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Professional paper
UDC: 78.534.6-053.4
UDC: 811.111'234(497.11+497.6).
DOI:10.19090/mv.2024.15.2.201-214

THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANIMATED CARTOONS ON PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES AND THE ROLE OF SPEECH THERAPISTS IN SERBIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the impact of foreign language animated cartoons on preschool children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighting both benefits and challenges. While cartoons can enhance vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension, cultural awareness and second language acquisition, some speech therapists in these countries express concerns. They argue that early exposure to foreign languages via screens may cause confusion, language mixing, and excessive screen time. Some of this scepticism contradicts current scientific findings. Interviews with speech therapists show how expert opinions shared through popular media can shape caregivers' practices, often leading to misconceptions. As most caregivers rely on media for information rather than scientific literature, this emphasises the need for researchers to communicate their findings effectively to the public. The study reviews literature and empirical evidence, highlighting the gap between media narratives and scientific research and offers practical recommendations for educators, therapists, caregivers, and policymakers.

Keywords: animated cartoons, second language acquisition, foreign language learning, speech therapists, preschool children, screen time, educational tools.

CRTANI FILMOVI NA STRANIM JEZICIMA I NJIHOV UTICAJ NA DECU PREDŠKOLSKOG DOBA: PREDNOSTI, IZAZOVI I ULOGA LOGOPEDA U SRBIJI I BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI

APSTRAKT: Ovaj rad ispituje uticaj animiranih crtanih filmova na stranom jeziku na decu predškolskog uzrasta u Srbiji i Bosni i Hercegovini, ističući koristi i izazove. Iako crtani filmovi mogu poboljšati vokabular, izgovor, razumevanje, svest o kulturi i usvajanje drugog jezika, neki logopedi u ovim zemljama izražavaju zabrinutost u vezi sa tom praksom. Oni tvrde da rano izlaganje stranim jezicima putem ekrana može izazvati konfuziju, mešanje jezika uticati da deca provode previše vremena pred ekranom. Ovo negodovanje je ponekad u suprotnosti sa rezultatima naučnih istraživanja. Intervjui sa logopedima pokazuju kako mišljenja stručnjaka, izneta putem popularnih medija, mogu uticati na staratelje da izvode pogrešne zaključke. Budući da se većina staratelja oslanja na medije, a ne naučnu literaturu, ovaj rad naglašava potrebu da istraživači jasno javnosti

prenose rezultate svojih istraživanja. Rad daje i prikaz literature i empirijskih dokaza, ukazujući na jaz između medijskih narativa i naučnih istraživanja, te nudi praktične preporuke za edukatore, logopede, staratelje i donosiocce politika.

Ključne reči: crtani filmovi, usvajanje drugog jezika, učenje stranih jezika, predškolska deca, vreme ispred ekrana, obrazovni alati, logopedi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Animated cartoons, with their vibrant visuals and engaging narratives, provide a unique and enjoyable way to introduce preschool children to new languages. The aim of this paper is to investigate how foreign language animated cartoons impact language learning and acquisition among preschool children in the Balkan countries, specifically Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). It examines both the educational benefits and potential challenges associated with using these cartoons as a learning tool. Additionally, the study explores the roles of various stakeholders in this process, with a particular focus on how speech therapists guide parents, educators, and other relevant parties in navigating the advantages and drawbacks of screen-based learning.

To achieve these objectives, the paper is structured into two key sections. The second section, Literature Review and Empirical Evidence, will present an overview of existing research on the use of animated cartoons in language learning, highlighting both theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. Interviews with speech therapists from news portals are included, as they feature experts who actively use these platforms to communicate with the general public. Although these sources are not academic in nature, they represent a crucial part of the ongoing public dialogue and reflect expert opinions that are shaping parental attitudes and behaviours. Including these voices helps contextualise the issue within the societal and cultural framework in which it is being discussed, highlighting the gap between academic research and public perception.

