

# TELEVISION AS ACTIVITY SYSTEM: A VYGOTSKIAN STUDY OF PUERTO RICAN PRE-SCHOOLERS' BEHAVIOR AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FROM ANIMATED FILMS

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## **Abstract**

This study provides a background on Vygotskian activity system, first language acquisition and second language acquisition. It also includes a literature review that surveys vital information on learning strategies, nonverbal behavior, play, and the role of play in pre-schoolers while acquiring a second language. In this study, the researcher explored and investigated how these areas were related while pre-schoolers viewed two Disney animated films.

## **Key words**

Vygotskian activity system, first language acquisition, second language acquisition, learning strategies, nonverbal behavior, play

## **Abstracto**

*Este estudio proporciona un trasfondo del sistema Vygotskian de actividades, la adquisición de un primer idioma y de un segundo idioma. Además, incluye un resumen literario que mide información vital en cuanto a estrategias de aprendizaje, comportamiento no-verbal, juego y el rol del juego en niños de escuela maternal, mientras aprenden un segundo idioma. En esta investigación, el examinador explora e investiga cómo estas áreas se relacionan mientras niños de escuela maternal observan filmes animados de Disney.*

**Palabras clave:** *Vygotskian de actividades, adquisición de un primer idioma, adquisición de un segundo idioma, estrategias de aprendizaje, comportamiento no-verbal, juego.*

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## **Introduction**

The impact of television in Puerto Rican society has been remarkable. Alegre (1994) noted that the introduction of cable in 1970, satellite in 1980, and the new video technologies in the 1990s have brought expansion and a variety of specialized

programming, which is now available to meet particular interests of Puerto Rican television viewers. A major contributor in the development of this specialized programming is the video cassette recorder (VCR). Video cassette recorders provide viewers with repeatable entertainment (Zoglin, 1990). Today, Puerto Rican viewers can use video cassette recorders to play back pre-recorded movies, sporting events, concerts, and a variety of other programs. As a result, many viewers can record and watch a variety of programs without having to schedule their calendars around their program of choice. Indeed, many of these programs which now can be tuned into at any time of the day or night have influenced viewers' lifestyles.

Television programming and the new technologies are also playing an important role in the cultural changes that have been taking place in Puerto Rico. Rosaly (1994) explains that American and foreign programs have influenced behavior, dress codes, and marketing practices.

Because of the widespread impact and accessibility of television, there has been great concern over the short and long term effects of television viewing among children. Today's young children receive a heavier dose of television than was ever possible at any time in the past. Hence, research has focused on children who are at the earlier stages of their social, cognitive, and emotional developments. Most findings tend to confirm that television provides children with models that influence in their behavior by the roles, relationships, and values that are implicit in the programs they watch.

Aidman (1994) viewed television as an instrument of pro-social behavior. She states that children learn polite behavior while, for a example, they try to understand and react to the program *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. By using Vygotsky's zone of proximal

development theory, Aidman investigated pre-schoolers' knowledge of polite behavior. Her study revealed that the rules of polite interpersonal behavior which flow into and out of different levels of social interaction in school, home, and society can also be found in television programs.

Studies have shown that television has a positive impact on language learning. For example, Ball and Bogatz (1971) noted that television programs such as Sesame Street have been excellent as teaching media. Their evaluation of this particular program indicated that children who watched it not only learned simple associations, e.g., naming letters, but also learned complex cognition processes, e.g., sorting and classifying.

Studies examining the contribution of television in play and language behavior have been limited. Rice (1983) who conducted studies in the use of television and language learning found a connection between language learners and as television viewers. In her study, Rice observed that children used television as a source of verbal interaction in their play. She found that children would use television language for humorous purposes while they played. Rice also affirms that pre-schoolers learned vocabulary incidentally as television dialogue became a new source for the production of new words.

