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# Developing aural-visual comprehension in a foreign language by filmed theatre

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**Abstract**

In the last few years, a significant amount of research in the intersection between teaching of foreign languages (FL) and theatre has been carried out. If a lot of these pieces of research are aimed at the improvement of the learners' oral production through the use of drama, not so many, like our proposal here, look towards aural-visual comprehension from the perspective of the semiotics of theatre. This study investigates the effectiveness of using filmed theatre and guided questions to developing aural-visual comprehension in Spanish FL with university beginner students. The guided questions target the most important theatrical signs so that beginner students can fill some linguistic gaps without being overloaded by all the information received from the auditory and visual channels. The results reveal that filmed theatre has proved to be an innovative and motivating learning tool to improve comprehension in general and develop the strategy of inference in particular.

## 1 Introduction

The teaching of foreign languages has evolved enormously since the mid-20$^{th}$ century. Present day methods have been adapted with the evolution of society and its current needs and today as much importance is given to speaking and listening as to written skills. Our own experience in adult education concerning aural-visual comprehension in Spanish with beginners has allowed us to make some firm observations. Firstly, "comprehension" is often seen (especially in textbooks) as a simple discrimination between certain words or sounds and the stage needed for the construction of sense is usually neglected. This stage is essential to comprehension, as Saint-Martin (2007: 9) emphasises: "we can know something, a phenomenon or an object, without understanding or knowing the meaning". Also, even though the continuous development of the audio-visual in new technologies allows access to numerous sources of authentic documents, their use in language classes, these days, remains quite restrained. Some of the reasons include the time it takes to prepare lessons using audio-visual material or not recognising the possible educational use.

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Lastly, in the same way they understand their own mother tongue, students feel the need to reach an almost complete level of comprehension with regard to documents in a FL. When the process of understanding is not complete, the students interpret it as failure. In this regard, Budner (1962) introduces the concept of "tolerance to ambiguity" in which the student assumes the complexity of learning a new language and accepts partial understanding as a normal state. Once the learner (especially at early levels) tolerates this ambiguity, the fact of not understanding every single word is less discouraging and the attitude towards understanding become more favourable.

## 2 Foreign language comprehension and semiotics of theatre: crossing paths

### 2.1 Learning material

Considering these observations, we explored the possible learning material that could contribute to improving aural-visual comprehension of French-speaking beginners of Spanish. The choice of material should in this sense incorporate multi-modality, i.e., "the simultaneous presentation of information visually (images, texts) and aurally (noises, natural language)" (Spanghero-Gaillard 2008: 4). Concerning audio-visual material, some researchers like Chaudron (1983) and Rubin (1994) emphasise the positive effect of getting the students to work on the interpretation of certain audio-visual texts due to their correlation between images and words. By contrast, Derwing (1989) questioned the excessive use of details in this type of texts. He remarks that too much information can overload the person understanding, having a negative effect on comprehension. Novice learners not being able to process all the information could judge the comprehension of audio-visual material too difficult for them, even more so if documents are authentic. However, the confrontation to authentic documents from the beginning of learning a FL can also have a motivational effect. As Aden states, "it is counter-productive to wait for students to have a good command of the language before giving them deep texts" (2008: 38). She believes that it is more productive "to find literary works that represent a cognitive, cultural and emotional challenge for the learners" (ibid. 39). Even if literary works can be represented both in theatre and in cinema, in a theatrical play there are usually less details than in films and, it is more difficult to overload the person understanding. Therefore, extracts from a filmed play seem to be an interesting choice to practice aural-visual comprehension in FL classes. The signs arranged by the director and the actors to lead the audience to the meaning of the play allow learners to draw hypotheses using the multi-mode nature of all the signs. Fischer-Lichte (1999: 40f) proposes a classification of the theatrical signs by contrasting "acoustic / visual", "transitory / longer" and "in connection with the actor / in connection with space."

These signs are also a basis for developing the various micro-skills that make up aural-visual comprehension such as recognising, anticipating, interpreting

Table 1: 40f)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Noises | Acoustic | Transitory | In connection with the actor |
| Music | | | |
| Linguistic signs | | | |
| Paralinguistic signs | Visual | | |
| Mime signs | | | |
| Gestural signs | | | |
| Proxemic signs | | | |
| Mask | | Longer | |
| Hairdo | | | |
| Costumes | | | |
| Space conception | | | In connection with space |
| Scenery | | | |
| Accessories | | | |
| Lighting | | | |

or inferring, which awaken certain fundamental aptitudes in the learner, not only to identify words but also to give sense to all the elements of the show. In this study we will focus on inference because of its crucial role in the process of comprehension in early levels of learning a FL.

