

Svetozar Poštič

Vilnius University

Institute of Foreign Languages

Universiteto 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lietuva

Tel.: +370 5 268 7264

E-mail: svetozar.postic@uki.vu.lt

Research Interests: cultural linguistics, intercultural communication, comparative literature

INFLUENCE OF CARTOON NETWORK ON THE ACQUISITION OF AMERICAN ENGLISH DURING CHILDHOOD

In the past decade or so, the appearance of first-year students who not only speak excellent English, but also speak it with an American accent, has been evident to every English university lecturer. Although the importance of the English language as the international language of communication and the influence of American media in general have been on a steady rise this century, the influence of American cartoons in the acquisition of the American version of English has been paramount.

For this paper, I interviewed eight first- and second-year students of Physics and Economics at Vilnius University who demonstrate native-like proficiency of American English about the influence of media, especially Cartoon Network, on their adoption of the English language. I found that they all watched the channel in their childhood, and most of them watched it at least a few hours every day. I conclude that, even though certain other factors are important for such near-perfect acquisition of the language – such as awareness of the importance of the English language and the pervasiveness of American pop culture, as well as watching American films and TV shows, and the use of the internet – the crucial role in the formation of American accent in Lithuanian children is played by cartoon-watching during their childhood.

KEY WORDS: cartoons, Cartoon Network, second-language acquisition, English language, childhood.

Introduction

There have always been students of English who were very good at pronunciation, and who could successfully adopt native accents. Occasionally, a young person who liked to listen to English music, watch American films and memorise lines from them could be encountered in classroom. The lack of foreign accent was usually contributed to their sense of hearing likened to musicality. Even as recently as fifteen years ago, those students were nevertheless very rare, and they were usually the ones who spent at least a short period of time in an English-speaking country.

As a teacher of English and English literature (as well as other foreign languages), a few years ago I started noticing that there was an increasing number of students who not

only spoke excellent English, but also spoke it with an almost pure American accent, including intonation. At first, I attributed this phenomenon to individual talent and interest in American movies and music, but two years ago I started conducting brief, informal interviews with those rare students, and found out they all grew up watching *Cartoon Network*. This seemed logical, after all, since the appearance of this phenomenon coincided with the appearance of that channel in most middle-class households with cable television in Eastern Europe.

This revelation gave me an idea to approach the idea in an organised manner and document my findings, so I made a questionnaire. Out of about 200 Vilnius University first-year students of Physics and Economics I had in the past two years, I chose eight who could fool any native American with their lack of foreign accent. Most of them had not even visited an English-language country. I had them fill out a questionnaire. Their answers confirmed my hypothesis. Even though the internet was cited as having a strong influence, especially after the age of twelve, watching American cartoons in the early childhood had the most decisive influence on the students' adoption of the impeccable American accent.

Most experts agree that foreign accent is lost in the native-speaking environment at an early age, before puberty. The results of this survey prove that watching and listening to cartoons, combined with limited usage, is enough for such effective language acquisition.

Literature overview

All linguists interested in the subject agree that the rate and success of second-language acquisition are strongly influenced by the age of the learner. Penfield and Roberts (1959), two of the pioneers in the field, argued that the optimal age for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life. The well known Lenneberg "critical period hypothesis" (1967) also suggests that there is a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily. Most subsequent studies showed that the chance of children reaching a near-native pronunciation of English is highest until the age of six, very small after the age of 13, and probable between those two ages (Asher & Garcia 1969, Singleton 1989). During this period, the brain retains plasticity, and language acquisition, therefore, takes place much more easily. Several studies show that watching cartoons, along with classroom practices, can significantly help students learn English faster during this age. Children during this age period have integrative motivation that helps them learn and improve their listening and speaking skills. Cartoon-watching enables young people to acquire an affinity toward the English language and English-speaking people (Haque 2015).

In a research conducted by Clark (2000) about the pedagogical value of cartoons as an authentic source of language material, it was found that cartoons can engage the attention of learners, create a non-threatening atmosphere in presenting information and have the potential to encourage thinking process and discussion skills. Another study conducted by Doring (2002), which focuses on the effect of exposure to cartoons on language learning, concludes that the language learners exposed to cartoons can produce oral answers

that are very productive and interesting. Children achieve high confidence in adopting the language due to the creation of low-affective atmosphere for learning. In a research carried out by Rule and Auge (2005), the results suggest that students prefer cartoons in language learning, since cartoons create an atmosphere that causes a high degree of motivation. On the basis of their research, the linguists argue that students who use cartoons can improve different language skills and achieve higher test scores. The quantitative research carried out by Bahrani and Sim (2012) shows that low level language learners can achieve a significant language proficiency improvement through exposure to cartoons. The dialogue of cartoons is characterised by sentences that are simple and complete, and repetition is used frequently. Children, therefore, learn significant number of words from the context of cartoons that they can use in real life. Moreover, by watching cartoons, students are highly stimulated to speak the target language (Haque 2015).

