

Subtitling Literary Documentaries as a Tool to Foster L2 Learning and Metalinguistic Reflection in University Contexts

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Abstract – Usage of AVT (and especially subtitling and reversed subtitling) has been proven over the last two decades to be an effective tool in L2 language learning. Nonetheless, the main trend in L2 language learning supported by the usage of audiovisual material appears until today to be mostly limited to practices that set the students as “end-users” of subtitles and/or – more generally - of translated audiovisual material. In nowadays globalized societies, where the phenomenon of fansubbing is becoming increasingly popular, it becomes comparatively easy to allow students to take an active role in producing subtitles, actively integrating them in the AVT processes. Teaching basic practical techniques and theory of AVT can therefore spark the interest of students in L2 language learning, encouraging metalinguistic reflections and development of actual translation skills. This paper will focus specifically on showing how involving students in the activity of subtitling literary documentaries that have literary texts and/or literary authors as a main topic can foster very specific reflections on translation issues and culture-specific reference.

Keywords – AVT, Literary Documentary, Second Language Learning, Subtitling

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I. INTRODUCTION

The present work aims at proposing a few ideas about how subtitling (that has in the last two decades gained an increasing interest from the scholars in the field of Translation Studies) could be used as a powerful tool to increase motivation, engagement and participation of students in the process of learning a second language at university levels. Viewing subtitled video programs can enhance motivation in language learning in a university classroom, and the advantages of interlingual reversed subtitling in L2 learning have been pointed out in the early nineties in fundamental case studies based on Paivio’s bilingual dual coding model [1].

Viewing subtitled video programs is, nonetheless, not the only way of using subtitles as part of a teaching method. As clearly pointed out by Chapman (2017) [2], language teachers are constantly looking for a wide variety of activities that are high in linguistic content but that can also have an appeal on the students’ emotions and encompass a communicative feel, task-based activities and group work. In this sense, students can be engaged in the activity of actually producing subtitles, as part of a task-based learning activity, that can be designed for individual students or for a whole classroom.

Many experts have already pointed out the advantage of using subtitling activities in learning processes, either when the goal is learning non-linguistic contents [3], either when the goal is learning a second language [4] or, more specifically, when the goal is acquiring higher translation skills, as pointed out by Pavesi and Perego (2008), two Italian experts of AVT theory [5]. In addition, European institutions have funded research-led projects such as *Learning Via Subtitling* (LeViS) and *ClipFlair*, thus endorsing and validating the potential of AVT in language learning [6].

II. LITERARY KNOWLEDGE AND TRANSLATION SKILLS APPLIED TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learning a second language encompasses a wide spectrum of skills and abilities, especially for what concerns learners with a high level of proficiency. At university levels, metalinguistic reflection is important in order to enhance L2 learners’ command of the second language, and therefore it can be of crucial importance to expose the students to specific problems related to translation theory, or related to literary knowledge.

One branch of Translation Studies that can easily kindle the interest and motivation of young learners is Audiovisual Translation (also known as AVT), a very “young” field of research that is expanding rapidly, in a world that is becoming globalised and multimedial at a very fast pace. The boundaries between spoken and written language are rapidly fading thanks to the massive spreading of new forms of communication in our daily life, such as text messaging combined with the usage of pictograms (which, in turn, are contributing to a sort of globalization and simplification of language, where local and global coexist sometimes pacifically, sometimes chaotically).

In a world that is gradually abandoning books as the privileged medium for spreading culture and for educational purposes (particularly for what concerns the field of Humanities), increasing awareness on the ways in which we use language - as well as stimulating metalinguistic reflections - is of paramount importance, especially for university students that can count on a solid cultural background at least for what concerns awareness of their native language.

Among the various alternatives to traditional printed books, literary documentaries are surely an interesting and modern way to divulge literary knowledge, as they can additionally represent a rich source of information about a certain literary author (poet, novelist, playwright etc.) that can't be found elsewhere, and especially not in what is the traditional scholarly medium *par excellence*, that along the centuries was used to preserve literary and linguistic culture and to hand it down from one generation to another: the book, that has become itself in our imagery an unparalleled symbol of knowledge.

Literary documentaries can be considered as a powerful tool in language learning, because they can provide at the same time a great exposure to literary knowledge as well as a great chance to design task-based subtitling activities, that can improve translational and metalinguistic competences.

