



Does movie subtitling enhance second language learning in Tanzania's secondary schools? Insights from English subtitles of Bongo Movie

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"No teacher, no classroom can provide the amount, the quality, the variety of language in interesting, meaningful, and informative and often amusing context than television can." (Vanderplank, 1990, p. 221)

Abstract

Audio-visual materials such as subtitled films have been shown to play an important role in language learning. This paper examines the usefulness of the subtitled movies to enhance second language learning. A focus is on Bongo Movies, a modern film industry in Tanzania and its influence among the Swahili learners of English as a second language. To explain the situation, a subtitled Bongo Movie clip was given to 26 form three students from Makongo and Jitegemee secondary schools in Dar es Salaam. Thereafter, focus group discussions with students were conducted. The findings show that subtitled movies helped students to learn some new vocabularies from the clip which happens consciously or subconsciously; and increase their reading speed. It was also found that students with good English proficiency did not find Bongo Movies with English subtitles useful learning tool. The study therefore, calls for more research on the interface of subtitling and second language learning.

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1.0 Introduction

The Tanzania educational policy insists on using English as the language of instruction in secondary schools and higher educational levels. In Tanzania, English language retains the status of the second language¹ (L2) to many Tanzanians, while Swahili and other local languages serve as the first language (L1) to them. This linguistic context of the country often causes a lot of challenges to learners when they are learning the L2. Because L1 is frequently used in many social contexts and therefore mastered by many users compared to L2. It is obvious, as the learners use L2 in school context only; their learning is limited by a lack of sufficient time and exposure for L2 inputs. Therefore, learners need to find other alternatives of language inputs and learning practices beyond the classroom context. However, outsourcing an appropriate source of input is also a challenge. In most cases, these learners may use television and films to provide themselves with a wider context from which they learn the L2 (cf. Aliyev and Albay, 2016). In some cases, the television programmes or films run in a language other than the learner's targeted language but it may be synchronised with subtitles which, to the learners, serve as a source of L2 input. Take an example of a Swahili speaker Learner of English as an L2 watching a Swahili Movie with English subtitles. This implies, beside their entertaining purpose, subtitled movies gain a new role in the context of education. They can be used by learners as authentic material for learning L2 (Zanon, 2006).

From television programmes and/or subtitled movies, learners may, for instance, learn new words from subtitles. They may also learn the pronunciation of words in almost similar ways as used by native speakers of that language. Furthermore, they acquire the meaning of new words exposed to them via subtitles. This is possible because a learner can associate what he or she hears from the characters' dialogue and its translation version on the screen. This claim coincides with other previous studies which support that subtitles may enhance second language learning (cf. Lertola, 2012; Talavan, 2007). In their study, Bianchi and Ciabattini (2008) insist that audiovisual materials, movies in particular, can be a good source for authentic input when accompanied by subtitles. So, it is within this perspective, this paper

¹ Second language in this paper has been used to mean a language learned sometimes later after first language (see Gass and Selinker, 2008), it is also used interchangeably with foreign language here



aims at establishing an understanding that Bongo Movies (local popular cinematic films based in Tanzania, usually in Swahili) with English language subtitles can be used as a learning tool for L2 learners aiming to learn English. Alternatively, these same movies can be helpful to English speakers who need to learn Swahili.

Historically, subtitling started to emerge around 1920s following the development in the film industry (Baker as cited in Khalaf, 2016, and Diaz-Cintas and Anderman, 2009) On the other hand, it seems that an interface of subtitling and language learning gained momentum around 2000s onward. Because it is during this time, the world witnessed a massive flow of publications in the area. Some of the researches focus on the role of subtitling to enhance foreign language acquisition (Birules-Muntane and Soto-Faraco, 2016; Almeida and Costa, 2013; Zanon, 2006). Other studies focused on a specific aspect of language learning such as vocabulary learning (Sabouri et al, 2015; Lertola, 2012; Talavan, 2007). Researchers like Kanellopoulou, 2019; Chiaye, 2017) paid attention to the effectiveness of movie subtitles in vocabulary learning. The above distribution of the scholarly works (that studied different aspect of the interface) point to the fact that film subtitles have recently attracted researchers' interest globally and much has been done to assess their worthiness in language learning. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the situation is not the same in Tanzania. The film industry in the country- Bongo Movie has received a relative low attention of researchers; both in terms of its interface with language learning and as a translation study cf. Ngunguti (2011) whose analysis found that Bongo Movie has numerous translation problems.