The third section, Discussion, will delve into the benefits and challenges identified in the literature, offering a balanced perspective on the use of animated cartoons. Pedagogical Implications will explore practical recommendations for preschool and university educators, parents, speech therapists, researchers and policymakers. It will emphasise the importance of speech therapists in guiding the use of animated cartoons to ensure that they contribute positively to foreign language learning and acquisition. This section will also suggest integrating animated cartoons into preschool curricula in a way that supports overall developmental goals.

By examining these aspects, this paper aims to contribute valuable insights into the potential of foreign language animated cartoons as a tool for early language acquisition and learning and to offer practical guidance for their effective implementation in preschool education within the Balkan countries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Late 20th and early 21st century research into language acquisition, aided by non-invasive brain imaging technologies, has consistently shown that early exposure to multiple languages can significantly enhance children's linguistic and cognitive abilities (Kuhl 2010). However, capturing preschool children's attention and maintaining their interest in language input is more challenging compared to other age groups. Therefore, teaching materials for foreign language learners, no matter how skilfully designed, may not provide the same level of motivation as authentic, age-appropriate input aimed at native speakers. A growing body of research examines whether authentic media materials, such as popular animated cartoons, affect second language acquisition and the results are promising (Prošić-Santovac 2017).

Krashen's Input Hypothesis, one of the most influential theories in second language acquisition, suggests that we acquire language through exposure to comprehensible input while maintaining a positive affective filter (Krashen 1982). Age-appropriate and engaging animated cartoons can serve as effective sources of comprehensible input. In addition to effectively capturing children's attention, animated cartoons create a strong picture-word connection that aligns with the "here and now" principle. Cartoons often use simple, clear language and visual cues that help children understand the context and meaning of what is being said, even if they are not yet familiar with all the words. Furthermore, cartoons frequently use repetitive language and phrases, which can help reinforce vocabulary and language structures, as "repetition has always played a part in language learning" (Harmer 2007: 56). Equally importantly, animated cartoons are authentic materials. Authentic materials matter because they often reflect the cultural elements of the target language, providing children with a broader understanding of the language by fostering cultural awareness in context (Radić-Bojanić 2020). This cultural exposure can enhance foreign language learning by making it more relevant and interesting. Additionally, cartoons are widely accessible and can be easily integrated into daily routines, allowing for consistent and frequent exposure to the target language, which is

essential for language learning and acquisition.

However, many researchers are critical of using screens as language learning tools, arguing that they lack modified input and interaction. They acknowledge evidence that specific vocabulary items can be learned through exposure to television programs (Kuhl et al. 2003: 9099), but their research does not show that more complex aspects of language can be acquired from TV exposure. Nevertheless, animated cartoons have sparked worldwide research interest as potential language learning tools. One of the earliest articles on this topic, published in the 1990s, featured a case study from Finland (Jylhä-Laide 1994). In the 2000s, several European researchers extensively analysed popular cartoons for their linguistic content. One study concluded that “Peppa Pig is a hidden treasure for language learning and that the series can be used to teach authentic everyday language, vocabulary, and lexical chunks to very young EFL learners” (Alexiou & Kokla 2019: 28). Similar findings were reported for Dora the Explorer (Kokla 2016). This topic has also attracted significant attention in Asia (Alghonaim 2020; Mahbub 2023; Trota et al. 2022).

The enthusiasm about the potential of screens as learning tools is marred by concerns about the overall impact of screen use on young children. Screen time usage among children under five has significantly increased, with American toddlers spending around two hours a day in front of screens (Rideout et al. 2003). The effects of this practice are highly controversial, as there are no conclusive and consistent scientific findings about the benefits and risks (Beatty & Egan 2020). Consequently, some researchers call for urgent longitudinal studies to understand the long-term effects of screen time on very young children, enabling caregivers and educators to provide better guidance (Cerniglia & Cimino 2020).

