

Wojciech M. Piegza

University of Wrocław

Subtitled Films as a Facilitator in the Development of Foreign Language Integrated Skills

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that second or foreign language acquisition can take place only in the abundance of input of the target language. However, the input itself is not sufficient. The researcher is of the belief that the role of the teacher and the teaching method is more than significant. This point of view is shared by the majority of researchers. As a result there is a marked tendency in foreign language research to focus on the teacher, the method and eventually the learner. However, apparently there is very little research done in the matter of student's actions outside the classroom. It is true that the notions of learner differences, motivation and autonomy were greatly developed in the last couple of years, but the fact remains, that it was always in connection to a specific teaching approach, learning strategies or learner training.

It seems reasonable to assume that learning a foreign language means learning a skill; and like with any other skills, no matter how complicated they would be, one of the most important elements is the attitude towards the learning process and the amount of time devoted to it. However, if the process is pleasurable, and at least partially controlled by the learner, then one's motivation, engagement and, evidently, chances of success increase. Therefore, what the teachers should look for, are the means by which they can elaborate the notion of language learning, by already existing habits of their learners. This notion inspired the researcher to investigate the fact that most people, if not all, watch television, and to be more specific – films.

2. The aim of the research

The most recent approach towards teaching foreign languages – CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) – was formed by a set of beliefs shifting the emphasis of what language to teach, and how exactly it should be done (Brown 1994).

The practitioners of the communicate approach, perhaps more than others, design their classes with the focus on student interaction. To this end there will probably be considerable, if not extensive use of pair, group and mingling activities, with the emphasis on completing the task successfully through communication with others, rather than the accurate use of form. During these activities the teacher's role will be to facilitate, monitor and provide feedback on the linguistic performance by means of post-activity correction. The emphasis is put on more authentic context, with example sentences being, at the very least, semi-authentic and potentially of communicative use, rather than arbitrary examples of form, with little or no communicative value. In today's classroom there is a possibility to observe a lot of authentic listening and reading materials being used and far fewer contrived texts designed to illustrate grammatical form or present items of vocabulary with no attempt to communicate a meaningful message to the listener or the reader. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the communicative approach is that it allows the teacher to incorporate motivating and purposeful communicative activities and principles into their teaching while simultaneously retaining some best elements of other methods and approaches rather than rejecting them wholesale.

The question the researcher found intriguing was whether it is possible to facilitate and improve learners' speaking skills outside the classroom, deprived of either formal or informal teaching. Therefore a research was designed to measure the extent to which subtitled films might influence students' oral performance in the foreign language.

Although the study was designed to focus exclusively on speaking skills, additional results emerged throughout the procedure.

3. Research methodology

According to specifications characterized by Brown (1993) the presented research was a 'quantitative' and 'longitudinal experiment' which lasted six months and involved two groups of six students. All of them received the same treatment, the same method, the same teacher, but one group additionally watched subtitled films as an extra activity outside their regular classes.

During the research certain variables had to be taken into account and dealt with:

- independent – watching subtitled films
- dependent – speaking skill improvement as measured by transcript analysis and evaluation chart
- intervening – the way students were exposed to the contextualized, and real-life language used in films affected their speaking
- controlled:
 - age of students and level – adult learners at the intermediate level
 - additional English tutorial outside class as well as the opportunity to hear and use the language
 - number of students in the class
 - number of lessons per week
 - the teacher and the method used – the same teacher, the same materials
 - students' attendance

On the basis of the two instruments, the Transcripts of the recordings and the Evaluation Charts the researcher tried to verify the following hypotheses:

H_0 – *There is no significant effect of watching subtitled films on speaking skill development.*

H_1 – *Watching subtitled films significantly improves learners' speaking skills.*

4. The choice of the group

From the very beginning the most important objective was to control as many variables as possible. Therefore learners are of the same age, social status, educational background and language-learning experience. The most crucial thing, however, was the treatment, so that although students will be presented as separate units they did not have separate classes. Both groups combined (into one class of twelve) would meet once a week for 90 minutes in the course of 6 months and had normal foreign language lessons. The researcher decided to take learners' expectations into consideration, but nonetheless, introduce some elements of those skills which were less important in the minds of the learners themselves.

