

Television and Vocabulary Development in a Child

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Abstract

Television is assumed to help young children in developing their vocabulary in general, however, there is less research on the development of vocabulary through this media among young children for whom English is a second language. Therefore, in absence of a large-scaled empirical study, some writers have been content to accept both the positive and negative effects of television on a child's vocabulary development. This research uses a case study to find out whether or not watching English television programmes help a child from a non-English ethnic background acquire English vocabulary. The case study used here is a four-year-old boy from Bhutan without any English language background. An unstructured interview and naturalistic observation methods were used to gather data. The findings indicated that there was an enhanced development of vocabulary from watching television and movies. The key factors contributing to such development were viewer's (a) age (b) immersion; and (c) imitation. The study concludes that while a general relation may exist between vocabulary development and viewing television, more research is needed to ascertain the exact nature of this correlation.

Introduction

A child learns and masters his or her first vocabulary without any deliberate effort with age. In fact, it is subconsciously acquired as a result of the exposure to vocabulary from the parents, friends, and from play (Harmer, 2007). Similarly, children incidentally learn vocabulary while watching television during leisure hours. The incidental effect cannot be denied, as Kuppens (2009, p. 66) stated, "It is not only useful for intentional language learning but also for incidental language acquisition." The opportunities available to the child can have a significant effect in developing a child's vocabulary. For this, children need to be exposed to situations where they can hear and use the target language.

There is no doubt that television provides a massive amount of first language (L1) input (Webb, 2009). However, there is less research examining the relationship between vocabulary development and television viewing of second language (L2) learners. The aim of this study is to observe the influence of television on the vocabulary development of a young Bhutanese child.

Television in this study would be understood as English language-based television

programmes such as animation movies, videos, and children's shows.

Research Question

This paper investigates the question "Does a four-year-old child incidentally develop vocabulary from watching television?" It is also to test the hypothesis that when a child is allowed to view animation and cartoon programmes in English, this tends to develop the child's English vocabulary more effectively.

Literature Review

Many empirical studies have indicated the positive relationship between watching television or video and incidental vocabulary development. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) defined incidental vocabulary learning as "learning words without deliberate decision to commit information to memory" (p.11). Rice and Woodsmall (1998, as cited in Webb & Rodgers, 2009) found that children who watched a 12-minute cartoon with a narration that featured 20 unknown target words had higher scores on a picture recognition task that measured knowledge of those words than children who watched the cartoon with a narration in which the target words did not occur. The findings also showed that five-year-old learned more words than three-year-old. Further, Oetting, Rice, and Swank (1995) used the same video and target words with normal and specific language impaired children of six to eight-year-old. They also found that both groups of children demonstrated significant L1 incidental vocabulary gains though the specific language impaired children made a small gain than the normal children. The above studies suggest that there is a positive influence on incidental vocabulary learning from television.

Besides, Pavakanun and d'Ydewalle (1992) studied the effects of watching a 12-minute cartoon on vocabulary learning on two groups of language learners: English native speakers learning Dutch and Dutch native speakers learning Spanish. It was found that the group who watched the movie in the target language had higher scores on a multiple-choice test measuring recognition of meaning. All of the target words were spoken on the programme at least five times. So, they concluded that watching television in a foreign language may lead to large incidental vocabulary learning. And in their study with foreign language vocabulary acquisition with primary children, Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) found that young children who watched a 15-minute English language documentary had higher scores on a multiple-choice test that involved matching the L1 meaning with the L2 target vocabulary than the controlled group children who did not watch the programme.

With pictures on primary school children. The result showed that those

who watched short video clips in the target L2 (French) achieved higher on a comprehension test than learners who heard the teacher read a transcript of the video and saw four pictures relating to the context. Their finding suggests that the use of video improved comprehension more than pictures as it is more effective at creating the link between L2 form and L1 meaning.

Increasingly, studies show how watching television can be effectively used as a medium for learning foreign language skills. For instance, Kuppens (2009, p.65) cited in Vanderplank (1998) argued that television provided learners with appealing samples of authentic language to reinforce their confidence and language proficiency. Bahrai (2011, p. 261) supported this claim stating that “through exposure to television news, children acquire the knowledge, structures, strategies, and vocabularies they can use in everyday situations.”

A study conducted by researchers at Lancaster University, Northern England, studied 52 children aged four to six to find out any educational benefits from exposing them to Harry Potter movies. The children were formed into two groups, with the first group being shown magical scenes from the movie, which included talking animals, wizards and spells. The second group watched non-magical scenes from the same movie. It was found that the first group performed better than the second group in creativity tests which included pretending to be a rabbit and thinking of different ways to put plastic cups into the trash bin. The result suggested that watching movies about magic might aid to explain children’s imagination and creatively (“Watching Harry Potter,” 2012). Therefore, it can be argued from this study that watching English movies and television has potential to influence the viewers in learning foreign words. Linebarger’s (2004, p.20) study on the potential language benefits of television programmes for children aged above two years supported this claim where his study findings revealed positive outcomes relating to children “vocabularies and expressive language abilities.” Although television can be used as an effective language learning material, yet, Clark and Clark (1977, cited in Evans, 2004, p.23) contest that, “television is a passive medium and children need to be interactive users to learn language”. From the Interactionist theory (Vygotsky, 1985, as cited in Blankson et al., 2015) proposes that children need to interact with others to learn vocabulary. If children need to interact, then watching television would not enable them to learn a language. Wright et al. (2001), in his two longitudinal investigations, also found that children who watch more general education programs at 2–5 years of age have lower vocabulary receptive.

