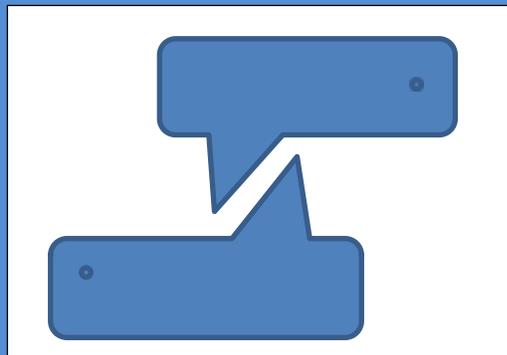


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mehozcan20@gmail.com

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Impact of timing of Palatal repair on Speech Errors in Children with CLP

M. Pushpavathi¹

All India Institute of Speech and Hearing

Ajish K Abraham²

All India Institute of Speech and Hearing

S.R. Mahadeva Prasanna³

IIT Guwahati

Girish K.S⁴

All India Institute of Speech and Hearing

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Abstract

Surgery of palate is one of the important rehabilitation for children with cleft lip and palate. In most of the children with cleft lip and palate (CLP), speech errors persist even after surgical repair of the palate. However, the timing of palatal repair plays a vital role. The associated problems in children with cleft lip and palate differ based on the timing of the palatal repair. Resonance and articulation are the crucial measures of disordered speech and they form the important areas of therapeutic intervention for children with repaired cleft lip and palate (RCLP). Thus, the present study aims at profiling resonance and consonant production errors (CPEs) in children with RCLP among early intervention group (EIG) and delayed intervention group (DIG). The research design employed was standard group comparison. The participants consisted of eight Kannada speaking children with RCLP (6 to 12 years) in each group (EIG and DIG). They were asked to repeat 10 meaningful bisyllabic words loaded with pressure consonants to assess the resonance and 8 non-meaningful bisyllabic words loaded with stop consonants to check CPEs. The responses were recorded in a sound-treated room and were presented to three Speech Language Pathologists for assessing resonance and CPEs using Henningsson's protocol. The results revealed a statistically significant reduction in the resonance and few CPEs in EIG than in DIG. 'Nasalized voiced pressure consonants' and 'weak oral pressure' were found to be significantly lesser in EIG than DIG. The present study concludes that early surgical intervention has a direct impact on reducing hypernasality and CPEs in children with CLP. Children with CLP require early surgical intervention and therapy to establish appropriate oral motor skills that are necessary for normal speech production.

Keywords: Repaired cleft lip and palate, early intervention, resonance, consonant production errors, Henningsson's scale

1. Introduction

Speech errors in children with CLP are associated with hypernasality, nasal air emission, weak pressure consonants, and compensatory articulation due to the impairment of the velopharyngeal closure. Hypernasality is the

¹Bio: Dr. M. Pushpavathi., Director, All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysuru, Karnataka. She is the Chairperson of Unit for Structural Oro-facial Anomalies. Corresponding author: shivanna.pushpa@gmail.com

²Bio: Dr. Ajish K Abraham., Professor in Electronics and Acoustics, Department of Electronics, All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysuru, Karnataka.

³Bio: Dr. S.R. Mahadeva Prasanna., Professor, Department of Electrical & Electronics Engineering, IIT, Guwahati, Assam.

⁴Bio: Mr. Girish K.S., JRF, Department of Electronics, All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysuru, Karnataka.

disturbance in the resonance of vowels, vocalic consonants, glides and liquids which gives rise to deviant voice quality in speech production. Nasal air emission is the nasal airflow which accompanies during the production of pressure consonants (stops, fricatives, and affricates). A compensatory articulation is a term which is often used clinically to embrace any non-English consonant realization (Harding & Grunwell, 1996). It occurs when articulation placement is altered in response to the abnormal structure of the oral cavity. That is, when there is velopharyngeal dysfunction, it is difficult to maintain adequate oral pressure for pressure consonants, so the place of articulation may be changed to maintain adequate air pressure. Hence, children with CLP require early surgical intervention to establish appropriate oral motor skills that are sufficient for normal speech production.

Over the decades, researchers have opined that an early cleft palate repair may reduce hypernasality, decrease the likelihood of the child developing compensatory articulation errors and help in better functioning of the velopharyngeal port (Hardin-Jones & Jones, 2005). Henningsson and Karling (1984) described hypernasality and articulation in 38 children with early palate closure (before 18 months) and 30 children with delayed palatal closure (after 18 months). The results revealed that early closure group had fewer incidences of hypernasality and articulation errors than the delayed closure group. Similarly, Rohrich, Rowsell, and Dniry (1984) also found that significantly more articulation errors in the delayed closure group than early closure group in children with CLP. Likewise, Chapman, Hardin-Jones, Goldstein, Halter, Robert, Havlik and Schulte (2007) examined the impact of age and lexical status at the time of primary palatal surgery on speech outcome on 40 preschoolers (33 to 42 months) with cleft palate. They concluded that children who were less lexically advanced and younger at the time of palatal surgery exhibited better articulation and resonance outcomes at 3 years of age.

