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"Because of english-language television channels": the accidental impact of screen time on children's language acquisition

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Abstract

Background: In the 21st century, the use of technology among children has grown rapidly, making screen time an essential aspect of their language development.

Aim: This study aims to explore the impact of exposure to English-language cartoons on the language abilities of preschool children, specifically for S, a 5-year-old child.

Method: The research method used is qualitative, employing observation and interview techniques involving S's parents and caregivers as subjects. Data were collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews to understand S's parenting patterns and the use of screen time in daily life. This study offers a new perspective by exploring the impact of unintentional exposure to English-language media as an innovative language acquisition strategy, particularly in the context of early childhood in Indonesia, where similar studies are scarce.

Results: The research results indicate that although S experiences speech delays, exposure to English-language cartoons through screen time positively contributes to the development of their English language skills. Interventions by the parents, such as bilingual communication and speech therapy, have accelerated the improvement of these language skills.

Conclusion: This study concludes that directed media exposure, supported by active parental involvement, can enhance children's language skills despite initial challenges. Thus, the study emphasizes the importance of effective supervision and management of screen time to support optimal language development.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, during the era of globalization, the younger generation has become more frequent users of technology compared to previous generations. This is attributed to the significant changes and developments brought about by globalization and modernization (Rafiola et al., 2020; Afendi et al., 2024; Darmawan et al., 2023). In this digital age, children are immersed in digital and smart devices such as televisions, smartphones, and tablets, which offer them a variety of on-screen and off-screen experiences (Legi et al., 2023; Muhammad Yusuf et al., 2023; Hildawati et al., 2024). Research indicates that preschool children, even before attending school or being exposed to books, are already familiar with and adept at using technology. According to (Dolev-Cohen et al., 2020; Ulfah Maulidya, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2019), children of this generation can easily access media, the internet, and various content,

including television programs such as English-language cartoons. Therefore, through technology, Preschool children can access English-language cartoons that offer numerous benefits, particularly for English language acquisition.

In recent years, advancements in technology and digital media have transformed the way young children receive language input. One intriguing phenomenon is the unintentional exposure to English-language television channels. With increasing access to global channels, many young children in Indonesia are unknowingly exposed to foreign-language content through television, either as entertainment or due to family habits. This exposure has the potential to serve as valuable linguistic input for language acquisition, particularly foreign languages, even though it occurs without specific planning. English-language TV facilitates and enables preschool children to acquire English.

First, numerous studies increasingly show that during the preschool years (early childhood), language development, particularly speaking skills, is at its most active, rapid, and easily acquired by children (Zaim et al., 2020; Ardiyansyah Muhammad, 2020). Furthermore, the age of 0-6 years is considered the most critical or sensitive period for a child's speech development. During this time, children can effortlessly acquire any language they are exposed to (Farooq et al., 2022). It is important to note that preschool children are expected to achieve specific linguistic abilities and competencies during this stage, which typically spans from three to five (3-5) years of age. During this period, (Boelens et al., 2018) observed that their ability to organize and differentiate words and sentences becomes more accurate and contextually appropriate. Regarding phonological development, preschool children may struggle to articulate complex or multiple consonants. However, it is crucial to understand how this unintentional mechanism impacts a child's language development, considering that language is a fundamental component of cognitive and social development in early childhood.

Despite its positive potential, this phenomenon raises several issues. The unintentional exposure to foreign languages often neglects aspects of content quality and duration control, posing a risk of linguistic confusion in children. On the other hand, studies have shown that children exposed to high-quality foreign language content can expand their vocabulary, improve phonological awareness, and enrich syntactic aspects of language. However, in the Indonesian context, the lack of studies examining the impact of unintentional exposure to English-language television creates a research gap, particularly in early childhood environments from diverse backgrounds. The gap between this study and previous research lies in adopting a more contextual approach to the phenomenon of foreign-language media exposure among young children in Indonesia, specifically in relation to language acquisition. Prior studies have generally focused on the global impact of digital media exposure without considering local factors such as bilingual environments, parenting styles, or limited supervision for children living in developing countries like Indonesia (Dias et al., 2016). This study bridges the gap by delving deeper into how unintentional exposure to English-language media through cartoon channels can serve as beneficial linguistic input, even though it is not explicitly planned by parents.

