

TELEVISION AND CHILD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT.

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Cette étude tente d'établir les rapports entre les processus de développement linguistique des enfants d'âge préscolaire et leurs habitudes devant la télévision. L'étude a montré l'importance de l'influence des parents sur les préférences des enfants pour les programmes télévisés. L'étude aussi indiquée une relation entre le développement linguistique de l'enfant et le temps qu'il passe en regardant des programmes pour enfants de meilleur qualité. Bien que l'échantillonnage de l'étude ait été de portée limitée, cependant les résultats sont d'une valeur indicative considérable pour la recherche future sur ce problème si important.

Este estudio representa un esfuerzo para establecer las relaciones entre los procesos de desarrollo lingüístico de los niños de edad preescolar y sus costumbres delante de la televisión. El estudio demostró la importancia de la influencia de los padres sobre las preferencias de los niños acerca de la programación televisiva. El estudio también indicó una relación entre el desarrollo lingüístico del niño y el tiempo que pasa viendo programas infantiles de mejor calidad. Aunque el muestreo del estudio fue de alcance limitado, sin embargo los resultados tienen un valor indicativo considerable para la investigación futura de este tema tan importante.

INTRODUCTION

Several surveys in the United States indicate that children between the ages of 3 and 11 watch an average of five hours of television a day (Nelson 1973). In a recent study on television use in Australia, Canada and some European countries, nearly identical evolutionary tendencies in children's viewing habits were reported (Murray 1980). This considerable amount of viewing time has stimulated a great deal of research into the effects of television on viewers, who may be educated or otherwise influenced by the images and sounds of the medium.

Although debate on these issues continues, the feeling of general alarm appears to have abated and research has proceeded in a calmer and more analytic way (Christenson 1979). Yet findings on the impact of television and its capacity to influence viewers are as negative as ever. Indeed, the issue continues to acquire greater significance as television consumes an ever increasing amount of time in people's lives, as confirmed by the results of a Nielson survey (Spring 1977). Particularly important, however, is the finding by the same survey, that preschool children are watching more television than

ever before, surpassing all other age groups in terms of viewing hours.

Several instruction-oriented studies have been carried out regarding the effectiveness of the US children's series "Sesame Street" as a means of educating preschool children (Ball & Bogatz 1970; Frye 1972; Lesser 1974). Although some researchers appear sceptical of the projected success of the program (Cook et al. 1975), the body of evidence indicates that "Sesame Street" has succeeded in attracting the attention of young viewers and facilitated their learning of vocabulary, numbers, letters and other basic knowledge. Lesser (1974) concludes in related research, that the programme has been used by a variety of communities and has achieved its instructional goals. He claims that television can help children to extend the scope of their language, provided programming is presented in an attractive format.

Several programmes broadcast by the US Public Broadcasting System, for example, seek to complement the daily learning experiences of preschool children. Two such programmes, "Sesame Street" and

"Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood" have been shown to exert positive influence on the social behaviour of young viewers. For preschool children who have watched one of these programmes over a long period of time, frequently exhibit more affectionate, polite and cooperative behaviour towards their peers (Coates, Pusser & Goodman 1976; Friedrich & Stein 1973, 1975). Nevertheless, it should be noted that merely leaving children in front of the TV to watch such programmes does not amount to effective teaching strategy, as this offers them few lasting benefits, particularly when not accompanied by adults to encourage them to practice and apply the social values they learn (Friedrich & Stein 1975; Friedrich-Cofer, Huston-Stein, Kipnis, Susman & Clewett, 1979). Children who often watch programmes emphasizing positive values, such as sharing, working together and helping one another, tend to become more polite, cooperative and helpful towards siblings and classmates, particularly when called upon to apply in practice what they have been taught (Friedrich & Stein 1975; Friedrich-Cofer, Huston-Stein, Kipnis, Susman & Clewett 1979).

In 1968, the US government and a number of private institutions, in view of the potentially beneficial role of television, contributed the necessary financial resources to create the Children's Television Workshop, an organisation chiefly concerned with producing special television programming to attract children's attention and facilitate their intellectual growth. The first production, "Sesame Street", was quite successful and has become the most popular children's TV series anywhere, watched today by some 85% of children in the 3-5 age range and broadcast in more than 70 countries worldwide (Liebert et al. 1982; Wright & Huston 1983).

During its first year of broadcasting, the Educational Testing Service undertook research in order to evaluate the impact of the programme. A study was conducted on 950 children from five regions of the US, and analysis of the data clearly indicated that the programme was achieving its goals. Specifically, it was found that educational programming can be instrumental in transmitting information

to preschool children, significantly contributing to their intellectual development (Ball & Bogatz, 1970).