It is known that when adopting a new language, people adopt a new personality based on the perception they have about the target culture. This phenomenon is called “mirroring.” Adopting a personality of a cartoon character is very common in childhood, because those characters are funny, interesting and care-free. They appeal to children. Learning a second language requires a “positive” atmosphere, and nothing creates a more positive atmosphere than humour (Aboudan 2013), which cartoons contain in abundance. Cartoons also eliminate the pressure of being aware of learning another language. A child may repeat certain funny sentences from cartoons, and they subconsciously become ingrained in his/her mind, as “Suggestopedia,” the method of learning a foreign language by memorising sentences in a playful atmosphere, suggests. Different languages can evoke different memories of your life, Aneta Pavlenko argues (2014, p. 13), and having English connected to the surreal and fascinating world of cartoons evokes pleasant childhood memories, which also helps establish positive associations with the American version of the English language and with American culture. Language is pregnant with meaning, and the language in cartoons carries with it a proliferation of the culture and the set of values children are prone to adopt more easily at that age.

Methodology

The core of the empirical survey consists of a questionnaire given to eight first- and second-year students of Physics and Economics at Vilnius University. Those eight students demonstrated native or near-native knowledge of English and use of American pronunciation in classroom. During my interaction with them that lasted for either one or two semesters, beside their perfect or near-perfect employment of all levels of the language, they also showed a thorough orientation in all aspects of the American culture, even though they had never visited North America. The survey consisted of eight questions related to the usage of media in their English-language learning process, and especially to their watching of cartoons, with a special emphasis on a single channel, the *Cartoon Network*.

After identifying the medium that helped them most in adopting English, they were asked to explain how they perceive the manner in which it helped them learn the language.

Every student of a foreign language knows exactly what helped him/her most in the learning process, and the answer to this question is supposed to be indicative of the source on which I attempted to focus. The following set of questions was related specifically to *Cartoon Network*, the amount of time they spent watching it in childhood, and naming the specific cartoons they remembered watching. Finally, the last two questions related to cartoon-watching referred to the memorisation of lines and identification with cartoon characters, which was supposed to establish a link between the language learning process and “mirroring,” as well as the immersion into the culture through cartoon characters. The very last questions asked the students to name the ways they used written and spoken English on the internet.

So, the main quantitative part of the research is connected to the actual time spent in front of TV and, more specifically, *Cartoon Network*, and the qualitative part is linked to the influence cartoon-watching had on the English-language acquisition combined with the students’ personal assessment of that impact.

Empirical survey

Out of the eight students who filled out the questionnaire, five cited cartoons as the single most important or one of the most important media that helped them learn English. One student specified role-playing video games, which use cartoons and force you to converse, and only two cited a different source as decisive in their learning process. One of those two students names English summer camps with native speakers she attended in her childhood as the most important, and the other indicated relevance and pervasiveness of the English language in everyday life. Both of them later wrote, nevertheless, that they watched *Cartoon Network* at least two hours a day. Other key sources for the acquisition of English mentioned were TV, movies, to which teenagers switch from cartoons, video games, and speaking with family members. When asked about the consumption of English in films, cartoons and the internet before the age of twelve, all eight students confirmed cartoon-watching, while two excluded films and two excluded the internet.

Answering the question how using the English media helped them learn English, most students tried to explain the influence cartoon-watching had on their learning process. One student writes, “I believe that films and cartoons help children learn the basics of English in an entertaining way, and later they can build their English skills on these foundations with more self-confidence in classes and public conversations. Also, hearing people speak in cartoons and films helps to understand pronunciation.” Another student mentioned the lack of cartoons on TV in his native language, Lithuanian, and the abundance of English ones as the reason he watched American cartoons. So, it is safe to say that the appearance of all-cartoon channels on Lithuanian cable TV changed the manner and the intensity of children being exposed to English on a daily basis. Television in general, and especially cartoons, have a mesmerising effect on children, and they can keep even the most hyperactive child glued in front of a TV set for hours. So, channels such as *Cartoon Network* came as a babysitting relief for many busy or overwhelmed parents.