More recently, educators have suggested that television can be a positive tool in the teaching of a second language. Former Secretary of Education of Puerto Rico, Victor Fajardo (1997) declared that television can play an important role in the teaching of English in Puerto Rico. He believed that children who are exposed to English through media such as books, movies, and cable television should significantly improve their second language skills by learning English in a more natural way.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore whether Disney's animated films may play an important role in second language acquisition and whether Puerto Rican pre-schoolers used learning strategies while viewing English animated films. Secondly, this study attempts to examine if nonverbal behavior and the act of play are linked while the pre-schoolers are trying to understand and produce the language.

Specifically, the research addressed the following questions:

1. Do Disney animated films contribute to the acquisition and production of a second language?
2. Which learning strategies do children use to process and produce a language?
3. Does input from the animated films influence nonverbal behavior and/or child play?

## **Methodology**

A qualitative case study method was selected for the research. The guidelines and the parameters were delineated and data was collected through various instruments. The Checklist for Observation on Children's Language / Behavior (CLB) was prepared to evaluate the learning strategies among pre-schoolers when using the English language while viewing the animated films. The Checklist on Children's Word Production (CEWP) provided information of the participant's schema of expression. The Outline Analysis for Animated Films (OAAF) described the features of each Disney film. The Nonverbal Behavior Features Analysis (NBFA) focused on paralinguistic behaviors. In addition, participants' parents were interviewed and video taped sessions were held.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical framework for this research rests on Lev. S. Vygotsky's (1978) activity theory. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, is recognized as a pioneer in developmental psychology, which he defined as a dynamic process of upheavals, sudden changes, and reversals. It involved the development of higher mental functions, cultural development, and the mastering of one's own behavioral processes (Kozulin, 1994). Vygotsky wanted to find a theoretical approach that would allow him to create a methodology that could explain the transformation of elementary processes into higher ones. Vygotsky noted that the transformation that took place was a result of the mediating function of cultural development. In order to explain these higher mental functions (logical memory, voluntary attention, conceptual thought, planning, perception, problem-solving, and voluntary and disinhibitory faculties), Vygotsky would identify the brain mechanisms that performed a particular function in order to describe in detail their developmental history.

According to Vygotsky (1978), culturally constructed artifacts such as tools, signs, symbols, and language help humans transform elementary processes into higher ones. These cultural artifacts involved mediated activity that help humans adapt to their external world by assimilating the laws of nature. Lantolf and Appel (1994) stated that Vygotsky saw the need that humans have to control and master nature. In order to control nature, humans create and invent the use of auxiliary stimuli. Such stimuli include the use of tools and signs that are either technical or psychological tools, e.g., gestures, sign systems, and decision making. These are made to control mental behavior. Through the

use of tools and signs, individuals in collaboration with other individuals would shape their world according to their motives and goals (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Although Vygotsky's theory consisted of tools and signs that focus upon higher intellectual processes, he was also interested in the development of language as it is related to thought. Rieber (1987) explains that Vygotsky believed language is used in the service of higher mental functions. Therefore, speech becomes the most important sign because it is a means for interaction and communication in a society. Vygotsky's investigations were directed toward individuals engaging in social activity mediated by speech or psychological tools. Thus, language became important in Vygotsky's psychological system (Rieber, 1987).

Children go through the developmental stages in which language and action are related. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that children will learn from society those activities on which society was built and placed value on. Some of these activities include work, play and education.

Vygotsky (1978) pointed out once children have developed their speech, they are able to function independently of adult guidance and take control of their own activities using imagination and play, projecting themselves into adult activities of their own culture. Play and imagination are a product of the power to free behavior and thought from the domination of the immediate perceptual field. Play and imagination, he argues are connected with the development of other forms of socially organized action and interaction.