The reasons for this low attention or 'neglect' of subtitling in Tanzania and worldwide are explained by Diaz- Cintas (2004) in his paper '*subtitling: the long journey to academic acknowledgment*'. He pinpoints two reasons; one is the field's difficulty. That is, researchers face difficulties as whether they should treat subtitling as a translation or an adaption. According to him, the paradox is triggered by the inapplicability of the theories of traditional translation; as such most researchers choose to ignore the area. Another reason is difficulty in getting copies of translation from the translators. That is, sometimes translators are not willing to hand in their translations; as a result researchers ignore the area. But in Tanzania, the fact that subtitling technology arrived into the country recently (ie. around 2000s) may



explain low response of researchers in the field. Therefore, this paper hopes to shed some light for more research in the area. It focuses on the Swahili learners learning English as a second language and, whom this inquiry found as using Bongo Movies subtitles to learn English.

The paper used focus group discussion to obtain participants opinion over the questions posed to them to examine the role of subtitled movies in English language learning. This was accompanied by a movie clip to tally participants' responses with their reality. The findings of this paper suggest that to most learners film subtitles enhance second language skills because it increases reading skills and the learning of new words.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Bongo Movies, subtitling and their historical development

The phrase 'Bongo Movies' denotes a local film industry in Tanzania. It is also loosely used to refer to any movie produced in this industry. These movies portray Tanzania's culture and everyday social issues encountered by Tanzanians in their day to day life. The industry dominantly uses Swahili, a Bantu language that is spoken all over Tanzania. However, characters in Bongo Movies sometimes code switch and code mix Swahili with English. The movies can either be subtitled or not. Although the subtitles are not restricted only to English language, it is plausible to claim that English language is the most dominating subtitles in these movies. Generally, the subtitles in Bongo Movies range from English language's subtitles to ethnic languages including Swahili. The current study's focus is limited to the movies which are subtitled in English language in order to examine their significance among the Swahili learner of ESL.

Stubbs as cited in Reza (2016) defines subtitling as a linguistic practice that shows a written text on screen purporting to convey the dialogues, the iconic elements or other material on the soundtrack such as songs. Diaz- Cintas in Liu (2014) provides common types of subtitling based on linguistics parameters. These are intralingual and interlingual subtitling. The intralingual subtitling, which is also termed as no change in language by Diaz- Cintas in Liu (2014), refers to the use of the same



language in the characters' dialogues and the translation version on the screen. It is primarily meant to serve deaf and hard in hearing individuals. A subtitled movie is considered as intralingual when, for example, it is acted in English and subtitles are in English. On the other hand, interlingual subtitling is when more than one language is used. That is, the characters' dialogues use a different language from the translation version on the screen. The interlingual subtitling primarily helps speakers of a different language to understand the said message in a movie. This is to say, it aims at reaching an audience far beyond its native speakers. Bongo Movies is one of the vivid examples, whereby, the characters speak in Swahili language and the subtitles are in English language.

Moreover, the discussion on the development of subtitling in the world cannot be separated from the revolution that occurred in the film industry. Diaz-Cintas and Anderman (2009) explain that around 1920s when the world was experiencing massive advancement in technology, the film industry also felt its impact. In a sense that, during this period films' production were in transition from silence era to the inclusion of the sound (Taylor, 2009). Such advancement resulted in a language problem because movies were produced in different languages and were distributed to different countries in the world. As the world had no one common language, the on screen translation emerged as a way to resolve the problem of language differences. This has developed into what is today known as Audiovisual Translation (AVT) whose dominant modes are subtitling, dubbing and voice-over.

