

18 Learning foreign languages with ClipFlair: Using captioning and revoicing activities to increase students' motivation and engagement

Rocío Baños¹ and Stavroula Sokoli²

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the rationale and outcomes of **ClipFlair**, a European-funded project aimed at countering the factors that discourage Foreign Language Learning (FLL) by providing a motivating, easily accessible online platform to learn a foreign language through revoicing (e.g. dubbing) and captioning (e.g. subtitling). This paper will reflect on what has been achieved throughout the project and the challenges encountered along the way, in order to share our experience and inspire other FLL tutors in secondary and tertiary education. The focus is on the main outputs of the project: a) **ClipFlair Studio**, an online platform where users (both tutors and learners) can create, upload and access revoicing and captioning activities to learn a foreign language; b) **ClipFlair Gallery**, a library of resources containing over 350 activities to learn the 15 languages targeted in the project; and c) **ClipFlair Social**, an online community where learners, teachers and activity authors can share information.

Keywords: ClipFlair, audiovisual material, interactive, motivation, FLL, audiovisual translation, subtitling, dubbing.

1. University College London, United Kingdom; r.banos@ucl.ac.uk.

2. Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain; ssokoli@gmail.com.

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1. Context/rationale

The advantages of using audio-visual material in the foreign language (FL) classroom are widely acknowledged and have been explored by several scholars carrying out research in this field. Drawing on the existing literature, [Talaván Zanón \(2013\)](#) summarises the most relevant benefits of integrating audio-visual material in Foreign Language Learning (FLL): it introduces variety and creates an interactive and entertaining learning environment, thus increasing students' motivation; it provides exposure to non-verbal cultural elements and presents authentic linguistic and cultural aspects of communication in context; it is extremely flexible and can be adapted according to the needs of students and tutors; it promotes transferrable skills; and students can be easily encouraged to use this type of material when learning a language independently (pp. 52-53).

Regardless of how good or rich an audio-visual clip might be, we still need to find a way to integrate it naturally in our teaching, and to design tasks that engage learners and discourage passive viewing. Following this approach, some FL tutors have explored the advantages of integrating audio-visual translation modes in FLL. The benefits of this approach have been clearly discussed in the collective volumes published on this topic lately, especially in the case of subtitling (e.g. [Incalcaterra McLoughlin, Biscio, & Ni Mhainnin, 2011](#)). As was the case with the use of audio-visual material, no one seems to dispute the appropriateness and even the effectiveness of using audio-visual translation tasks (i.e. ask students to subtitle or revoice a short clip) to learn foreign languages. However, FL tutors who are not familiar with audio-visual translation might find these new approaches daunting, not only because they need to familiarise themselves with new terms used by experts (captioning, revoicing¹, audio description, dubbing, etc.), but also because they need to source the material and learn how to use the technology to make these activities possible, and they need to do so in the little time they can currently spare. As will be shown below, the ClipFlair project aims to solve some of these issues,

1. A definition of the terms revoicing and captioning is provided when discussing ClipFlair's conceptual framework.

having been designed bearing in mind the complex context in which FLL takes place and the needs of a wide-range of FL tutors and learners.

2. Aims and objectives

The ClipFlair project, funded by the European Commission, was launched in December 2011. It was designed with the main aim of enhancing interactivity when working with audio-visual material by providing a single platform where a wide community of FL tutors, learners and activity designers could interact. More specifically, the key aims of ClipFlair were to develop:

- a methodological framework for FLL through captioning and revoicing;
- an online platform ([ClipFlair Studio](#)) where users (both tutors and students) create, upload and access revoicing and captioning activities to learn a foreign language;
- a library of resources ([ClipFlair Gallery](#)) containing a wide range of audio-visual material, and over 300 activities to learn the 15 languages targeted in the project¹;
- an online community where learners, teachers and activity authors share information ([ClipFlair Social](#)).

3. What we did

In order to achieve the above-mentioned aims, the project mobilised ten institutions from eight European countries bringing together a diverse number of teachers and learners. Throughout the project, several institutions showed great interest in ClipFlair and joined the consortium as associated partners. ClipFlair

1. These were Arabic, Basque, Catalan, Chinese, English, Estonian, Greek, Irish, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish and Ukrainian.

could thus be considered a joint effort to share ideas and free interactive and innovative resources amongst the wider FLL community, especially in languages where limited material is available online.

