CHILDREN'S AUDIO DESCRIPTION FOR THE PRACTICE OF MEDIATION AND THE ACQUISITION OF VOCABULARY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Even though teaching methods have evolved, translation remains an important and useful tool in the second language classroom (Lertola, 2018). Teachers have been adapting translation exercises to the new teaching trends, and this has allowed AVT to gain a new dimension as a didactic tool (Alonso Pérez & Sánchez Requena, 2018). Some researchers have already conducted projects to implement AVT modes to enhance students' linguistic skills, but also to encourage intercultural education. Regarding DAT studies, the main modes that have been employed are dubbing and subtitling. However, accessibility modes like AD and SDH have not yet received as much academic attention as they deserve. A type of AD that has been ignored in academic fields is children's AD. When creating a script for a children's program, it is crucial to consider the specific needs of this group. This article discusses a case study in which an interactive activity based on children's AD is

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employed to help English as a foreign language students practice their mediation skills and acquire vocabulary related to feelings and emotions while also developing their creativity. The results of the experiment show that students perceive that they have developed their creativity and their vocabulary and that the activity has helped them be more aware of the importance of accessibility nowadays.

Keywords**:** accessibility, adaptation, children's audio description, didactic audiovisual translation, language teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation has been present in language teaching for centuries. Many methodologies have based their tasks on translation activities for students to learn the vocabulary and syntactic structures of a language. Even though teaching methods have evolved and, nowadays, more competencies are taken into consideration when teaching a second language, translation remains an important and useful tool in the second language classroom (Lertola, 2018). Teachers have been adapting translation exercises to the new teaching trends, and this has allowed AVT to gain a new dimension as a didactic tool (Alonso Pérez & Sánchez Requena, 2018).

AVT is a field that has been gaining academic interest in recent years. This growing interest has also encouraged scholars to research a range of didactic

applications of AVT. In the present, this is possible thanks to the development of ICT tools that enable teachers and students to create their own AVT tasks in a relatively easy way. Besides, the existence of free software that can be used to create unique audiovisual content makes it possible for students from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds to participate in these activities. In sum, DAT can be an effective and inclusive method for second language teaching and learning. One of the most significant methodological proposals in this field was created inside the TRADILEX project (Talaván & Lertola, 2022), which provides a methodology based on "complete lesson plans which make use of diverse AVT modes […]to enhance communicative competence and mediation skills in an integrated and differentiated manner".

The benefits of applying AVT tasks for didactic purposes are wide. First of all, the use of authentic materials is more engaging for students, who feel motivated to create their content. Coherently selected videos used for these exercises can be valuable in multiple ways, the most important of which is the fact that they include natural and fairly spontaneous speech in a controlled environment. This means that, whereas the speech present in audiovisual content has been previously scripted and consciously prepared, it is natural enough to be considered a real and relevant

production of language. Moreover, it can be even more helpful than improvised speeches by native speakers, for these scripts are revised and refined. This implies that grammatical inaccuracies or pronunciation mistakes do not usually find their way into the final product (Talaván, 2019). The selected videos should include themes that are relevant in the present day and can encourage students to reflect upon some aspects of society. This way, they would improve not only their linguistic skills but also their sociocultural competencies.

AVT comprises various modes including dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, audio description and subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing. Even though each one of them focuses more on some linguistic aspects than others, they can be complemented with other activities to reinforce different skills like oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral production, written production, grammar and vocabulary acquisition and creativity, among others.

Some researchers have already conducted projects to implement some of these AVT modes to enhance students' linguistic skills such as oral comprehension or written production, but also to encourage intercultural education (Incalcaterra McLoughlin, 2009; Díaz Cintas, 2012; Talaván, 2013; Incalcaterra McLoughlin & Lertola, 2014; Lertola, 2015). A few of these projects and studies have even achieved to

create brand-new tools to work with DAT in a learning environment, such as LeViS (Sokoli, 2006) and PluriTAV (Marzà et al., 2018). Accessibility has also been present in different DAT projects, such as the SubLITE project or TRADISUB, which used subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) to work with vocabulary acquisition (Alonso Pérez & Sánchez Requena, 2018), or other projects in which AD has been used to raise awareness about the importance of accessibility nowadays (Ogea Pozo, 2022). Others also have combined both SDH and AD in the foreign language setting (Talaván, Lertola & Ibáñez, 2022).

