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Why do sparkles make a sound in English? The impact of media exposure on child L2 vocabulary acquisition

Due to their features of multi-modal presentation and their abundance in terms of availability and diversity, the media have been assumed to have a distinct effect on second language acquisition (SLA). Although their beneficial effect on overall SLA has been found in various studies, very few of them examined the characteristics of different types of media in relation to how they may influence second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition at an early age. We present a case study of a 9-year-old Croatian girl who had achieved high competence in the English language primarily through exposure to television (TV) content in English. We examined her production for the evidence that some features of television as a medium might have influenced the development of her vocabulary and the way she experienced and used the L2. The production data was collected in a series of unstructured conversations in the informal atmosphere of the participant's home. Additional data on the participant's language learning background were collected in interviews with the participant and her parents. The results suggest that exposure to TV as a medium, which provides opportunities for repeated exposure to rich input, contextualized language, and a combination of visual and aural stimuli, may have an important influence on L2 vocabulary acquisition. However, it has to be emphasized that the influence was evidenced in the production of a highly motivated language learner in an environment that was truly supportive of her language development.

Key words: exposure to TV content in L2; FL learning setting; L2 vocabulary acquisition; out-of-school exposure to media; young learners.



1. Introduction

In the 21st century, globalization and digitalization have significantly changed educational perspectives on when, where, and how people learn. The discussion of the pedagogical effects of the media is an ongoing one and it is the focus of media pedagogy, but the effects of exposure to language through different digital media are also of interest in the field of SLA.

In Croatia, due to the presence of the English language through subtitled TV programmes, the internet, social media, music and gaming, English is an integral part of the everyday lives of many people. Furthermore, English is studied as a foreign language (FL) from the first or fourth grade of primary school. In other words, English language learning in Croatia is most commonly a result of formal learning in FL classrooms and informal/out-of-school exposure to English, primarily through the media.¹

In this paper we are going to address a topic which we believe merits much more attention: the influence of exposure to TV in English on child L2 vocabulary acquisition in an FL learning setting. Firstly, we will outline some of the characteristics of TV as a multimodal medium and compare it to the characteristics of learning that takes place in formal contexts. Next, we will review some research findings on the effects of exposure to TV content in L2 on overall SLA and point out some of the non-linguistic factors that facilitate L2 child vocabulary acquisition.

In order to look at the opportunities TV may provide to learners to pick up language without any form of explicit teaching, we are going to analyse the learner production data of a single participant who was extensively exposed to TV programmes in English. More specifically, we will provide some evidence of the content-, context-, and modality-specific features of TV² in the participant's L2 English production, taking into consideration some of the learner-internal variables that may affect L2 vocabulary acquisition in an FL setting.

¹ In this study we use the terms *second language acquisition* and *L2 vocabulary acquisition* to refer to the process of learning any language other than the learner's first language (L1). Therefore, we refer to the language being learned as *L2*, and the term *foreign language* (FL) is used only when the learning setting, or the fact that the language is not spoken in the learner's immediate environment, is relevant.

² Content-, context-, and modality-specific features are used here as theory-neutral terms to represent the characteristics/features of TV as a symbol system (see Section 2.1.)



2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Learning from the media*

As they grow up, children advance through stages characterized by specific behavioural and cognitive features (Piaget 1952) which determine how they process TV content. In his work on the interaction of the media, cognition, and learning, Salomon (1994) warns that each type of media is a symbol system in itself, as it has its specific features that interact with human cognition and learning. TV as a medium can use symbol systems from the real world (gestures, modes of speech, clothing, iconography), or compose shots into specific sequences, thus representing temporality or causality without using language as a symbol system (Salomon 1994). However, these symbol systems in combination with language provide the learner with additional information, which improves the processing of the content. As the audio-visual language of TV is holistic, the concepts presented within it are highly context-dependent.

Salomon (1994) emphasizes that the processing of media input³ occurs at the individual level. The meaning is conveyed within a symbol system in a way that is dependent on the system's attributes, but it demands specific skills and varies in the amount of mental effort one has to put into its processing. The final product of the learning process not only depends on the skills the learner has already acquired but also cultivates other mental skills in the process, affecting any future encounter with that or any other symbol system.

As TV combines images with sound (and language), it requires the viewer to process them simultaneously. Postman (1979) points out an important distinction between word and image. While a word only represents ideas about reality (which are decomposable, translatable, verifiable), images represent specific referents in the form of a narrative which is then "apprehended in the form in which it exists" (Postman 1979: 164). The way the viewer experiences audio-visual content and subsequently processes it, or tries to translate "the untranslatable" imagistic TV content into language, offers an insight into what they personally consider to be salient features of a certain concept.

Taking into consideration these characteristics of a medium as a system and the idiosyncrasies involved in the processing of its content, it is clear why its influence on the process of language acquisition is difficult to measure. In order to do this properly, it is important to know what the content of a TV programme is, how it is

³ Input refers to the information that a person is exposed to.



presented, what level of individual ability a child might have for processing that specific content and, finally, how these factors interact in the process.

2.2. *Learning from the media vs. formal learning*

One should differentiate between learning by watching television at home and learning in school in order to reach further conclusions about the effect of TV on SLA. The major differences pointed out in the literature are: goals, hierarchy, unity of time and place, compulsion, peers, activity, delay of gratifications, and language (Postman 1979; Meyrowitz 1995; Lemish 2007).