3.1. ClipFlair’s conceptual and methodological framework

Before being able to design the online platform and activities for FLL via captioning and revoicing, it was essential to establish the conceptual framework and the pedagogical methodology for this project. This involved researching the existing literature on FLL and audio-visual translation, and investigating relevant educational projects in this field. It soon became clear that one of the main tasks would be defining key terms to avoid misunderstandings and ensure consistency throughout the project. For instance, in ClipFlair, the terms ‘captioning’ and ‘revoicing’ are used as hyperonyms to refer to the insertion of text (captioning) or a voice recording (revoicing) in a clip with the purpose of learning a foreign language. Captioning involves adding subtitles, inserts and speech bubbles to a clip, for example, whereas revoicing involves adding a free commentary or narration to a clip, or dubbing it, i.e. making sure the dialogue fits with the lip movements of characters on screen.

During the development of the conceptual framework, project members contributed to establishing the following key aspects: types of learners targeted (teacher-driven, guided and independent learners), types of skills to be learned, guidelines to source audio-visual material, general guidelines for activity authors, pedagogical approaches and suppositions when using revoicing and captioning in FLL, etc. Discussions around these topics were essential to have a clear idea of what we wanted to achieve and, ultimately, to produce the specifications for the creation of the online platform (**ClipFlair Studio**). The purpose was to produce a very flexible and easy-to-use platform that could be integrated in a wide range of contexts, as well as to compile resources that could be reused or used as inspiration by FL tutors to work on a variety of skills and increase students’ motivation. We also wanted to create a community feeling, which was achieved through the development of **ClipFlair Social**.

3.2. ClipFlair Studio and ClipFlair Social

The online platform, designed to be free, open source and with both online and offline access, needed to be developed from scratch, as a completely new and innovative product. The creation of the functional specifications of the platform, based on the above-mentioned educational specifications, was followed by the development of the alpha and beta versions of the platform. Both versions were tested by project members, who provided detailed feedback to developers. During testing, users were able to report all kinds of issues, from technical defects to suggestions for improvements in functionality, posting relevant messages¹ on the [ClipFlair Social](#). Effective communication between project members was essential at this stage: less tech savvy members had to make sure developers understood how to implement the feedback given, and developers needed to make sure project members understood their limitations, considering the time and budget available. Through the development stages a great emphasis was placed on user experience with one of the main priorities being the user-friendliness of the platform. The aim was to ensure that the beta version, which would be tested by learners and tutors during the pilot phase, was as functional and user-friendly as possible. During the pilot phases, feedback was gathered both on the specific activity piloted and on the performance of [ClipFlair Studio](#) and/or [ClipFlair Social](#). For example, as a result of the feedback provided, developers worked on enabling text directionality for Arabic, and implemented a feature that allowed loading clips locally in addition to using clips available online.

3.3. ClipFlair Gallery

In order to build a large library of resources to be used by the wider FLL community, guidelines to standardise the process were needed first. For the compilation of the video gallery², the issue of copyright was investigated and project members were informed about the type of licences videos should comply

1. <http://social.clipflair.net/> > Contribute > Feedback on Social.

2. <http://gallery.clipflair.net/video/>

with (e.g. Attribution Non-Commercial Share-Alike, educational purpose licence under the Berne convention). A list of online websites where videos meeting these criteria could be downloaded was compiled, and project members were encouraged to upload as many relevant clips as possible, using the appropriate forum¹ in the **ClipFlair Social** to suggest material. A clip metadata form was filled in for each of the uploaded videos (to include the language of the clip, duration, description, genre, etc.), to ensure users will be able to search for videos at a later stage in a user-friendly way.

A similar process was followed for the creation of activities and the activity gallery². Project members were involved in the design of over 350 activities for the 15 languages targeted in the project. Activities include media files, instructions for the completion of requested tasks, captioning and/or revoicing panels, and any additional text, image or media component deemed necessary by the authors. As with video clips, authors were requested to fill in a form providing necessary metadata such as the title of the activity, name of the author(s), keywords, aims, estimated time for completion of tasks, languages, level according to the Common European Framework (CEFR), skills acquired, mode of feedback to learners, etc. Activities were created through different stages of the project, and they were reviewed constantly by the own designers. In addition, all activities underwent a peer-review process. This was essential not only for quality assurance purposes, but also to have the opportunity to integrate the new features developed in **ClipFlair Studio** and the social network in existing activities.