This entails that films have been the major source of development of subtitling technology in many countries. In Tanzania for instance, subtitling gained popularity in the mid of 2000. This was when Bongo Movies, the modern film industry (as it is known) was in its booming era (as the leading film producer) around East Africa. Also, it was regarded as the second film industry in Africa after Nigeria (Mwakalinga, 2016). Its audience is approximated 132 million potential viewers across central and southern Africa (Press Release, 2014). As such, it can be inferred that subtitles' synchronisation in Bongo Movies target the external market around those areas.

Unfortunately, with anecdotal evidence, there have been several complaints over the kind of English subtitles synchronised in Bongo Movies. Some of these complaints include a mismatch between the time at which the word is uttered and when its



subtitles appear and disappear on a screen. More so, Bongo Movies subtitles bear typos. These two complaints are thought to have even lowered the Bongo films' popularity at international level. For the film to win the international popularity, it needs to have high quality of all the required features of the movie, including literary design, visual design, cinematography, sound design and editing. However, Bongo films appear to have low qualities of these features (Gumbo, 2019). Yet, researchers have paid relatively little attention to it, especially their significance in language learning. The possible reasons for lack of such scholarly attention to Bongo Movies, is the popular view that Bongo Movies are meant for entertainment only; and that, as Shule (2013) states, Bongo Movies were initially meant for people of low class. Thus, even in the present with the increase of the number of the audience, researchers in the field of translation and linguistics still have that initial perception on Bongo movies. This situation weakens the industry development in general.

Mitterer and McQueen, (2009) clarify that foreign subtitles improve the speech perception of a foreign learner. It is therefore, not deniable to state that challenges in Bongo Movies with English subtitles have some repercussions on the viewers, especially non-Swahili speakers. For instance, foreigners may be interested in learning Swahili and use movies as an authentic tool but, with errors in the English subtitles, these learners expose themselves to acquire erroneous linguistic input. This is because learners with no Swahili background may extremely rely on the English translation they read from the screen hoping to learn Swahili concepts they heard from the characters' dialogue. Similarly, a Swahili speaker also may intentionally want to learn English language by using the English subtitles in Bongo Movies.

2.2 Empirical literature

The discussion on the significance of subtitles and film subtitles show paradoxical perceptions regarding the impact of film subtitles among learners. For instance while, Dollerup (1974) in his paper '*On subtitles in television programmes*' argues that subtitles improve one's command of a foreign language and are a means of learning other languages, Zanon (2006) views movie subtitles as a means of weakening learning skills to learners. Hwang and Huang (2011) and Metruk (2018) on the other hand, state that there are no significant differences in language learning when a learner uses subtitled or a non-subtitled movie. But still, even with the lack of



common understanding, it is undeniable that in most cases learners usually gain some linguistic skills from watching subtitled movie. A similar situation has been observed when a person focuses on the songs in a foreign language to learn that language.

Birules-Muntane and Soto-Faraco, (2016), Chiaye (2017), and Eye (2016) conducted different experiments focusing on the significance of movie subtitles. They generally found that movie subtitles help learners learn and improve more on the aspect of vocabulary when they learn the L2. Sabouri et al (2015) conducted a similar experiment to 24 male and 22 female Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) with upper- intermediate level and found that there is more improvement on vocabulary learning when subtitles are involved. Chiaye's (2017) study also shows that watching subtitled movies facilitate vocabulary learning and motivate learners to acquire words, phrase and idioms.

In addition, Hwang and Huang (2011) conducted a study involving 80 freshmen students from Taiwan University, in order to determine whether video English captions can improve or impede EFL students' reading comprehension. Hwang and Huang's study used an instructional video with English subtitles. They divided the learners into two groups. One group was given a video with subtitles and another without subtitles for 10 weeks. Then, Hwang and Huang administered a general English proficiency test (GEPT) to these two groups of learners. Their study showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Thus, in their study, they concluded that even if a video caption provides comprehensive input as authentic material, it does not guarantee accessibility in the learners' mind.