Recently, second language researchers such as Aidman (1994), Lantolf and Appel (1994), and Medina (1990) believe that Vygotsky's theoretical framework is significantly

relevant in understanding the process of second language acquisition. Medina (1990) found that Vygotsky's nature of inner speech is relevant to the study of second language acquisition. She concluded that inner speech may provide researchers with one of the most effective means of finding out what goes on in the learners' minds as they are learning a second language.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Learning strategies.* Learning strategies involve naturalistic practices and facilitates the acquisition of language. They are steps taken by students to enhance their leaning. These strategies can be either direct or indirect and deal with language or language being learned (Oxford, 1990). Direct strategies require mental processing of the language which may be categorized as memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies are categorized as metacognitive, affective and social.

*Nonverbal behavior.* Nonverbal behavior includes all reflexive and nonreflexive movements and positions of the body that include emotional, attitudinal, and informational message (Wood, 1976).

*Play.* It involves the exploration by repetition of sensual perceptions, of kinesthetic sensations, and of vocalizations (Herron & Sutton-Smith, 1971).

### **Results of the Study**

The first point considered in the study was learning strategies. The results revealed that five out of six participants used learning strategies. Direct strategies (memory, cognitive, social, and compensation) as well as indirect strategies (social and

affective) were observed. It was also inferred from the questionnaire and interviews that television viewing at home and school experiences played an important role in indirect learning strategies because these experiences were meaningful not only for the parents and teachers but also for each participant.

A second salient point in the study was that all participants exhibited nonverbal behavior. Levels of kinesics and oculisics were present in the study. Kinesic behavior included the use of facial expressions such as eye movements and eye brow language, the act of smiling, and body movements. Eyebrow language included the arching of the eyebrows to show emotions such as surprise. Wide opened eyes indicated surprise as well as other emotions. Mouths were also opened as if the participants' attention was given entirely to the films. There were also movements that the children would tighten their lips showing fear or while they were awaiting what would happen next. The act of smiling seemed to indicate their liking of the films. Among the body movements that were collected in this study, hand language seemed to be a nonverbal strong feature. The usage of the participants' hands seem to have indicated the children's interaction with the animated films by closely imitating with their hands certain gestures exhibited by the animated characters.

Paralinguistic features were also identified. Nonverbal behavior features such as noise, screams of excitement, laughter, and silence were observed in the research. Pre-schoolers imitated sounds or produced screams as they viewed the films. Laughter was associated with happiness. The participants would giggle over funny scenes.

Another finding from the study was that language had been slightly influenced by the viewing of animated films. Some of the participants would key words or expressions



from the films as though they were interacting with the animated characters. Furthermore, the participants created playful experiences with other children which led them to imaginative communication. The communication was in terms of language / behavior that they had seen from the films.

Nevertheless, the qualitative results in the study revealed that viewing English animated films at home and at school seemed to have influenced pre-schoolers' language / behavior. When both the home and school environment are positive and supportive, children were encouraged to learn and speak English. In cases where the home environment does not encourage English television viewing as in one of the participants in the study, students lack the opportunity to hear and practice the target language. Thus, they may limit language proficiency.

### **Implications**

The findings in the present study arise from a qualitative analysis. Because of the case study approach used in this research, the generalizations, based in the findings are restricted to the participants of the study.

Implications for the teaching and learning of a second language can be drawn from this study, which explored the relationship between animated films and language / behavior. If animated films are used wisely both in and out of the classroom, they can be used as a positive influence in the acquisition of a second language. Therefore, parents and teachers need to be aware of the potential that animated films have in the development of English skills.

ESL / EFL teachers should become aware of the importance of incorporating the use of learning strategies in learning activities such as the viewing of English animated films. Therefore, learning strategies should be included not only into the curriculum but also in daily lesson planning. Consequently, students will use these learning strategies inside and outside the classroom. Oxford (1990) indicates that learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. She also explains that strategies are important for language learning because they are tools for learners' active and self-directed involvement. Eventually, learners will be able to internalize these strategies and will be able to handle language more effectively.