4. Discussion

The ClipFlair project has resulted in a series of outcomes which can now be enjoyed by the wider FLL community. The most relevant outcomes and their impact will be discussed here.

1. <http://social.clipflair.net/> > Contribute > Suggest Material

2. <http://gallery.clipflair.net/activity/>

ClipFlair's conceptual and methodological framework, which is available online¹, is crucial to understanding the principles that have guided the whole project. It is hoped that this document will be used as an additional resource by tutors and researchers wanting to investigate the use of audio-visual translation in FLL. One of the main challenges faced when developing the framework was reflecting the needs of all tutors and language learners, as well as the complex nature of audio-visual texts. The latter led us to suggest a further set of audio-visual skills, including watching, audio-visual speaking and audio-visual writing, since the four language learning skills as traditionally used seem to be too restrictive, leaving no room for audio-visual communication and multimodality. We categorised activities according to three types of learner response²: repeat, rephrase or react to the audio-visual material.

- Repeat: rendering the verbal part of the clip as literally as possible.
- Rephrase: free rendering or noticeable rewording of the text.
- React: producing a new communicative contribution in response to a previous one.

ClipFlair Studio, the online application to create and use FLL activities that involve captioning and revoicing, is one of the main outcomes of the project. Unlike other tools available for captioning and revoicing clips, **ClipFlair Studio** is free, very flexible and easy to use, and it provides all the necessary components in a single area. With a detailed online user guide³ available in 12 languages and video tutorials explaining **ClipFlair Studio** basics, learning to create new activities and to use existing ones is very simple. FL tutors may use a ready-made activity as it is, adapt it to their needs or create their own, either using their own video or choosing one from the ClipFlair video gallery. Authors who wish to share their activities can upload them on the activity gallery to enrich it.

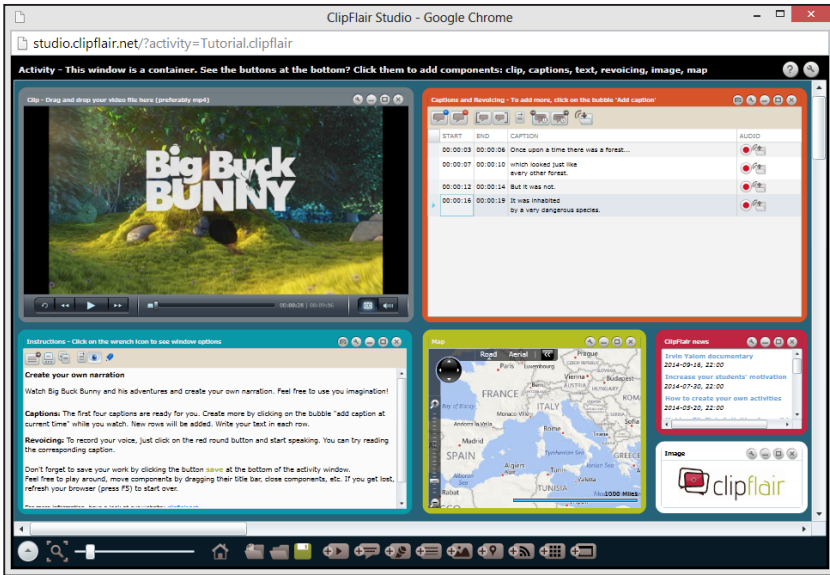
1. <http://www.slideshare.net/ClipFlair/clipflair-conceptual-framework-and-pedagogical-methodology>

2. This was important when designing an activity, as learners need to know what they are expected to do, or may wish to search a certain type of exercise.

3. <http://social.clipflair.net/Help/Manual.aspx>

At the time of writing this paper, the gallery contains a wide range of video clips, images, and over 350 revoicing and captioning activities, covering all CEFR levels, to learn 19 languages. Thanks to the gathering of metadata for videos and activities mentioned above, tutors and learners can search the gallery to find activities or videos that suit their needs. It is expected that the number of activities, videos and languages will increase as more members join the ClipFlair community.