2.1. Foreign Language Animated Cartoons and Speech Therapists in Serbia and BiH

An increasing number of toddlers and preschoolers in Serbia and BiH use English words and phrases in everyday communication. The public became aware of this issue through warnings from speech therapists, child psychologists and other childhood development experts, who have been interviewed by news portals aimed at parents and caregivers. One article begins by stating that children under the age of four progressively mix Serbian and English in their speech and experts attribute this primarily to the excessive watching of cartoons in a foreign language. In the same article, a well-known speech therapist in Serbia stated:

Children watch foreign channels a lot. They do not have enough time to form a base of their native language and they have already started adopting foreign words. It is a disease of the modern age.¹ (Čabarkapa 2017)

The text ends with a recommendation for an obligatory visit to a speech therapist “when, unfortunately, a problem does arise and your child speaks the Serbian-English language... The parent must turn off the mobile phone, television, tablet, computer. Such a child must exclusively listen to the Serbian language” (Čabarkapa 2017). Another speech therapist in Serbia is of a similar opinion:

Studies have shown that watching cartoons in a foreign language negatively affects children’s speech development. While some children may be more affected than others, it surely does not promote healthy language development. Children exposed to content in languages like Russian or English have acquired these languages as their mother tongues. Parents may mistakenly take pride in their child speaking a foreign language, believing it to be a sign of intelligence, which is not necessarily true. From our perspective, this calls for early intervention. We advise that children should not be exposed to cartoons, particularly in a foreign language, until they have developed their mother tongue. (Jovanović 2020).

Similarly, a Bosnian news portal reports that the excessive use of technology at an early age can lead to speech development disorders, as evidenced by a number of children who spoke their first words in a language they had invented. The interviewed speech therapist states that it is often the case that a child does not speak clearly or articulately, but mixes Serbian and English words when communicating. “This happens because the child is not yet mature enough to distinguish between the two languages... Essentially, the child ends up not fully knowing either language and this issue needs to be taken very seriously” (Ivanović 2018).

Despite the warnings issued by speech therapists, an increasing number of preschool and school-aged children as well as university students in Serbia and BiH demonstrate a surprising level of English listening and speaking skills without showing any language problems. Media reports and videos highlight children who started speaking English early in childhood (Mičić 2015a; Mičić 2015b; Mičić 2017). Parents generally report that their children, despite never living in an English-speaking country or attending language classes, picked

¹ All the translations from Serbian into English were done by the author of this paper.

up the language from screens, primarily from English-language cartoons.

English teachers in Serbia and BiH anecdotally report similar findings, observing pupils and students who have never lived in an English-speaking country, yet exhibit very strong language skills and native-like pronunciation. As this cannot be fully explained by formal instruction, some research suggests that animated cartoons may play an important role. A study conducted at a university in BiH found that students with strong English-speaking skills, particularly in spontaneous situations, had watched animated cartoons and played computer games in English during early childhood. Their speech is characterized by fluency, an accent closely resembling that of native speakers, sound assimilation, the use of filler words and hesitation markers (e.g. ‘kind of,’ ‘sort of’), colloquial and slang expressions (e.g. ‘My English is a bit shaky,’ ‘You’ve got me there,’ ‘Sorry, I didn’t catch that’), a rich vocabulary, an appropriate balance of formality, and verbal and non-verbal politeness (Mičić 2017).

Teachers of other foreign languages, such as German and Spanish, report similar cases in informal conversations. Paradoxically, this phenomenon has not been extensively studied in either Serbia or BiH.

3. DISCUSSION

Petitto & Dunbar (2004: 4) have highlighted the significance of introducing foreign languages to children at an early age and the effectiveness of foreign language animated cartoons in capturing children’s interest and conveying language and cultural concepts. However, some researchers (DeLoache et al. 2010; Kuhl, Tsao, & Liu 2003) express scepticism about using screens for language learning, noting that such methods often lack the necessary interactive and adaptive input crucial for language development. While there is considerable excitement about the possibilities screens offer as educational tools, this optimism is tempered by worries regarding the broader effects of screen exposure on young children’s development. Based on the reports, interviews and research discussed in this paper, it can be concluded that toddlers and preschool children in Serbia and BiH are frequently exposed to foreign languages through screens. A growing number of these children mix their native language with words and phrases from the foreign language they have encountered via the media. Some speech therapists in Serbia and BiH, as shown in Section 2.1, view this language mixing as detrimental. Additionally, some parents, language teachers and speech therapists assert that children have even acquired foreign languages through screen

exposure alone.