Recently, Bruneel, Luyten, Bettens, D'haeseleer, Dhondt, Hodges and Van Lierde (2017) compared resonance and articulation characteristics of 15 Ugandan participants with CLP who had delayed (≥ 8 years) primary palatal closure across age and gender-matched Ugandan participants without CLP. They found that individuals with CLP had a significantly higher prevalence of more articulation errors, hypernasality and higher nasalance values for all oral and oro-nasal speech samples. They concluded that delayed palatal repair is insufficient to eliminate nasal airflow errors, resonance abnormalities, and articulation disorders which leads to unintelligible speech.

In Indian context, Murthy, Sendhilnathan, and Hussain (2010) studied the speech outcome of 131 individuals with CLP who underwent primary palate repair after the age of 10 years. Baseline assessment was done and all the individuals were counseled, oriented, and demonstrated the correct place and manner of articulation for the phonemes misarticulated by them. Though postoperative speech samples assessment revealed improvement in speech intelligibility, there were residual speech problems in most of the individuals with repaired cleft lip and palate (RCLP), requiring further



evaluation and appropriate treatment. They concluded that more residual speech problems are found with late palatal surgical intervention.

Recently, Pushpavathi, Kavya, and Akshatha (2017) compared the speech characteristics of three toddlers with RCLP who underwent surgery before 1.6 years of age (Early Intervention Group) with three toddlers with RCLP who underwent surgery after 1.6 years of age (Delayed Intervention Group). All the toddlers had Kannada as their native language and they were in the age range of 2-3 year. The baseline was established and measures such as type and pattern of the vowels and consonant inventory were analyzed for the toddlers in both the groups. The post-therapy measurement was done after 20 speech and language therapy sessions. The results revealed that the early intervention group had better and diversified phonetic inventory when compared to the delayed intervention group. They concluded that the timing of the surgery of cleft lip or cleft palate plays an important role in shaping the future communicative abilities.

Though studies have been conducted on focusing the parameters such as hypernasality and articulation in children with CLP, only limited studies have been conducted on investigating compensatory articulations or consonant production errors. Nikhila and Prasad (2017) investigated the impact of timing of surgery by analyzing the compensatory articulation errors across the early surgical group (before 2 years) and delayed surgical group (after 2 years) in 40 Telugu speaking children with RCLP. They also provided data on compensatory errors in Telugu speaking children with RCLP. The mean percentage of occurrence of compensatory errors in early and delayed surgical group respectively, were as follows: Glottal stops - 20% and 10%, Pharyngeal stops - 20% and 50%, Pharyngeal fricatives - 45% and 70%, Pharyngeal affricates - 0% and 05%, Pharyngeal backing - 15% and 35%, Posterior nasal affricates - 60% and 20%, Nasal fricatives - 30% and 45%, Nasal emissions - 55% and 60%, Mid Dorsum fricative stops - 0% and 30%, Mid Dorsum palatal fricative - 0% and 0%, Velar fronting - 5% and 10%, Velar palatal - 0% and 20%, Cluster reduction - 05% and 15%, Mild hypernasality - 30% and 55%. They concluded that children in the early surgical group showed less compensatory errors when compared to the late surgical group.

Researchers have discussed speech errors in children with CLP/RCLP in several ways. Trost-Cardamone (1981) said that compensatory articulations in individuals with history CLP can be classified into 6 specific types. They are mid-dorsum palatal stop, Posterior nasal fricative, Velar fricatives, Pharyngeal fricatives, Pharyngeal stop, and Glottal stop/plosive. Many investigations have been done to account for the compensatory articulations in individuals with cleft palate.

Later, Sell, Harding and Grunwell (1994) gave a comprehensive speech assessment tool called “Great Ormond Street Speech Assessment”, a screening tool for describing the speech characteristics commonly associated with CLP. In this, they broadly grouped consonant production errors into, place of articulation (Imprecise tongue tip movements, Double articulation, Backing – velar/uvular, Compensatory articulations) and manner of articulation (Nasalised weak consonants, Nasal emission accompanying consonants, Nasal fricatives, Lateralisation, Palatalisation).

In 2008, a new descriptive term ‘Consonant Production Errors’ (CPEs) was proposed by Henningsson, Kuehn, Sell, Sweeney, Trost-Cardamone, and Whitehill. They gave a system of universal parameters for reporting speech outcomes in individuals with cleft palate, where consonant error production is divided as (a) abnormal backing of oral targets to post-uvular place (Pharyngeal and Glottal), (b) abnormal backing of oral targets, but place remains oral (Mid Dorsum Palatal, Velar and Uvular), (c) Nasal Fricative, (d) Nasal consonants for oral pressure consonants, (e) Nasalized pressure consonants, (f) Weak articulation, and (g) Other oral misarticulations. So the present study used this standardized system of universal parameters to study the CPEs in children with early versus delayed palatal repair.

