

# An academic perspective: How the ABA Films help you learn a language

**Prof. Marga Navarrete BA, MA**

Imperial College of London  
Clipflair R&D European Project

January 2015

## ABSTRACT

*Academics agree that well planned and produced video can have a positive impact on foreign language learning. The ABA Films make good use of the opportunities that video allows for language learners.*

**KEY WORDS:** *audiovisual resources – foreign language learning – interlingual subtitles*

Academics working in the field of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) are interested in how people learn and the benefits of using different types of tools and learning materials. A number of **research reports** (Cintas, 1994; Lonergan, 1984; Stempleski, 2003; Neves, 2004) **support the idea that audiovisual resources are excellent tools for language learning. Video is an attractive, effective and motivating way for learning** because it combines images, sounds, spoken and written language in both fictional and real contexts.

These experts share the belief that using video-clips for foreign language learning **benefits the understanding of events because of the combination of the audio and visual stimuli**. In addition, the wide range of topics that can be covered via video-clips can be extremely attractive to students to work on specific areas of language.

The teaching and learning methodology team for the online **ABA English course have used these insights to create engaging and effective videos for language learning**. The course is organised around high quality video content. Each unit contains two videos, a video-lesson where grammar is explained by different language teachers and a fictional video-clip.

The production of the films was carried out by a professional team with experience making films for Cinema. The scenes were filmed both in Europe and the USA, with lots of items shot on location in London and New York. The settings are diverse and unique for each film making use of locations such as a hotel hall, a street, a beach, inside a train, or a bar. There are different music genres and styles which help setting the mood of the film. The scripts are well written and make uses of devices like humour.

When **learning a foreign language, it is good to be exposed to a range of accents**, so that learners are used to interacting with people from different areas. **In the ABA Films there are 200 native English actors with a variety of American and British accents.** Most characters are professional actors – a few are English teachers though - however, they all perform well. There is a tendency to overact, or to exaggerate slightly some facial gestures which is not a negative point from an academic perspective.

Many experts agree **nonverbal communication conveys a significant part of a speaker's overall message**, and in particular facial gestures (Mehrabian, 1971; Demarais & White, 2004), so this characteristic in the acting will benefit the learner's understanding of the overall messages especially "when any nonverbal behaviour contradicts speech, it is more likely to determine the total impact of the message" (Mehrabian, 1971: 45). The richness in facial expressions by the actors will help learners understand the interacting messages of the films.

There are 144 units in the ABA course, the duration of the videos tend to increase as students go up in levels. They last from 30 seconds (unit 1) to 6 minutes (unit 144). **The ABA clips are self-contained**, that is, they are usually based on a single scene that makes sense by itself. **Each film is actually a mini story with a beginning and an end.** This is **a crucial aspect to help the comprehension** of the clip, and also, to make the learner feel that he/she has accomplished a complete task, which is the understanding the story. The clips are conversations between two characters where there is a certain degree of suspense, a climatic part and a final twist (or an unexpected ending) always with a touch of humour.

**When audiovisual resources are created for the purpose of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) the outcome can be less effective when they focus primarily on language items to be learnt**, rather than engaging the learners with a compelling story. **These adapted resources often result in an unauthentic and unnatural language.** However, the **ABA Films** have avoided these challenges, and **provide a balance within the amount of grammar content, communicative functions, vocabulary to be introduced to learners and the story itself.** Each film has a title (i.e. 'The Jealous Friend) and a grammatical focussed subtitle (i.e. 'To do as an auxiliary verb'). Thus, **learners are aware of the fictional content as well as the linguistic focus** introduced in the clip.

What is **even more effective for language learning is when video is enhanced with subtitles.** These can be intralingual subtitles within the same language, in this case the language they are learning. An alternative is interlingual subtitles (i.e. from one language to another), in this case we would be referring to the student's native language and the target). Lertola (2012: 61) mentions different scholars who have studied the potential of subtitles in second language acquisition "with regards to reading comprehension" (Gant Guillory 1998; Bravo 2008), "listening comprehension" (Danan 2004; Caimi 2006), "oral production" (Borrás & Lafayette 1994), "and vocabulary recall" (Bird & Williams 2002; Talaván 2007). According to Bravo (2008: 8) **"the presence of subtitles, interlingual or intralingual always contribute towards viewers' comprehension of the content**, even in culture-specific areas such as idioms".

**ABA students can watch their videos with and without subtitles** in English, and in their native languages (this course is targeted to speakers of a wide range of languages including French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish). As the **subtitles help reading and listening comprehension and vocabulary recall**, the combination of an improvement in all of these skills will **also facilitate oral production**.

In conclusion, academics agree that well planned and produced video can have a positive impact on foreign language learning. **The ABA Films make good use of the opportunities that video allows for language learners**, by exposing them to a variety of accents by actors who perform well. **Films are of high quality**, there is a **variety of settings and music** genres that suit the scenes, and **each film is a story with a degree of suspense**, and an unexpected humorous final twist, which makes it **engaging to the learners**. The scripts are **well written with natural language that suits the learning language focus of each film**. Finally, the **films are subtitled** into English and the student's native tongue. This helps to **improve the learner's comprehension skills, vocabulary recall and oral production; all of these are areas that have been identified in previous studies by experts in the field**.

## References

- Bravo, C. (2008) *Putting the reader in the picture: Screentranslation and foreign-language learning*. Doctoral thesis. Tarragona: Universtat Rovira I
- Demarais, A., White, V. (2004). *First Impressions*. New York, NY: BanTam Books.
- Díaz-Cintas, J. (1994), "El subtitulado como técnica docente", *Vida Hispánica*, 12, 10-14.
- Lertola, J. (2012). 'The effect of the subtitling task on vocabulary learning' in A. Pym and D. Orrego-Carmona (Eds.) *Translation Research Project 4*, Tarragona: Intercultural Studies Group, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 61-70.
- Neves, J. (2004), "Language awareness through training in subtitling". En Orero, P. (ed.) (2004): *Topics in Audiovisual Translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, Amsterdam / Philadelphia.
- Mehrabian, A. (1971) *Silent messages*, Wadsworth, CA: Belmont.
- Sempleski, S. (2003). *Integrating video into the classroom curriculum*. Selected Papers from the Twelfth International Symposium on English Teaching. Taipei: Crane.