require a more detailed approach on the part of teachers and program developers. Even more as regards writing Business English skills, given that dealing with business correspondence is an activity students will have to face relatively often.

There are several features that make the practice of writing different from that of speaking that need to be taken into account. There is no interaction since the reader is never present and may not even be known to the writer; thus, there is no possibility of immediate feedback, so the writer needs to anticipate to the reader's reactions. Related to this, 'writing creates its own context and must be fully explicit' (Byrne, 1988: 3). Also, writing is permanent and can be reread, so that it needs extra care as to the careful construction of sentences and textual organization.

Although the fact that you have time to think and correct the content of written communicative exchanges may make some people consider writing easier than speaking, the specific features this skill entails make it in fact more difficult for the English learner. People are used to speak, which is the most common skill in any language, where they can interact without the need to pay special attention to correctness. In fact, when they learn a language, they can plunge into speaking without fear of making mistakes, as long as interaction flows and communication takes place. However, learning to write requires a process of instruction (Byrne, 1988). In the course of this process, students are required to learn how to organize ideas into the written form depending on the type of texts, what sort of structures are more suitable for which text type, etc. In fact, if we analyze the mother tongue learning process of writing, we can see that it is also a problematic skill in which teachers need to focus extraordinarily. Those who think writing is easier have not lost the fear to plunge into speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes. It is the task of the teacher to prepare appropriate activities that make them change their mind and behavior as to the requirements and performance of both skills.

Since it is such an arduous practice, it is typically difficult to find new ways to motivate Business English learners to practice writing skills. A new and potentially very helpful way is subtitling. This strategy can motivate learners in two ways. On the one hand, when they translate to their mother tongue, they can use the playful and familiar character of the activity to make them feel more comfortable writing on topics similar to the ones they have been working on as part of post-subtitling tasks. That is, the topic included in a particular clip constitutes the communicative, linguistic, content, and motivational basis of the writing tasks. On the other hand, when they perform the activity into English captions, the strategy can help them acquire structures that are used by them as they create the captions, and they can also work all the aspects commented in the previous instance, as part of post-subtitling tasks.

A relevant aspect of the subtitling technique applied to the enhancement of writing skills is that it can help students improve their written production, in the sense that it provides them with practice regarding condensed expression. This is so because they must attempt to preserve the main ideas of the message while adapting the discourse to short chunks in which the complete original dialogues cannot fit (Díaz Cintas, 1997b). This is interesting given the importance of economy

of language of Business English, where there is an intensive use of abbreviations and set phrases, and where time is foremost. In this sense, this type of exercise is very helpful in order to practice summarizing skills since it strengthens the students' ability to maintain the most relevant information while aiming at economy of expression, one of the main discursive differences between English and other languages, and a milestone in the business world.

This strategy can also help students work on the understanding of the internal coherence and cohesion of the discursive material they are handling. In fact, subtitling is a very interesting place to analyze textual coherence and cohesion, since it must be kept at all times, while working on the different subtitles. This understanding is very comprehensive, given that it helps learners enhance future reading and listening comprehension, as well as writing and speaking production practices.

All these activities are not easy nor automatic (al least at the beginning) and so require a careful guidance, in the form of multimedia instructions and/or by the teacher himself. Learners need to be conscious of what type of business text they are dealing with (be it a memo, an announcement, a minute, a report, an e-mail message, a business letter, a fax, a proposal, or a contract), their role as senders, the type of audience, and the purpose of the exchange (Flórez, 2004).

Writing is an absolutely necessary skill for Business English students and its practice can also provide them with tangible evidence of their progress in the language, which is very motivating in itself. Subtitling can be a suitable place to get rid of the fear to write in English for some, to create the stimulating grounds from where to learn new writing strategies for others, or to check their command of English for others. Thus, the strategy hereby described can make all this happen smoothly within a new, yet familiar, learning context.

6.1. Sample unit: guidelines

To illustrate this technique, here follow the guidelines of a sample unit that makes use of a clip taken from the film *Bridget Jones' Diary* by Sharon Maguire. This clip can be found timing from 11:36 to 12:50. Examples of other clips that can be used as the basis of other writing business English lessons are detailed in Appendix I.