Most professionals recommend correcting the structure at the earliest to provide the child with better speech potential. Once the structure is normalized, correction of resonance and compensatory productions is much earlier and easier. But, even with early surgical repair of the cleft, speech errors persist in most of the children with CLP. These speech characteristics related to resonance and articulation problems in children with CLP requires a detailed assessment by Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs). Detailed speech and language assessment include both perceptual as well as instrumental evaluations like Nasometry, Nasal Visualization System evaluation, Naso-endoscopy etc, but the perceptual assessment is considered as the gold standard (Kuehn and Moller, 2000) for the analysis of speech. Resonance and articulation are the crucial measures of disordered speech and an important goal of therapeutic intervention for children with RCLP. Thus carrying out the perceptual judgment of speech errors are important in order to measure the speech outcomes and to determine appropriate treatment plans.

1.1. Need for the Study

There have been limited attempts in the Indian context to study the impact of timing of surgery on resonance and consonant production errors in children with RCLP. In particular, there have been no studies on profiling CPEs in children with RCLP undergoing early and delayed surgical intervention using standardized Henningsson’s perceptual rating scale. Hence, the present study attempted to explore these parameters in the early surgical group and delayed surgical group using Henningsson’s scale.

1.2. Aim

The aim of the present study is to profile the speech characteristics of the early intervention group versus delayed intervention group in children with repaired cleft lip and palate.

1.3. Objectives

- 1.3.1. To compare resonance across the early intervention group and delayed intervention group in words.
- 1.3.2. To compare consonant production errors (CPEs) across the early intervention group (EIG) and delayed intervention group (DIG) in words.



1.3.3. To document the occurrence of overall CPEs in children with RCLP.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The research design employed was standard group comparison. Sixteen non-syndromic Kannada speaking children with RCLP between six to 12 years served as participants for the present study. The participants will be selected based on convenience and purposive sampling methods. Equal numbers of participants were considered in both early intervention group (EIG - who underwent palatal surgery before 1.6 years of age, Henningsson & Karling, 1984) and delayed intervention group (DIG - who underwent palatal surgery after 1.6 years of age, Henningsson & Karling, 1984), as shown in table 1. All the participants considered for the present study had Kannada as their native language and the language abilities were age adequate. Individuals with other associated problems like hearing loss, intellectual disability and nasal pathologies were excluded from this study. The present study was conducted with the clearance from the AIISH Bio-behavioral ethical committee. A written consent was taken from parents/caregivers of children with CLP where the parents/caregivers were provided with the information about the aim, objective and approximate duration of the testing procedure.

Table 1

Participants details in EIG and DIG

	Name	Age	Gender	Age at which first Palatal Surgery was done
EIG	X1	8 years	Male	8 months
	X2	8 years	Male	18 Months
	X3	8 years	Male	8 Months
	X4	7 years	Male	10 Months
	X5	6 years	Female	1 Year
	X6	6 years	Female	11 Months
	X7	6 years	Female	10 Months
	X8	10 years	Female	14 Months
DIG	Y1	9 years	Male	3 Years
	Y2	10 years	Male	5 Years 5 Months
	Y3	10 years	Female	2 Years
	Y4	7 years	Female	7 Years
	Y5	11 years	Female	4 Years
	Y6	12 years	Female	2 Years
	Y7	5 years	Female	2 Years
	Y8	7 years	Female	2 Years

Note- EIG: Early Intervention Group, DIG: Delayed Intervention Group

2.2. Materials and procedure

The speech stimuli included ten meaningful Kannada bisyllabic words loaded with pressure consonants (/bassu/, /ʃaʃa/, /ɖabbi/, /ka:dU/,

/kasa/, /ko:tɪ/, /pa:pU/, /paɾa/, /sara/ and /ɖaɖa/) to assess resonance. Eight non-meaningful bisyllabic words loaded with stop consonants were used to check CPEs. In non meaningful words, the unvoiced stop consonants like /p/, /t/, /t/, /k/ and voiced stop consonants like /b/, /d/, /d/, /g/ were used with the combination of vowel /a/ [/papa/, /tata/, /tata/, /kaka/, /baba/, /ɖaɖa/, /ɖaɖa/ and /gaga/]. Participants were made to repeat words after the tester. The responses were recorded using Brüel & Kjær Sound Level Meter (Type 2250-s Hand Held Analyzer) in a sound-treated room.

The recorded speech samples were presented to three Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) through the headphones (Sennheiser HD 457) for rating hypernasality and articulation error analysis. The SLPs were well-versed in the area of CLP with a minimum of three years experience. The orders of speech samples presented to SLPs were randomized. SLPs have to listen to the meaningful words and rate the hypernasality on a four-point rating scale (Henningsson et al., 2008), where 0 = normal, 1 = mild, 2 = moderate and 3 = severe and each individual's total score varied from 0 to 30. Similarly, non-meaningful words were presented to the SLP's and they are requested to document the CPEs based on a standardized rating scale developed by Henningsson et al. (2008). In CPEs, there can be more than one error for the single speech stimuli. Instructions for the evaluation were provided to the SLPs both orally and in written form. SLPs evaluated samples in a quiet room situation. The final rating for resonance and CPEs for each speech sample is based on the consensus among the three judges.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

Obtained data were subjected to statistical computation using IBM Statistical Package Social Sciences software (version 20). Average mean values, median values, mean rank values and standard deviation of all the variables were calculated separately. Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was applied to check the normality, where the test revealed the normal distribution of the data ($p > 0.05$) for resonance and non-normal distribution of the data ($p < 0.05$) for CPEs. Independent samples t-test was carried out to check if there was any difference in resonance across EIG and DIG. Mann-Whitney U test was carried out to check if there is any difference in CPEs across EIG and DIG. Cronbach's alpha showed higher inter-judge reliability among three judges ($\alpha > 0.70$).