The goals of watching television are not primarily educational, but TV content attracts children's attention. When exposed to media content in L2, children can be motivated to acquire the skills that they need in order to understand the content itself, and thus they have greater motivation to learn L2. Additionally, TV content and the act of accessing it do not require any previous knowledge or previous qualifications, unlike school, which is based on accumulating knowledge or skills in a specific hierarchical order (Lemish 2007). When watching television, regardless of their knowledge of the verbal language the medium might use, learners still have access to non-linguistic (visual or aural) cues, which help unravel the meaning conveyed through the medium.

Unlike with school activities, children can watch TV independently, at their own pace, and according to their own preferences. This means that children can adapt, for instance, the length of viewing or the content they wish to view according to what they find entertaining, interesting, or important. Furthermore, as school is compulsory and supervised, it includes tests, negative and positive reinforcement, while TV viewing is self-governed. Provided there is enough interest in the TV content, children receive instant gratification when watching it (Lemish 2007). Therefore, the learning of a language that might happen in the process is only of secondary importance to children since it is only a prerequisite for processing the content itself.

When it comes to productive skills, activities like homework assignments, discussions, group projects etc. often reinforce the knowledge and skills acquired by formal instruction in schools, while the skills and knowledge acquired by viewing TV are not additionally processed by children unless they decide to engage in similar activities (Lemish 2007). While this points to some shortcomings of television viewing due to lack of interaction and the opportunities for practicing productive



skills, the stress-free atmosphere, in which children's affective filter (Krashen 1984) might be low and enhance learning, should also be taken into consideration.

A study by Bunting & Lindström (2013) provided some insights into the differences between learning English in school and out-of-school contexts as perceived by Swedish 11-year-old learners of English. They concluded that the learners were very much aware of the differences between learning at school and elsewhere and that learning through out-of-school exposure to the media is perceived as more effective. This greater effectiveness was explained by the fact that learning happens as a "bonus effect" of the activity that was meant to entertain rather than educate.

2.3. Previous research on the effects of out-of-school exposure to media on SLA

Most studies on informal exposure to L2 have been conducted in immersion settings, and exposure to an FL in out-of-school environments, as well as its effects on L2 attainment, merits further research (Lopriore & Mihaljević Djigunović 2011).

As part of a comprehensive project on early language learning in Europe, ELLiE (Enever 2011), which included students from seven European countries,⁴ Muñoz & Lindgren (2011) focused on out-of-school exposure to FL. They reported positive correlations between the extent of out-of-school exposure and the students' listening and reading skills. Out-of-school exposure with the strongest explanatory power was watching TV in the target language (followed by listening to music, reading, and playing games) (Muñoz & Lindgren 2011: 114).

However, in a more in-depth study of exposure to L2 English in out-of-school environments in Croatia and Italy, Lopriore & Mihaljević Djigunović (2011) found that the relationship between the amount of exposure to L2 and the learners' achievement (in listening and reading tasks) was not linear. They concluded that the key to beneficial effects might be in the type and quality of input rather than the overall amount of exposure. They also suggested that comprehensive research should take into consideration the learners' characteristics in interaction with variables of language exposure in the immediate as well as the wider learning context.

Another study carried out as part of the ELLiE project, relevant to the matter of out-of-school exposure, was conducted in Croatia by Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj (2011). The study looked at the levels of lexical diversity young learn-

⁴ Croatia, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden.



ers in Croatia reached at the end of the first four years of formal learning of English and their correlation with quite a few non-linguistic factors. The researchers found significant positive correlations between lexical diversity (measured by Guiraud's index) and the reported exposure to L2 through watching TV and gaming. They concluded that the engagement with L2 through this type of exposure (being pleasurable and of interest to the young learners) contributed to L2 vocabulary acquisition.

In recent years, more studies have dealt with incidental language learning through the media. Bahrani & Tam (2012) examined and compared the effect of exposure to audio-visual news, cartoons and films in an FL on L2 competence. They found that it was the exposure to cartoons, not news, which had a significant beneficial effect on the development of low-level learners' competence. The finding was explained by the presence of less specialized vocabulary, which made cartoon language input more comprehensible, but also by the amount of interest the cartoons invoked in the participants. The exposure to films also proved effective in improving low-level learners' competence, but not to the same extent as cartoons.

Kuppens (2010) conducted a study with sixth-grade Flemish students of English on incidental learning through watching TV. She found that the self-reported frequency of exposure to popular media in L2 English had a significant effect on the participants' both Dutch-to-English and English-to-Dutch translation skills.

Jylhä-Laide's (1994) case study on an 8-year-old Finnish participant Laura, who started watching TV cartoons in English extensively when she was 6 years old, reported that Laura was able to use English creatively, that she had acquired a lot of English grammar, and had achieved near native-like pronunciation of American English. However, she had not learned to read or write in English. The study also provided a summary of features common to the language used in the cartoons and the typical child-directed caretaker's speech, which accounted for the findings:

- (1) the cartoons contain features that effectively capture the viewer-learner's attention,
- (2) they present a strong picture-word interconnection, which corresponds with the "here and now" principle of "modified" registers,
- (3) the dialogue of the cartoons is characterised by sentences that are simple and complete,
- (4) the dialogue contains very few disfluencies,
- (5) repetition is used frequently, and
- (6) the rate of speech is relatively low in some cartoons. (Jylhä-Laide 1994: 94)

Although viewing television did not provide Laura with an opportunity to interact with another speaker, Jylhä-Laide (1994) claimed that videotaping and re-watching the same cartoons enabled Laura to induce repetition, become more fa-



miliar with the dialogues, and then to test her hypotheses on dialogues in other cartoons.

