



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

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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?

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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.



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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



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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



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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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