As Suggestopedia and certain scholars suggest (Bahrani and Sim 2012), repetition is crucial in the learning process. A student explains: “As a kid I was constantly watching English cartoons and, naturally, I wanted to understand them better [...] The learning process was simple – watching old and new cartoons, I think re-watching old episodes was the most useful because I would try to understand the parts I didn’t understand the last time.” The pervasiveness of American cartoons, and then movies and TV series formed a specific anglophile culture among teenagers fascinated with the American culture. “So without noticing, me and my friends would share English jokes more often than Lithuanian ones, or start using specific phrases or slang. I guess I had immersed myself into the culture more than my friends and eventually I developed an ear for the language”, a first-year female Economics student testifies. One of the key factors is the fact that cartoons are created for young people at this stage of mental development, when they think visually rather than verbally. Another student explains: “The thing that helped me the most in the early stages of learning English was *cartoons*. The animated TV shows were always really visual. So for me as a kid it wasn’t hard to learn the words and associate them with real life things, considering that most of the time when the cartoon characters talked about a specific thing, they pointed to it and you could see what they were talking about on the TV screen.”

We arrive at the quantitative part of the research. When asked how many hours a day they spent watching *Cartoon Network* (or any other American cartoon channel), the answer varies from two to three hours a day (four students) to 5-6 hours or “half of afterschool activities.” That means that all the interviewed students spent at least part of the afternoon and weekends watching cartoons, and some spent most of the afternoon consuming them. Other than *Cartoon Network*, two students mention watching *Fox Kids*, another American mostly-cartoon cable channel present in Lithuania since the early 2000s. Of the 35 different cartoons students remember watching, they mention *Powerpuff Girls* most often (6 students), then *Ed, Edd n Eddy* (5 students), *Dexter’s Laboratory*, *Courage the Cowardly Dog* and *Ben 10* (4 students) and *Tom and Jerry*, *Scooby Doo*, *the Flintstones*, *Johnny Bravo* (3 students). The rest of the cartoons cited received less than three mentions. In general, all of these cartoons are modern-looking, fast-moving, graphic 2D animations with quite a bit of violence, exaggerated action and slapstick humour popular in American comedies. The action-packed, colourful cartoons are bound to grab attention and fascinate young viewers. The language is full of easy-to-memorise, clichéd, conventional phrases and adolescent slang.

Most students answer affirmatively when asked if they are aware of using some lines from cartoons and films when speaking English, especially when telling jokes. One student writes that “when I’m making a reference or a joke, then [...] I remember the cartoon or even the specific episode really vividly, though some phrases have grown on me so much, people have told me I use them regularly even though I don’t really notice it.” I was wondering about the source of inspiration for one student’s dry, sarcastic humour in class until I read that his favourite cartoon is *South Park*, known for its crude language, satire and dark

humour aimed to attract young adults. In the questionnaire, he concedes using lines from *South Park* when telling jokes. Five out of eight students are aware of having identified with a specific cartoon or film character when speaking English, and one admits that he tried to replicate their manners of speech, and still does that. After the initial stage of second-language acquisition, young people move to different media and, as the language comes more naturally, tend to forget the initial stimulus in the language-learning process. Having cartoons as the single source of English in a Lithuanian-speaking household, however, has to make one, even if unconsciously, mimic the character that pronounces the sentence he/she is trying to reproduce when speaking English.

Now when most of them have turned 20, students use written English mainly on social networks and forum discussions, and spoken when playing video games and on *Skype*, talking to their English-speaking friends. English is the international internet language, and students spend a lot of time online, displaying a distinct, pervasive addiction to the most popular contemporary medium. Whereas cartoons developed their listening and speaking skills and shaped their pronunciation in early childhood, social networks, video games and the internet in general are now helping them refine their reading and writing skills.

Conclusion

Lithuanian, as well as other non-English speaking European children, have been increasingly exposed to American cartoons for the past two decades or so. As a result, there is an increasing number of children who not only speak excellent English, but also speak it with an American accent. English has become omnipresent. One student who filled out the questionnaire used in this survey writes about the single most important factor in his adoption of the English language: "I think the relevance of the English language played the main role in my learning process. The relevance, in the sense that it surrounds virtually everyone and everywhere in our time." Children do not only become aware of the importance of English at an early age, they come to like it. One of the main vehicles in the process of capturing the fancy of young people is the presence and the exposure to American cartoons, attention-grabbing, humorous animations that create a low-affective and non-threatening atmosphere in the learning process. Even before benefiting from classroom foreign-language studies, movies or the internet, children learn English from cartoons, and the level of their successful adoption of the language seems directly related to the number of hours they spend watching them. Commensurate with the studies on the age most suited for second-language acquisition, the study on the correspondence between cartoon-watching and the rate of their consumption contributes to the finding that cartoon-watching successfully improves both listening and speaking skills in children, while propagating American culture and values at the same time.