Nightingale (2014) studied the potential of cartoons in L2 for raising pragmatic awareness through exposure to culture-specific language that includes formulaic language and situation-bound utterances (SBU) (Kecskés 2002). SBUs are highly context-dependent and their meaning is not always semantically transparent, since they serve a pragmatic purpose more than they refer to the signified concept. This is highly relevant for child SLA since children “learn and use FL as ‘chunks’ before they develop the faculties of lexico-syntactic analysis necessary to break these units into their composite parts” (Nightingale 2014: 207). Nightingale concluded that cartoons provided a wide range of SBUs and formulaic language in general, and that they are a valuable pragmatic resource because they provide well-illustrated situational frames.

From the findings presented above, it is safe to conclude that exposure to different media can have a positive effect on the learner’s oral production, vocabulary learning and translation skills. It is important to mention that it can also have a significant effect on the learner’s pragmatic competence (in the sense of Bachman 1990), which is reported as underdeveloped in formal language learning contexts (Elgort & Nation 2010; Nightingale & Pla 2018).

2.4. L2 vocabulary acquisition: The applied linguistics perspective

Much research has been done in the field of child L1 vocabulary acquisition or bilingual L1 vocabulary acquisition, while research on the acquisition of vocabulary in SLA has been conducted largely on adult L2 learners. Even though vocabulary is the basis for language development, child L2 vocabulary acquisition (focusing on the age of 4 to 12) is still a relatively underexplored area of study (Butler 2019).

L2 vocabulary acquisition can take place under different conditions: implicitly and explicitly, incidentally and intentionally, in different settings (SL vs. FL) and in informal and formal environments. The age of learning most certainly plays an important role as the differences between types of knowledge and abilities of child and adult L2 learners (such as cognitive abilities, previous linguistic knowledge, world knowledge, learning settings etc.) greatly affect the learner’s vocabulary knowledge and the process of L2 vocabulary acquisition (Elgort & Nation 2010).

In the SLA research tradition it is common to distinguish between explicit and implicit knowledge and learning as two dichotomies. Explicit knowledge is typically considered to be a result of conscious learning, while implicit knowledge is a re-



sult of unconscious learning from incidental input. However, Ellis (2009: 6–7) points out that implicit/explicit *knowledge* and *learning* stand in a complex relationship and they interact dynamically (Ellis 2005).

Hulstijn (2003) also points out that implicit learning is not to be equated with incidental learning, as implicit learning is a result of information processing that may also be entirely intentional. For the purposes of this paper, which looks at the aspects of exposure to a particular type of input, we are using the term *incidental language learning* in the sense of more or less unintentional and incidental acquisition or what would be considered “picking up” language while watching television (cf. Hulstijn 2003). It is important to note that, in order to overcome terminological inconsistencies and to exclude intentionality as a factor in such a context, researchers have lately been using the term *contextual word (language) learning* (cf. Elgort et al. 2018).

2.4.1. *Conditions that promote L2 vocabulary acquisition*

In the past, the roles of implicit and explicit language learning were ascribed varying importance. Some researchers claimed that L2 vocabulary was acquired through exposure to input and that there was no use to intentional vocabulary learning (Krashen 1989). Others claimed that successful vocabulary acquisition required some forms of explicit learning (form-focused instruction) and language awareness (e.g. Ellis 2008). The arguments put forward for the inadequacy of incidental input alone for successful L2 vocabulary acquisition are, for example, a relatively small number of different vocabulary items used in everyday speech, and the need for the learner to have prior knowledge of a great number of lexical items that appear in the input in order to learn new ones (Cobb & Horst 2004). Furthermore, it is claimed that learners have a tendency to ignore lexical items whose meaning cannot be guessed from the context, that the meaning guessed from the context may be incorrect or only partially guessed, and that items whose meaning is easily guessed from the context are also easily forgotten (Laufer 2005).

All the limitations of exposure to incidental input are considered to be provided for in the classroom environment through the teacher’s modifications, whereby learning is not reliant on inferring the meaning from the context. However, studies show that explicit vocabulary acquisition and the intentional focus on form in the classroom do not provide the learners with pragmatic and sociocultural knowledge, which is necessary for successful vocabulary acquisition. As for these two types of knowledge, learners have been found to benefit greatly from exposure to authentic language (e.g. Nightingale 2014). Unfortunately, very little is known about the pre-



cise role of implicit and explicit learning in child L2 vocabulary acquisition and the nature of knowledge that results from each type of learning. For example, it has been widely assumed that implicit learning declines with age and that explicit learning becomes more effective, but this may at least partly be due to the learning conditions i.e. type of instruction they commonly receive during education.

Both the process and the outcome of L2 vocabulary learning are also affected by a great number of non-linguistic factors. Motivation is just one of the most prominent and most researched factors, and other relevant factors also include the learner's attitude, aptitude, and attentional and cognitive resources they have at their disposal. Other relevant non-linguistic, learner-external factors are those related to the wider and narrower social context in which learning takes place (Marulis & Neuman 2010).

When dealing with L2 vocabulary acquisition in young learners, it is important to take into consideration the young learners' parents or caretakers. When studying out-of-school learning, particularly relevant are various variables related to the parents' socioeconomic (education level, social class, lifestyle) and sociocultural (attitudes, values, beliefs, etc.) status. For example, Muñoz (2008) has found that the parents' encouragement, and involvement and interest in their children's language learning had a significant influence on the children's language learning success.