The lesson looks for the acquisition of e-mail writing skills and the level of students it applies is B1, according to the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Information and Communication Technologies or ICTs commonly utilized in network-based language and business communication teaching include e-mail, bulletin boards, computer conferencing, newsgroups, chat, and videoconferencing. Of the various technologies, e-mail, a simple and inexpensive one, seems to be the technology most widely used in foreign language and business communication classrooms worldwide. As for the pedagogical value of e-mail is concerned, such features as authenticity, learner-centeredness, and the increase in the share of both students' independent work, and pair-work or teamwork, can be included. The use of e-mail provides a context for real-world communication and authentic interaction, and it expands topics beyond classroom-based ones, promotes student-centered language learning, encourages equal opportunity participation and connects speakers quickly and cheaply. Nowadays a significant proportion of written business communication is transmitted electronically, via fax or e-mail, and this 'genre' can be characterized by accuracy, and by a certain degree of informality when compared to traditional letter writing.

The unit is placed in a multimedia presentation suitable for both face-to-face and distance learning contexts, i.e., answers and/or guidance are available within the presentation, in case the teacher is not present. The teacher can act as a guide and helper and, if the situation involves a distance learning context, a collaborative voice or video chat discussion can be scheduled for the pair work tasks. The lesson begins with two pre-tasks in the form of warming-up activities. The first one consists of a series of questions that try to create a background for the study of this skills, e.g. *Which are some of the most common functions of a business e-mail message?, Do you send/receive many e-mails a day?, What differences can you see between e-mailing and letter writing?.* The second pre-task consists on an exercise that presents a formal e-mail and four possible answers to that e-mail, from which learners must choose the most appropriate one.

The lesson continues with the task itself. The task consist on subtitling, following a list of basic instructions, a short clip taken from *Bridget Jones' Diary*. The subtitles are created in English. Students are supposed to complete the subtitles departing from the aural information, but they can check the script in case they find any problem.

After the task, there is a section devoted to 'theory', i.e., a language focus on the main points studied, so that students can have a guide they can follow to review the main features involved in writing e-mails. This section is accompanied by two small activities that check the acquisition of concepts such as structure of e-mails and formal and informal greetings and closings.

To end the lesson, there is a post-activity section divided into two parts. In the first one, they have a fill-in-the-blanks activity that reproduces the conversation contained in the clip, so that students can complete some relevant details. The second task requires them to write a correct response to a particular e-mail related to the e-mails discussed in the pre-activities[5].

At the end, the teacher can also propose (in face-to-face environments) the writing of an internal company communication (i.e. communication with a colleague or colleagues within the company on a business related matter) by e-mail, and work on more informal aspects of writing e-mails.

7. Conclusion

There is a historical rejection in many countries, such as Spain, Italy, Germany, or France, towards subtitled films or programs. However, a proper use of subtitles can motivate students to realize the significant aspects of audio-visual input that do not reach the audience when it is dubbed, as well as to appreciate the linguistic and cultural features their use allows to learn and discover. Hence, using subtitles can lead learners to appreciate original version films outside the academic context, by watching moving pictures and other types of programs in their original version, thus keeping up and improving day by day their command of the foreign language.

Up to this point, a flexible proposal relative to computer-based subtitling for enhancing Business English speaking and writing skills has been made. It has been introduced and explained and a methodology has been proposed. The strategy

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[5]   Students can be reminded that, before writing, it is important to bear in mind: the purpose of the correspondence, if there are references to previous communications, the feelings and attitudes of the writer, the level of formality, and the desired outcome.

described is aimed at improving language learning acquisition, especially in those fields that are usually so difficult to teach, learn, and effectively use (particularly in distant-learning contexts): oral production and written production. Besides, the novelty and the ludic character of this activity is expected to highly increase the motivation and participation of Business English learners, something absolutely necessary and not so straight-forward to acquire in most educational setting.

The theoretical framework that has built the foundations of this whole proposal is the current Communicative Language Teaching foreign language learning approach, combined with significant aspects of Content-Based Instruction, such as authenticity and 'subject-matter orientation', Task-Based Learning, such as 'task division' and 'sense of purpose'; these three approaches give learners the opportunity to make the language learned in the classroom meaningful. The student profile that has been selected as the basis of the study includes all levels of adult Business English learners, studying both in face-to-face and in distance-learning contexts.

Some international business people may say that a language teacher cannot be a substitute to teach years of business experience; however, with video, the teacher at least provides students with a shortcut to proficiency, by increasing their awareness of the reality of such a highly complicated and interesting field.