All of these researchers' work has proven that DAT can have many benefits for foreign language students and that DAT tasks can be applied to the school's curriculum. They have also shown that both teachers and students enjoy this kind of activity because they find it motivating and enriching, being able to work individually or in groups to create their audiovisual content.

2. CHILDREN'S AUDIO DESCRIPTION

AD is one of the main accessibility services. It consists of the introduction of additional messages in the original soundtrack which describe what appears on the screen. These messages describe all those

visual elements relevant to the plot of the audiovisual text that are not accessible to visually impaired audiences (Talaván, Águila-Cabrera & Costal, 2016). This information must be included in between dialogues or during silences to prevent the overlapping of the AD with what the characters are saying. Besides, AD should describe the visual elements clearly and concisely, so the blind and visually impaired spectators can easily contextualize what is happening. It should also match the audiovisual text's tone and rhythm and help target recipients perceive the audio-described content in the same way as the rest of the users (Fryer, 2016).

The blind and visually impaired audiences are quite varied and heterogeneous, involving diverse profiles with their characteristics and needs. The main difference can be found between those who are completely blind and those who can still perceive some shapes or colours. Moreover, inside the group of users who are blind, some people have lost their sight at different stages in their lives. For example, some people suffer sight loss due to old age, whereas others can become blind due to an illness or an accident. Some even might be born blind. This last group is a very special case because, unlike other users, they have not had any visual experience of the world, therefore they do not have any visual input of their environment whatsoever. This condition affects

their cognitive and linguistic development because, in the early stages of life, when humans still cannot communicate verbally, they learn about the world through their eyes.

In addition, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (2009) states that a high percentage of blind children suffer from cortical blindness. In this condition, the main visual organs are intact and function properly, but the main issue is found in the brain. This brain damage can affect other areas that control movement or cognitive functions. Therefore, many blind children may also present other impairments like deafness, difficulty moving or other cognitive problems. These unique characteristics make blind and visually impaired children a group with very specific needs that must be considered when creating an AD targeted to them.

One of the aspects that must be taken into consideration when doing an AD for children is the syntax and vocabulary that are employed. Needless to say, they have to be adapted to the target public's age (ITC, 2000). Moreover, like in standard AD, the tone and the rhythm of the AD have to match those of the audiovisual context. However, this aspect becomes even more important when talking about children's programs. These need to include elements to catch the children's attention, so they are usually characterised by a cute and friendly tone. Of course, the AD must

match this tone, so it is advisable to include a great variety of expressive adjectives and adverbs that can be interesting for children (ITC, 2000).

These parameters also apply to the recording of the AD. Usually, in standard AD, the AD's voice-over speaks with a rather neutral tone, without letting extreme emotions show in their voices. However, the situation is different in children's programs. As established before, children may get distracted while watching certain audiovisual content, and this is why these programs include elements to keep their attention. Narration also has to be involved in this. The narrator of the AD script must use an expressive tone and try to reflect in their voice the characters' feelings. This way, children can feel the characters' emotions and follow the plot more easily, as well as develop their oral comprehension (Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2013).

The amount of information rendered in the AD must be considered when creating audio-described content for children. Children cannot process the same amount of information as adults due to their short attention span (RNIB, 2009). Hence, children's AD should include more concise sentences, without giving more information than is strictly necessary for the comprehension of the plot. In addition to this, the language style should also be simple and easy to understand, but it is also advisable to include more

difficult words or terms with a curious pronunciation at specific moments of the program to keep children's interest and to help them expand their vocabulary. This can also be emphasized with the use of rhymes or linguistic devices such as alliteration (RNIB, 2009).

