



# The Role of Audiovisual Translation in Mediating Foreign Language Learning

## Activity Theory Perspective

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**Abstract.** This is a case study of a specific learning environment in the Intensive English Language Program, characterised by technical, spatial, temporal, and motivational restrictions that impede students' progress. Activity Theory was used to describe the situation, and to design an intervention in the form of a new activity system. A dubbing project was designed and implemented in the Listening and Speaking Course. It utilised students' mobile devices in an anywhere, anytime type of learning, and their native language and cultural background as a starting point to engage them in a collaborative effort that led to the production of eight dubbed videos. The resulting videos were entered in an internally-organised video competition which added a further motivational element to the project. To evaluate the project's effect on students' perceptions and motivation, data were collected using 5 focus group interviews. Results show high levels of motivation, increased learning, increased confidence and sense of achievement and pride in the resulting work.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual translation · Dubbing · Activity theory · Language learning

## 1 Introduction and Context

The dubbing project is a mobile learning project that was carefully designed to fit a specific learning context characterised by a number of restrictions. This paper reports a case study that took place over one academic semester where the learning context was first analysed using Activity Systems Analysis and tensions were identified as temporal, motivational, spatial, and technical. An intervention in the form of a new activity system was designed and implemented by the researcher.

This study was conducted in the Intensive English Language Program (IEP) in a semi-private university in the United Arab Emirates where students are required to demonstrate their English language proficiency by sitting a standardised English language proficiency test (IELTS). Students who do not obtain the required score enrol in the IEP to improve their language proficiency. The programme is in 4 levels, starting from level 1 for false beginners, i.e. students who studied English language before but have little command of the language, up to level 4 for intermediate students. Each level is taught over a period of one academic semester. Students are placed in each level,

based on the results of a placement test. Those who miss the placement test prior to programme entry are placed in level 1 regardless of their actual level. All students are allowed to drop out of the IEP as soon as they achieve the required score; therefore, students make multiple attempts to take the standardised test during the semester.

The dubbing project was implemented in two sections at level 1, taught by the researcher. One section had 18 female students and the other had 16 female students. Eight short videos were dubbed to English and were entered in an internally-organised competition to choose the winning video. The winners were chosen by a panel of judges who were four IEP instructors.

This study asked the following questions:

1. How did the video dubbing project remediate English language learning for false beginners and mixed ability classes?
2. What was the impact of this remediation on students' perceptions and motivation?

These questions are significant in that they test dubbing projects in a context different to contexts documented in previous studies (see Sect. 2.2).

## 2 Literature Review

This section provides a short review of Activity Theory (AT), which is used to problematise the context, followed by a review of relevant literature on practices and concepts that form the theoretical framework for this study. Dubbing as a language learning activity is reviewed, followed by mobile learning. Both of these constitute the basis for the proposed activity system that was designed to overcome the above-mentioned constraints.

### 2.1 Activity Theory

AT provides a suitable lens for conceptualising learning environments [1–3]. It offers the language for description and addresses the situation using a manageable unit of analysis: the activity [4, 5]. It is a cultural historical theory where context is integral to the activity itself and is seen to influence the mind and action of people [6]. An activity is an action directed towards an object and is motivated by the need to change the object into an outcome [1], which means reaching this object is purposeful and leads to achieving an outcome.

AT studies the activity in its natural context, taking into consideration all variables within the environment of the activity. These variables are the *subject* or actor, the *object* or objective which the subject needs and is motivated to achieve, and the *tools* and artefacts that mediate the activity. All these are governed by *rules*, and exist within a *community* where there is a *division of labour* among community members to ensure the achievement of the objective. These elements are depicted in a triangular form (in Fig. 1).