The course was based on three books: *Natural English Intermediate* (Gairns and Redman 2006) and *New Cutting Edge Intermediate* (Cunningham and Moor 2005) as well as materials gathered from the internet or prepared by the researcher.

Combining three different courses allowed to focus on four main skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) equally during the lessons, and to elaborate on grammar and vocabulary in the course of homework assignments. It has to be pointed out that all learners were always well-prepared and did everything they were asked to.

The only difference between the groups involved things they did at home. In order to maintain objectivity in the research the division into the Film Group and the Others – as the groups are called on all of the graphs – was done only on the basis of their accessibility to a computer. Both groups were told that they were the ‘chosen ones’ and that the second group was the control one. They were not told openly what the research was about. The researcher decided that this is the only chance for them to behave according to the assumptions, as it is impossible to control what people do outside the classroom.

5. The research scheme

The Film Group was provided with countless films and TV shows and was asked to watch at least one film a week or two one-hour episodes of a TV series. As a result the learners had the opportunity to watch for instance *Friends*, *The X-files*, *Criminal Minds* or *Prison Break*. They also watched motion pictures but naming all the titles seems to be irrelevant at this point. What is important is that all of them watched more they were asked to, some having a few-hour marathons, but the exact number is impossible to measure. They found this task enjoyable and pleasurable, and in their words that was the best homework they have ever received.

The Other group was told that the topic of this paper deals with the influence of reading on the speaking skills. Although the researcher is of the belief that there is no such connection, it was crucial that they were not trying to find out what the first group was doing. Surprisingly, when both groups were asked not to communicate as to what they were given at the end of each lesson – in separate classrooms – they willingly did so. They understood the importance of keeping this a secret.

In order to avoid any distortion in the research, whatever the second group got to read, whether it was an article, or a chapter from an abridged version of a book, the Film Group received exactly the same copies and was also asked to read them as part of a regular homework. Therefore all the homework was checked at the end of each class in separate rooms.

6. The research instruments

While evaluating oral performance it is always difficult to remain objective. Therefore clear criteria, familiar to students, should always be used. The researcher examined closely the way assessment of oral exams should be conducted (Cambridge 2001 and 2002; Tranter et al. 1988) and decided to use suggested scales to create even more detailed evaluation instrument, where both subjective and

objective assessment will take place. Due to the fact that the learners were recorded at the beginning of the research and at the end, there are number of ways to establish their progress. The researcher decided to include both the objective and the subjective one.

The first to be presented is the objective one. The process of analyzing the recordings was long and time-consuming. Each recording lasted approximately five minutes, but due to numerous variations in that, the researcher decided to take into consideration only the first five minutes of the recording. The following categories were taken into consideration while evaluating the transcripts:

- *number of errors,*
- *time spent on thinking what to say,*
- *number of syllables,*
- *number of words,*
- *words / hesitation pauses correlation.*

Due to the fact that all learners' oral performance, in real-life situations is evaluated by people subjectively – and not by detailed transcript analysis – the researcher decided to ask a group of highly qualified individuals to grade learners' progress in a form of an Evaluation Chart with ten categories they were supposed to focus on:

- *fluency,*
- *vocabulary,*
- *range of grammatical structures,*
- *coherence of speech,*
- *grammatical accuracy,*
- *individual sounds pronunciation,*
- *prosodic features (to what extent the accent is Polish or native-like),*
- *rhythm (accent of the individual words),*
- *intonation,*
- *overall (the general impression of the whole).*

As mentioned before, the main attention was the **progress** and not the final outcome. All the learners began at slightly different levels and therefore finished at different ones. The evaluators could grade the progress on the scale from 0 – when they saw absolutely no change, or 10 – when the progress made by the learner was highly significant and instantly noticeable.