3. Findings

The present study is one of the preliminary attempts in the Indian context to profile the speech characteristics of the early intervention group versus delayed intervention group in children with RCLP. The obtained results are discussed under following sub-sections.

3.1. To compare resonance across early intervention group and delayed intervention group in words

The total mean score and standard deviation for resonance were calculated in words for EIG and DIG, as shown in table 2.



Table 2

The mean and standard deviation of resonance at word level across groups

	Resonance		
	Mean	SD	p-value
EIG	11.13	2.35	*0.007
DIG	15.88	3.52	

Note- EIG: Early Intervention Group, DIG: Delayed Intervention Group.

The total mean scores of resonance rated by the 3 SLPs were comparatively greater in DIG than in EIG. The results clearly indicated that, as the values increased, the performance of the participants deteriorated. Conversely, lower scores indicated better performance. Independent two-sample t-test was conducted to compare resonance across EIG and DIG. It was observed that there was a significant difference in resonance [t(14)=3.028,p<0.05] across EIG and DIG.

3.2. To document and compare consonant production errors (CPEs) across the early intervention group (EIG) and delayed intervention group (DIG) in words.

The mean and standard deviation of CPEs across EIG and DIG for words were calculated across EIG and DIG, as represented in table 3.

Table 3

The mean and standard deviation of CPEs across EIG and DIG

	Consonant Production Errors	Mean		SD		
		EIG	DIG	EIG	DIG	
1.	Abnormal backing of oral targets to post-uvular place	Glottal Stops	3.12	2.75	5.02	4.23
2.		Pharyngeal Stops	0.25	0.25	0.70	0.70
3.	Abnormal backing of oral targets, but place remains oral	Mid Dorsum Palatal Stops	0.50	0.12	1.41	0.35
4.		Velar Substitutions	1	0.5	1.77	1.41
5.		Uvular Substitutions	0	0	0	0
6.		Nasal Fricatives	0	0	0	0
7.		Nasal consonant for oral pressure consonant	1.37	4.25	2.44	3.41
8.		Nasalized voiced pressure consonants	0.25	5.37	0.70	5.82
9.		Weak Oral Pressure	6.37	1.62	5.09	1.30
10.		Dental Substitutions	1	0.37	1.19	0.74
11.	Other Errors	Labio Dental Substitutions	0.25	0	0.46	0
12.		Voicing Errors	0.62	0.62	0.91	1.40
13.		Double Articulations	0	0.5	0	0.92
		Total	14.75	16.37	2.37	2.38

Note- EIG: Early Intervention Group, DIG: Delayed Intervention Group.

The mean values of overall CPEs were less in EIG when compared to DIG. Mann-Whitney U test was carried out to check if there is any difference in CPEs across EIG and DIG. The mean rank of CPEs in EIG and DIG were calculated as represented in table 4.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney U test results of CPEs across EIG and DIG.

	Consonant Production Errors	Mean Rank		Z	P (*p≤0.05)
		EIG	DIG		
1.	Glottal Stops	8.31	8.69	0.165	0.869
2.	Pharyngeal Stops	8.50	8.50	0	1
3.	Mid Dorsum Palatal Stops	8.56	8.44	0.091	0.927
4.	Velar Substitutions	9.44	7.56	1.035	0.301
5.	Uvular Substitutions	0	0	0	0
6.	Nasal Fricatives	0	0	0	0
7.	Nasal consonant for oral pressure consonant	6.50	10.50	1.760	0.078
8.	Nasalized voiced pressure consonants	6.25	10.75	2.174	0.030*
9.	Weak Oral Pressure	10.94	6.06	2.072	0.038*
10.	Dental Substitutions	9.69	7.31	1.152	0.249
11.	Labio Dental Substitutions	9.50	7.50	1.464	0.143
12.	Voicing Errors	8.94	8.06	0.448	0.654
13.	Double Articulations	7.50	9.50	1.464	0.143
	Total	6.50	10.50		

Note- EIG: Early Intervention Group, DIG: Delayed Intervention Group.

The overall CPEs were less in EIG when compared to DIG but there was no significant difference ($Z=1.868$; $p=0.062>0.05$). It revealed that glottal stops, nasal consonant for oral pressure consonant, nasalized voiced pressure consonants, double articulations were less in EIG when compared to DIG. Other CPEs like mid-dorsum palatal stops, velar substitutions, weak oral pressure, dental substitutions, labio-dental substitutions, and voicing errors were more in EIG than DIG. Pharyngeal stops were the same in both the groups and there were no uvular substitutions and nasal fricatives found in the participants considered for the present study. But, significant difference across EIG and DIG was found only for nasalized voiced pressure consonants ($Z=2.174$; $p=0.030<0.05$) and weak oral pressure ($Z=2.072$; $p=0.038<0.05$). There was no significant difference across EIG and DIG for other CPEs.