3. The study

3.1. *The aim*

The aim of the study was to examine the effect that extensive exposure to TV content in L2 may have on child L2 vocabulary acquisition in an FL setting. Since this type of exposure takes place in a private and more intimate environment, and given that language development is highly dependent on numerous cognitive and contextual factors, we believed that a case study would provide a better insight into this largely underexplored context of L2 vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, we present a case study of a successful young learner of English who had been extensively exposed to TV content in English. As this was an exploratory study, in order to reach tentative conclusions about the influence of TV as a medium on L2 vocabulary acquisition, we first isolated some evidence of the media content-, context-, and modality-specific features in her L2 production. These categories served as a lens which helped us identify and describe the characteristics and recurrent patterns found in the child's oral vocabulary production in L2.



3.2. *Lana*

Lana is an only child living in a middle-class neighbourhood in an urban setting in Croatia and her native language is Croatian. Her parents are native speakers of Croatian and advanced users of English. The father's employment in the aviation industry often includes long-distance travelling and active use of English, and the mother is a passive user of English. At the time the study was conducted Lana was nine years old and she was in the third grade of primary school. She had been learning English in primary school⁵ for two and a half years, and she had been communicating in English with the first author through unstructured play dates for three and a half years.

3.2.1. *Language learning background*

Lana did not attend kindergarten. Her exposure to the English language, through TV content, started when she was three years old.⁶ Between the ages of three and a half and eight, Lana made a few trips abroad with her parents, which included three visits to English-speaking countries (the USA and Canada). Each visit lasted for approximately three weeks.

Lana had access to cable TV, the internet, as well as games and books in English. However, her parents reported that she did not use any of them remotely as often as she watched TV. As reported by both parents and Lana, the only human input in L2 came from the parents in the form of clarifications she needed to understand the TV content. In fact, Lana mentioned her father most often as the provider of translations and answers to her language dilemmas. He seemed to be her role model and the one who, according to Lana, knew English best.

Lana did not receive any tutoring in English until she was five and a half years old. The incentive came from her parents who had noticed that she occasionally used L2 and wished to provide her with an interlocutor, believing it would help her retain the language she had already acquired.

⁵ Foreign language is studied from the first year of primary school in the Croatian primary curriculum with two contact hours (45 minutes each) a week.

⁶ Exposure to English in the Croatian environment is widely available primarily through digital media. A large number of TV programmes on national TV channels are broadcast in English and are subtitled in Croatian. Apart from the additional input available through the internet, social media, and music, children are also exposed to English through cable TV in which some programmes are subtitled, but most are broadcast in English without subtitles.



Lana had play dates with the first author once a week (lasting 60 minutes) and they were held regularly for approximately three and a half years prior to the study. The play dates were carried out in English and only on rare occasions were any vocabulary items translated into Croatian. Corrective feedback was not provided in the beginning and later on it was given implicitly in the form of recasts (Lyster & Ranta 1997). The participant showed disinclination towards reading and writing (both in Croatian and English), as well as towards other academic-like activities, and her preferences shaped the structure of the play dates. The conversations focused on topics Lana initiated (retelling events of the previous week, talking about her plans for the near future), and revolved around unstructured play and on-site participant-initiated activities; card games (such as Uno), board games (Sorry), fantasy play (with pre-assembled Lego-bricks), etc.

Formal instruction in English commenced when she was seven, in the first grade of primary school, and proceeded on a regular basis for two and a half school years prior to this study.

3.2.2. *Interests and exposure to TV content*

During the sessions, it was observed (and confirmed by her parents) that Lana's main interests were animals, music and, to an extent, technology. She also expressed interest in travelling and being exposed to foreign languages.

The interests seemed to match the type of programmes Lana most frequently watched: cartoons and documentaries. The diversity of the programmes Lana referred to as her favourite was striking, just like the fact that all of them were in L2, and most did not have Croatian subtitles. Her list of favourite programmes started with Air Crash Investigations, a documentary series broadcast by National Geographic. It is interesting to note that the content was closely related to her father's field of work, but also that it was the only programme on the list which provided subtitles that could have helped Lana with the content and more complex language. Next on the list were three cartoons, Sofia the First, Lion Guard, and Super Spies, two of which include animal characters Lana liked. During the study, Lana often reported that her parents watched TV with her, encouraging her and responding to her inquiries regarding its content. The parents also reported that they encouraged her television viewing. The amount of exposure reported by her parents was approximately three hours daily on weekdays, one and a half hours on Saturdays and Sundays.



3.2.3. Proficiency in L2

The participant's proficiency in the English language was not measured prior to the study. The impression that Lana's proficiency was above average came from the first author's observations during the play date conversations before the study was conducted, and it served as the primary motivation for the study. However, from the participant's production data collected for the purposes of the study and based on previous studies on lexical complexity and lexical diversity found in young learners after four years of formal L2 learning in Croatia (Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj 2011; Letica Krevelj & Medved Krajnović 2015), it can be safely concluded that her proficiency was much higher than that of her peers.

Lana's above-average proficiency in the English language was most evident at the lexical level. Her vocabulary in L2 was very rich (see Section 4.1.), and in her production data we often found vocabulary items denoting superordinate or subordinate concepts, instead of basic ones which are often used by young L2 learners (Cameron 2003).

Lana's above-average proficiency was also obvious from the complex grammatical structures she produced. It is important to note that in her production we found great variability in accuracy such as numerous inconsistencies as to the correct use of articles (a common problem for Croatian learners of English), and also irregular verbs and prepositions.

Nevertheless, her production, both at the lexical and syntactic levels, obviously exceeded the expected outcomes at the end of the first three years of formal instruction in primary school as predicted by the Croatian National Framework Curriculum (2011).⁷

As the conversations did not include any form of writing, we were unable to judge her ability in that skill. The only evidence we have is that Lana could spell random words when asked by her interlocutor. Lana's reading skills were not examined either. On several occasions, reading was a part of a game, and when asked to explain the meaning of a written word as quickly as possible, Lana misread some of the words and started explaining e.g., the word *motor* instead of *mother*.