Including the community in the system of interaction came as a later development by Engeström [7], who extended Vygotsky's and Leontiev's understanding of the social mediation of activity to include social mediators within a community. Engeström

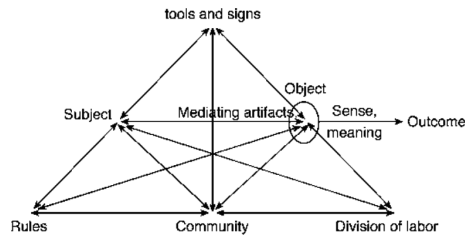


Fig. 1. The structure of a human activity system [7]

explains that the *tool* mediates the relationship between the subject and the object, the *rules* mediate the relationship between the subject and the community and the *division of labour* mediates the relationship between the object and the community.

The variables are seen to interact either in an enabling manner, or in a manner that causes tensions and contradictions, also referred to as obstacles [4]. There are four levels of tensions within AT: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary [7] (see Sect. 3). By identifying these relationships and the tensions, improved activity systems can be designed to enhance the activity by overcoming them.

According to Engeström, Bateson's Learning 3 is relevant here. He refers to it as expansive learning and defines it as learning by constructing a new activity and expanding the context. He explains:

'Learning by expanding or learning 3 is very much going beyond the information given to construct a new set of criteria, a broader picture, a broader object for your activity which liberates you from the constraints of the particular setting in which you are functioning and enables you to create new settings.' [8] (minute 8.18 of interview)

This came after Engeström's revision of AT when he suggested the possibility of expansive transformations, stating that 'an expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are re-conceptualised to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of activity' [9, p. 137].

## 2.2 Dubbing and Audio-Visual Translation

There are three main types of audio-visual translation: dubbing (or lip-sync); subtitling; and voice-over [10]. All three types involve a recount of both image and sound of the original video, either in the form of written text at the bottom of the screen, as in subtitling, or in the form of audio voice-over.

The empirical studies that are available show that all three types have been experimented with in the field of language learning. Danan explains how dubbing from L1 (native language) to L2 (target language) has many benefits which he attributes to the combined use of translation and technology. He asserts that the return of the pedagogical role of translation along with the ubiquity and growing versatility of technological tools have opened up an array of possibilities for language learning, one of which is dubbing activities [11]. His approach of implementing the L1 to L2 dubbing activity is interesting, and his findings are promising; therefore, they influenced the design of the new activity system in this study.

Other studies suggest different dubbing activities ranging from intralingual (L2 - L2) to interlingual (L1 - L2/L2 - L1). First, there is the repeat/verbatim activity (intralingual) where learners simply repeat the original speech of the characters [12–17]. Such studies report improvement in learners’ pronunciation, intonation, speed and fluency. Another type involves free translation, i.e. to paraphrase for gist [11, 12], or translation but with concision since literal, faithful translation may not be possible due to register difference or time constraints or learners’ slower speeds of speaking [11]. This point proved to be particularly significant in this study because it highlighted areas of difference between L1 and L2 in terms of register, and encouraged students to attempt more fluent speech. Reported benefits of these studies are similar to those of the intralingual activities with additional benefits ranging from the improved overall language skills, grammar, awareness of register, language variation, intercultural awareness, paralinguistic elements (such as expression of emotions through voice and facial expression). Other important behavioural benefits were reported such as motivation, autonomy, collaboration, enjoyment, ownership and pride of finished product. In general, all mentioned studies report high levels of student enjoyment of the projects and a desire to do similar projects in the future.

Researchers have reported that within the available body of literature, little has been done on the use of audio-visual translation in relation to productive skills and autonomous learning [11]. There is also a call for empirical evaluation of the effect of dubbing in the foreign language learning context [16]. Avila and Talavan report on dubbing projects used with advanced learners and speculate about the suitability of these projects with beginners [17]. None of the available studies have linked dubbing projects with mixed-ability classes or with class management, nor has it been implemented with beginners/false beginners. This study is an attempt to fill these gaps by providing an empirical study to evaluate the use of dubbing projects for language learning with false beginners and mixed-ability classes.