3.3. To document the overall combined CPEs in children with RCLP.

The mean scores and standard deviation of overall combined CPEs in children with RCLP were calculated, as represented in table 5.



Table 5
Mean and standard deviation of overall combined CPEs in children with RCLP

	Consonant Production Errors	Mean	SD
1.	Glottal Stops	2.93	4.49
2.	Pharyngeal Stops	0.25	0.68
3.	Mid Dorsum Palatal Stops	0.31	1.01
4.	Velar Substitutions	0.75	1.57
5.	Uvular Substitutions	0	0
6.	Nasal Fricatives	0	0
7.	Nasal consonant for oral pressure consonant	2.81	3.22
8.	Nasalized voiced pressure consonants	2.81	4.80
9.	Weak Oral Pressure	4	4.35
10.	Dental Substitutions	0.68	1.01
11.	Labio Dental Substitutions	0.12	0.34
12.	Voicing Errors	0.62	1.14
13.	Double Articulations	0.25	0.68

The mean scores of combined CPEs in children with RCLP were found to be more in weak oral pressure, followed by glottal stops, nasal consonant for oral pressure consonant, nasalized voiced pressure consonants, velar substitutions, dental substitutions, voicing errors, mid-dorsum palatal stops, pharyngeal stops, double articulations, labio dental substitutions, uvular substitutions, and nasal fricatives.

4. Discussion

The present study investigated the impact of timing of palatal repair by comparing resonance and CPEs across EIG and DIG in children with RCLP. In resonance, EIG had lower scores than DIG which was statistically significant, i.e., hypernasality was less in EIG when compared to DIG. This result is in consonance with the findings of the following previously done studies: Bruneel et al. (2017) who found a significantly higher prevalence of hypernasality in Ugandan participants with CLP who had delayed primary palatal closure age; Henningsson and Karling’s (1984) who reported that early complete closure group had a significantly lower incidence of hypernasality than the delayed closure group; Chapman et al. (2007) who found a better resonance outcome in 40 preschoolers who underwent early palatal surgery. When the child undergoes early surgical intervention, the structures involved in the velopharyngeal closure are corrected in the earlier stage of speech and language acquisition resulting in a better function of the velopharynx. This suggests that early surgical intervention has a direct impact on reducing hypernasality in children with CLP with better speech outcome.

With respect to the CPEs across EIG and DIG, the overall CPEs were less in EIG than in DIG (but it was not statistically significant). This result is in consensus with the findings of the following previously done studies: Henningsson and Karling (1984), who reported that early complete closure group had lower articulation errors than the delayed closure group; Rohrich et al. (1984), who reported more articulation errors in the delayed closure group than early closure group; Murthy et al. (2010), who reported more

residual speech problems with 131 individuals with CLP who underwent late palatal surgical intervention, Bruneel et al. (2017), who also found a higher prevalence of articulation errors in Ugandan participants with CLP who had delayed primary palatal closure age; Nikhila and Prasad (2017) who found that the children in early surgical group showed less compensatory errors when compared to the late surgical group.

This suggests that children who have undergone an early palatal surgery have a better velopharyngeal closure. Early palatal surgery helps to improve the place and manner of articulation and avoids the development of compensatory productions, which can be difficult to eliminate in late palatal surgery. Compensatory articulation productions often develop due to the open palate or persistent velopharyngeal insufficiency. Also if the child is surgically intervened within the critical age period, the acquisition of speech and language skills is easier and better. This supports the findings of Pushpavathi et al. (2017) who found a better and diversified phonetic inventory in toddlers with RCLP who underwent palatal surgery before 1.6 years.

Within CPEs, a statistically significant difference was found only in the following: (a) Nasalized voiced pressure consonants, which were found to be significantly lesser in EIG which indicated that early palatal surgery helps in reducing nasality in oral consonants due to better velopharyngeal closure than DIG. (b) Weak oral pressure, which was found to be significantly more in EIG. This is because the oral pressure was not adequate which can be considered as weak oral pressure but not a nasal substitution or a nasalized consonant. Whereas, most of the children in DIG nasalized the oral consonant or substituted the oral consonant with the nasal consonant. These errors cannot be put under weak oral pressure as the oral pressure is absent or negligible.

The most frequently occurring CPEs in children with RCLP are weak oral pressure, glottal stops, nasal consonant for oral pressure consonant, and nasalized voiced pressure consonants. Similar results were reported by Hardin-Jones and Jones (2005) on examining the speech of 212 preschool and school-aged children with cleft lip and palate. Their results reported that approximately 13% of the children used nasal substitutions and 25% used compensatory articulation errors, specifically glottal stop substitutions. It also supports the findings of Sell, Harding, and Grunwell (1994) who opined that glottal stops occur frequently and consistently among other compensatory articulations. Few CPEs like uvular substitutions and nasal fricatives were not evidenced in the present study.