Research Method

A case study is understood as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case-based themes” (Creswell, p.73). In conducting a case study, the case being studied may be an individual, several individuals, an event, or an action, existing in a specific time and place. For this research, a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995, as cited in Creswell 2007) is chosen for the investigator to focus on “an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate the issue” (Creswell, p.74).

Thus, this paper adopted a case study method to provide an in-depth observation and understanding of the case – the incidental development of English vocabulary through watching television of a four-year-old boy.

Informant

There was only one informant involved for this case study, a boy named Karma (pseudonym used for the protection of the child’s identity and for ethical reasons). Karma is four year old and had come to Australia from Bhutan with his parents. He had not yet been to pre-school in Bhutan and his home language is Tsangla, a dialect spoken by the people in the eastern part of Bhutan.

Code-switching is common phenomenon in Bhutan and is the capability of a bilingual to substitute naturally between two languages (Bullock & Toribio, 2009). Not only could language dominance play a role (Gollan & Ferreira, 2009; Gross & Kaushanskaya, 2015, as cited in Bosma & Blom, 2019), but also the situation of language use. Thus, both parents speak English as they have been educated in an English medium school in Bhutan. They speak English, Tsangla (Karma’s mother tongue), and Dzongkha (national language of Bhutan) interchangeably with Karma at home. Karma did not have much contact with any native English-speaking children of his age at the time of this study. Thus, his language environment mainly of Bhutanese people and interaction with peers of his age who spoke mostly his own mother tongue (Tsangla) and Dzongkha (the national language of Bhutan).

Research Data and Analysis

The data for this paper derives mainly from four sources to ensure triangulation and validity (Creswell, 2007). One source is the data from seven unstructured interviews with the informant. Each interview took around 10-15 minutes. All interviews were conducted in his native language. I conducted nine weekend observations of the informant. I visited the informant's home every Saturday and Sunday and observed for an hour on each visit. I observed how often he watched television and how he imitated and used the language heard on the television or video.

It proved difficult to personally check if Karma picked up any vocabulary from the television watched during my visits and observation. To counteract this difficulty, I developed an observation checklist to be filled in by his parents whenever they observed Karma using a new word or a phrase. I also had informal conversations with Karma's parents seeking their observations about Karma's vocabulary development. These data were analysed following grounded theory procedures to identify salient themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Vocabulary

Karma acquired a number of English words and phrases and his ability to use words in English had increased at a steady and impressive pace during the period of this study. He had acquired 283 words (Table 1) in nine weeks, but some words were repeated in his phrases. There was a vast improvement in his vocabulary between the first week and the last week (Table 2). For instance, in week four, Karma named five more animals such as dinosaur, donkey, horse, bunny and rat besides the names of the five animals asked in the interview. He used short phrases that were in movies and television shows to talk with his toys and parents - phrases like "what is that?" from the children's show *Dora the Explorer* and *big monster* from the animated movie *The Ice Age*. In the first week, Karma seemed worried about the inadequacy of uttering even a single English word that I asked. In fact, he hardly spoke any English word concentrating his attention to the cartoon and his parents. By the end of the observation, he had become comfortable with my presence and quite confident of his ability to answer my questions. He often used vocabulary like "okay, no, yes, thank you, sorry, see you" in our informal conversations. I observed he greatly enjoyed trying his newly acquired words while playing with the toys.

Table 1*Total Words Acquired*

Words/ phrases uttered by the informant
Red, blue, green, yellow, orange, Mummy, daddy, no, 4. yes, ok, gun, car, book, spoon, plate, outside, hi, up, rain, baby, come, eating, going, cow, dog, cat, rooster, monkey, here, run, my car, baby sleeping, come, no going, there, up, boy, naughty, big monster, put this, my cat, don't do that, swimming, story time, not here, go there, yellow leaf, toy, my toys, mummy angry, food, yellow leaf, my best, story, paper, you, come on, fight, see you, I am good, not that, look aeroplane, running, give, horse, donkey, hippo, camel, zebra, lion, tiger, rat, dog, bird, duck, butterflies I know, snow, alright, go out, say, listen, jump, fly, hungry, sleep, water, sorry, thank you, please, new shoe, raining, sunny day, daddy, mummy, Fire, dinosaurs, elephant, acorn, big monster, me too, towel, bucket, hat, sun, swim, sandcastle, rainy day, umbrella, thunder, lightning, I go outside, listen me, jump high, look airplane is flying, baby sleeping, I sleep, yes, I hungry, I'm sorry, give me water please, baby's new shoe, no shoe, no playing fire, , look raining, elephant is big animal, you big monster, my dinosaurs, quiet, baby towel, my hat/cap, put sun-screen, baby, go swimming, look sandcastle, car, gun, airplane, train, boat, , helicopter, orange, cherry, mango, banana, grapes, I want to drive, do like that, I like that, don't go, stay here, come on, here, there, what happened?, this way, that way, say sorry, try again, my things, my head, just wait, I want to pee, toilet, I want to eat, wake up, get up, sit down, hold on, too hard, bedroom, kitchen, I will be back, not sharing, don't say that, what is that sound?, I am cold/hot, color, white,