### 2.3 Mobile Learning and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) Policy

The UNESCO report on ‘Mobile Learning and Policies’ identifies a popular definition of mobile learning to be ‘education that involves the use of mobile devices to enable learning anytime and anywhere’ [18]. This anytime and anywhere feature relates to the physical and temporal spaces making mobile learning possible for people who face restrictions in terms of time and space as in the context of this study. Palalas identifies five essential spaces - temporal, physical, transactional, technological, and pedagogical - explaining that it is the *blending* of these spaces that:

‘can produce a combination of resources (information and actors), contexts, processes and supports that promote learning. [...] Hence, with facilitation and guidance of experts, mobile tools can effectively mediate the interplay of these elements toward successful learning outcomes’ [19, p. 87].

This is an important part of the theoretical framework that underlies this study.

### 3 The Problem Statement - Constraints

Level 1 of the IEP programme is best explained using AT. By examining how variables relate to each other, contradictions were identified. The information below stems from the researcher's insider knowledge of the programme as a faculty member and as the instructor of level 1 classes. These contradictions are categorised into three types of restrictions or systemic tensions (see Fig. 2) and are explained below.

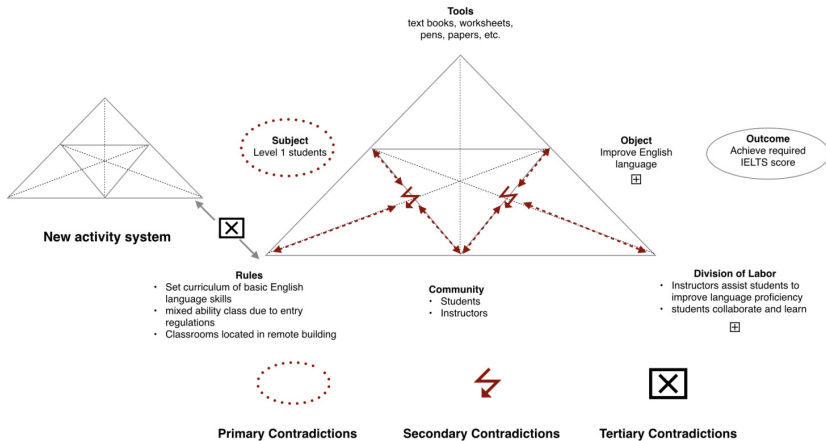


Fig. 2. Systemic tensions in level 1 activity system

#### 3.1 Primary Tensions: Motivational and Temporal Restrictions

Engeström explains primary contradictions to be relevant to the values 'within each corner of the triangle of the activity' [7, p. 102]. In this case, the contradiction is within the students' value system. Although they value the outcome of the activity, they do not value the time they need to spend to achieve that outcome. Therefore, students tend to not comply with the timeframe of the original activity system by engaging in several attempts of the standardised test. When they do not achieve the required score, they experience feelings of frustration. This has a noticeable negative effect on students' motivation and engagement, which threatens the activity system since the subject needs to be motivated to reach the object (a motivational constraint).

#### 3.2 Secondary Tensions: Institutional Constraints

'The secondary contradictions are those appearing between the corners' [7, p. 102], i.e. 'between the constituents of the central activity' [20]. The *rules* within the IEP stipulate that the curriculum is designed for a *community* of false beginners when in fact the same rules allow students to enter level 1 without a placement test which causes the *community* of the level to be more mixed ability, hence, causing a contradiction between *rules* and *community*. This also affects the *division of labour*, which mediates

the relationship between *community* and *objective*. Because some students are of a higher level, they tend to dominate group work activities or simply disrupt them. In other words, the *rules* cause inconsistency in the *community* and cause tension in the *division of labour*, which reduces its ability to mediate the relationship between *community* and *object*.