The disparity between the present study and the previous studies can be attributed to various aspects such as speech therapy, type of speech stimuli, type and extent of the cleft, type of palatal surgery, number of palatal surgeries, maturity and motivation, family support, socio-economic status, etc. Wherein, Speech therapy could be one of the major factors. Speech therapy could maximize the outcome of the palatal surgery and it is usually recommended as soon as the surgical correction of the palate. The present study did not consider the factors related to speech and language intervention and its strategies undertaken by the participants.



The present study used stop consonants with the combination of the vowel /a/ (CVCV) as the speech stimuli to compare CPEs across EIG and DIG, where a significant difference was obtained only in nasalized voiced pressure consonants and weak oral pressure. A significant difference in the other CPEs could have also been obtained with the inclusion of other pressure consonant categories like fricatives and affricates with the combination of the vowel /i/ and /u/ as well. Another major factor influencing the generalization of the results is the number of participants in the study. Present study considered only 8 participants in each group, exhibiting diverse speech errors limiting the ability to generalize the findings of the current study. The severity of resonance and articulation problems might vary with respect to the type and extent of the cleft palate but this aspect was not considered in the present study, thus being one of the limitations. Other factors like maturity, motivation, and family support were also not discussed in the present study which could have been the factors contributing to the results of the present study.

5. Conclusion

The present study concludes that early surgical intervention has a direct impact on reducing hypernasality and consonant production errors in children with RCLP. Children with CLP require early surgical intervention to establish appropriate oral motor skills that are necessary for normal speech production.

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Acquiring English as a mother tongue through watching English television programs in a non-English speaking community

Obie Noe B. Madalang¹

Mountain Province State Polytechnic College

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Abstract

This grounded theory research design looked for possible answers to the question: Can a child in a non-English speaking community learn and sustain his or her ability to communicate in English with the help of television alone?

The subjects, one four-year old preschooler and a ten-year-old fifth grader speak English like natives in their respective ages and use English sentence structures, vocabularies and pronunciations that are not usually taught in Philippine classrooms nor taught by their parents.

The unique communicative qualities displayed by the subjects do not only test the claims of early studies on the contribution of television programs on language learning and English vocabulary enrichment for non-native speakers but also challenges the popular criticism that watching television has an adverse effect on the cognitive development and academic performance of a child since both subjects excel in school.

This study uncovered an emergent concept that a child can possibly acquire English as his or her mother tongue through television even if English is not commonly used in the family or community where the child lives.

For such condition to have become possible for the subjects concerned, the child as young as six months had been exposed to television programs in English language and the average time spent watching those programs was at least four hours a day. The children had also been alone watching the programs without diversions such as playmates that can distract the viewer's concentration.

Such situation may be good for English language acquisition but might impair other essential aspects of the child's development socially and physically.

It may be too early or premature to say that both subjects have inborn inclination to the English language but both subjects observably recognized several benefits of having English as a language so they kept on using and learning it.

Keywords: English as Mother Tongue, Language Acquisition through television, Philippines

1. Introduction

In this era of globalization, proficiency in the English as the international language is definitely an advantage in employment, business and travel. Not too long ago in the Philippines, only the children of parents who could afford to pay for English language tutors and higher teaching standard private schools were the ones who were offered this advantage. The playing field, it seems somehow, is now being evened out thanks to affordable modern technology.

Minus English tutors and private education, can a child in a non-English speaking community learn and sustain his or her ability to communicate in English with the help of television alone?

¹ Bio: The author is an English language professor in Mountain Province State Polytechnic College. Contact: obienoe_madalang@yahoo.com

The American Academy of Pediatrics (1999) recommended to parents that children younger than two years old should stay away from television for one most important and valid reason—time spent in front of the television set would waste away the quality time supposedly for parent and child bonding. Included in the report though was the idea that “appropriate, curriculum-based educational programs” may help a child to learn a language if the program have specific strategies similar to real life communicative interaction to encourage the child to use verbal language in communicating. A study of Ling, et al (2014) to validate the opinions of the American Academy of Pediatrics has arrived at even more straightforward conclusion saying that young children who spend so much time in front of the television set have “increased risk” of hindered cognitive, language and motor skills development among children.

Several scholars claim that the influence of television on children is direct and detrimental. According to early popular views as the television was gaining popularity in the late 1940’s, television is harmful like alcohol. That if a person who drink intoxicating beverage gets drunk, reduced to unproductivity and eventually gets hooked and become a helpless alcoholic, television impairs the mind and makes one lazy and injudicious, thus the term ‘couch potato’.

Television watching can be associated with many negative things such as lost quality bonding time between parents and children or slowed down language development because the time spent in front of the television for sure takes the opportunity of having a real conversation between children and adults.

On the other side of the field, the exceptional communicative qualities displayed by the subjects in this study do not only test the claims of early studies on the contribution of television programs on language learning (Linebarger, 2000; Van Evra, 1990) and English vocabulary enrichment for non-native speakers (Neuman and Koskinen, 1992).