Table 2

	Researcher observation	Parents observation
Week1 (March 3-4, 2012)	Karma's Vocabulary	Karma's vocabulary
	Blue, red, yes, mummy,	Mummy, baby, dog, gun, monkey, boy,
Week 9 (April 28-April 29)	Big monster, thank you, my best, not sharing, colour, sit down, no going, come here, go there, look raining, my gun, towel, naughty, quiet, baby towel, I go outside, come on.	elephant is big animal, say sorry, story time, hungry, you, I am cold/ hot, look airplane is flying, yellow leaf, I am good, sleep, going, baby no shoe, don't say that, what is that sound?

Multiple Words

Another striking observation of Karma's vocabulary development was his ability to use multiple words. His single word "fire" developed in the earlier week was added with other words such as "You, fire!" or "Come on, fire me" while playing with his toy gun. These lines were imitated from the movie *Toy Story*. Vocabulary development had clearly increased. For instance, at the beginning of the first few weeks, Karma could hardly speak or name the few colours that were asked on the television show *Wurrah*. At the end of the observation week, he could understand, enjoy, and almost accurately tell the meaning of the words and name the things in English when asked about them in his native language.

Pronunciation

Impressionistically, Karma's pronunciation of the words he acquired was nearly native. He articulated the words like "monster, dinosaur, no, kind" clearly. The sound /th/ /t/ /k/ of his words was very distinct. His intonation was noticeably better than most Bhutanese children whom I had taught earlier in Bhutan.

Discussion

The development of vocabulary of young children is unique and it is estimated that their receptive vocabulary often is four times greater than their expressive vocabulary. A few thousand words account for 90 percent of the spoken vocabulary anyone uses or hears on a regular basis (Hayes & Ahrens 1988, cited in Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). From regular television viewing and videos Karma had developed a good percentage of vocabularies within the short observation period though he could not express all the words that were acquired. His success in acquisition of vocabulary can be attributed to his age, immersion, high integrative motivation to use the words learnt, imitation and the learning context. Therefore, I conclude the hypothesis by stating that the incidental development of vocabulary from watching television is effective.

There are number of ways in which one might attempt to explain this conclusion. It is possible that Karma's young age might be the most influential factor in developing his vocabulary very fast. For those who view younger as better for second language acquisition (Krashen, Long & Scacella, 1979, cited in Schmidt, 1983), this is a positive factor. For instance, I have observed my six year-old son using English words that are far beyond his age sometimes and when asked, he would say that he learnt them from the Cartoon Network channel or other movies he watched on television. Occasionally, he would ask the meaning of some words he heard on television or movies and then use them in his communication with others. This is also in consistence with Rice and Woodsmall (1998, as cited in Webb & Rodgers, 2009) findings that five-year old learned more words than

adults did. A longitudinal study on the effects of television exposure on children between six and 30 months of age by Kirkorian, Wartella and Anderson (2008, p.48) showed television viewing at three years and beyond of programmes such as *Dora the Explorer* and *Blue's Clues* had positively linked with subsequent vocabulary and expressive language development.

Karma was highly immersed in movies and motivated to use the new words in playing with his toys and that must have had a considerable influence in his developing multiple words. He often talked to the television characters and frequently engaged in situation-related actions and dialogues. There is clear evidence of incidental development of vocabulary from watching television. Television viewing can help develop contemporary communication skills (Flood & Lapp, 1995). Moreover, Evans (2004) strongly supported television as a fun way of learning language and as medium that introduces a variety of language teaching items for children. Though contested by the Interactionist claims that television lacks interaction in helping children develop a new language, viewing does serve as a useful tool for vocabulary development in a young child at least in the Bhutanese context.

Another aspect of Karma's ability may be imitation that reflects one characteristic of television influence. Karma's parents reported that Karma was very good at imitating the characters' dialogue and used phrases with them such as "put me up" from the animated video *Happy Two Feet* to ask his father to pick him up. Linebarger (2004) claimed that young children are more likely to use those words and grammatical phrases to which they are exposed. Thus, the language heard and seen on television and animated movies act as a fundamental support for early vocabulary development. Viewing television shows guide children in their learning and provide "an important forum for development awareness of the pragmatics of language" (Dockrell, Stuart & King, 2004, p.16).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates beneficial of viewing television in the child's vocabulary development. It also indicates of having potential for language development in young children. Though, case studies provide useful empirical data but in this study the data was limited to only one case study, so any attempt at generalisation is challenging. Although, there is evidence of enhancement of vocabulary in a child from watching television, more research is required to form a comprehensive data and research finding on television viewing and vocabulary development in young children.

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