### 3.3 Tertiary Tensions: Technology Related Restrictions and Spatial Restrictions

Engeström clarifies that the tertiary contradiction appears when teachers who represent culture introduce a new, more advanced activity system with a new objective and motive [7]. The new activity system, the dubbing project, designed by the researcher/instructor had a new object (dubbing a video), a new motive (the dubbing competition), and new tools (a short video, dubbing software, etc.), i.e. technology. This new activity system faced tensions caused by the *rules* of the previous activity system. All classes of level 1 were located relatively far from the computer laboratory which made it difficult to arrange for computer laboratory classes where students can have access to required software tools, causing spatial and technological restrictions.

## 4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the intervention is based on AT, dubbing as a language learning activity, mobile learning and BYOD. AT was used to identify tensions in the learning environment. An intervention was designed to overcome these tensions. The new activity system is the activity of translating and dubbing an Arabic video clip into English using personal mobile devices as mediators and an internally-organised competition as motivator. As indicated earlier, dubbing activities have been used previously for language learners and studies report positive results. In addition, mobile learning studies show that mobile learning is capable of blending spaces to overcome the temporal, spatial, technological and motivational restrictions of the old activity system and BYOD helps overcome lack of classroom technology.

The change in object, motive, tools, rules and division of labour can lead to collective transformation. Engeström explains that:

‘expansive learning theory is concerned with collective transformation, rather than individual learning. Although changes in the collective are initiated by individuals within the community, the transformation itself is a change in the collective system. The object of expansive learning activity is the entire activity system in which the learners are engaged. Expansive learning activity produces culturally new patterns of activity. Expansive learning at work produces new forms of work activity.’ [9]

## 5 The New Activity System

In the ‘Listening and Speaking’ class, a multi-stage project was designed. The main *outcome* for it, other than language learning, being to re-enforce students’ self-confidence to communicate in English, an act they had been resisting. The rules of this new activity system were the set of instructions given to the students. The division of labour enabled the more advanced students to do the more advanced linguistic tasks (translation) and helped weaker students with new vocabulary and pronunciation.

Initially, students were instructed to choose any short Arabic video they particularly liked. This stage was designed to engage students through something they were familiar with and enjoyed, while at the same time alleviating the pressure of the foreign language by starting from L1. Students used their own mobile devices to view, save, and share these videos with group members. Then, they collaborated to translate the script into English and handed it in for evaluation. Translations needed to be reworked more than once until it finally reached an acceptable state. The next stage was the division of roles, and practicing performing the parts.

In the recording stage, the instructor/researcher functioned as a tool along with iMovie App and a personal mobile telephone. This was to monitor students and ensure that pronunciation, intonation, fluency, etc. were all correct. Each recording session turned into a personalised lesson on pronunciation, intonation, grammar and register. This was a valuable stage of the project because it ensured paying attention to each student individually by giving personalised guidance along with mini-lessons on language register and paralinguistic elements.

The result was 8 dubbed videos that were entered in an internally-organised competition for the two sections. All IEP students and staff were invited to the auditorium where the dubbed videos were shown on the big screen. This competition heightened students’ *motivation*, increased their self-confidence and gave them a sense of achievement.

## 6 Methodology

This study adopted a constructivist research paradigm since AT is a constructivist-based learning theory. Constructivism aligns with AT because ‘Both Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Dewey’s idea-based social constructivism bridge the gap between the dualism of mind and world’ [21, p. 38]. Moreover, it provides an understanding of ‘the world of human experience’ [22, p. 36] through the ‘participants’ views of the situation being studied’ [23, p. 8]. Contrary to post-positivists, the study does not start with a theory, but inductively develops patterns of meaning [23].

The methodology followed was a case study approach to provide a holistic description [24] and explore students’ perceptions of the dubbing activity as an alternative to the prevailing activity system. It was a study of a ‘bound system’ through detailed data collection using multiple sources within a rich context [25].

Case studies benefit from a variety of data collection methods to arrive at a more detailed description of the case [26]. Data were collected through focus group interviews, a questionnaire to collect demographic data and my personal observations as an

insider researcher (who is part of the educational institute, the instructor of the participants and the designer of the new activity system). This required some measures to reduce researcher bias and influence, mainly by delaying data collection until the participants completed the course and moved on.