⁷ After eight years of learning English in primary education, Croatian learners are expected to achieve A2 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001).



We would like to point out that this example of greater productive than receptive (reading) vocabulary knowledge was simply due to the fact that Lana was not exposed to written language as much. The misread word belonged to the basic vocabulary that was most certainly present in Lana's oral productive vocabulary and also covered within the first several contact hours of formal instruction. However, the first two years of early L2 learning at school the focus is on oral language only, while reading is introduced later.

3.3. Methodology

The data on the learner's language learning background were collected from the learner's parents (mainly the mother) and through observations and questions made to the learner during the sessions. Both the parental consent and the learner's assent were obtained for the participation and publication of the findings and the learner's name was changed in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

The production data were gathered in six one-to-one sessions that comprised the usual unstructured play and conversation on everyday topics between the learner and the first author in the participant's home. The sessions were audio-taped during the course of two months, five to 14 days apart, and each lasting for one hour. The participant was informed about the purpose of the audio-recording; first in Croatian by her parents and later in English by the first author. She also agreed to answer additional questions about her production the first author might ask for the purposes of the study.

Striving for spontaneous language production and inconspicuous data gathering, the sessions followed the usual structure and format (see Section 3.2.1.) with the addition of a word-guessing game. In order to gather more data on the depth and nature of the knowledge of some vocabulary items, the participant was asked additional questions in which she had to either recall where she had encountered a particular word (e.g. Where did you hear that?) or explain the exact meaning of a word she had used (e.g. So, what does ... mean?).

4. Results and discussion

We first present some general characteristics of Lana's L2 English production that we interpreted as evidence that her L2 knowledge was the result of incidental learning. The evidence we provide sometimes comes from the observations made on the basis of recurring patterns in the production data as a whole, and sometimes it sur-



faced through the questions (asked by the first author) regarding the way Lana experienced particular lexical items and L2 learning in general. Next, we present the data from Lana's L2 production which we believe exhibit content-, context-, and modality-specific features of TV as a medium and as such could be attributed to the exposure to TV programmes in L2. The production data are not presented in a chronological order but are organized around the phenomena we wish to describe.

4.1. General observations based on L2 production data

During the data collection, Lana showed great awareness of the different sources of L2 input she was provided with in the process of learning. It was obvious that she considered each input as a true opportunity for learning, regardless of the fact that only the input she received at school had a clear instructive purpose.

When asked how come she was able to understand TV programmes in English, she mentioned the first author and her parents as the providers of the necessary knowledge, but also her teacher at school (see excerpts (1a) and (1b) below).

Excerpt (1a)

⁸R: But how? Who told you what all of those things mean?

L: You?

R: But you never watch TV with me.

L: I know that.

R: How could you understand what they were saying then? You had no subtitles, no translation, nobody to tell you what they were talking about. ...

L: My parents were home. Then I asked them.

L: What this means - what does that mean?

R: Was it like an entire sentence or a word?

L: It means blah, blah, blah.

R: So all you needed is a word?

L: Yes.

R: Such as? Do you remember any word like that?

L: Umm - **following**.

R: It was a word you asked your mom?

L: My dad.

Excerpt (1b)

⁸ R: researcher, L: Lana



R: Why do you say “an egg”?

L: An egg, um, it’s better.

R: It’s better. Why is it better?

L: “A egg” - it doesn’t sound proper, but “an egg”, it does.

R: ... But why do you say this “a” or “an” at all? Why do you say it in front of-?

L: I don’t know.

R: You don’t know? Did you hear it somewhere?

L: My teacher says it so.

Nevertheless, Lana claimed that TV can teach, and that people can learn from it.

The TV programmes Lana had been watching seemed to match her general interests. Her own informal “curriculum”, based on her preferences, was also visible in the depth and breadth of her vocabulary. The excerpt (2a) below provides an example of her own explanation for **not** being familiar with a lexical item.

Excerpt (2a)

R: Sweet pea. What’s a pea?

L: Um - I don’t like vegetables so I don’t know how they are called.

Lana recognized *pea* as a vegetable which she could not identify, and she showed no intention of learning anything about it. This is a good example of the way interests may influence motivation for learning particular lexical items in young learners.

As the choice of TV programmes determined her familiarity with some of the vocabulary items, it also determined the semantic domains within which they were placed in Lana’s mind. The excerpt below clearly suggests that the word *iron* existed for Lana only in the semantic domain of construction material.

Excerpt (2b)

R: How do you say *pegla* (Eng. ‘an iron’) in English?

L: Sizzles.

R: No [giggles] Have you ever heard of an iron?

L: No. Oh, yes, yes, yes.

R: An iron. What’s an iron?

L: It’s a material.

R: A material? Okay. But it can also mean *pegla* ... and ironing, you know what ironing is?

L: No.

R: No? It’s when your mom-



L: - making something out of iron?

The conversation above revolved around a toy iron called Sizzles, and Lana offered *sizzles* as a word for *iron* believing that the name of the toy denoted the name of the real, physical object. When the word *iron* was mentioned, Lana quickly recalled that iron was a material, and that she had heard it before, most probably in programmes such as Air Crash Investigations. It is interesting to note that Lana was quick to make further conclusions about what the word *ironing* could mean, but she still worked within the domain in which she first encountered the word. In other words, regardless of the fact that she had just learned the new meaning of the word, further elaboration seemed to be firmly associated with the specific referent within the specific domain familiar to Lana.