Likewise, the type of information that should be included in children's AD can lead us to the controversial topic of subjectivity. When looking at some standards guides for AD that have been published, it can be noticed that 1) almost none of them consider children's AD a special type of AD, and 2) they all advise audio describers to be as objective as possible when describing the actions and events that take place on the screen. However, as has been mentioned before, children's AD must match the program's tone and include adjectives and adverbs that express those endearing elements that children's contents portray. Therefore, this conception might contradict the widespread standard that AD should be objective.

In the end, the main goal is to create an accessible product that enables visually impaired children to experience audiovisual content similarly to other audiences without visual impairment. To do so, it is necessary to fill the AD with expressive words that keep the audience's attention and a voice-over that matches the characters' feelings and emotions.

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Moreover, sometimes it could be even necessary to include additional information to contextualize some sounds or elements to ensure that children understand what is happening in the program. This may involve adding information about the colour, the shape or the source of a sound. In sum, a complex and diverse audiovisual product, with a variety of elements, meanings and emotions, must have an AD that provides the same complexity for blind and visually impaired audiences.

3. THE POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN'S AUDIO DESCRIPTION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

When looking at DAT studies, the main modes that have been employed are dubbing and subtitling whereas accessibility modes like AD and SDH have not yet received as much academic attention as they deserve. This may well be because accessibility has gained more relevance in the academic field only recently. This has been made possible thanks to the work of associations, academics and users that have demanded a more accessible society in which everyone can enjoy any audiovisual product, no matter their specific needs.

There have been a few case studies and experiments using AD practices for students learning a foreign language. According to Navarrete (2018), the first

steps into didactic AD were taken by Martínez Martínez in 2012. The main goal of the activities she designed was to improve students' acquisition of vocabulary through passive AD. However, soon the focus shifted from passive AD tasks to exercises in which students had to create their AD proposals. Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen experimented in 2013 when they employed AD to improve students' lexical and phraseological competence. The results of this experiment concluded that students had shown a clear improvement in their linguistic skills and vocabulary acquisition (Navarrete, 2018). In 2014, they continued exploring didactic AD possibilities in the foreign language classroom. They performed another study involving collaborative work between a group of Spanish native speakers who were studying AVT and a group of Dutch native speakers who were learning Spanish, with very promising results.

Later studies also focused on how AD-based tasks could be used to improve oral production (Ibáñez Moreno et al., 2016), which set the basis for future studies in this area. Talaván and Lertola's experiment in 2016, which included one group that completed collaborative AD tasks and a control group that continued with their usual activities, also demonstrated that AD tasks could be applied in distance learning and that they helped to improve oral production. Finally, Navarrete (2018) carried out a

preliminary experiment with a small group of English speakers who were learning Spanish in which they used AD exercises to improve oral skills. The results of this experiment showed not only that students had indeed improved their oral production, particularly intonation and pronunciation, but also that they considered that this experience with AD had had a positive impact on their learning process.

Even though there is still a long way to go, it has been already established that AD can be a powerful didactic tool in the language teaching classroom. The creation of an AD script involves several linguistic skills like written and oral production, but it also helps students develop their creativity, their ability to synthesise information and their sociocultural skills. In addition to this, AD is a form of intersemiotic translation, since it involves a translation process between two different systems: from images to written and oral text, so a process of mediation is also involved in the creation of an AD script.

In cases in which AD has been employed for didactic purposes, the audiovisual content was quite standard and teachers did not place much focus on the potential audience that would receive the audio-described product. Further research could be conducted focusing on different types of AD addressed to specific audiences, such as blind or visually impaired

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children, so that students would have to adapt their proposals to those particular final recipients.

Because of all its specific characteristics and unique features, children's AD can be a helpful tool in the language teaching classroom. As with other AVT modes, it could be employed in DAT lesson plans to encourage students to create their audiovisual content while developing their linguistic skills in a second language.