III. WHAT IS A LITERARY DOCUMENTARY?

A non-fiction film about a literary topic or about a famous novelist, can undoubtedly provide its audience with a unique and peculiar insight about the author's poetics, ideology, attitude towards life, and even voice and accent: all elements that cannot be fully learnt and gathered only by reading an author's literary works.

It can therefore be asserted that in some way, apart from being an artistic product of its own, a well-made literary documentary can integrate and complete the idea that a scholar (or a reader) has of a certain literary author, of his/her language and of his/her

distinctive and unique usage of language, including speech (that encompassing vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation is also known as idiolect).

Some literary documentaries can meet an extremely wide audience, like for instance the one that became a very popular film about the life and work of the 1998 Nobel Laureate José Saramago (*José e Pilar*, a 2010 documentary by Miguel Gonçalves Mendes), while others remain confined to a more specialist audience, even though the author or the works treated are comparatively popular. This can be proven true by *Encounters with Kiki Dimoula* (*Συναντήσεις με την Κική Δημουλά*), a 2010 documentary directed by the contemporary Greek director Katerina Patroni about the contemporary Greek poetess Kiki Dimoula, the first living female poet ever to be included in the prestigious French publisher Gallimard's poetry series. The documentary shows the poetess in flesh and bones, in all her gushing femininity, reading her own poems, chain smoking, ranting about love and death, speculating about philosophy, gender, identity... in other words treating the same themes that she always treated and elaborated through poetical verse, but in front of a camera rather than on a printed page. During the shooting, the director developed a very personal and intimate way of interacting with the poetess while following the process behind the realization of what later on became and was published as one of the most important essays by Kiki Dimoula [8]. The documentary, showing the poetess and her poetics through a less idealized perspective, is of remarkable interest for any reader or scholar that is interested in the work of this important Greek contemporary author and that wish to fully understand the authentic nature of her literary production.

3.1 Literary documentaries in India

Within the Indian context, where the film industry represents a fundamental element of national and social cohesiveness as well as an immensely powerful medium for spreading culture and ideas, literary documentaries are still not as popular and diffused as other non-fiction film genres. Nonetheless, there is a wide variety of literary documentaries that could be of great interest if used in educational/guided contexts for language learning purposes, both for perfecting proficiency in Indian regional/classical languages and for improving proficiency in the English language.

A remarkable project launched by *Sahitya Akademi*, the Indian National Academy of Letters, promoted the production of more than thirty medium-length films (30-minute or 60-minute documentaries) about “writers of national repute, [...] directed by eminent film-makers or writers familiar with the work of their subjects” [7], in which the authors present themselves, their work, their achievements and their working environment in

various and sometimes informal, more authentic ways. The affordable prices and the easy accessibility of this film series represent a great opportunity for the documentaries to be used as educational tools in a university classroom.

IV. SUBTITLING AS A WAY TO FOSTER METALINGUISTIC REFLECTION

Subtitling is a form of AVT that requires a certain degree of awareness regarding language, perception and semiotics of language: it transposes in a written and visually perceived form something that is usually not written and perceived through the auditory channel, providing the translator with great opportunities to reflect about the nature of language itself as well as a wide spectrum of chances to express his/her own creativity and ability as a translator.

As many AVT experts agree upon [9], a subtitle is created through three distinct phases:

- a) *Reduction*: a subtitle has to condensate a lot of information within a restricted space (the bottom of a screen) and time (subtitles are only a key to understand an audiovisual text, and should not be too complex in order not to distract the audience from the latter).
- b) *Diamesic Transformation*: subtitles change oral discourse into written discourse.
- c) *Translation*: interlingual subtitles convey a message from a source language onto a target language. Intralingual subtitles on the other hand are used mostly for the hearing-impaired audience and should not be confused con interlingual ones.

According to Henrik Gottlieb [10], one of the pioneers of AVT studies, subtitles also have some other specific peculiarities. Subtitles are always:

- a) *Written* (in contrast with the oral form that they translate/integrate).
- b) *Additive* (they add information to the elements that are already conveyed through visual and auditory channel).
- c) *Prepared* (they require a deep understanding of the message and an accurate planning of translation strategies).
- d) *Immediate* (the reduced and translated text has to be consumed in real time and cannot be re-read in case the audience is not able to read it properly).