Taking all this into consideration, we asked ourselves how to give beginner Spanish students the aesthetic experience of a play while aiming at improving their aural-visual comprehension skill. In addition, we examined how the teacher should consider guiding the students towards significant elements to prevent overloading them with information. To set up our study, we had to put in place a theoretical framework bringing together not only semiotics of theatre and the teaching of foreign languages but also other disciplines such a semantics or cognitive psychology.

## 2.2 The aural-visual comprehension process

I define aural-visual comprehension as a complex and active process through which an individual builds the sense of what s/he is seeing and hearing from knowledge s/he already possesses and from the treatment of a series of signs, which will be presented to him or her in various forms. During the process of learning a FL, this process is often approached from a semiological model in which "priority is given to the perception of the (significant) formats of the message" (Gremmo & Holec 1990: 32). During the initial stage, the learner

must recognise sounds and words to be able to give them a meaning. Beginners, however, are not always in a position to recognise many of the linguistic signs they are hearing and may become blocked, as there is a significant amount of words they are not able to make out. Over and above the purely linguistic signs, there is a whole series of paralinguistic and extra-linguistic signs that are produced in parallel to the spoken word and that can assist the learner in understanding words and expressions by intuition. The onomasiological model whereby "priority is given to the creative operation of pre-construction of the meaning of the message" (ibid. 33), is based on the principle that the learner has to anticipate the meaning of the message by using a series of clues. This principle rests mainly on the recognition of signs other than linguistic. In fact, as Noizet (1980: 69) asserts:

> In most cases oral/aural communication rests on information stemming from perceptive sources other than oral/aural ones and on from semiological systems other than those of language. This information not only completes the oral message but also reduces any ambiguity with reference to the situation.

When starting to learn a FL, the student has a weak knowledge of the target language. However, s/he does have the pragmatic, socio-cultural, logical and emotional skills from his or her own language, which can be transferred to the other language. Without a doubt, this transfer is enhanced if it is made between two similar languages as "experience shows that in these cases and once freed from any preconceptions, the student will, very early, after a few readings, be able to understand some of the sense, even if he [sic] is a beginner" (De Man-De Vriendt 2000: 157). Nonetheless, it is still a difficult task to complete.

> When we are dealing with a foreign language without a high level of skill, automatic semantic treatment fails to produce a meaning. A partial realisation appears in these cases often accompanied by a cognitive feeling of discomfort: a voluntary activity of interpretation of the sentence can lead to automatic treatment, taking more or less time and with more or less success. (Gineste et al. 2005: 103)

Consequently, in order for this "voluntary activity of understanding" to lead to understanding speech, FL learners should develop a sensory skill of comprehension to better recognise all the signs (mainly other than linguistic) which carry meaning to ease the building of meaning. How can the theory of theatrical aesthetics shed light to this topic?

## 2.3 The guidance

The aesthetics of production and reception prove two very wide and complex areas of study, so attempting to approach both fields in our research was very challenging. However, it did seem productive to be able to turn to a notion "with a foot in each camp" between the two aesthetic concepts such as the idea of

"guidance" (the action of guiding). Talking about the play's text (produced by the playwright) and its acted out version (produced by the director), Ubersfeld (quoted in Pavis 2007: 632) uses "this concept of guidance to reception not as an unlimited intentional phenomenon to visual and positional areas, but a textual mechanism instigated by a certain reading strategy".

Gineste and Le Ny define the construction of meaning as "an activity going on in the listener's mind, but guided from afar by the speaker" (Gineste et al. 2005: 117). Whether it is specified in the field of the semiotics of drama or of the cognitive psychology of language, it seems clear that the reception/comprehension of language is not just an individual task but that the person understanding is accompanied by the speaker in his or her search for meaning. Thus, it is important to introduce the concept of "guidance" in teaching exercises when learning a FL.

At the same time, the learner (in this case the person understanding) can call on learning strategies. Legendre describes the term "strategy" as "a group of teaching operations and resources planned in accordance with the subject but encouraging to the maximum reaching objectives in a teaching situation" (Legendre 1993: 1187). Therefore, in the same way a member of the audience implements "reading strategies" (with regard to a play) so as to understand the play better, students have to get used, from the first year of learning, to "comprehension strategies" (for an audio-visual document) coming from his or her learning strategies such as, for example, establishing a semantic field, comparing with other languages he knows, using linguistic or extra-linguistic clues, etc.

## 3 The present study

The literature discussed in the previous section enabled us to put forth the hypothesis that, when starting to learn a FL, the selection and recognition of semiotic signs through guided questions would allow students to reach a better general understanding of the material. Also, reading extra-linguistics signs would promote the inference of unknown terms by connecting the meaning and the signifier. The present study, conducted at the University of Toulouse 2- Jean Jaurès, aims to measure the effect of reading of drama signs on the construction of the general meaning of a multimodal extract as well as to verify whether this reading could improve the inference of unknown linguistic terms.