These claims, however, often conflict with established scientific theories and findings in language acquisition, raising critical questions about this phenomenon. Notably, early exposure to another language does not cause language delays or confusion in children (Petitto & Kovelman 2003). Further, children are able to differentiate the language systems from birth (Genesee 1989: 175). Language mixing might actually be an indicator of early bilingual development, often considered a form of code-switching. It has been suggested that “code-switching may be a good indicator of bilingual fluency for children who are still learning English as their second language” (Reyes & Ervin-Tripp, n.d.).

Generally, research supports the notion that earlier exposure to a second language is beneficial (Birdsong & Molis 2001; Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley 2003). However, this view is not without its critics. Some studies highlight potential drawbacks of early second language exposure, particularly when the child’s first language is not adequately supported. For example, Cummins (2000) warns that neglecting the first language in favour of early second language learning can lead to “semilingualism,” where children may develop issues in both languages. Similarly, De Houwer (1999) argues that without strong support for the native language, early exposure to a second language can cause confusion and interfere with overall language development. Thus, while exposure to a second language at an early age can be beneficial, it is essential to also ensure that the first language receives adequate support and development.

Though high-quality screen content can enhance certain aspects of language learning, the scientific community firmly rejects the idea that a language can be acquired through screens without human interaction (Conboy et al. 2015). However, emerging empirical evidence challenges this view and suggests the need for more interdisciplinary research to better understand this phenomenon.

The interviews with speech therapists on news portals illustrate how some experts are leveraging accessible media to influence everyday practices, which is highly relevant to the study’s exploration of language exposure and development in children. Considering that most parents do not read scientific papers but tend to trust the opinions of experts presented in popular media, this trend is particularly worrying as it can lead to misconceptions and potentially uninformed decisions about children’s language development.

What seems to be missing from expert discussions in popular media is the recognition that early exposure to foreign languages through cartoons is a highly individualized process shaped by factors such as a child’s age, attention span and

language development level. The overall quality and quantity of daily interactions with parents are essential. When children have plenty of meaningful interaction throughout the day, a moderate amount of screen time can be more acceptable. However, without such interactions, the effects of screen time may become more significant. The context in which cartoons are watched is also critical. Watching with parents and discussing the content can enrich the learning experience, while solitary viewing without opportunities for engagement may be less effective. Ultimately, it should be pointed out that balancing screen time with interactive, enriching experiences is key to maximizing the benefits of foreign language exposure through cartoons.

3.1. Pedagogical implications

Conflicting advice about introducing other languages at a young age often leaves parents and caregivers uncertain about what steps to take. They see how some schoolchildren and adults have greatly benefited from early contact with foreign languages, yet they worry that the same approach might lead to language difficulties for their own children (Petitto et al. 2001: 454). Thus, collaboration among parents, speech therapists, university and preschool educators, as well as researchers is crucial. By working together, parents and professionals can share insights and develop comprehensive strategies that address the needs and concerns of all stakeholders involved in early childhood language education.

To improve education at the university level for speech therapists regarding second language acquisition and typical misconceptions, the faculties should offer in-depth courses on the topic (Psycholinguistics, Neurolinguistics, etc.) to help students understand how the brain processes multiple languages and what the implications for speech therapy are. There should be sessions dedicated to debunking common myths, such as the misconception that early exposure to multiple languages causes confusion and language delays. When a child in Serbia or BiH has language and other developmental difficulties and watches cartoons in English or other foreign languages, speech therapists should be aware that the issue may be due to excessive screen time and insufficient exposure to native Serbian and not due to the exposure to foreign languages. It is important for parents and educators to hear from speech therapists and other professionals that there is no scientific evidence that exposure to a foreign language harms a child's language development.

Speech therapists should help preschool educators and parents understand that children develop stronger language skills in the language

they are most exposed to. A balanced approach should be recommended, allowing children to watch foreign language cartoons in moderation while setting daily limits on screen time. This should be complemented with interactive, off-screen language learning activities. Since children who only listen to a language without actively communicating often struggle with expressive language skills, it is important for them to engage in interactive dialogue where they can practise and experiment with languages. Therefore, speech therapists should encourage parents and educators to participate in interactive language activities, such as having quality daily conversations in the child's native language and a foreign language if possible, reading age-appropriate books, and engaging in storytelling and play-based learning.