Nonverbal behavior is another important implication. Viewing animated films contributed to the participants' body language, noise, laughter, and play behavior. The pre-schoolers from the study used gestures and paralinguistic behavior in order to imitate the animated characters' behavior. Body language sometimes was accompanied by sounds and words. The animated films provided visual cues which pre-schoolers used to understand the characters' emotions. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the importance of nonverbal behavior. Teachers should observe this aspect carefully to ensure learners understand both meanings and feelings from the animated films correctly. Nonverbal behavior may help enhance educational perceptions about language learning and how this perception can contribute to a positive interaction with television and its technological devices. Wood (1976) confirms that kinesics research is vital in the acquisition of a second language because it helps uncover the movements and combinations of movements that generally relate to meaning. Other researchers state that the observation of other levels of nonverbal behavior such as proxemics, haptics,

paralinguistic, occulistics, and olfactory levels should also be considered important while acquiring a second language (Brown, 1994; Curt, 1975; Marshall, 1983; Weimann & Harrison, 1983).

Play was observed from two aspects: language / behavior and playthings. According to Ellis (1973), playthings have certain attributes such as complexity and responsiveness. Playthings possess complexity if children are able to investigate their physical properties. Playthings are responsive if they produce some effect that is under the control of the child. The participants asked questions about their toys. For example, a participant asked another pre-schooler why *Buzz Light year* could not fly if he had both wings and rockets. The other student responded that the figure could only fly in the movie and that the one they were playing with was just a plastic figure. It was observed in the study that toys increased their play activity.

Vygotsky's theory is a key factor for students learning a second language. The activity systems used in this investigation showed that these systems occurred simultaneously. The use of animated films awakened a variety of internal processes that the participants were able to activate when they were interacting among themselves during the viewing activity. Once these processes were internalized, they became part of the participants independent achievement. Therefore, the findings in this study revealed that Vygotsky's theory does play an important role in the teaching and learning of a second language. Furthermore, this study may also lead to further insights toward future studies. For example, research which may lead to the analysis of television and its technological devices could benefit by building on the Vygotskian framework used in this study.

## **Conclusion**

The study revealed that these activity systems are related because they intertwine economical, political, and cultural aspects of the Puerto Rican society. The activity of English-animated film viewing, child play, and nonverbal communication may influence the acquisition of a second language.

Parents, teachers, and environment are also key factors in the acquiring of a second language. Attitudes may be determined by what students have experienced and by the people with whom they identify. Parents indicated in their oral interviews that purchasing English animated films was important because they gave their children more access to the English language. They also viewed these films as a positive family activity which provided strong family ties as well as a liking towards the English language. Teachers also played an important role in their use of both languages (English and Spanish). It is also vital that teachers select wisely animated films. This can promote an affective and effective learning environment by using animated film viewing as an integral part of the school's curriculum. The students emotional well-being can be enhanced if teachers provide a positive environment for their students. This study revealed that school environment and the viewing of animated films encouraged student participation and stimulated child play.

Play seems to contribute to language learning. It allows children to interact and integrate current experiences particularly if they have received external stimulation such as television viewing. The act of play also reinforces vocabulary skills by re-enacting the

animated characters' verbal expressions. Play can help educator teach and strengthen these language skills through careful planning.

Nonverbal communication should also be considered while teaching English. This behavior can give insights on what children are learning. Cultural awareness activities can involve educators, students, and parents in the learning and teaching of a second language. To observe nonverbal behavior is essential because gestural signals vary from culture to culture. It is important to understand what is accepted as appropriate behavior in one culture may not be appropriate in another culture. Brown (1994) insists that people should not underestimate the importance of nonverbal behavior in second language acquisition. He concludes that nonverbal behavior is enhanced with communicative competence and that the learner should acquire the ability to send and receive nonverbal signals unambiguously. Therefore, if parents and educators learn to recognize the importance of body language effectively, this will give them a better understanding of the teaching of a second language.

The acquisition of a second language is greatly influenced by many variables as previously mentioned. Other factors such as positive or negative learning conditions at home and school may contribute to the pleasure or rejection of the second language.

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