The benefits of the application of children's AD for didactic purposes are many. First, as in the rest of the AVT modes, the use of real-life audiovisual content makes it more interesting for the students and motivates them to complete the exercise. The use of active tasks is also an additional motivation for young learners. AVT involves the creation of new and unique audiovisual content on the part of the students, who can feel that they are doing something real and useful for people with accessibility difficulties.

Moreover, as the content used is taken from existing audiovisual content, the language that appears in them is fairly natural and spontaneous and students are less likely to encounter grammatical inaccuracies than in other forms of speech uttered by native speakers in a less controlled environment. Furthermore, the fact that children's AD involves the use of content specifically targeted to children makes

it even possible to apply this type of AD for didactic purposes at lower education levels, like Primary Education. This content, thanks to the success of streaming services, is more varied than ever. Many children's programs that address a wide variety of topics and try to pass today's societal values on to the younger generations can be found. Because of this, didactic children's AD can also be an outstanding tool for the sociocultural development of foreign language students.

As an accessibility mode, children's AD can have further benefits for foreign language students, since it may open their eyes to the reality of those who cannot enjoy audiovisual content as easily as the rest. The use of AD as a didactic tool helps to raise awareness about the importance of accessibility and the necessity of including it in our everyday lives. The use of children's AD could make young learners reflect upon the importance of culture and audiovisual content, especially for the youngest members of society, and how it is essential to make these products accessible to them.

Finally, as happens with standard AD, children's AD tasks also cover the great majority of skills that are assessed in language learning, especially written production, grammar and vocabulary acquisition, creativity and cultural mediation (Navarrete, 2018). Students have to attempt and provide a suitable AD

that can make it easier for visually impaired people to access the program that has been audio-described. To achieve that, they have to be creative so they can elaborate short sentences that can be said in the available amount of time and that, at the same time, provide the necessary information to understand what is happening on the screen. Besides, they have to be mindful of their target audience, for they have to adapt their script to the specific needs of visually impaired children.

The previous reflection has proven that didactic children's AD shows the same benefits as other DAT modes. However, due to its particular characteristics and unique features, it can also bring additional benefits which can make didactic children's AD a form of DAT that stands on its own. For instance, the fact that students should employ expressive nouns, adjectives and adverbs that convey the perky and gentle tone of children's programs and make an extra effort to make an attractive and appropriate AD for children. In a way, they would have to put themselves in the shoes of a visually impaired child who wants to enjoy that particular film, short movie or TV show. This would demand of them a higher level of creativity and would help them acquire new vocabulary, especially the one related to feelings and emotions. By using this type of lexicon, they would help the target audience to follow the plot and to

experience the same feelings as the characters. Thus, visually impaired children will be able to enjoy the audiovisual content as a whole. This has already been applied in some projects based on SDH, in which this accessibility mode was used to develop students' vocabulary, particularly with specific adjectives (Talaván, Águila-Cabrera & Costal, 2016).

However, this does not only apply to vocabulary. Syntax has to be adapted to younger audiences, too. As established before, children cannot process the same amount of information at the same pace as adult audiences, so sentences should be straightforward and concise but also include the essential information of the scene. This would demand students to practise their ability to summarize, a skill that can also be very important when learning a second language.

Subjectivity is an interesting element to apply when creating didactic children's AD tasks as well. The fact that this type of AD can benefit from more subjective scripts that step out of the norm to increase visually impaired children's enjoyment of the program can be a great asset for students. They would feel more self-sufficient to experiment and explore other possibilities that perhaps would not have occurred to them in standard AD. This could lead to more involvement of the students in the activity, increasing their motivation, and to more surprising results. All

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these elements would be crucial for the creation of a fruitful experience.

4. METHODOLOGY

To put into practice these assumptions about didactic children's AD and to study students' perceptions, a small-scale experiment was performed. The subjects of the experiment were students from the final year of the Translation and Interpreting Degree at a higher education institution in Spain, their ages ranging from 18 to 26. Twenty-five students completed the task and twenty-one of them answered the questionnaires. The experiment took place in December 2022 in the EN-ES AVT classroom. These students already had some AD notions, but they had not previously dealt with children's AD.