## 7 Participants and Procedure

The dubbing project was assigned to two sections of level 1 in the ‘Listening and Speaking’ class. There was a total of 34 female students aged 18 to 21 years, mostly fresh graduates of Arabic public secondary schools. Around half of the students were placed in level 1 because they missed the placement test.

Data were collected through 5 Focus Group (FG) interviews where students were required to reflect on their experience of the dubbing project, describe, and evaluate it. Twenty students responded to the FG invitation and 5 groups were formed in two different ways. Two groups constituted students who worked together on the same video and three groups contained students who worked on different videos. Although Cohen et al., among others, advise that FGs should be rather heterogeneous so that discussion can be enriched [24], Cousin tends to disagree, stressing that group members should have something in common to gain a certain sense of cohesion [26].

Each group interview went through three stages and lasted around one hour. Initially, the dubbed video(s) of the group members were played to remind students and stimulate detailed discussion. The second stage was answering a questionnaire to gather some demographic data, including their IELTS examination results before and after the project. This served as a good reminder of the project, particularly because the interview took place three months after the end of the project. Finally, the interview stage was introduced with an explanation of the purpose of the research.

## 8 Data Analysis

The group interviews were transcribed, translated and thematically analysed using open coded analysis [27]. Apart from the unanimous expression of how much fun and enjoyable the project was, six main themes emerged and are here discussed in order of the emphasis given to them by students.

### 8.1 Group Work and Collaboration

This emerged as a strong theme. Students expressed in different ways how group work enriched them and helped them learn. Two groups mentioned how they got together after class to work and how tasks were divided and redistributed if one student faced difficulty. A student remarked that she could not have understood much on her own without the help of her group. The following comments show this meaning: “If one of us did not understand something, other group members would explain it to her” and “When in a group, everyone participates with ideas. When I did not notice something, someone else in the group drew my attention to it.”



Group 4 mentioned that they did not need the dictionary much because they had a classmate who knew English well enough and asked her for meanings. One student, however, expressed how she did not like to work with a group and that she would have rather worked on her own or used the help of people from outside. This was a point of disagreement in one of the mixed focus groups and generated discussion among group members. Eventually, the student who disagreed acknowledged the need for others in this kind of project, but expressed her preference to work with outsiders for a more enriching experience. These findings show how the community of the new activity system became more harmonious, and division of labour was more effective in reaching the outcome.

## **8.2 The Competition as a Motivating Factor**

This was a prominent theme that emerged strongly without prompting. It was mentioned when asking for general impressions. Words such as ‘enthusiastic’, ‘motivated’, ‘encouraged’, ‘competitive’, and ‘want to win’ were quite recurrent. One student said that for her, it was only after announcing the competition that the interest started. “This is when the interest and drive for hard work kicked-in. This is when ideas started to come” she said. Another expressed that the competition made them more serious about the work, especially after knowing that the dubbed videos would be shown to an audience and a panel of judges. “We started to work hard when we knew that other instructors will be on the panel of judges to choose the winner.” Two groups remarked that when you work hard on something, you want people to see it. Others said that they finally dared to speak in English after being very reluctant to do so. They said that now they do not mind speaking in English and feel more confident and motivated. They also indicated that they felt honoured to be called on stage and presented with achievement certificates and awards. One student said that she immediately shared her certificate with her family. It is quite clear here that the new activity system was effective in changing students’ perceptions and motivating them, which answers the second research question.

## **8.3 Achievement, Pride, and Sense of Ownership**

A general sense of pride and achievement was prevalent. Students repeatedly asserted that doing this project was a big achievement for them since it was their first semester in the university, especially for being able to speak as fluently as they did in the videos. Having it on video was a proof of their improvement. Most students said that they shared the videos with family and friends, except one student who said she did not share it because she felt that she could have done better. This was the same student who did not prefer group work, giving the impression that she could have produced a better video on her own.