The novelty of this research lies in its unique approach to examining the impact of unintentional exposure to English-language cartoons on the language abilities of preschool children in Indonesia, a theme rarely explored in-depth within the local context. This study highlights the phenomenon of unintentional screen time as an effective source of linguistic input, even when not intentionally planned by parents. Moreover, it demonstrates how a

combination of bilingual communication at home and educational interventions can help children overcome speech delays and improve their English language skills, aligning with (Saha., 2023) view on the importance of social support in language learning. In the Indonesian context, this study also reveals linguistic challenges resulting from the interaction between Indonesian and English, reflecting the theory of first-language interference on second-language acquisition. By integrating perspectives from parents, caregivers, and teachers, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding to support children's language development while providing a foundation for developing digital media-based educational strategies (Hasan et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, their vocabulary begins to expand, and during this period, their communication language starts to function effectively. They are eager to share perceptions and experiences with others, especially peers of their own age (Gupta, 2018). Additionally, preschool children begin to develop morphology, characterized by plural forms, suffix changes, and verb modifications. Preschool children can unconsciously acquire language by watching TV cartoons they view daily for hours. It is a common observation that preschool children who are extensively exposed to a variety of English-language cartoons during their childhood exhibit significantly better pronunciation and communication skills in English compared to those who are not immersed in English from an early age (Nolan & Molla, 2017).

Based on empirical observations, they can even imitate, like native speakers, pronunciation, accents, diction, and even the behavior of characters. This is supported by (Putri & Putri., 2020), who consider preschool children to be the best language learners due to their spontaneous language mastery. In addition to excellent pronunciation, exposure to English-language cartoons enables children to learn new words or vocabulary, construct complete sentences, ask questions, and use them in appropriate contexts (Lascano Pérez & Altamirano Carvajal, 2023). Their research (Obloberdiyevna D S, 2022) found that English-language cartoons facilitate grammatical and structural accuracy.

A review of various studies (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2018) reveals that several factors contribute to L1 interference in L2 acquisition. These factors include similarities and differences in the structures of both languages, children's background knowledge, proficiency in the second language, and the consonant cluster structures in L1 and L2. (Febriani et al., 2023) explored first-language transfer in L2 writing and found that when second-language learners write in L2, their L1 influences their writing. Additionally, Fatemi 2012 investigated these differences, particularly in oral consonants between the first and second languages, emphasizing that L1 and L2 structures vary. They found that learners struggle to pronounce L2 due to unfamiliar phonological rules. This implies that L2 learners rely on their native language, especially when attempting to produce meaningful responses in the target language, resulting in a high frequency of errors in L2 when the structures of the two languages differ, leading to L1 interference in L2 (Supriatnaningsih et al., 2019).

It has been observed that differences between children's first language (L1) and second language (L2) cause interference, which leads to difficulties and errors in language use. At this point, children's L1 influences two factors related to L2 acquisition: transfer and interference (Rahim & Ahmadi, 2021). When L1 habits facilitate L2 acquisition, positive transfer occurs; however, interference or negative transfer happens when it hinders target language acquisition. This often occurs due to L2 exposure through cartoons such as BabyFirst.

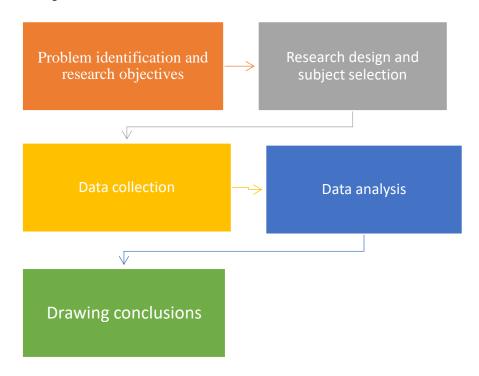
This study aims to analyze how unintentional screen time influences children's language acquisition. Specifically, it examines the types of vocabulary and sentence structures acquired by children through exposure to English-language cartoons. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for parents and educators regarding the unintended impact of screen time on language development. Additionally, the study may serve as a foundation for developing educational materials that leverage digital media to enhance language learning effectively.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore the experiences of a 5-year-old child in acquiring English through watching cartoons. The study focuses on one purposively selected subject: a child who regularly watches English-language cartoons (Rostiani, 2023). The research population comprises preschool children, but the study is limited to a single individual to gain an in-depth understanding of the language acquisition process. The research subject is a 5-year-old child enrolled in Kindergarten (TK) AN. Additionally, kindergarten teachers and guardians are involved to provide supplementary perspectives on the child's language development. The data collection techniques used in this research include: Observation: The researcher conducted direct observations of the child's behavior and interactions when communicating with teachers and peers. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with kindergarten teachers and parents to explore information on the child's language development, cartoon-watching habits, and their impact on English language skills. Documentation: Additional data were collected through documentation, including the child's developmental records at school, recordings of cartoons watched, and teaching materials used in the kindergarten.