Figure 1. Example of an activity in ClipFlair (ClipFlair tutorial)



Each activity in the gallery has its own link which tutors can easily share with learners. Figure 1 shows a ClipFlair tutorial, whose URL is <http://studio.clipflair.net/?activity=Tutorial.clipflair>.

As can be seen when visiting [ClipFlair Gallery](#), ClipFlair caters for different levels of participation, depending on the learner needs and level, from the minimum level of activity (e.g. watching a video, fill in the gaps in the subtitles) to the maximum (e.g. subtitling in L2 without a script). Some ClipFlair

activities require learners to simulate the work of audio-visual translators (e.g. to subtitle¹ or dub a clip from one language to another, to subtitle within the same language for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers², or to provide an audio description for blind and visually impaired viewers³), whereas others might not involve translation as such, but require learners to produce a text to be narrated at a later stage.

A single activity can promote the acquisition and reinforcement of several skills: for example, if students are asked to dub a clip with audio in the L2, they will be working on oral production and on listening comprehension, and increasing their cultural awareness and vocabulary at the same time. In addition, if some parts of the clip are muted, they will not only reproduce what they hear (e.g. repeat), but also create new content in the L2 (e.g. react). Tasks can be more or less time-consuming and may require more or less technical knowledge on the part of the learner.

Given that learning is a unique and individual process, the fact that learners learn at different paces is also taken into account: ClipFlair allows learners to follow instructions and repeat videos as many times as they need in order to complete an activity. However, since learning is also a social process, the platform also provides collaboration tools through **ClipFlair Social** including forums, groups and blogs to allow for different levels of learner involvement. At the time of writing this paper, **ClipFlair Social** has 1,400 registered members, and it is expected that this number will increase in the near future as more tutors and learners join the ClipFlair community.

As regards the feedback received from FL tutors and learners, it is worth mentioning the results of ClipFlair's pilot phase briefly. This phase lasted approximately one year and involved 37 tutors and 1,213 learners, who tested 84 language learning activities for 12 languages (English, Portuguese,

1. Subtitling activity example: <http://studio.clipflair.net/?activity=1Waterloo-Cap-C1-ANY.clipflair>.

2. Subtitling for the hard-of-hearing example: <http://studio.clipflair.net/?activity=Yalom-Cap-B2-EN.clipflair>.

3. Audio description example: <http://studio.clipflair.net/?activity=VisitBritain-CapRev-C1-EN.clipflair>.

Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Catalan, Romanian, Polish, Basque, Irish, Estonian and Italian), mainly in higher and secondary education institutions. The fact that only 23% of the tutors reported experiencing technical issues is encouraging, especially considering that this was done on the beta version of the platform. Regarding learners' feedback, more than 80% found the activities used interesting and useful for language learning, and reported that they would like to work on similar activities to learn foreign languages. In addition, the majority considered the activity fun. Over 80% of the learners had no technical difficulties while using **ClipFlair Studio**, and a similar percentage considered it to be user-friendly. Although the survey reveals that the attractiveness of the interface could be improved (the answers were divided between 'attractive' and 'more or less attractive'), the overall response from students was very positive, with over 80% acknowledging having enjoyed working with ClipFlair.

During the pilot phase most activities were tested in class together with the teacher (70%), but the project has shown that the learning context where ClipFlair can be used is flexible. In the case of teacher-driven learners who follow a course with predefined units and lessons, the tutor can decide how learners can best use ClipFlair for activities integrated in the syllabus, as supplementary material, or otherwise (remedial work, voluntary work, further reference, etc.).

At the other end of the continuum, independent learners selecting and organising their own learning path, goals and strategies, are able to use ClipFlair activities freely, to modify and adapt them for their needs or even create their own.

5. Conclusion

Although the funding period for the ClipFlair project has drawn to an end, the platform will be maintained for at least five years and can be accessed for free. The aim of the ClipFlair consortium has been to consolidate and pave the way for future research, projects and applications to come, contributing with tangible

results. We hope to have increased awareness and to have provided useful resources and a flexible and user-friendly platform to exploit the great potential of captioning and revoicing for FLL.

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Websites

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ClipFlair Social: <http://social.clipflair.net/>

ClipFlair Studio: <http://studio.clipflair.net/>

ClipFlair Website: <http://clipflair.net/>



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