Many students expressed repeatedly that they never thought they could speak like that. “I don’t know how, but I dared to speak! I don’t speak much, not even in Arabic! Now I’m more confident and I don’t mind speaking as I used to before” one student commented. They also mentioned that they showed it to their other instructors: “they were impressed, told us how well we did and encouraged us to keep it up.” One student

mentioned a significant remark from one of their instructors. She said that this instructor turned around while the video was playing and said to her: “So you do speak English!” This remark from the instructor is an indicator of how resistant students were to communicating in English, even in their English classes.

#### 8.4 Difficulties

One common difficulty mentioned around 8 times was the fact that they had to speak in English and how they struggled with accepting the idea. They said that seeing others speaking and making mistakes made them feel that it was fine to make mistakes and gave them some confidence. Other remarks varied about the difficulties they faced and different students pointed to different aspects of the project. Students mentioned difficulties such as:

- dealing with Arabic words that do not have English equivalents: “Some words were hard to translate and had no equivalent, so we had to describe them instead”;
- lip synching, speaking speed, editing and re-recording: “the duration of our pronunciation was different from the character’s lip movement, so we had to re-record and change some of the dialogue as we were recording”;
- acting and changing the voice according to the role: “Sometimes we had to practice a lot just to get the right voice for the character. Acting with your voice is not easy”;
- pronunciation of new words.

One student said: “the more difficulties there are, the more you would want to overcome them and it drives you to do more”. Finding a suitable, quiet place to do the recording was noted as a challenge, but because the recording was done with a mobile telephone, the location shifted according to availability.

#### 8.5 Learning

Although this might be a difficult aspect to measure, students indicated that they learned a number of new vocabulary words. As students were watching the video at the beginning of the interview, they were prompted to jot down any word they learned in this project. They produced lists of words that ranged from 4 to 11 words per video. There was a correlation between the number of words and the length of dubbed video. The longer the video was, the more words were learned. Moreover, in the interviews they mentioned learning pronunciation and register: “Some Arabic expressions do not fit in the same context in English”. This was linked to the difficulty of translating some expressions. Repeating the recording for the sake of proper lip-synching was pointed out as the main reason they improved their pronunciation and fluency. One group specifically said: “this project was good to learn language, vocabulary, pronunciation, how to say things [intonation]... When you translate, you also learn grammar.” This relates to the first research question showing that the dubbing project remediated learning for false beginners and mixed ability classes.

## 8.6 Suggestions

When asked if they recommended this project for other classes and what suggestions they had, they all recommended it. Most said that the project was good as it was, a few suggested dubbing whole episodes or plays. One student suggested individual productions but others in the group did not agree, saying that if they had to act or perform on their own, they would not have done it.

## 9 Discussion and Conclusion

Students' comments and reflections were overwhelmingly positive and indicated a high level of engagement within the activity of dubbing. This is seen as a significant change to the disengagement, disruption, and frustration that were prevailing in the old activity system. As for motivation, a positive change in students' attitudes towards learning was noted. The activity catered for different levels of language learners. On the one hand, it encouraged collaboration between students. On the other hand, by breaking away from the set curriculum, each student found a task suitable to her level. Stronger students helped weaker ones, while all of them were motivated to do everything they could to win the competition.

Part of the demographic information students provided in the questionnaire was their score in the speaking component in the IELTS examination before and after level 1. Ten students indicated taking the IELTS both before and after level 1. The speaking component score improved for seven of them. Although this cannot be attributed to the dubbing project alone, it can still be suggestive of improvement. These results answer the first research question and provide evidence that this new activity system remediated language learning for false beginners in mixed-ability classes. It also answers the second question by showing students' increased motivation and confidence. Although the dubbing activity proved to be successful and enjoyable, results of the study need further verification in other contexts. For example, in the recording stage, students could be guided to do their own recording, video editing and publishing with less interference from the instructor.

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