The data analysis was conducted through the following steps: 1) Data Collection: All data gathered from observations, interviews, and documentation were organized and categorized based on themes relevant to the research objectives. 2) Data Presentation: The categorized data were presented in narrative form to illustrate the child's experiences and the information obtained from teachers and parents. 3) Conclusion: From the analysis, the researcher concluded that exposure to English-language cartoons influenced the child's language acquisition, vocabulary development, and recognition of sentence structures. 4) Data Verification: To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher conducted triangulation by comparing information from various sources (observations, interviews, and documentation) to achieve a more comprehensive understanding. This method aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the process of English language acquisition in preschool children through cartoon exposure and to offer recommendations for parents and educators in supporting children's language development. The study was conducted over a two-week period, with two sessions each week, from June 3, 2024, to June 15, 2024.

The following is the research flow:



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

Based on the results of the research conducted through observation and interviews regarding the parenting practices of S's parents, it was found that the parenting style applied by S's parents is similar to that of most parents, using the mother tongue, Indonesian. S's mastery of English is purely a result of screen time with the caregiver at home, as both parents are busy working, leaving the caregiver to accompany S in daily activities. Unfortunately, the caregiver pays little attention to S's development and allows S to enjoy screen time alone in the family room, using a television connected to YouTube. The chosen programs are in English on children's TV channels. The mother stated:

"But since both of us work, he spends more time with his caregiver, and he watches in English and speaks (imitates) from the Baby First channel, something like that."

The impact of all this began when S was 3 years old. His father and mother found it difficult to understand what he was saying because his speech was unclear, and his intonation was rapid. As it became increasingly evident that S's development was not progressing appropriately, and as he turned 4 years old, his parents took the initiative to enroll him in a daycare as an initial step. Over time, the daycare became a place for the parents to consult about S's future development. Based on the consultations, S was able to meet with a consultant who recommended speech therapy and continuing his education at an international school to further develop his English skills.

Subsequently, S's parents took proactive steps to enhance their own English skills. His father began communicating in English at home, while his mother continued using Indonesian to balance both languages. S also started attending English courses led by experienced teachers. The combination of therapeutic intervention and ongoing education contributed to S's progress in English proficiency, enabling him to communicate more fluently. Another effort consistently

made by S's parents was to support his optimal development. His father continued to use English when communicating with S at home, while his mother maintained communication in Indonesian to ensure a balanced language acquisition. Additionally, S continued his English lessons guided by skilled language teachers. These efforts were carefully planned and tailored to reinforce and expand the language skills S had acquired during playtime.

The enthusiasm of S's parents for learning English was evident in their active participation and progress in seeking information about their child's development, allowing S to confidently express his skills.

"However, to ensure he can communicate with his peers, I also train him to speak Indonesian at home. When he's with his father, I let him speak English, so his speech delay therapy can be effective, and S can communicate with us fluently."

Thus, the results of this interview provide valuable insights for readers about the positive and negative impacts of screen time on children's language acquisition. The combination of therapeutic intervention and continuous language education has supported the development of children's English language skills. However, parents must monitor and manage screen time effectively to support ongoing development in all areas of learning.

The findings of this study indicate that exposure to English-language cartoons through screen media significantly influences children's English language skills. These results align with previous research highlighting the benefits of exposure to English-language media for children. For instance, a study by (Dias et al., 2016) noted that children exposed to English-language cartoons at an early age demonstrated better speaking skills compared to those who were not exposed. This aligns with the experience of the child in this study, who, despite experiencing speech delays at the age of three, showed rapid progress after consistent exposure to English content.



Figure 1. Documentation after interviewing S's parents

B. Discussion

However, these findings also reflect the negative aspects of poorly managed screen time. Research by (Chen., 2018) indicates that unsupervised media use can lead to delays in language development. In S's case, uncontrolled exposure and a lack of attention from the caregiver resulted in difficulties with pronunciation and communication. This highlights the crucial role of parents and caregivers in actively supervising and selecting appropriate content.

Furthermore, research by (Ma and Li., 2022) emphasizes that children who receive support from a linguistically rich environment are more likely to succeed in acquiring a second language. This aligns with the steps taken by S's parents, who began communicating in English and sought speech therapy. These interventions reinforce the findings of (Marttunen et al., 2017), which state that a combination of educational interventions and social support can mitigate the challenges children face in language acquisition. Thus, this study strengthens the existing literature on the positive and negative effects of screen time on children's language development (Irna et al., 2023). The results demonstrate that while exposure to English-language media can aid children in acquiring the language, it is essential for parents and caregivers to manage and monitor screen time to prevent negative impacts (Gao et al., 2015). This is a critical consideration to ensure that children can fully benefit from such experiences.