- e) *Synchronous* (have to flow at the same speed of the oral discourse and the audience can't decide about their pace).
- f) *Polymedial* (they work in synergy with several components of the audiovisual text: written text and images through the visual channel + sound track and dialogues through the auditory channel).

Apart from subtitles, there are other kinds of written text that can appear on screen: *captions* and *displays*. *Captions* (also known as *chyrons*) are added to the film in the editing phase and usually provide the audience with information about the location or time in which the scene of a film is set, therefore it's usually indispensable to translate those parts as well, since they often have a diegetic relevance.

On the other hand, displays are visual elements of a film that happen to be in the shot and that bear some written text (a stop sign, a book cover displayed on a table, a road sign along the highway, a nametag etc.). All these elements unavoidably convey some meaning through the visual channel and can often interfere with the message conveyed through the auditory channel. Sometimes subtitles can be used to translate the meaning of these displays, but it's up to the translator to decide whether it should be a priority for the subtitle to follow the dialogues of a certain scene or not.

Subtitling is therefore an activity that requires a constant negotiation from the translator, that has to be extremely creative and autonomous in deciding which ones are the best translating solutions and approaches, since literally every case is unique: in subtitling (more than in many other forms of translation) there is no right/wrong translating solution. There are no fixed rules: everything is always left up to a good translator's ability to deeply understand the source text and to his/her creative and communicative skills, that will allow to find the best translation strategy for each specific case.

This is even more true if we consider some specific technical restraints that characterize subtitles, such as brevity limits. Many AVT scholars have assessed that in order to be legible and correctly understood a subtitle should have no more than 37 characters per line (in no more than two lines) in order to achieve its beneficial effect of "invisibility" [11]. A perfect subtitle should in fact nearly pass unnoticed and the audience should be able to read it almost unconsciously in order to experience the best fruition of an audiovisual text.

In addition, time constraints should be taken into account: it has been estimated that the display of a single subtitle cannot last on screen for more than roughly six seconds in order to follow the natural

rhythm of oral discourse. A variation in this standard could make the audience too aware of the subtitle itself (a spectator may read it twice for instance) and this would jeopardize the stability of the so-called *fictional pact*.

Considering all these factors, it appears therefore evident that creating a subtitle requires a considerable amount of metalinguistic awareness and that it is a form of translation that has to be focused on even the slightest detail. Choosing a very specific word rather than a synonym can actually make a difference in the final outcome of the translator's work.

5. SUBTITLING LITERARY DOCUMENTARIES

5.1 From *anime* to documentaries: bridging technical gaps and learning technical aspects of subtitling

In 2011, Dr Hye-Kyung Lee published a pioneering study about the increasing popularity of the phenomenon of *fansubbing*, bringing the matter to the attention of academia [12]. *Fansubbers* form virtual communities (usually organized with very well-structured hierarchies) of non-professional translators that create subtitles for audiovisual texts (most often Japanese *anime*) in order to make them available to a wider audience that can make use of the films on usually illegal and free platforms. These communities usually include a vast majority of young adults with great motivation connected to the film genre, and practically never related to the idea of earning money in any form.

These communities make wide usage of user-friendly software that can be downloaded from the internet, usually for free, such as *Aegisub*, a free open-source cross-platform subtitle editing program. People working in *fansubbing* communities are usually not trained as translators and very often don't even have a strong knowledge of the source language (often Japanese), since they use the activity of subtitling to actually learn the language "on the way": through the process of subtitling they actually expand their vocabulary and operational skills with the second language.

In the case of *fansubbers*, a huge motivation (that allows them to self-learn how to use specific software and how to use a foreign language in context, overcoming relevant difficulties) is only kindled by the passion they nurture for the audiovisual text that they are translating, the urge to share it with a wider audience, and sometimes also by the desire to prove their ability as audiovisual translators within their community.

Similar reasons and motivations (affection for the topics treated in the audiovisual text, eagerness to share the latter with a wider audience, ambition to

prove own's ability) can be easily adopted in the context of a smaller community, like a university classroom for instance: in such a context students could be provided with audiovisual texts related to literary topics (i.e. literary documentaries), that could kindle their interest through identification with the topics treated, make them want to share knowledge with a wider audience, and make them prove their ability as translators while collaborating with their classmates (in group work) or "competing" with them (in task-based individual activities). Motivation would therefore guide the students with mechanisms that are similar to those that characterize a *fansubbing* community, with the advantage that, being in a guided context, students would be able to rely on a teacher that can provide them with technical support for what concerns subtitling software and, most importantly, advice and instruction about technical aspects of translation and correct usage of the L2.