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Svetozar Poštič

Vilniaus universitetas, Lietuva

Moksliniai interesai: kultūrinė lingvistika, tarpkultūrinė komunikacija, lyginamoji literatūra

CARTOON NETWORK ĮTAKA AMERIKIEČIŲ ANGLŲ KALBOS ĮSISAVINIMUI VAIKYSTĖJE

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje ieškoma animacinių filmukų žiūrėjimo vaikystėje ir anglų kalbos įsisavinimo sąsajų, ypač tais atvejais, kai beveik pasiekiamas gimtosios amerikiečių kalbos tarimo lygis. Formuluojuant išvadas, remtasi anketa, kuri buvo išdalinta aštuoniems Vilniaus universiteto pirmo ir antro kurso fizikos ir ekonomikos studentams, kurių anglų kalbos žinios puikios, o jų tarimas artimas amerikietiškam. Nė vienas iš jų negyveno šalyje, kurioje kalbama angliškai. Anketoje, kurią užpildė, jie buvo paprašyti įvertinti, kuri priemonė jiems labiausiai padėjo mokantis kalbos, kiek laiko jie praleisdavo žiūrėdami filmukus vaikystėje, kokius dažniausiai žiūrėdavo. Jie taip pat turėjo pasakyti, ar prisimena, kad vartojo tam tikrus pasakymus iš animacinių filmukų, kad buvo susitapatinę su animacinių filmukų veikėjais.

Tyrimo rezultatas patvirtino hipotezę, kad animacinių filmukų žiūrėjimas lemia tokį kalbos išmokimą, kuris artimas gimtajai. Priinama prie išvados, kad, norint taip veiksmingai įsisavinti

kalbą, pakanka žiūrėti animacinius filmukus, nors kalbos vartojimas ir ribotas. Šis teiginys paremtas ir kalbininkų išvadomis, kuriose teigiama, jog vaikai iki šešerių metų gali pasiekti geriausių rezultatų mokydami tokio anglų kalbos tarimo, kuris beveik nesiskiria nuo gimtosios. Mokymosi galimybės labai sumažėja sulaukus trylikos metų, o tarp šešerių ir trylikos metų tikėtina, kad rezultatas bus teigiamas. Studentai, kurie buvo apklausti, žiūrėjo amerikietiškus animacinius filmukus nuo ankstyvos vaikystės iki paauglystės ir tokiu būdu pagerino savo klausymo ir kalbėjimo įgūdžius. Pasibaigus paauglystei, jie patobulino savo rašymo ir skaitymo įgūdžius naudodamiesi kitomis informacijos priemonėmis, labiausiai internetu.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: animaciniai filmai, Cartoon Network, antrosios kalbos įsisavinimas, anglų kalba, vaikystė.

Svetozar Poštič

Vilnius University, Lithuania

Research interests: cultural linguistics, intercultural communication, comparative literature

INFLUENCE OF *CARTOON NETWORK* ON THE ACQUISITION OF AMERICAN ENGLISH DURING CHILDHOOD

Summary

This work tries to make a connection between English-language acquisition, especially reaching near-native pronunciation in American English, with cartoon-watching during childhood. The basis for the conclusion is found in the survey administered to eight first- and second-year Physics and Economics students at Vilnius University, Lithuania, who demonstrate a native-like speaking proficiency in American version of the English language. None of them have lived in an English-speaking country. In a questionnaire the students filled out, they were asked to assess which medium helped them most to learn the language, how much time they spent watching cartoons in their childhood, and which cartoons they watched most. They were also asked about their awareness of using certain lines from cartoons or films they watched, and about their identification with cartoon or film characters. The result proved the hypothesis that cartoon-watching is pivotal in reaching the near-native adoption of American English and the conclusion reached is that watching cartoons, combined with limited usage, is sufficient for such effective language acquisition. This link supports the findings of linguists that the chance of children reaching a near-native pronunciation of English is highest until the age of six, very small after the age of 13, and probable between those two ages. The students who were questioned watched American cartoons from early childhood to adolescence, and in that way improved their listening and speaking skills. After puberty, they complemented their writing and reading proficiency by using other media, most notably the internet.

KEY WORDS: cartoons, Cartoon Network, second-language acquisition, English language, childhood.

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