7. The results of the research

In order to determine whether the learners have done statistically significant progress the researcher decided to implement the 't' test into the research. For the sake of this paper and all other results the following formula was used:

$$t = \frac{M_w - M_m}{\sqrt{\frac{SD_w^2 + SD_m^2}{N}}} .$$

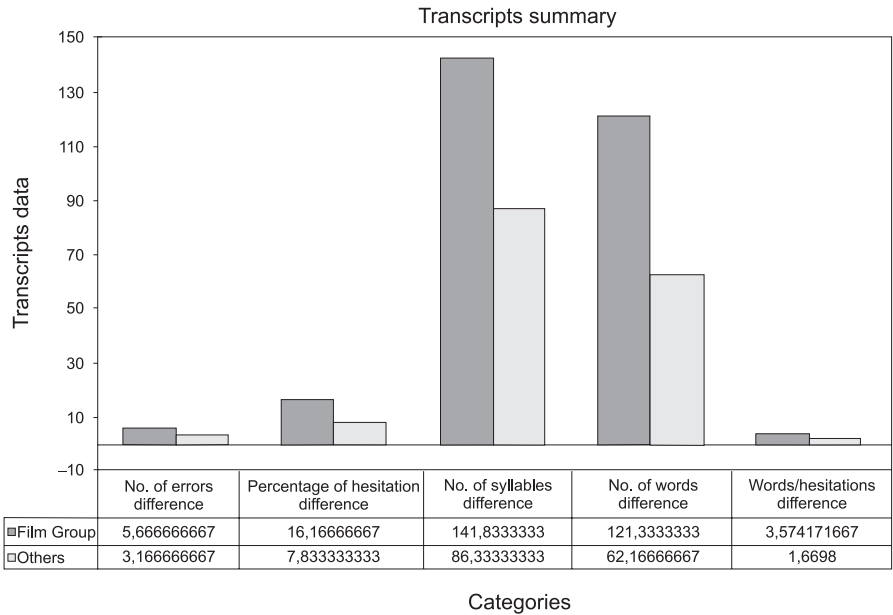
M stands for *Mean* which is “virtually the same as the arithmetic average that you may calculate when grading classroom tests” (Brown 1993: 66). *SD*, the standard deviation, “provides a sort of average of the differences of all scores from the mean” (ibid.). *N* stands for the number of learners. The results of the ‘*t*’ test are presented in Graph 2.

Correct interpretation of the results required from the researcher to determine the critical value of ‘*t*’. Taking the level of significance of one-tailed test and degrees of freedom for two groups of 6 learners each into account, the value to be used is 2,764. The same number will be used in all statistical analyses of this project.

It was pointed out earlier that the group was homogenous as far as attitudes and test results were concerned. However, because of the fact that each individual has a different style of speaking, the researcher will not focus on the final outcome but on the progress made – the differences in the two recordings, to be more specific.

Therefore learner A might have made more mistakes in the final recording than learner B but it is the progress they made in comparison to the first recording that was important.

The results were compared and presented in Graph 1.



Graph 1. Summary of transcript analysis

What is positive about those results is that all of the learners made progress in all of the aspects mentioned. For instance, even though the learners from the Film Group were able to produce over 140 syllables more than before the experiment, which made a greater opportunity for errors, they also spent 16% less time thinking about what to say and managed to make 5 mistakes less than in the first recording. The person talking to them would also hear over three words more, before the flow of speech would be interrupted by a hesitation pause.

The next question the researcher had to address was whether the differences between the two groups were statistically significant. Once again the '*t*' test formula was used, and the results are presented in Graph 2.