Bahrani and Shu sim (2011) suggested that the new electronic media, such as television, do not only provide entertainment but also “can be used as a pedagogically valuable technology” which can be a realistic resource for language learning (p.144).

According to Dewar (2009), television is just the tool in transferring the information and it is the information that matters, not the medium itself. Studies supported this by revealing that young toddlers who are exposed to “age-appropriate” television programs exhibit noticeable progress in their skills to recall information and evaluate challenges presented in the programs (Crawley et al, 1999; Geist et al 2000).

Perhaps some parts of television programs such as too much graphics, dubbing in local dialect or subtitles may discourage young viewers to watch attentively or practice concentration while watching but that may not be proof enough to say that television makes one an airhead. What seems very likely according further to Dewar (2009) is that babies may have relatively difficult time to learn to talk by only watching and listening to television programs because in order for one to learn to speak, there should be social interaction which is the basic requirement in the communicative process.



A CASE STUDY, OBSERVATION

This study examined the independent cases of two Filipino minors who are both exhibiting a native level speaking proficiency in English while the rest of the people in their remote village including their parents can hardly speak passable English.

The subjects, one four-year old preschooler and the other, a ten-year-old fifth grader speak English like native speakers in their respective ages and use English sentence structures, vocabularies and pronunciations that were taught neither in classrooms nor by their parents.

Is it possible to acquire a mother tongue different from the language used in the community by watching television alone? Can the subjects' proficiency in English be sustained long enough considering the prevailing circumstances? How can this phenomenon be associated or opposed to the earlier or existing beliefs about watching television and language learning?

2. Methodology

This study started with a question: "Is it possible for a child to acquire English as a mother tongue even if this child lives in a non-English speaking community?"

In order to provide a plausible answer to the above question, the most appropriate research design to go with this imperative investigation is grounded theory in which the "coding paradigm" devised by Corbin and Straus (1990) was used as the basis. Acquiring a mother tongue different from the prevalent language used within the community was the central phenomenon that is pinpointed as the focus of the study. The causal conditions that contributed to the phenomenon were then explored by observing, interviewing and analyzing the different circumstances surrounding the subjects and people that are immediately around them. The actions and interactions taken by people in response to the phenomenon and the consequences of those actions and interactions were also observed and recorded for later thorough evaluation and analysis using existing and emergent theories as points of reference.

3. Findings

The researcher heard of a four-year-old boy named André attending kindergarten class in a neighborhood. Apparently, the boy was posing quite a predicament to his teacher because the teacher had to explain the lessons to André's seven classmates in Kankana-ey, the dialect in the community as it is the prescribed medium of instruction under the K to 12 program of the Department of Education while André has to be separately instructed in English as he does not understand the lesson in the dialect thus at times becoming inattentive and preoccupied with other things when the native dialect was being used in class.

The switching from Kankana-ey to English and back every now and then slows down the pace of the lesson but the major problem as seen by André's parents was that the teacher's English diction which was learned in the Philippine classroom does not match the English language which André hears on TV as spoken by native speakers of English.

This causes added confusion to the child that he sometimes inquire from his parents some issues on pronunciation such as ‘real’ which he hears from his teacher as ‘riyal’ \rē-aj\ but used to hearing it on TV as ‘reel’ \rē(-ə)l\.

The parents too are of little help since they complain of not being able to understand more than half of André’s terms and André would not respond to them if spoken to in their native dialect.

The researcher finally met André one time when he and his mother came by the researcher’s house to ask for some flower seedlings for planting.

André was looking around the flower garden and noticed the ceramic garden gnome perched under a concrete mushroom. “You said we’ll visit a real elf. I want a real elf not this thing here.” André whined. The mother smiled ruefully and explained to me in Kankana-ey that she convinced André to go with her since she does not want to leave the child watching TV at home all by himself. She had told her son that they would go and see an elf friend who lives in my front yard.

A four-year-old Filipino boy speaking English like that in flawless native-like articulation confirmed how the teacher and neighbors describe how André speaks like a “four-year-old American boy.” One does not normally hear anyone in the Philippines contract ‘we’ and ‘will’ in a conversation. One would usually use the formal ‘we will’ instead of ‘we’ll’ except for highly educated businessmen and politicians who were schooled in the US or UK.

Another point, “I want a real elf not this thing here.” is not naturally uttered by an ordinary classroom-taught four-year-old Filipino. Even three college English instructors who were asked to comment if they were in André’s situation during that particular moment would say: “You told me that we will see a live elf but I am seeing a concrete one.” (wordy and formal). “I prefer to see a true elf not a sculpture.” (choice of words). “I did not know that we will come here and see a garden decoration. I thought I would see a true elf. (wordy, formal and wrong choice of words). That was after several minutes of thinking how to say it.

Upon learning that this researcher is taking some notice in André’s ‘talent in English’, a young mother of a ten-year-old fifth grader came to confide about her son’s problem in school caused by his unfamiliarity with the native tongue but has a very good command of the English language.

Maverick is the first of two children. According to the mother, the television served as Maverick’s babysitter as soon as he learned to feed from the bottle. Both young parents then had find manual labor jobs to keep both ends meet so a young neighbor kept Maverick company most of the day in front of the television set.