TELEVISION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING.

In the light of the above research, we shall now examine the relation of television to language learning.

The literature relevant to this specialised question of the relation between television and language development is quite limited, whereas investigations into the impact of television are numerous and more analytic. A significant publication in the Greek context is the collective volume *Tileorasi ke EPI-Kinonia* (Television, Communication and Society) edited by Klimis Navridis, Giannis Dimitrakopoulos and Grigoris Paschalidis (Paratiritis publications, Thessaloniki 1988), which includes a broad unit entitled "The Child and Television". From this volume, particularly noteworthy are the articles of Dimitrios Stasinou. "Television and Syndromes of Problematic Child Behaviour" (pp. 367-388) and Thanasis Gotovos, "TV Language Instruction: The Educational Dimension of the Ritual" (pp. 389-408), including related bibliography.

This work, *Television, Communication and Society*, discusses and investigates several aspects of the impact of television on children, while at the same time debunking several myths concerning the "family centred" contribution of television. The study was conducted among children of varying primary school age and in various regions of Greece. It is clear that there are few households left in Greece which do not have at least one TV set. It is not true, however, that television acts as a place for the whole family to gather and interact; the majority of children do watch programmes together with their parents, primarily their mothers, yet little discussion of programming content takes place on this level. Rather, children discuss the programmes they watch among themselves and occasionally with their teachers. Thus, it is clear that TV exerts a powerful influence on children, the educational potential of which has not yet been fully appreciated.

"TV seems to represent a 'legitimate'

means of educating children, as on the one hand it is mild, not meeting vital needs, and on the other it is sufficiently desirable to the child so as to be effective" (p. 311). Thus, television is regarded as constituting a valid approach to investigating a child's cognitive capacity in certain areas, such as that of language development. This study further examines the role of parents in children's development (the effects of over-protectiveness, etc.), as well as the role played by television in this complex of human relations.

Nevertheless, specialised investigations into the relation between television and language learning are not available in Greece. Our study thus relies of necessity on the foreign and particularly English literature, which is the most extensive as well as the most accessible.

As far as I am aware, the first significant study concerning the effect of television on children was carried out in 1961 by Wilber Schramm, who linked television to language development processes. The subjects of his research were children who had attended school for at least two years and came from two towns, one of which received TV signals, whereas the other did not. Although Schramm's method was somewhat primitive, assessing only vocabulary level, he did find, with few exceptions, that children growing up in the community with television possessed a more developed vocabulary than children in the community which lacked access to the medium. Cassirer (1966) also reports studies in Caracas, Venezuela, which indicate that programmes aimed especially at preschool children result in development of a richer and more correct vocabulary.

In view of the above data, this writer has conducted a related study in Greece—Athens, whose principal aim was to link the impact of television to the development of language capacity of children, and then to determine the strength of this correlation.

Sample: Several investigations have shown that children's language development proceeds rapidly during the preschool years. By the age of 5 or 6, a child

already has command of the greater part of his or her home language. The child pronounces his or her first words by the age of one and begins to form his or her first tentative "sentences" by the age of two; starting from the age of three, the development of language skill accelerates dramatically, while vocabulary becomes correspondingly richer.

Our research focused on this critical age and involved a sample of children from Greek public kindergartens. A preliminary study of this population showed that, although ages theoretically ranged from 3½ to 5½, in fact most of the children were between the ages of 4 and 5½. For the purpose of data collection, the parents of these children were sent special forms, which they were requested to complete and return.

Of the 200 forms returned by the parents, 82 were selected, corresponding to an equal number of children. The kindergartens maintained contact with parents, whose cooperation was essential for data collection. The parents in turn provided necessary information about the children's TV viewing habits as well as various demographic information.

We are concerned here with programmes recorded by mothers in the viewing diaries they were asked to fill in. From each child's viewing schedule, TV programmes were classified into three categories:

- a) children's programmes,
- b) Greek films,
- c) Game shows.

Language samples: The language used by children and the language used by TV programmes formed the basis of our research. In order to develop a reliable standard for language analysis, it was necessary to establish an assessment procedure, based on a variety of criteria.

An exhaustive examination of existing measures indicated the procedure of Developmental Sentence Scoring (DSS) as the most suitable for analysing the language samples collected throughout the study (Lee, 1974). In short, the DSS procedure provides a method of detailed, measured assessment of a child's use of Standard English grammatical rules.

This scale was translated and adapted to Greek, and a team of collaborators experimentally verified the validity of its application.

Children's language samples were collected according to the techniques laid out by Lee for the DSS procedure.