Metruk (2018) also did a study to Slovak EFL learners in order to assess whether subtitled movies can improve their reading and listening skills. Metruk divided learners into three groups; the first group was with English subtitles, the second group was with Slovak subtitles, and the last group was without subtitles. The observation of his study indicated a minor difference in analysing the reading test between Slovak subtitles and English subtitles. However, this difference was not statistically significant for both reading and listening skills. Therefore, the reviewed literature suggests that subtitled movie may influence learners variably; some skills, such as vocabulary learning can positively be influenced, while other skills, such as



reading and comprehension do not sometimes indicate any significant difference in the use of the subtitled films. This paper sought to contribute to this debate in the literature by adding on insights from Tanzania.

2.3 Theoretical basis of Multimedia Learning Hypothesis

This study adapted Mayer's Multimedia Theory as its analytical lens. According to Mayer (2005) in his book *A Cambridge handbook of multimedia Learning*, learning is deeper when people use words and picture than words alone because, a human being has two information processing systems, the visual and auditory, the pictorial form and the verbal form. However, the verbal form is a dominant processor. That notwithstanding, when a learner integrates the verbal mode and pictorial mode, he or she takes an advantage of the full capacity of information processing as opposed to only using one mode (Mayer, 2005, pp. 26-27). The advantages of integrating the two channels are, first, a learner will process more material than could have been done with one channel. Second, the two modes will complement each other to enhance understanding. The stated advantages imply that a meaningful connection of the pictorial and verbal representation of the material to the learners enhances deep understanding of the learned material.

Therefore, the hypothesis suggests that learning is best done when more than one cues is used. Similarly, for a subtitled film, for instance, there are three cues. These are characters' dialogue, the on-screen translation and the characters' actions. The learner processes information of the movie by combining all the three cues. Such connection is what gives a learner deep understanding of the language used in it; as compared to reading the language from text book alone. However, as Van der Zee et al (2017) explains, for a subtitled movie to be helpful, visual complexity of the film and other factors like learners' proficiency of the second language are of prime importance.

This theory fits the current study because the theory is about multimedia learning; which is also a discussion of the current paper. It acknowledges that when many modes are integrated learning is deep. Thus it has enabled the researcher to view the role of film with subtitles as one form of multimedia tools that enhances deep learning. The theory argues for words and picture to be used together to deepen a



learner understands of the material. Similarly, a movie has subtitles and characters' dialogues as words and characters actions as pictures, such combination enabled the researcher to establish the extent to which Bongo Movies with English subtitles are significant to learners.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted in Dar es Salaam because it is a leading region in the country, in terms of television ownership and subscription. Statistics show that about 53.2% of the households own television in Dar es Salaam (United Republic of Tanzania, 2012). The participants of this study are 26 form three students (boys and girls) from Makongo and Jitegemee secondary schools in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The criteria that guided the choice of participants was their interest to watch Bongo Movies with English subtitles. The researcher submitted a consent letter to the school administration of both schools to request students' participation in the study. Head of each school signed the letter on behalf of the students to allow students to participate in the study. Makongo secondary school is located in Ubungo municipality and Jitegemee secondary school is in Temeke municipality in Dar es Salaam. The selection of these schools was based on their popularity in the production of films and music artists in the country. I chose form three students from both schools because this is the level where learners' ability of making choices is clear after they have gained learning experience in form one and form two (Ndalichako and Komba, 2014).

Data was collected in the following stages. First, students in each school were given a 15 minutes subtitled clip of Bongo Movie, which they were required to watch twice. The clip had to be short (at least 15 minutes) so as not to interfere with the school timetable. The researcher asked them to watch it twice without giving them a reason on why they should watch it. Then, after a 5- minutes break, participants were invited to take part in the focus group discussion. Focus group discussion was used because it is open to qualitative and observational data where analysis can be demanding (cf. Nyumba et al, 2017).