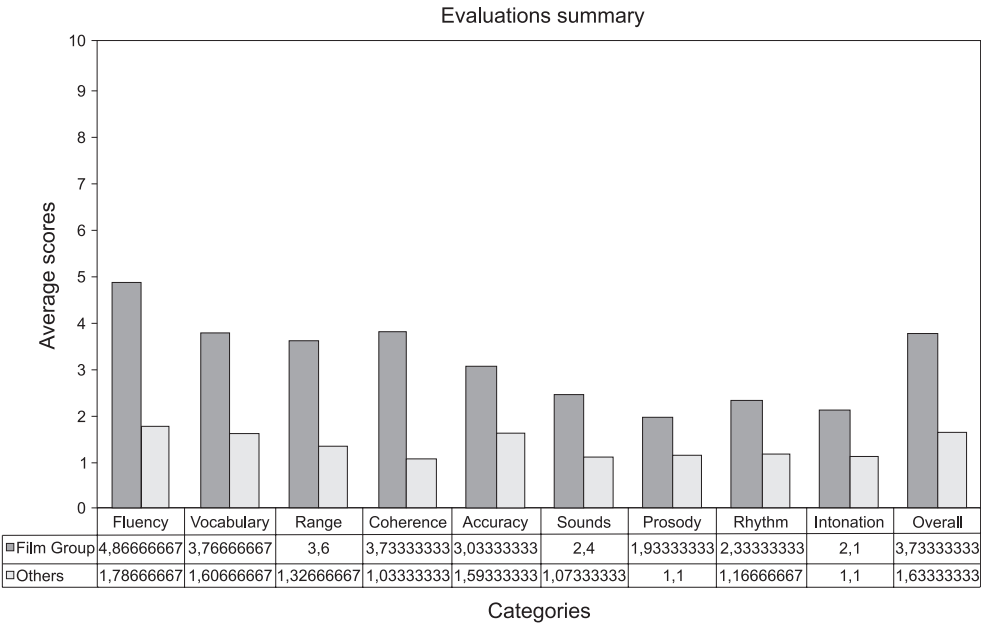
Graph 2. Statistical significance of the progress made – based on the analysis of the Transcripts

It can be observed that almost all aspects differ more than significantly. Only the difference in number of errors falls below the desired value. It is, therefore, safe to say that according to the transcript analysis watching subtitled films positively influences fluency and vocabulary, but only hard work and plenty of exercises can make a difference in terms of number of errors.

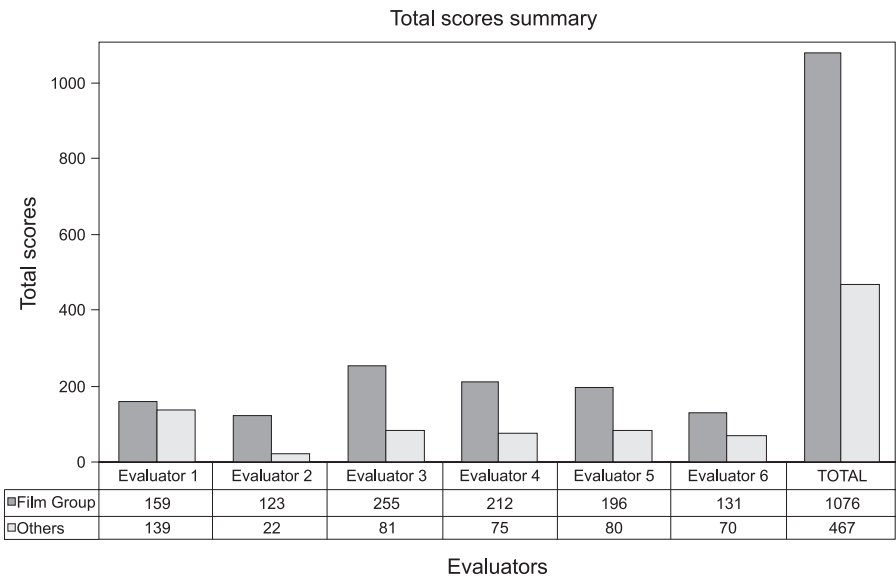
The results from the Evaluation Charts are presented in Graphs 3 and 4. What can be noticed is that in general the progress does not seem to be significant. This might prove a commonly shared belief that without separate conversation classes and phonetic training it is very difficult to achieve visible progress in those areas.

However, the important thing is that there is a clear difference between the two groups. More importantly, this tendency can be noticed among all of the eva-

luators. There are differences in the amount of points each of them awarded but nonetheless the Film Group seems to have made significantly larger progress than the Others Group.