The findings of this study provide a clear picture of the impact of exposure to English-language cartoons on S's language abilities. To analyze these findings, we can refer to the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory developed by several experts, including Stephen Krashen. According to (Ozfidan and Burlbaw., 2019), there are five main hypotheses in SLA, one of which is the input hypothesis, which states that children learn languages most effectively through exposure to "comprehensible input." In S's context, the English-language cartoons he watched can be considered a rich source of input, providing vocabulary, sentence structures, and social contexts essential for language acquisition.

Furthermore, this study reveals that although S has good access to English-language media, he requires support with pronunciation and communication. This aligns with theoretical research, which highlights that while abundant input can accelerate language acquisition, other factors such as environmental support, social interaction, and speaking practice also play significant roles. Research by (Adam et al., 2024) indicates that without adequate interaction, children may experience delays in language development, similar to S's situation, where the caregiver paid little attention to his communication development.

Meanwhile, theories of intervention in language education emphasize the importance of social and environmental support in facilitating language acquisition. In S's case, the parents' initiative to communicate in English and encourage S to enroll in language courses demonstrates an understanding of the need for a supportive learning environment. (Saha., 2023) argues that a linguistically rich environment, encompassing positive interactions and consistent exposure, is crucial in helping children develop their language skills. This highlights that S's parents' efforts to provide bilingual communication at home are a strategic step in enhancing his English language proficiency.

Within the framework of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which states that children learn most effectively with support from adults or peers, it is evident that interventions through speech therapy and formal education have also contributed to S's improvement in language skills. (Yusuf et al., 2019) highlight Vygotsky's emphasis on the importance of social interaction in learning, as demonstrated in S's interactions with peers and teachers at daycare and language courses (Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2019). These interactions enriched his vocabulary and language structure while providing opportunities for practice and constructive feedback.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the theory of bilingualism, which suggests that children exposed to more than one language from an early age may experience interference between the languages. In S's context, the use of Indonesian by his mother and English by his

father creates a bilingual environment that potentially enriches S's language experience (Aisyiyah & Hakim, 2020) but also poses challenges, such as language confusion. Research by (Hasan et al., 2024) indicates that structural differences between the first and second languages can lead to difficulties in pronunciation, which appears to be relevant to S's experience.

This analysis affirms that various factors influence children's language acquisition, including media exposure, parental support, social interaction, and educational approaches. The findings of this study not only highlight the importance of balanced and guided exposure but also demonstrate that appropriate interventions can help children overcome challenges in the language learning process. The integration of these theories provides a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of language acquisition in the context of early childhood. This underscores the crucial role of parents and caregivers in supporting children's language development.

This research emphasizes the need for careful management of screen time for young children, highlighting both its benefits and challenges. By integrating insights from media exposure, parental involvement, and bilingual communication strategies, it demonstrates how screen time can serve as a powerful tool for language acquisition if guided appropriately. The findings also suggest that therapeutic and educational interventions are crucial for optimizing the potential benefits of screen exposure.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the role of screen time in early language acquisition, particularly within bilingual environments. It offers a unique perspective on the unintended benefits of English-language cartoons as a linguistic input, highlighting the interplay between media exposure and structured parental strategies. Additionally, it bridges gaps in the literature by focusing on the Indonesian context, where such studies are scarce, and exploring the dynamics of unintentional language learning.

The study focuses on a single subject, which limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population, the lack of longitudinal data restricts the ability to assess the long-term effects of screen exposure and interventions, limited scope of caregiver and environmental factors that might influence language acquisition.

Expand the sample size to include children from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds for broader generalizability: Conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the sustained impact of screen time and interventions over time. Explore the role of different types of media content and interactive tools in enhancing language acquisition. Investigate the influence of parental education and involvement in moderating the effects of screen time on children's language skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study show that exposure to English-language cartoons has a significant impact on S's English language skills. Despite experiencing speech delays at the age of three, parental interventions, such as bilingual communication and speech therapy, have helped S improve his language abilities. This study highlights the importance of environmental support and supervision in managing screen time, as well as the active role of parents in creating a linguistically rich learning context.

However, this study has several areas that could be improved. The limitation of focusing on a single subject reduces the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to determine the long-term impact of screen time and the

interventions applied. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of subjects from diverse backgrounds and adopt a longitudinal approach to monitor children's language development over time. Broader and more diverse research could provide more comprehensive insights into the impact of screen time and educational interventions on children's language acquisition.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

MGN conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, and supervised the overall research process. AZR was responsible for data collection, focusing on observations and interviews. NE conducted data analysis and contributed to the literature review. SA handled documentation and coordinated interactions with participants, including parents and caregivers. IN provided expertise on the theoretical framework and contributed to drafting the discussion section. QR supported data verification, assisted with triangulation, and ensured consistency in data presentation. All authors collaboratively contributed to writing, reviewing, and revising the manuscript, ensuring its accuracy and alignment with the research objectives. All approved the final version.

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