In each school, therefore, two focus group discussions were administered. The subtitled clip of the Bongo movie was given to them in order to tally the responses



from the discussion and their prior experiences. The participants were asked the following questions: (i) what are their motives for watching Bongo Movies with English subtitles (specifically to the clip given to them during the research). (ii) What are they learning from the given clip? (iii) Are students capable of noticing errors? And (iv) have they used the English language they gained from Bongo movie? The first two questions wanted to figure out the reasons for these students to develop interest with subtitles movie; also to know if these kinds of movies have any significance in their language learning. The remaining questions (iii and iv) aimed at determining whether the participants were capable of noticing errors and whether they used the English language gained from Bongo movie in real life situation (the clip used during the study was used to justify their answers). Their responses were audio-recorded under their consent. They were then transcribed and analysed thematically. Findings from this analysis are presented and discussed below supported with extracts from focus group discussion which are cited to strengthen the discussion.

4.0 Findings and discussion

Despite the inconclusiveness of whether subtitling enhances second language learning and/or acquisition or not (as seen in the literature review), most previous studies were experiments trying to establish those perceptions. This paper, however, uses students' views to show the worthiness of subtitled movies, particularly, Bongo Movies, on enhancing second language learning as the authentic material. On the other hand, the English translations found in this section were provided by the researcher of this paper, and the findings are presented in the order of the questions asked during focus group discussion.

4.1. What are the students' motives for watching subtitled clip of Bongo Movie? Do they learn anything from them?

25 students stated that they watch subtitled clips of Bongo Movies for refreshment. However, 18 of them admitted that they end up gaining some English words from the movie. Only one student explained that he has not only watched the clip with learning motives, but also he had been doing it for quite some time, before he came to stop. The reason for quitting was when he realized that those subtitles contain so



many errors. Furthermore, the 18 students explained some of the language aspects they usually end up benefiting from these movies. Their views include:

- (1). It has helped me to acquire new words, for instance; when a character says *maji* 'water' and I see it has been written (at the bottom of the screen)'water', I understand that this is how the word water is written. (Student 9, Jitegemee Secondary School, FGD group 2)
- (2). They have improved my reading skills and speed, which is an important skill for reading my essays at school. (Student 1, Makongo Secondary School, FGD group 1)

These responses suggest that among the aspects the learners of the second language benefit from subtitled movies are vocabulary learning and reading speed. Such observation has also been shown in the previous studies, including Bellalem et al (2018), Chiaye (2017) and Sabouri et al (2015) in their experiments. However, it is doubtful that students really learned the vocabulary from the subtitled movie; based on observation during focus group discussion, it is likely that some students used the subtitles as spelling checker for the words they already knew. This is because when they were asked to share words learned from the clip they watched; some of the students confidently mentioned those words and their meanings, in a way that tells they already knew them (see extract 1 when a student mentioned the word *maji* 'water'). They re-corrected even some spellings of some words from the watched clip. However, it is undeniable that there were those who for the first time learned new words from the clip (and some of the words were erroneous).

On the other hand, not all students saw subtitling in Bongo Movies as enhancing their language learning. Some students were of the view that subtitling in Bongo Movies does not enhance their language learning because of obvious errors in the subtitles. The following view from a student who finds that subtitled Bongo Movies today are worthless is revealing:

- (3). To me, subtitles are not useful at all, because sometimes what the movie characters speak and what is written in the subtitles, do not match. That is, they don't speak what is conveyed in the subtitles; they just write/add words there (on the screen) for people to read. (Student 3, Jitegemee Secondary School, FGD group 1)



This response suggests that some learners ignore the English subtitles in Bongo Movies and it further implies that only learners with high proficiency may decide whether the subtitles are worth relying on or not.