However, as previously mentioned, her exceptionally rich vocabulary was particularly visible in the domain of the animal world, where numerous utterances contained low-frequency words and expressions such as *wolf pack*, *sloth*, *rodent*, *animal enclosures*, etc. The excerpt (2c) below clearly illustrates the depth and breadth of Lana's vocabulary related to animals, as well as the previously mentioned awareness of where she first encountered some of the vocabulary items.

Excerpt (2c)

R: So, he is - How do you say it?

L: Immune.

R: Immune. Where did you hear the word immune?

L: The Lion Guard. They have a character, Bonga, and he is a honey badger.

R: Okay. And he is immune to -?

L: Snake bites.

R: Snake bites. Well, he isn't immune to snake bites, the snakes can bite him, but he is immune to snake -

L: Venom!

R: Venom? Wow! I would say "poison", where did you hear the word "venom"?

L: Um, from Ten Deadliest Snakes.

From the data collected, it is evident that Lana was able to name the exact source of data input for a particular vocabulary item, and this is further discussed below. However, this does not mean that she was happy to provide answers about the language itself. She usually replied briefly as to the exact input and left no room for further questions. In fact, Lana avoided metalinguistic discussions altogether, and she employed overt avoidance strategies – by ignoring the questions and insisting on the activity in progress, or by expressing annoyance. The excerpt



(3) below exemplifies an instance in which she was asked about the origin of the name of one of her toys.

Excerpt (3)

R: You don't know? You've never thought about it? What about Lunding?

L: Oh, this is getting tiring. [gets up to fetch the toy]

When Lana became aware that her language was under scrutiny, she often spoke in a quiet and incomprehensible way or changed the topic of the conversation. Even though she had agreed to answer additional questions about the language forms she produced, these instances were in sharp contrast to the conversational practices she was used to prior to the study. The same behaviour was observed when Lana was provided with corrective feedback. Most commonly, she did not acknowledge directly that she was being corrected. She sometimes repeated the correct word or utterance, but she was unwilling to focus on the linguistic item itself. On the one hand, this finding is in accordance with the explanation provided by the gratification theory (Lemish 2007), which claims that frequent exposure to television makes children accustomed to immediate satisfaction (instant gratification) of their need to be entertained, thus making them less interested in activities which resemble those in formal school settings. On the other hand, it may be due to her unwillingness to juggle several topics at a time, as well as some degree of language anxiety L2 speakers may feel having realized they have made a mistake. However, on several occasions, when asked to reflect on the erroneous forms in her production, Lana relied on how it sounded, simply stating whether it sounded right or not. This behaviour is characteristic of learners who have acquired language implicitly and lack the explicit linguistic knowledge and awareness (Ellis 2009).

Furthermore, Lana often used informal spoken expressions such as *shoo, shoo* for playfully sending someone away, contractions such as *gonna* and *gimme* instead of *going to* and *give me*. She also sometimes omitted the subject in sentences like *Gonna take that* and *Don't have sticks*, and used intonation to make questions such as *Maybe go again?* Similar findings were reported by Jylhä-Laide (1994) and identified as consistent with the features of cartoon language. However, Lana seemed to be also fully aware of what she termed "proper" way of saying something, which suggests a high level of pragmatic as well as grammatical competence.

4.2. Context- and content-specific features in production

Before we provide evidence of some context- and content-specific features in Lana's production, we would like to return to the curious finding that Lana was able



to pinpoint exact instances in which she encountered most of the vocabulary items or expressions. Given that her interlocutor mostly raised questions about the low-frequency vocabulary items identified in Lana's production, it is possible that Lana also perceived them as such, and that it is precisely their low frequency that made them more salient for Lana when she encountered them. However, we believe that her awareness of the exact context in which she encountered them was most probably due to the overall dependence on the contextual information in the process of decoding the linguistic meaning through the TV content.

In Lana's production we found many instances of what seemed to be direct mappings between function and form. We believe that the frequency of these instances in the production data can be explained by the fact that the multimodality of TV as a medium can ease these function-form mappings, even if the linguistic input itself is not meaningful. Most importantly, Lana was capable of using the acquired fixed expressions appropriately in a new context, as excerpts (4a) and (4b) below illustrate nicely.

Excerpt (4a)

- L: What number did I get?
R: Two.
L: Oh barnacles!
R: Barnacles? What's that?
L: [blows a raspberry]
R: You don't know what that is?
L: No.
R: Then why did you say it?
L: I don't know why.
R: Where did you hear it?
L: SpongeBob SquarePants.

The word *barnacles*⁹ in excerpt (4a) is used as an exclamation in the cartoon series *SpongeBob SquarePants* expressing regret or irritation when something goes wrong and Lana appropriately used it to express her annoyance, just as it was used in the cartoon.

The next excerpt (4b) shows that although she was reluctant to analyse a fixed expression at first, after being prompted by the suggestion that the literal meaning

⁹ Barnacle 'any of numerous species of marine crustaceans that are free-swimming as larvae but fixed to rocks or floating objects as adults' (The Penguin English Dictionary, 2007).



of the phrase might sound nonsensical, Lana readily offered an explanation – a vivid recollection of a specific scene in a specific TV programme that helped her unravel the meaning.

Excerpt (4b)

L: [plays a card and wins the round] Ha-ha! In your face! In your face!

R: What does it mean? “In your face?”

L: Right in your face!

R: Huh? Does it mean this [puts her hand on her face]?

L: Yes. I think it means that.