5.2 Literary Documentary: "reading a screen" or "watching a book"?

Literary documentaries are usually rich in literary references: they often allow to see a literary excerpt on screen, or to listen to an oral realization of a literary text (that can be heard in voiceover or as a voice-off, or that can be read out loud by a person shown on screen). While translating literary documentaries, it is very challenging for a translator to assess interactions between content and information conveyed through the auditory channel and the visual channel. When this content is an actual literary excerpt, a major doubt arises: how to translate the literary text in a literary way (respecting figures of speech, metric regularity etc.) while adapting it to the rigid technical constraints that subtitling implies? Finding an answer to this question can be a motivating challenge for a university classroom involved in the subtitling of a literary documentary, that in order to produce a good translation of the audiovisual text will have to make very specific research on a certain literary author, as well as on his/her work and literary style.

An example to this point can be provided by a 53-minute documentary about the life and work of Ilias Ch. Papademetrakopoulos (a major Greek contemporary prose writer) entitled *Σπίτι δίπλα στη θάλασσα* (*The House on the Beach*) and realized in 2009 by the Greek director Lefteris Xanthopoulos. The documentary makes very specific (and sometimes implicit) references to some of the author's prose texts, which are often shown on screen or read out loud/heard in voiceover. In a scene of the documentary, for example, an epigraph (Fig.1) is shown on screen (the text is considered as a *display* in the context of AVT). This apparently unimportant epigraph actually has a very interesting relationship with Papademetrakopoulos's work: one of his short stories [13], based on actual events, contains a transcription of that very epigraph (Fig.2). The author of the documentary, being passionate about

Papademetrakopoulos's work, knew about the epigraph from one of his books and decided to trace it back to its source (a rural area on a remote Greek island) and to film it, using its image in the documentary, which interestingly proves that what is narrated in the book actually exists in reality. In this case the documentary configures itself as a narrative device that works at the same level with the original literary text, providing a semiologically alternative rendition of the same narrated subject (i.e. the epigraph): the prose writer *transcribes* it on a printed page, while the film director *shows* it on a screen. For a scholar interested in Papademetrakopoulos's work this is of remarkable importance, because the documentary actually provides specific elements to better understand how reality and actual events inspired the literary production of the author.



Fig. 1 Still from L. Xanthopoulos's documentary *The House on the Beach* (2009)

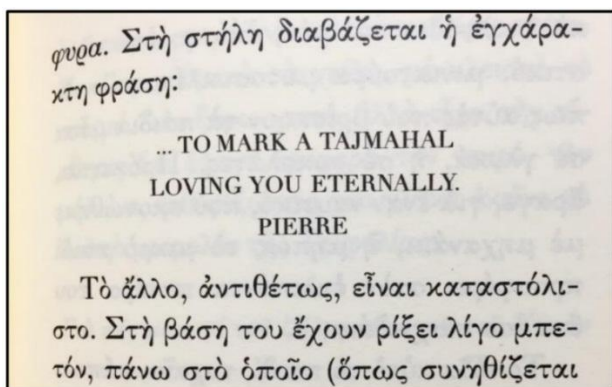


Fig. 2 Excerpt from Ilias Ch. Papademetrakopoulos's book *Ο οβολός και άλλα διηγήματα* (2004)

For an audiovisual translator that has to realize subtitles for a documentary like *The House on the Beach*, it is of paramount importance to understand interactions between an author's work and the audiovisual text. The translator must be familiar with the author's literary style and idiosyncrasies, in order to be able to decide whether to try a rendition of the author's style also in subtitling literary excerpts.

5.3 Literary Documentaries about Indian authors: proposals for learning activities within the Indian cultural *milieu*

Many universities in India offer specific courses for advanced learning of classical or regional languages. In the Indian context, though, diglossia and bilingualism/multilingualism very often coexist, especially in university contexts that privilege English as the official medium for interaction. Involving students in subtitling activities related to literary authors that make use of Indian classical/regional languages can therefore represent a chance for the students to reflect on how diglossia and multilingualism characterize their daily life, as well as a chance to perfect their knowledge of a certain Indian language, through a medium that can have a strong appeal on their emotions and sense of local/national cultural pride.