The main goal of this experiment was, first, to determine if children's AD could be successfully implemented in a DAT task; second, to establish if students applied a different approach to children's AD taking into consideration the specific characteristics of visually impaired children, and, third, to analyse how this type of exercises could improve students' linguistic skills in a foreign language.

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4.1. Case Study

The task designed for this experiment was based on the concepts of DAT, AD and didactic children's AD that have been analysed before. The audiovisual content chosen for the experiment was a children's short film titled *Puppy* (https://n9.cl/nwiyv).

The software employed was the online tool *Learning apps* (https://learningapps.org/). This tool offers a wide variety of templates and examples to create interactive activities. Besides, as it is an online app that does not require downloading any additional software, students can access the activity directly by just clicking on a link. The design tool of *Learning apps* allows the addition of an unlimited number of questions, as well as to employ many different types of media, from text to YouTube videos, images or audio files. It even includes an option in which the text inserted can be read by an AI, which opens endless possibilities for interactive AVT tasks.

To make it easier for students to write their own children's AD and to get the best possible results, the video was divided into 10 different clips. Thus, they could easily determine which elements participated in each scene and how they would include them in their proposal to create an accessible product for visually impaired children. Each one of the clips had one space

below in which students could write their AD proposal.

Thanks to the possibilities *Learning apps* offer, while designing the activity, teachers can provide potential answers and establish which basic information would have to be included in each clip. With this feature, students could know in real-time if their proposal was adequate or not. However, one minor disadvantage that was noticed while performing the task was that the online tool only allows the teacher to enter these options and suggestions manually, so some of the students found that the software indicated that their proposal was not correct, even though they had included the necessary elements. The main reason for this is that the project is in its early stages of development, so not all options may have been considered from the very beginning. However, the positive side is that thanks to students' feedback, more and more options can be included and the results will gain precision.

4.2. Procedure

The main stages of the activity were the following:

First, a brief presentation on DAT and the main characteristics of children's AD was shown to students. This way, they could become familiarised

with the particulars of children's AD and they would consider them while completing the task.

Second, students worked on the exercise, creating a suitable AD for each one of the clips and including it in the space available for it. They were able to replay the video as often as they wanted, and there were no space limits, although they were advised to stick to the available time between dialogues or important sounds that appeared on the clip to make their AD as realistic as possible.

Third, students submitted their proposals on the app. Those options that were considered correct turned green, whereas those that were insufficient turned red. Students were encouraged to revise the incorrect options and try to improve them.
Fourth, when students considered their options to be adequate and of quality for a children's AD proposal, they were asked to include them in a questionnaire whose answers would be available to the teacher. After revising them, those that were adequate were included in the app for the improvement of the task's results.

Finally, Students answered a final questionnaire in which they were asked about their experience with the children's AD activity, their general feelings

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towards DAT and the possibility of doing more activities like the one they had done in the future.

4.3. Resources

In addition to the online resources employed for the design of the task, the questionnaires were created through *Google Forms* (https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/). In this case, two questionnaires were provided: one for students to submit their proposal and another for them to reflect upon their experience with the children's AD task. In both of them, when students sent in their answers, the teacher could easily access them, and determine how many students had completed the entire activity. Besides, another advantage is that *Google Forms* offers graphics and diagrams that reflect students' answers with different colours, something that simplifies the analysis of the data.

In the final questionnaire, the questions were mainly oriented to determine how the task had helped to raise awareness about accessibility in general and children's AD in particular, and if students perceived the differences between standard AD and children's AD. Furthermore, some questions also were focused on the students' perceptions of the task, their motivation while completing it and their interest in performing similar exercises in the future. Finally, students were also asked to determine which

linguistic skills they felt that they had worked on the most, and if they felt that they could improve their second language level through similar activities.