R: But you haven’t thrown anything in my face. So what does it mean?

L: I don’t know.

R: ... Okay, since I’ve lost this round, I want a full description of where you heard the phrase “in your face” and why did you say it to me?

L: Um, from Baggage Battles.

R: Okay, and what happened in Baggage Battles? ...

L: Um, it’s a war on luggage.

R: Okay, and what happened? Somebody said to somebody: “In your face,” right?

L: Yes. Billy said to Mark: “In your face!” ...

R: So, “in your face” means what? When do you use “in your face”?

L: For, um, so you can get back at somebody [incomprehensible] ...

L: ... if somebody said something mean to you and then you said something mean, then - in your face!

Excerpt (4b) shows that the meaning of the situation-bound utterance was highly contextualized and that the communicational situation provided Lana with enough input to both mentally elaborate the meaning and to apply it to a new context.

It is important to note that Lana’s comments provided in the excerpts mostly reflect unconscious engagement with the input to which she had been exposed. However, even though further discussion on the processing of specific input is out of the scope of the study, we would like to add that there were many instances in her production that suggest highly dynamic engagement with the input (its elaboration and restructuring) once she realized that the input had not been understood properly.

4.3. *Modality-specific features*

Finally, two excerpts below show the way audio-visual features of TV may have shaped Lana’s representation of L2 vocabulary items. Excerpt (5a) shows the inter-



action during a time-constrained game in which Lana had to explain the word *flag* without using the word itself.

Excerpt (5a)

L: It's like, American, when you raise it high and the wind blows it. It's a-?

R: When you raise a -?

L: That thing. And the wind blows it.

R: In America?

L: Yes.

When defining a flag, Lana did not describe it as a flag of her own country, Croatia, nor did she resort to describing its simplest structural features, which would be more appropriate for her age. The word seemed to invoke a different image; the American flag fluttering in the wind. This might indicate that Lana connected the word *flag* with the cultural context of the English-speaking country and invoked mental images that belonged to the cultural context of L2. Apart from the cultural features, the description also contained dynamic features indicating that Lana had been exposed to a similar visual representation of the flag through TV.

Furthermore, Lana quite often concentrated on both visual and aural features when explaining a word in English. The next excerpt illustrates Lana's description of the word *sparkle*.

Excerpt (5b)

R: Sparkle? What does it mean?

L: *Šljokice*. (Eng. glitter)

R: ...What does it mean when something sparkles?

L: It means you see a glow.

R: Aha.

L: And it's in a lot of colours.

L: And I think it makes a sound?

R: It makes a sound?

L: Ts-ts-ts, something like that.

In her description of what a sparkle is, Lana successfully described its visual features: it is colourful and glowing. She was also able to provide an approximate Croatian translation equivalent. The curious part in her description was that sparkling produced a sound which she tried to imitate. Indeed, in cartoons, the sparkling effect is often followed by sounds similar to bells, cymbals or wind chimes, and it is obvious that Lana's exposure to the audio-visual image of sparkling had influenced her mental image. The way Lana described the concept above is in ac-



cordance with Postman's (1979) claim that the description of imagistic content is practically impossible to translate into words and that it asks for an infinite number of specific concepts to be introduced into the description.

Furthermore, an interesting aspect is this conviction of the reality of the features ascribed to the concept acquired through exposure to images on TV. As the development of the distinction between fantasy and reality happens gradually when the child enters the concrete-operational stage (Piaget 1952), it is possible that Lana had not completely developed this distinction. We believe, however, that the intonation and Lana's use of the epistemic modality marker *I think* suggests that she started to question the representation of the concept once she was asked to explain it; as though realizing that it might not be possible or true. Therefore, apart from the influence of the exposure to a symbolic (aural and visual) representation, we may be witnessing the previously mentioned instance of engagement with and restructuring of that symbolic representation once she had to render the image into words.

5. Conclusion

When English is learned in an FL setting, such as the one in Croatia, the process of learning through the media usually happens simultaneously with the process of formal learning. Like in previous studies (e.g. Muñoz & Lindgren 2011), in our study, possible effects of media exposure were examined at the time the learner had already been exposed to formal L2 learning. While this may be seen as a limitation in studies on the effect of exposure to media alone, we believed that studies which control for both types of learning have a greater ecological validity.

Apart from the exposure through formal input, in our study the participant was also exposed to meaning-focused interaction in L2 with the first author. This was at the same time both a facilitating and a debilitating condition. On the one hand, the first author's experience of acting as the participant's private tutor allowed for a much more insightful and accurate reconstruction of the recorded data, as well as a possibility to collect spontaneous production data. On the other hand, the relationship between the participant and the first author, as well as the previously co-constructed conversation practices and expectations, have constrained the content and structure of sessions and methodology used in the study to some extent.

Therefore, here we will only summarize our observations and tentative evidence that suggests certain features in Lana's production data reflect the context-, content-, and modality-specific features of input from TV programmes to which she



had been exposed. Apart from providing evidence that Lana's above-average L2 vocabulary knowledge was in fact a result of exposure to the media in L2, instances captured in the learner data also shed some light on the acquisition of L2 lexical and conceptual representations as a result of incidental word learning through the media at an early age.