TV language samples were gathered from selected programmes viewed by children during the autumn and winter of 1989, and from each sample 30 sentences were transcribed.

These sentences were subsequently analysed in terms of grammatical content and graded according to the procedure described in the DSS scale.

This analysis gave information as to the linguistic age of a child (and the language level of television), a mark for each grammatical category in his or her language sample, as well as a mark for the average complexity of words used within each grammatical category.

Data from the viewing diaries were sorted and coded for analysis. The demographic information given by parents provided the necessary basis for interpreting predictions as to the correlation of mother's educational level to the development of child language ability and selection of programmes according to educational level.

This study analysed the effects of television viewing on language development, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. A second series of tests involved relations between mother's educational level on the one hand and child's language ability and TV watching habits on the other.

To this end, the degree of dependence of the child language capacity measure on six (6) independent variables was investigated. These variables were:

- a) total weekly viewing time,
- b) weekly time spent watching children's programmes,
- c) weekly time spent watching Greek films,
- d) weekly time spent watching game shows,

- e) child's age,
- f) mother's educational level.

There followed a statistical analysis of the data resulting from the study, where the method of multiple recurrence was selected. This analysis was carried out with the statistical package SPSS PC (Marija J. Norusis, SPSS, Inc., Chicago, Illinois 1984).

In order to ensure that the investigation of the problem at hand was as exhaustive as possible, and to rule out any misleading results due to possible peculiarities of the sample, the multiple analysis was performed with two separate methods:

- a) the method of *forced entry*, involving a set sequence for the introduction of all independent variables into the model under formation, and
- b) the method of *stepwise introduction*, involving an automatic selection of suitable variables and elimination of others, according to established statistical criteria.

Both the above-mentioned methods of multiple analysis arrived, in the case of this study, at the same conclusion: that ultimately the only correlation which can be established and consequently lead to the expression of a model is between mother's educational level and differentiation in the child's viewing habits.

In analogous charts, the effects of mother's educational level (independent variable) is also analysed in relation to:

- a) total weekly viewing time,
- b) weekly time watching children's programmes,
- c) weekly time watching Greek films,
- d) weekly time watching game shows.

The significance of mother's educational level is given by the R-Square function, which consistently indicates the effect of the independent variable on each of the dependent variables.

The variables used in the study were selected after a review of the relevant English and Greek literature.

The formulation and content of the hypotheses were based on research findings which outline the principal features of child language development.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS.

This study represents an attempt to establish the relations of preschool children's language development processes to their television viewing habits. The scope of the survey was small, yet the results have considerable indicative value in terms of future research into this highly important issue.

In other words, the conditions under which the study was conducted reduced the likelihood of significant findings. Nevertheless, this study should be seen as a starting point for further research, which will be able to analyse the impact of television on child language development in greater depth and detail.

Finally, this study showed the significance of parents' influence on children's television viewing tastes. Further research concerning parents' influence on the way children watch TV would be an important contribution to the literature, while at the same time providing empirical data of immediate value.

The slight correlation which appears to exist between child language development and time spent watching children's programmes, as well as the clear correlation between mother's educational level and time spent watching children's programmes must act as a pilot, with a view to continuously improving and enriching the content of such programming.

Every new technological advance contains both positive and negative potential implications. The media are no exception to this rule. Advances achieved in communication systems have opened new horizons. Television programming aimed at children is one of the newest fields created by this ongoing technological evolution. It was natural that educators should attempt to make use of such a powerful technology for the purposes of instruction. Certain programmes, as mentioned in the review of the literature, have helped to develop the basics of reading, manipulating arithmetic concepts, visual perception and rational thought, as well as to promote positive patterns of behaviour. Yet television has also been

accused of exerting a negative influence on children, as indicated by research done in Australia, Finland, Canada, Poland and Great Britain. It has been accused of promoting passivity and discouraging creativity (Eron 1980, 1982; Liebert & Baron 1972). Moreover, there seems to be a sensitive period before the age of 8, when children may be permanently affected by aggressive behaviour patterns modelled on violent television programming (Aletha Stein & Ivette Friedrich 1972). Although a great deal of research has been carried out concerning the impact of television on young children's behaviour, the overall picture remains hazy. Also, the effects of television on intellectual development, language capacity and school achievement are quite complex.

During the sensitive and crucial period from 3 to 5 years of age, children should engage in a rich social interaction and activities demanding problem solving ability and imagination; the free expression of thoughts and feelings must be encouraged rather than a dependence on advertising techniques. Activity rather than passivity must prevail during these years. Particularly in a learning environment, children need more active and socio-verbal experiences than those provided by passive television viewing.

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