4.4. Analysis of results

After finishing the task, students had to complete a final questionnaire about accessibility, DAT and children's AD. In the first part of the questionnaire, they had to answer some questions about accessibility and children's AD. All 21 students who answered the questionnaire stated that this activity had helped them realise the importance of accessibility nowadays. Also, though in different degrees, almost all students (90 %) agreed on the fact that children's AD presents a series of characteristics that set it apart from other types of AD. Finally, 20 out of 21 students considered that a more subjective children's AD can help the target public to better understand the plot and to completely enjoy the program, in contrast with what is usually recommended in AD guidelines, where objectivity is one of the most important elements of AD. This demonstrates that students understood that blind and visually impaired children have specific necessities that need to be taken into consideration when creating an AD script targeted to them.

In another section of the questionnaire, specific questions about didactic children's AD were asked.

Of all the parameters measured with these questions, the ones students agreed on more were how the didactic children's AD activity had helped them develop their creativity and acquire new vocabulary in English. This is shown in some proposals in which students decided to include more expressive sentences like "Wanna be my pet?" or "Dave goes crazy!". This goes in line with the insight the students indicated in the questionnaire, where they answered that, from their point of view, a more subjective AD would help children to better understand the story and enjoy the plot. In addition to this, some students, instead of describing the characters all the time, decided to identify them by giving them names. At the beginning of the task, they were told that the minion's name was Dave, but nothing was said about the UFO. Despite this, some students referred to it as "Robot" or "UFO", making it sound more familiar to the audience. Besides, the most common modifiers used with both nouns include "little", "baby" or "friend", which shows that students have made an effort to match the program's friendly and endearing tone.

With regards to vocabulary, students perceived that they had amplified their vocabulary in English, which is shown in some proposals where we can find words like "tweets", "stares", "abducts", "swallows" or "astonished". Specifically, one type of vocabulary

that students felt they had developed the most was that of vocabulary related to feelings and emotions. Throughout all the proposals, adjectives like "astonished", "expectant" or "curious" and adverbs like "sweetly", "happily", "smiling", "lovingly" or "warmly" appear, showing that the students who completed the task and answered the questionnaire took into consideration the potential audience's needs and tried to describe the characters' feelings.

Besides, all students answered that the activity performed in the class had made them aware of children's AD importance nowadays. In specific questions about the children's AD task, 100 % of the students stated that they liked the activity and that they considered it a good method to apply children's AD in didactic environments. Moreover, 95 % of them expressed that they would like to try similar activities in the future to improve their linguistic skills.

At the end of the questionnaire, students were asked to add any comments or suggestions about the activity. One of them considered employing diminutive adjectives to make the AD more familiar, whereas another student valued positively the presence of humorous scenes, as they considered that they made the activity more enjoyable. Overall, 95, 2 % of the students believed that this activity had helped them be more aware of AD's importance in

our society. Students showed motivation to create a children's AD proposal that would fulfil the target audience's needs, and their answers in the questionnaire showed that the fact that the activity was based on children's AD made it more attractive and motivating for them.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This experiment has demonstrated the didactic possibilities of children's AD to encourage students to be creative and adapt their AD script to blind and visually impaired children's needs. This helps them to be more aware of the importance of accessibility and improve their mediation skills. Besides, children's AD-specific features enable them to explore different possibilities and apply subjective linguistic devices. For example, more expressive sentences, exclamation marks or vocabulary related to feelings and emotions. This is why didactic children's AD work is a useful tool for the acquisition of this type of vocabulary.

Thanks to the fact that the audiovisual content that is employed in this type of task is specifically targeted at children, further research on this subject could deal with the application of didactic children's AD for foreign language teaching in lower levels of education, such as Primary Education. This could be

achieved by designing exercises adapted to younger learners which include all the benefits of didactic children's AD that have already been established.

A further line of research that can be considered regarding children's didactic AD is its use to practice oral production. This may be done by suggesting an additional activity in which, once they have finished their script, students could be asked to narrate their AD, always trying to match the feelings and emotions they portray through their intonation with those of the characters who appear on the screen. This way, they could work on their pronunciation and fluency.

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