### 3.1 Material

The supporting material of this experimental study consisted of two extracts of two minutes each of the filmed play of Federico García Lorca's "La Casa de Bernarda Alba" staged in Spanish by the company Les Anachroniques in May 2012. These extracts were consecutive and constituted a complete signifying unit, sufficiently independent to be understood in isolation of the rest of the play. In the extracts, Angustias, suspecting that her sisters have stolen the portrait of

his fiancé Pepe, becomes really angry at them. Their mother, Bernarda, has the maid search in the girls' rooms where, a few seconds later, she finds the portrait. Martirio, the sister having taken the precious object, justifies her gesture as a simple joke even if other feelings seem to have prompted her to do it. As a result, her act will provoke a violent altercation between all these women in a climate of mistrust and resentment.

### 3.2 Participants

Our experiment was carried out within the framework of an A1 level course in Spanish. This exploratory study lasted two hours and there were 71 A1 level students distributed in three classes. In order to have the most homogenous group, only students whose mother tongue was French were considered for this study. Thereby, out of 71 students, only 66 were sampled for our experimentation. The experimental group (with whom we tried the guided comprehension) was made up of 35 students and the control group (who had "traditional type questions" so we could compare the results), was made up of 31 students.

### 3.3 Procedure

In the first part, the experimental group and the control group were confronted with extract nº 1. After each viewing (three in total), the students had to answer a series of questions that they had previously read. The purpose of these questions was to enable us to verify the comprehension of the situational context. It goes without saying that students of a FL understand better language they are able to produce. That is why we asked them to express themselves in French, their first language. This also helped the students to feel at ease and to say more easily what they had understood. Along these lines the questions the students were asked were also in French so we could be sure they had understood exactly what we were asking them.

The experimental group answered several guided questions before replying the questions in common with the control group. The common questions were: What happens in the extract? Who is Bernarda? Who are the girls? Who is la Poncia? And where and when does the scene take place? The extra questions of the experimental group sought to guide the students towards the extra-linguistic and para-linguistic signs. They were oriented towards the kinetic elements (gestures), proxemics (physical distance between the characters) or aesthetics (makeup or clothes) but also towards the intonation or intensity of the character's voices. It is important to emphasise that each guided question plays a role in the path towards understanding. For example, one of the questions was about the physical situation of one of the characters, la Poncia, who is clearly set back from another character, Bernarda. Then we asked who might be la Poncia, and most of the students answered correctly that it was the maid. The questions in the control group followed the typical

path of listening comprehension activities that can be found in textbooks for learning a FL: making and comparing hypotheses between students and verifying comprehension based on multiple choice, true/false or short questions. Regarding the role of la Poncia, in contrast to the experimental group, the vast majority of students replied that she was an aunt or a sister but just three identified her as the maid.

Table 2: Table 2. Comparative chart of the question nº 3 concerning the role of la Poncia[2]

| **Example of experimental group questions** | **Example of control group questions** |
|---|---|
| A third woman, la Poncia, is present on stage... | |
| Where is she situated in relation to Bernarda? | In pairs, make hypotheses about her. |
| What tone does Bernarda use to talk to her? | |
| What gesture does Bernarda use to talk to her? | |
| In your opinion, what could be the role of la Poncia? | In your opinion, which could be the role of la Poncia?<br>a.) a sister b.) an aunt c.) a maid |

In order to collect feedback from the students on this first part, they were asked to answer a questionnaire just after to judge the difficulty of the extract and to report on the overall impression of the extract.

After this, we selected five key terms from the other part of the excerpt. We had paid particular attention to avoiding "transparent" terms. These terms include: *gastar una broma* (make a joke) – *pecho* (chest) – *calla* (shut up) – *paredes* (walls) – *fuera de aquí* (out of here)

First, we tried to determine whether students were familiar with these terms. To this purpose, we read these terms out. For each word, students had to mark if they did not know the term (valid option for this study) or if they knew the term (option not valid for the study). In the latter case, students had to translate the term or define it in French; this was important for us to ensure that they really knew the meaning of the word.

Then, the students watched for the first time the extract nº 2 after which they reported on whether they had identified the terms or not in the excerpt. The objective here was to help students recognise the words at the same time as they discovered the situational context of the extract. During a second viewing, students viewed just the fragment where each term to infer appeared, after which they proposed a translation or definition in French. After a third viewing of the extract, the students pointed out the methods used to infer the meaning of each term. They could choose several answers among four possibilities. This question sought to make students think about the elements giving them access to understanding.

## 4 Results and discussion

Once we analysed the answers, we found that the experimental group had a significantly better understanding than the control group about the situational context of the extract nº 1.