From day care to grade five, Maverick’s parents had been blamed for the child’s difficulty in socializing with other kids in school. No one wants to play with him because they cannot understand him and there was always this language barrier. Even his teachers observed that although he reads, speaks and interacts well inside the classroom when English is used; Maverick struggles in other subjects that are taught in mother tongue (Kankana-ey) or in Filipino.

With six years’ difference and an hour walk away from each other’s house to be called friends or neighbors, both André and Maverick both learned English by spending much of their most active language development stage



A CASE STUDY, OBSERVATION

in front of the television set watching English cartoons. For Maverick, a young girl who is three years older than him kept him company during those times but the ‘babysitter’ was just tasked to watch over the boy and never bothered to play or interact with him. André, whose mother is employed once in a while as a casual nurse in the nearby local hospital and whose father drives a commuter van, has to be left alone in the house with the television on since he was just six months old. A man who tends a fuel station just across the street volunteered to check on the child every time no one stops by to fill-up.

Some parents claimed their children also grew up in front of the television set during those crucial stages of language development but they do not exhibit the same language traits as André and Maverick do.

Cable television made the difference.

André and Maverick’s homes had cable TV and therefore had Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon and other children’s channels that run English programs. Local TV networks run cartoon shows during weekends but are dubbed in Filipino or have Filipino subtitles.

Other parents also say they started talking to their children in English and the children were responding in English too. But as soon as they started mingling with other kids in the neighborhood who speak the native dialect, their English disappeared.

People expected Maverick to do the same but at the age of ten and in grade five, the only changes in Maverick’s language are additional terms in Iloco (a dominant dialect from the neighboring province which is also commonly used by the locals when they go to the city to avoid being misunderstood by other ethnic groups who speak other dialects) and Tagalog, an informal form of Filipino.

During the first meeting with Maverick, hesitance and vocal pauses were evident while he was telling things about his favorite TV shows. As the conversation went on, the hesitance disappeared and his use of the English language was really that exceptionally good that he can pass for a US-grown kid. The mother who was sitting with us during the interview later explained that she noticed that kind of hesitance in her son on few occasions. Accordingly, Maverick assesses first the English ability of the person he is talking to. If the person speaks in English the way his parents or teachers do, he matches that with pauses and other hesitant behaviors as if groping for words or just deliberately slowing down to be understood.

Maverick’s mother related one occasion when a US Peace Corp volunteer happened to drop by their house and Maverick was so upbeat and talkative that they were surprised their son could speak English the way they never imagined.

How was Maverick able to keep his ability to communicate in native level English? Although he managed to have a few playmates in school and in the neighborhood, Maverick spends most of his time watching TV. This time, Discovery channel, National Geographic and BBC Earth are his favorite channels plus the occasional cartoons and anime. He speaks English inside the home and talks strictly to his younger brother in English who is also

good in the language but uses Kankana-ey to his parents in and outside the home.

Asked if they would have preferred to be speaking in Kankana-ey instead of English, both subjects cringed at the thought as though the idea of them as Kankana-ey speakers is awkward. Why so? "I can understand the lessons in English better than my classmates and I understand most of the shows I watch on TV." says Maverick. André enjoys the attention he gets from people who love talking to him in English and says he wishes his mama and papa would speak English the way he sees adult people speak on TV.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The definition of Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018) of "Mother tongue" as "one's native language" or "a language from which another language derives" is very debatable as far as this study is concerned. English can never be the native language of the community where the subjects in this study live and that the language used in the said community did not originate from English.

But if the traditional linguists' definition of the phrase applies wherein the mother tongue of a person is simply the first language (L1) that that person was exposed to, learned, uses in functional communication and sustained within a reasonable period, then this study can prove that according to the manifestations of the subjects, a mother tongue can be acquired through sufficient time of watching appropriate television programs during the critical language development stage of a child and can be sustained by the person depending on how that person values the language.

In order to substantiate the above contention so that other researchers and scholars will have enough traction for rebuttal, the following qualifications are offered: A child can acquire English as his or her mother tongue through television even if English is not commonly used in the family or community where the child lives. In order for this to be possible, the child had been exposed as early as six months to television programs that used English language and the average time spent watching those programs was at least four hours a day. The children were also left alone watching the programs without diversions such as playmates that could have distracted their concentration or that could have influenced the subjects to learn their playmates' language before learning English from TV.

As for the sustainability of the language learned on TV, it is obvious that the parents of the subjects encouraged them to go on using English at home and even outside by trying their best to communicate with them in the language where the subjects are comfortable with. Most importantly, encouraging them to watch TV programs in English has fortified the subjects' proficiency in English even if it was discouraged socially.

It is not recommended though that for the sake of English language acquisition, other developmental aspects of the child must be not be sacrificed such as socialization and physical development in place of watching too much television.

It may be too early or premature to say that both subjects have inborn inclination to the English language that is why they easily learned and kept it as their language but according to how they manifested things during the



data gathering, both subjects recognized several benefits of having English as a language so they kept on using and learning it.

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