As a very first step for instance, in such an environment, characterized by strong traits of diglossia and multilingualism, reflecting about the difference between interlingual and intralingual subtitles, can definitely increase the students' awareness about the various languages used in their daily life.

5.3.1 Tamil poetry spread through English-language media: Amshan Kumar's documentary *Subramania Bharati* (2000).

In 2000, the Chennai-based filmmaker and writer Amshan Kumar realized a 45-minute literary documentary about the life and work of the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati. This documentary provides its audience with specific information about the famous Tamil author, mostly through a descriptive voiceover in English and through interlingual/intralingual English subtitles, that interact in various ways with the information and content conveyed through the auditory and visual channel:

1) In one case subtitles are interlingual and used to translate a literary excerpt: they provide an English translation of Tamil text (a poem by Bharati) conveyed through the auditory channel, orally realized in form of a song, that is audible in the film soundtrack (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Still from Amshan Kumar's documentary Subramania Bharati (2000). An interlingual English subtitle interacts with an oral realization of Tamil text conveyed through the auditory channel.

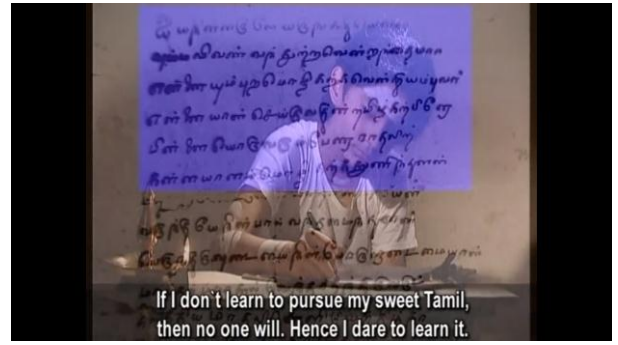


Fig. 5 Still from Amshan Kumar's documentary Subramania Bharati (2000). An intralingual English subtitle interacts with an English voiceover conveyed through the auditory channel and with Tamil text conveyed through the visual channel (display).

2) In another instance, interlingual subtitles in English are used to translate unprepared speech in Tamil language: during a "talking-head" style interview of Mr. Kalyana Sundaram (one of the poet's acquaintances), subtitles provide a translation into English of his words uttered in Tamil language (Fig.4).

4) In other cases, captions are used to describe or to transliterate English or Tamil text (displays) shown on screen (Fig. 6-7).



Fig. 4 Still from Amshan Kumar's documentary Subramania Bharati (2000). An interlingual English subtitle is used to translate unprepared speech in Tamil language. A caption in English language has been added above the subtitle to introduce the speaker.

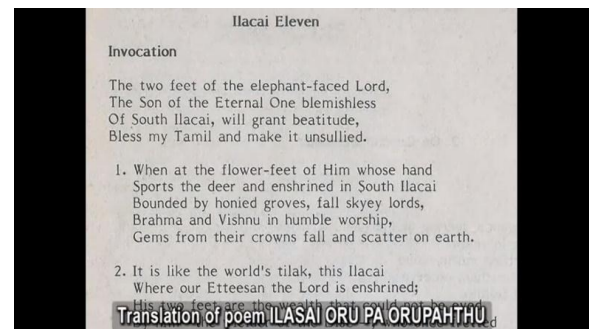


Fig. 6 Still from Amshan Kumar's documentary Subramania Bharati (2000). A caption in English describes a book excerpt in English visible on screen (display). The original title in Tamil Ilasai Oru Pa Orupathu is not presented using Tamil script.

3) In other cases, intralingual subtitles are used to provide a rough transcription of English text that is conveyed through the auditory channel (voiceover), which, in its turn, is a translation of Tamil text (known in AVT as *display*) conveyed through the visual channel (Fig. 5).

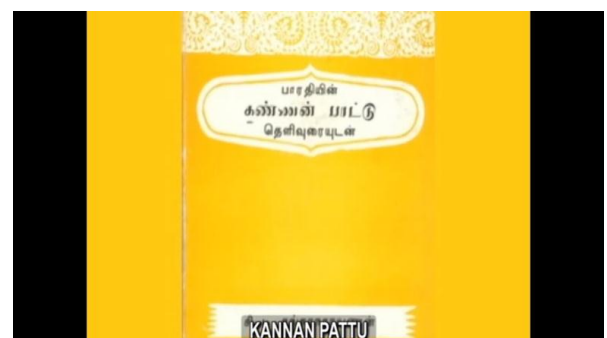


Fig. 7 Still from Amshan Kumar's documentary Subramania Bharati (2000). A short caption is used to transliterate Tamil script shown on screen (display).