The excerpts from Lana's interaction with the researcher provided in the study suggest the following:

- Her extensive vocabulary knowledge was most clearly visible within the semantic fields that cover the areas of Lana's interest, and consequently the TV content she had been exposed to (animals and technology). Less-developed vocabulary was found in the areas that did not interest her as much (food).
- Lana's production reflected a high level of pragmatic competence in her use of vocabulary. The evidence that it had originated from exposure to TV content came from Lana's accounts and carry-over contextual features in her production. She was able to pinpoint exactly where she had heard particular low-frequency lexical items, fixed expressions and situation-bound utterances. The phenomenon could be attributed to either the fact that they had been acquired through contextualized communicative situations in audio-visual input, or an overall greater salience of such items in the input.
- She often used informal vocabulary and spoken discourse, which corresponds well with the features of cartoon language she had been exposed to (Jylhä-Laide 1994).
- She disliked and generally avoided metalinguistic questions which can be accounted for by the gratification theory (Lemish 2007), Lana's age and the general metalinguistic abilities of children at that age, and the informal, meaning-focused interaction in which the production data were collected.
- She was unable to explain why some forms and structures were correct or incorrect, but from her production it is obvious that learning had taken place, which is the best evidence of implicit learning (Ellis 2009).
- Her descriptions of concepts contained aural and visual stimuli, which are commonly used as symbolic representations on TV, even though the concepts were most certainly encountered in everyday life without these stimuli. We interpreted it as the evidence of the influence of the modalities TV employs as a medium (Postman 1979).



- Her production was replete with formulaic sequences which seemed to be used as unanalysed chunks. However, some answers provided to the researcher's inquiry about the depth of her vocabulary knowledge suggested a skilful both semantic and syntactic segmentation.

It is important to emphasize that the findings were obtained in a highly motivational environment: rich exposure to L2 input, parental encouragement, the parents' high competence in the English language and their engagement with Lana's learning. The beneficial effect of these variables on L2 receptive skills has already been confirmed on a much larger sample (Muñoz & Lindgren 2011, cf. also Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj 2009 for Croatian context).

Therefore, we may conclude that frequent exposure to age-appropriate and interesting TV content in L2, together with proper parental support, positive attitude towards L2, but also opportunities for informal interaction in L2, provides an opportunity to develop substantial L2 vocabulary knowledge at an early age.

6. Suggestions for further research

Previous research into out-of-school exposure to media in L2 in FL settings clearly suggested that numerous factors may affect the outcome of SLA. As mentioned before, we believe that a case study design may provide more comprehensive findings. It offers a more holistic insight into the process and it may help disambiguate simultaneous interactional effects of different individual, contextual, and linguistic factors. Furthermore, it allows for more precise measurements of exposure to L2 media (which usually takes place in a private environment), not only in terms of quantity, but also quality of the input to which the learner is exposed.

The process of learning from exposure to TV in L2 most certainly warrants further research into its potential of producing beneficial effects despite the lack of output and interaction. However, in order to obtain more informative data on the effect that exposure to media may have on L2 vocabulary acquisition and processing, studies should control more tightly for all types and sources of input to which learners are exposed. Such empirical studies may be truly valuable in informing research on the role of incidental language learning and its effect in producing the best learning outcomes. The effects of exposure to the media in this context may be truly important when introducing changes in language teaching practices respective of the needs of language learners in modern society. Also most certainly worthy of further study are additional effects of TV as a multimodal input in



the process of L2 vocabulary learning, and the interplay between the two.

We hope that the findings and insights provided in this case study will be valuable in further research on the effect of exposure to media in L2 on L2 vocabulary acquisition in an FL setting. Furthermore, we believe they can also serve as a starting point in making finer conceptualizations of the lexical knowledge of young L2 learners by comparing them to those found in young children in naturalistic/immersion settings.

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**ZAŠTO ŠLJOKICE PROIZVODE ZVUK NA ENGLISKOM? UTJECAJ IZLOŽENOSTI
MEDIJIMA NA USVAJANJE VOKABULARA U DRUGOM JEZIKU**

Medijima se, zbog njihovih značajki poput mogućnosti višemodalnog prikaza te široke dostupnosti i raznolikosti, često pripisuje poseban utjecaj na ovladavanje stranim jezikom. Iako su razna istraživanja utvrdila dobrobiti izloženosti medijima na drugom jeziku, malo je istraživanja koja ispituju obilježja raznih vrsta medija i njihova utjecaja na usvajanje vokabulara. Ovaj rad prikaz je studije slučaja devetogodišnje djevojčice iz Hrvatske koja je postigla visoku razinu jezičnog umijeća u engleskom jeziku prvenstveno putem izloženosti televizijskim sadržajima na tom jeziku. Analizirali smo njezinu jezičnu produkciju da bismo utvrdili jesu li pojedine značajke televizije kao medija možebitno utjecale na razvoj njezina vokabulara te na način na koji doživljava i koristi drugi jezik. Podaci o jezičnoj produkciji sudionice prikupljeni su u njezinu domu, tijekom niza nestrukturiranih razgovora u neformalnoj atmosferi. Podaci o učenju jezika i jezičnom okruženju prikupljeni su putem intervjua sa sudionicom i njezinim roditeljima. Rezultati ukazuju da izloženost televiziji, kao mediju koji pruža priliku za opetovanu izloženost bogatom jezičnom unosu, kontekstualiziranom jeziku i kombinaciji vizualnih i zvučnih podražaja, može imati značajan utjecaj na ovladavanje vokabularom drugog jezika. Pritom treba naglasiti da je utjecaj uočen u jezičnoj produkciji visokomotivirane učenice engleskoga jezika u okruženju koje istinski podržava njezin jezični razvoj.

Ključne riječi: izloženost medijima u izvanškolskim aktivnostima; izloženost televizijskom sadržaju na engleskom jeziku; ovladavanje vokabularom drugoga jezika; učenje stranoga jezika u ranoj dobi.