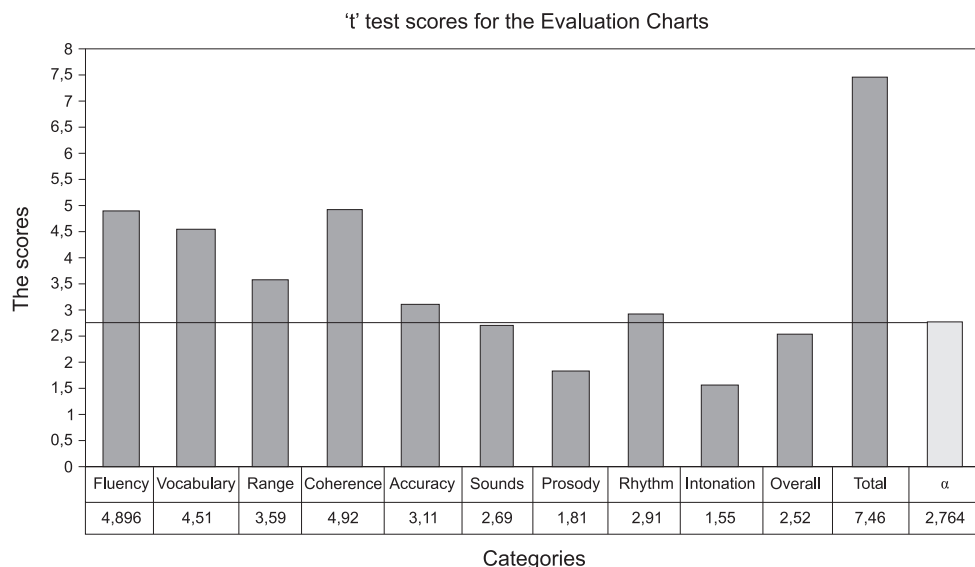


Graph 3. Evaluation charts summary



Graph 4. Total scores summary

The presence of huge differences among the Evaluators, presented in Graph 4, puts serious doubts to the idea of oral exams. The difference between the two groups seems to exist in all cases but taking into consideration for instance Evaluator 2 and 3 one can observe an enormous discrepancy between the progress they observed. The reasons for this are impossible to establish, but the observation itself seems interesting.



Graph 5. Statistical significance of the differences in the progress made – based on the Evaluation Charts

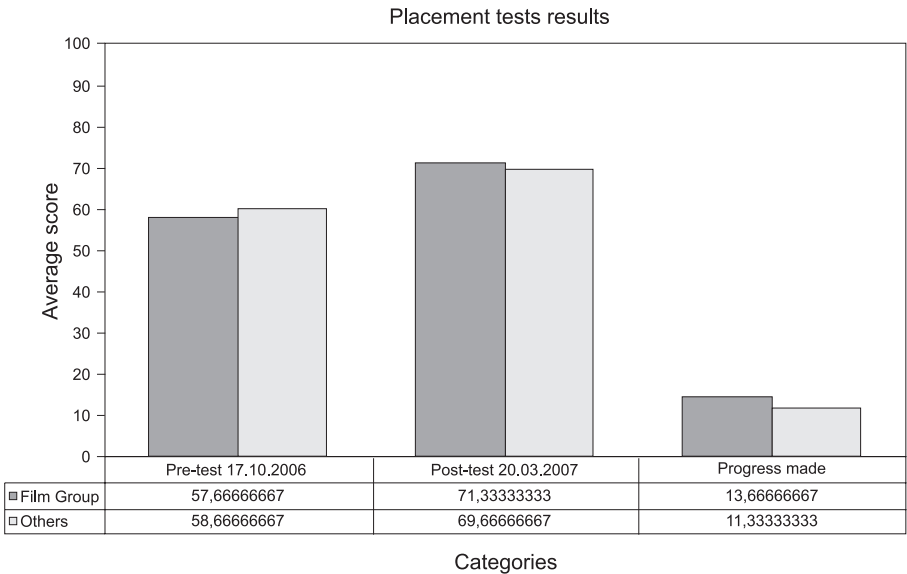
The specific numbers presented in Graph 5 show the total scores awarded by each of the evaluators. Each student could have scored 100 points if they improved greatly in each of the categories. Therefore the highest possible number of points scored by the entire group was 600.