It must be admitted that subtitles used for Amshan Kumar's documentary about Subramania Bharati are not always complying with standards that are usually applied to subtitling, both in terms of readability (positioning, timing, segmentation etc.)

and in terms of translational strategies adopted (usage of intralingual subtitles when not needed, complex syntax etc.).

It is worth noting that the documentary makes use of a few images (Fig. 5) taken from a collection of Bharati works translated into English [14]; these translations are apparently relatable to the interlingual subtitles that are used to translate the poem *Kannan (My servant)*, which can be heard in Tamil during a scene of the documentary showing a theatrical performance (Fig. 3). In fact, the translated verses contained in the 1989 collection *Bharati Patalkal* differ in terms of metric, rhyming, syntax and punctuation, but present a very similar vocabulary when compared to the homologous text of the subtitles (Table 1):

TABLE 1: Literary translation and audiovisual translation (interlingual subtitles) of an excerpt from the poem *Kannan* by Subramania Bharati

Literary translation (from <i>Bharati Patalkal</i>)	Audiovisual translation (English interlingual subtitles, with duration shown in brackets)
3. To me thus musing, sad and serious, Came a lad from somewhere mysterious. "I'm a shepherd," he said; and on he did rattle Your children I'd cherish and graze your cattle; Your house I'd sweep, your lamps I'd light, And all your biddings do always right; I'd keep with care your jewels and clothes; And lovely lullabies I'd compose And sing them; and dance and play, it may be, To the great delight of little baby.	[...] 'Came a lad from nowhere. He said 'I'm a shepherd'. [00:14:01] Your children I'd cherish and graze your cattle. [00:09:62] Your house I'd sweep, your lamps I'd light. [00:08:98] Carry your biddings and guard for your jewels and clothes. [00:08:87] Sing lullabies and dance to the delight of the baby' [00:10:72]

For an audience able to understand the original Tamil lyrics, it could be interesting to compare the original text audible in the film soundtrack (i.e. conveyed through the auditory channel) with the English subtitles (whose timing regrettably exceeds the 6/7 seconds limit prescribed by AVT experts), and possibly to propose alternative translational solutions: should subtitles follow a literary translation of a literary text, or should they not consider the aspects of literariness of the latter? The question is intentionally left open ended.

5.3.2 Subtitling using Indic scripts: a chance for subtitling software implementation

Amshan Kumar's documentary about Subramania Bharati, belongs to a whole *corpus* of literary documentaries about Indian authors that could be used for educational purposes. A number of them make wide use of English language, therefore students could be productively engaged in translating them into Indian local languages through the usage of subtitling software. Unfortunately, not all the subtitling software available supports Indic scripts yet, but recent advancements in computing capacity and machine learning techniques are encouraging research in making Indic scripts more easily available to a wider portion of users [15].

While producing subtitles in Indian local languages, students could perfect their operational skills in the given language, especially for what concerns its written form (that is usually the one that requires an additional effort in learning/teaching processes). Developing new ideas on how to implement subtitling software, making the usage of Indic scripts more accessible, could also be an additional *stimulus* for students that are interested in IT disciplines.

6. CONCLUSION

Subtitling literary documentaries in guided context such as a university foreign language class, where a systematic analysis of translating solutions and strategies could be consciously made by a language expert such as a University professor, can expand the students' vocabulary and operational skills with the second language. Proposing the students that are attending a university language course to subtitle a simple audiovisual text from L2 to L1 (or vice-versa) could undeniably kindle their interest in the language itself, making them an active part of the learning process. The teacher's role would obviously be to guide the students, which in turn, with their creative contribution could feel like being put on the same level of the teacher in terms of active participation to the learning/teaching activities. Since subtitling, as previously pointed out, doesn't follow translational solutions that are always right or wrong, but require continuous negotiation, a group of students could actually develop valid and interesting translation strategies on a team basis. Teachers and students would therefore find themselves collaborating on a same level and with a common aim: to find the best translation strategy for each single case. This would obviously kindle the students' motivation and engagement towards the L2 learning process, being able to get an instant and gratifying feedback when a good translation solution is found.

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