4.2. Are students capable of noticing errors? And have they used the English language they gained from Bongo movie?

Literature informs us that learning is closely associated with noticing errors. Corder (1974), states that errors are significant because they inform the progress of a learner. The rationale of these questions, therefore, was to understand how much risk learners are in, when using the erroneous subtitled Bongo Movies. But this may also inform whether learners really use subtitled Bongo Movies. Such information may provide a way forward and a further discussion of Bongo movie as a learning tool.

The students were asked if they could notice errors and whether they have ever used even once the English vocabularies learned from subtitled Bongo movies. The following are some of their views.

(4) When I watch [a movie], I normally identify errors that I am familiar with, but for those English expressions that I do not understand, I always think they are correct, until sometime later, when I realize that they are incorrect, then I understand that they did a mistake. (Student 5, Makongo Secondary School, FGD group 2).

Another student said that before he stopped relying on subtitled Bongo Movies, he was not in a position to notice errors himself. He gave one scenario where he used erroneous statements he learned from Bongo Movies:

(5) It happened one day, people were talking outside, and then my father asked me what they were saying. I answered him in English. My answer was based on what I heard from the *Bongo Movie*. But, my father corrected me and he said I was wrong. (Student 2, Jitegemee Secondary School, FGD group 2).

These findings suggest that subtitled Bongo Movies are used or have once been used by learners as a learning tool. The determining factor for some of them to stop seems to be their language proficiency. That is, those students with high proficiency can tell the extent of errors in a movie and decide whether a particular movie is worth relying or not. Besides, the fact that learners are capable of noticing errors suggests that they



normally pay attention on the input exposed to them. This supports Ellis' (1997) argument that the first stage of learning is noticing errors.

Generally, in comparison to the reviewed empirical studies, the current paper's findings fairly concur with the findings of other studies that argue for positive effect of subtitled movies on learners. The findings also support the studies that argue for negative role of subtitles on learners. However, the difference is, sometimes, even if learners learn from these subtitled movies, yet some are held back by their language proficiency of the target language. An explanation for the observed challenge remains to be an absence of a teacher or someone to guide a learner when a learner interacts with a movie, as such they are exposed to learn errors too. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that Swahili learners of English are influenced by these English subtitles in the Bongo Movies; this may happen consciously or subconsciously. It may also be positively or negatively.

5.0. Conclusion, limitation and recommendations

This paper aimed at examining whether Bongo movies with English subtitles may serve as a tool for learning English among Swahili learners (speakers). The paper made use of the theory which states that "learning is deeper when people use words and pictures than words alone." Findings from this paper show that when learners interact with these movies, either consciously or subconsciously, they learn some words or improve their reading skills. These findings are significant in relation to existing literature in different ways. First, the findings support previous studies which report that subtitling enhances second language learning (cf. Birules-Muntane and Soto-Faraco, 2016; Chiaye, 2017; Eye, 2016). The findings also support other studies which have shown that subtitling does not enhance second language learning (Hwang & Huang, 2011; Metruk, 2018). This is because, as findings from Bongo Movies show, when subtitling is erroneous, this can hardly enhance language learning except when the learner is well versed with the second language to be able to identify the errors and correct them. The paper has also shown that subtitling can serve the purpose of second language learning if learners are provided with support from, for example, their peers or parents to help them identify correct and erroneous subtitles.

From the findings, therefore, the paper makes a few recommendations. First, this study should be taken as one of the starting point that is trying to shed light on errors made in Bongo movie's subtitles. Due to the potential of Bongo movie's subtitles in



Tanzanian educational sector, the area needs further research so as to minimize or if possible to completely eliminate the existing problem. Second, the Tanzania Board of Films, i.e., the government organ that is responsible for monitoring ethics of all films should also monitor language aspects, specifically, the correctness of the subtitles of Bongo movies before these movies are released on the market. As findings of the paper show, this is important because subtitled movies can be an important educational tool for second language learning in Tanzania. This study's findings can, however, not be generalised to all Swahili learners of English; instead, the findings will be transferred to the environment of similar situation.

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