Table 3: Table 3. Number of correct answers regarding the situational context

| | E.G. | C.G. |
|---|---|---|
| Who | 24 | 13 |
| Where | 19 | 10 |
| When | 15 | 7 |
| What | 20 | 12 |

We also observed that the path to understanding was not the same for both groups. For the experimental one, meaning building was made "directly" (there was no backtracking in their answers). By contrast, for the control group, meaning was built "gradually" (the students changed their answers quite often). After reading the remarks of the students, we can assert that the control group, in general, had a feeling of dissatisfaction and/or hesitation. However, the students of the experimental group maintained a more positive attitude.

Some remarks from the control group:

- "I understood some bits but others are still not clear."
- "The activity was difficult but fun."
- "I'm not good enough yet for authentic documents."
- "It's difficult and I really need a lot of viewings to understand the meaning of the story."
- "I could not understand everything, they spoke very quickly."
- Some remarks from the experimental group:
- "The questions led us to look at the details and understand better."
- "On the whole it was not very understandable and it was rather due to the questions that I was able to understand the story."
- "The questions led us to think about things we would not have thought of and so to deduce things logically."
- "My impression was pretty good, I like theatre so I had fun."

Table 4: Table 4. Degree of difficulty in the document according to the two groups

| | E.G. | C.G. |
|---|---|---|
| Intelligible | 24 | 7 |
| Difficult | 11 | 22 |
| Very difficult | 0 | 2 |

- "Questions help us and make us deduce things."

If we analyse these remarks, we can claim that those in the control group felt cognitive discomfort, due maybe to the fact that they did not identify many of the words (see next table). However, those in the experimental group, although they realised the "difficulty" of the teaching exercise, managed to understand the logic of the extract and felt comfortable with the document. In other words, guided understanding from questions directing the attention of the learners towards the signs which hold the meaning of the most important concepts not only enhances the general understanding of the situational context of the document but also the impression they have after seeing it. Once the guided comprehension exercise has been assimilated and it becomes automatic for the learner, it will have an encouraging effect for beginners in the Spanish class who will be happy to approach authentic documents, as they are very stimulating cognitively speaking.

Regarding word inference, in general terms, the number of words inferred correctly was not very high for the two groups but it remains more significant for the experimental group. The students in the control group inferred 23 terms and those from the experimental group 54. It turns out that the experimental group (having worked on comprehension from the guided listening) inferred more than double the amount of terms of the control group. All terms had been associated to a non-linguistic sign except "gastar una broma" and "calla", which seems to explain why there were so few students who inferred these two terms. Table 5 details the results of each group.

Table 5: Table 5. Number of words inferred correctly by both groups after fragmented viewing

| | E.G. | C.G. |
|---|---|---|
| Gastar una broma | 6 | 2 |
| Pecho | 11 | 4 |
| Calla | 5 | 2 |
| Paredes | 13 | 8 |
| Fuera de aquí | 19 | 7 |

Regarding the methods implemented to infer unknown terms; it can be observed that the experimental group turned more towards a reading of the paralinguistic and extra-linguistic signs than the control group. It would appear that this kind of reading has proved positive given that this group inferred twice as many terms as the control group. In any case, the two groups relied mainly on elements already known such as context or words.

Table 6: Table 6. Methods implemented by students to infer unknown terms

| | E.G. | C.G. |
|---|---|---|
| Deducing from the general context | 21 | 22 |
| Paying attention to known words | 23 | 25 |
| Paying attention to extra-linguistics signs | 19 | 10 |
| Paying attention to para-linguistics signs | 17 | 8 |

## 5 Pedagogical implications

In conclusion, our study may suggest that students are able to improve their aural-visual comprehension through targeted and guided exercises. Indeed, exercises seeking only to evaluate understanding do not seem to give students any leads to think about this cognitive process. By contrast, the guided questions towards the more meaningful signs have shown that the general understanding of a text can be improved. It is not a matter of making understanding very obvious, but of helping students establish connections between their knowledge and inputs to create new knowledge. Moreover, these guided questions allow students to focus their attention on the most significant elements thus avoiding a cognitive overload. Therefore, we encourage teachers to use this kind of questions in order to make understandable to students complex multimodal authentic documents.

In addition, as we have observed here, the use of filmed theatre in a class of a FL facilitates the use of the strategy of inference by beginner students in particular, thanks to their reading of the theatrical signs. Even if inference of unknown terms still seems difficult for the initial years of learning a FL, we have seen a better performance among students who have been made aware of reading extra-linguistics and paralinguistic signs. We can only encourage teachers to guide their students in the development of strategies like inference that can provide them with autonomy, which will be of great help when confronted with the real language.

Lastly, from the data collected during our study, we have observed that students were interested in this kind of authentic, aesthetic and motivating documents never seen before, which also show students real models of language and culture. The students who followed the guided questions found

the document easier, but the general attitude of the two groups towards the document was positive. This encourages us to continue to delve into new learning material, such as filmed theatre, and how to use it to improve learning a FL.

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