The detailed analysis seems to confirm the general idea one might have while studying Graph 5. In categories such as: fluency, vocabulary, range of grammatical structures, coherence, accuracy and total points awarded, the significance is enormous. It is clear evidence that watching subtitled films positively influenced learners' oral performance at almost all levels.

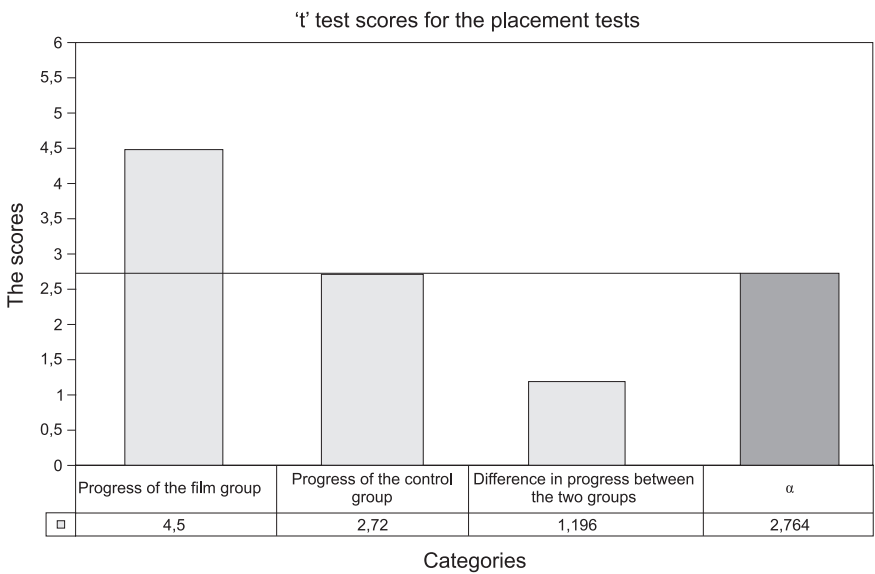
The three categories connected with pronunciation: individual sounds, prosody and intonation do not differ significantly, which again proves the need for implementing a specific phonetic training into the course of foreign language teaching. Surprisingly however, when evaluators had to give an overall impression of the progress there is no real difference between the groups. It becomes clear at the moment we take into consideration the total number of points awarded to each learner. Then the tendency is evident.

8. Additional results

Although the researcher always had the topic in mind, he did all he possibly could for all the learners to benefit equally and significantly from the lessons they had. That is why at the end of the procedure learners were asked to write the same



Graph 6. Average pre- and post-treatment placement tests results



Graph 7. Statistical significance of the progress made – based on two grammatical tests

grammatical test they wrote at the beginning. The average results of both tests and progress made are presented in Graphs 6 and 7. As both groups scored approximately 70 points they advanced from *Intermediate* to *Upper-intermediate* level.

As can be noticed both groups made a statistically significant progress as far as the grammar-lexis test is concerned. The Film Group made a slightly larger one, but the difference in progress between the two groups has low statistical significance, but nonetheless it exists. Moreover, there are results which cannot be measured, analyzed and put into a graph or a table.

9. Conclusions

It has always been the researcher's concern to do everything possible to implement elements of language learning into learners' everyday life. It goes without saying that the more a person is involved in developing a particular skill the more successful they eventually become. The elements of passion, enjoyment, self-motivation and autonomy are of crucial importance. Playing in a band, painting or being an outstanding sportsman is by the majority of people perceived as a simple result of someone's talent or luck. Surprisingly, a lot of people predict their success or failure in the matter of foreign language learning on the basis of the aptitude or personality type they seem to possess. However, why does it have to be so much different than any other skill an individual might be good at? In basketball, for instance, there's a common belief that the success of a player depends on his talent only by 30%. The remaining 70% is hard work, dedication and passion for the game. In language learning no one will ever be able to prove that countless hours spent in front of a grammar book and in language classes, can be replaced by mere language aptitude.