Before DVD and modern technological progress became available and mature, all these flexible uses of subtitles in combination with all types of activities were simply out of the question. Now, teachers and learners have a great deal of technology at their disposal, and they can employ it to make the best use possible. If high technology brings the real world into the academic setting, authentic video segments bring 'real business life' in English into that very setting, and the creation of subtitles help to understand that reality, avoiding the overwhelming feelings students commonly experiment when they face authentic materials and situations.

Technologically based language education, either in face-to-face or in network-based distance contexts, is a field of study that is increasingly growing in use and interest. Trainers, especially the ones who already had previous experience in the use of the electronic networks, have rapidly recognized the value of this Internet-based communication system for sharing and searching information and the multiple opportunities the Web provides for educational uses both as a resource and as a mediating tool. As regards the potential of the Web as a

medium of language instruction both to complement face-to-face teaching and as a stand-alone course, Felix (2001) studied the learners' perceptions regarding Web-based learning. The advantages he reports fell into the broad categories of time flexibility, reinforced learning, privacy and wealth of information, while the disadvantages include distraction, absence of teacher and personal interaction, and lack of speaking practice.

It is hoped that further basic and applied research on the use of video and subtitles will increasingly encourage teachers to start using DVD and advanced computer technologies in order to make the best use of video and subtitles to enhance the students' language learning motivation and skills in general, and writing and speaking proficiency in particular. In addition, the author hopes that more teachers will devote to exploring the multiple and potential uses of this type of methodological strategy in novel ways.

It needs to be noted once more that this strategy has been developed under the framework of the Business English Intelligent Tutoring System currently under construction, I-PETER II. That is why its use can be valid for both distance and technology-based face-to-face instruction.

To finish with, it is significant to point out a relevant and far-reaching metacognitive benefit of the strategy here presented. Through this type of activity, students can reflect upon the subtitling technique itself, either from a linguistic (translational, interpretational) point of view, or from the point of view of the audiovisual translation itself, as far as subtitles are concerned. They are all probably familiar with that linguistic manifestation through the cinema, the DVD, or the TV, but it is most likely that it has passed unnoticed, as regards to all the work it entails, the different ways in which it can be performed, etc. What is more, given the fact that subtitles are typically encountered by students outside the academic context, and having worked empirically with them, even knowing the technique needed to produce them, learners are expected to develop a critical attitude towards future observations of the same phenomenon. All things considered, this new general attitude towards video in its original version could eventually have a positive impact on the number of films in their original version that are released in cinemas, on the quality of subtitles, and ultimately, it can lead to a whole new attitude towards foreign language learning in general, and English as a foreign language in particular, in terms of an easier overall acquisition of the otherness and the proposal of a friendlier and more pleasurable learning approach.

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APPENDIX I

Examples of other clips that can be used to enhance Business English speaking skills are[6]:

Ally McBeal. Chapter 6 (Season 1): 03:32- 04:38.

   • Possible function: transferring someone to another department.

   • Level: B2

Ally McBeal. Chapter 7 (Season 1): 35:00- 35:57.

   • Possible function: firm speeches; handling hostility.

   • Level: C2

Bridget Jones' Diary: 45:57-46:55.

   • Possible function: Job interviews.

   • Level: C1

Bridget Jones' Diary: 18:58-19:27.

   • Possible function: Formal introductions.

   • Level: A2

Friends. Chapter 15 (Season 1) 14:52-15:12.

   • Possible function: requests.

   • Level: A1

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[6]   The levels will refer to the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

Friends. Chapter 16 (Season 1) 04:53-05:41.
  • Possible function: giving and receiving instructions.
  • Level: B1

Examples of other clips that can be used to enhance Business English writing skills are:

Ally McBeal. Chapter 5 (Season 1): 26:30- 27:12.
  • Possible functions: handling hostility; reports.
  • Level: C2

Ally McBeal. Chapter 7 (Season 1): 05:12- 05:58.
  • Possible function: letters of complaint.
  • Level: B1

Ally McBeal. Chapter 8 (Season 1): 37:50- 39:01.
  • Possible function: formal apologies.
  • Level: B2

Ally McBeal. Chapter 8 (Season 1): 11:18- 11:57.
  • Possible function: handling friction; expressing discontent.
  • Level: A1

Ally McBeal. Chapter 6 (Season 1): 07:01-07:42.
  • Possible function: complete requests with pre-request.
  • Level: C1

Ally McBeal. Chapter 7 (Season 1): 35:00- 35:57.
  • Possible function: analyzing business situations.
  • Level: A2