Just like with any hobby people might have, our own personal involvement is crucial. Therefore, teachers of all subjects should promote the view of learning as something pleasant and similar to hobby – like sport, playing guitar or drawing. In all of those activities, talent, definite hard work and tutorial are necessary, but it is the student's autonomous involvement which makes him or her outstanding and unique.

According to Krashen "input is the primary causative variable in second language acquisition, affective variables acting to impede or facilitate the delivery of input to the language acquisition device" (Krashen 1982: 32). The entire project of this research was based on the notion that people enjoy watching films. Even if they are not movie fans to the extreme, it is highly difficult to find an individual who would treat watching a film as a mandatory and unpleasant experience. Whether we like it or not, the majority of films and TV series are of American origin, and therefore are in English. This led the researcher to design the project. It was a long-term process, time-consuming effort and unforgettable experience,

but thanks to the help of the people involved, and the Evaluators, it was possible to prove that the initial hypothesis, based on observation, is – in fact – a fact.

Obviously some type of language tutorial has to be involved but after analyzing the Transcripts of the two recordings and the Evaluation Charts there is one conclusion that can be drawn without hesitation. Watching subtitled films in the target language significantly influences speaking skills. In almost all the categories the statistical significance greatly exceeded the critical values. Although, due to the small number of learners in the groups, we can only talk about tendencies and not statistical results, the researcher is of the belief that no matter the age, the number of groups or learners within those groups, as long as all the possible variables are controlled any given researcher would come up with the same results. The progress of the Film Group observed by the Evaluators and proven by the recordings is remarkably higher than the one of the Other Group. What cannot be objectively documented are the researcher's observations of the very learners.

Schumann characterized second language acquisition as "one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (in McLaughlin 1987: 110). Therefore watching films of the target culture origin can be considered as a facilitator in the development of language awareness and skills.

Learners from the Film Group can talk for hours about the accent of their favorite actor or actress. They mimic their most memorable phrases and quote the films during informal conversations. For them the notion of learning a language seemed much less stressful and serious than at the beginning of the project. Some of them even try to transcribe their favorite scenes so that they could be practiced and analyzed. This corresponds nicely with the idea presented by Zimbardo that "we think through images, which are symbols, we think through words" (Zimbardo 1988: 202) whose main role is communication. For those learners the phrases of foreign language became the key to the most memorable, emotional and important scenes they have seen.

During the classes the Film Group learners had much fewer problems with listening exercises or small group discussions. Without any further effort on the side of the teacher, they themselves search for opportunities to get involved in language situations for the mere purpose of listening how people talk. They browse the internet in the search of interviews with their favorite celebrities and given a choice between a film with a speaker or subtitles they select the latter one. They look for the real language, as it is used by everyday people. Their new-born passion for the language and hobby-like attitude towards it is something that one cannot put a price on. They continue to benefit from this experience long after the research was conducted.

Prabhu (1987) argued that students presented with a task were just as likely to learn the target language as those who focused on the language directly. In this case the task is chosen by students and it is just watching and enjoying a film.

Bibliography

- Brown, J.D. 1993. *Understanding Research in Second Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, H.D. 1994. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Cambridge 2001 and 2002. *Cambridge Examinations, Certificates & Diplomas. Handbook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cunningham S. and P. Moor 2005. *New Cutting Edge Intermediate*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Gairns, R. and S. Redman 2006. *Natural English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and Practices of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- McLaughlin, B. 1987. *Theories of Second-Language Learning*. London: Edward Arnold, a Division of Hodder and Stoughton.
- Prahbu, N. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tranter, G., P. Kiefer and H. Teichmann 1988. *European Language Certificates*. Frankfurt: WBT.
- Zimbardo, P.G. 1988. *Psychologia i życie*. Warszawa: PWN.