Parents should also be informed that exposure to other languages can lead to bilingualism or multilingualism, and they should understand the benefits and other implications early bilingualism/multilingualism can have for a child. There is also a need for qualified bilingual speech therapists in Serbia and BiH, as they can distinguish between typical bilingual language development (such as code-switching) and genuine language impairments. Without this expertise, monolingual therapists might misinterpret normal bilingual behaviours as signs of a disorder.

Research by Jovanović and Mastilo (2022), while focused on Spanish language teachers in Serbia, offers valuable insights that apply broadly to the initial education of all foreign language teachers. Their findings highlight the concerning lack of attention given to developing psychological, pedagogical, and methodological competencies for working with young children. Furthermore, foreign language teachers rarely gain practical experience in preschool settings, which leads to the underutilization of a critical period for language development. To address these shortcomings, the inclusion of specialized courses on these topics in teacher education curricula is highly recommended.

This situation highlights the need for researchers in Serbia and BiH to actively engage with the public, ensuring that scientific findings are communicated clearly and accessibly. Researchers in second and foreign language acquisition should not disregard the evidence from children who claim to have learned a second or foreign language through screen exposure (Jylhä-Laide 1994; Mičić 2015a; Mičić 2015b; Mičić 2017). There is significant potential for research into how cognitive engagement, linguistic input, and the socio-cultural context provided by media interact, as well as how the engaging and interactive nature of animated cartoons can serve as a powerful tool in second or foreign language acquisition and learning.

Additionally, the field of second or foreign language acquisition seems to receive insufficient attention from researchers in related disciplines like psychology. Notably, there is currently no scientific journal in Serbia specifically dedicated to the study of early foreign or second language acquisition and teaching (Jovanović & Maričić 2024: 28).

Policymakers should consider the findings of this study when developing guidelines for early childhood language education. Policies should support the use of foreign language animated cartoons as a valuable educational tool while also addressing the concerns. Additionally, collaboration with educators and speech therapists is crucial to ensure the content is age-appropriate and pedagogically sound. Ongoing research and feedback mechanisms should be established to continuously evaluate and improve the effectiveness of these educational tools.

All things considered, while foreign language animated cartoons offer significant potential for enhancing language and other cognitive skills in preschool children, their use must be carefully managed and supported by a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach. By doing so, we can maximise the benefits of this educational tool while minimising any potential drawbacks.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the complex effects of foreign language animated cartoons on preschool children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighting both the promising benefits and the critical concerns associated with their use as educational tools. The conflicting viewpoints between speech therapists and proponents of early exposure to foreign languages underscore the urgent need for a more informed, interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, bridging the gap between scientific research and public understanding is essential. Since parents often rely on media rather than academic studies, it is crucial for researchers to communicate their findings more clearly and make it more accessible to the public. By fostering greater collaboration among researchers, educators, parents, and speech therapists, well-rounded and practical solutions for integrating animated cartoons into early childhood education can be developed, maximizing their benefits while addressing legitimate concerns.

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BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI

Sažetak

Kroz pregled literature i empirijskih dokaza, ovaj rad istražuje uticaj animiranih crtanih filmova na stranom jeziku na decu predškolskog uzrasta, sa akcentom na Srbiju i Bosnu i Hercegovinu. Uz kontrolu vremena provedenog pred ekranima, animirani crtani filmovi, koji sadržajem i načinom prikazivanja odgovaraju uzrastu i interesovanjima dece, nude izuzetan potencijal za poboljšanje izgovora, vokabulara, veština razumevanja, stvaranje kulturološkog konteksta i olakšanje usvajanje drugog ili stranog jezika u ranom detinjstvu. Uprkos ovim prednostima, jedan broj logopeda pokazuje negodovanje u vezi sa ranim izlaganjem stranom jeziku putem ekrana. Tvrdi da ta praksa dovodi do konfuzije kod dece, mešanja jezika i prekomernog vremena ispred ekrana, te glasno upozoravaju roditelje na njen isključivo negativan uticaj na jezički i sveukupan razvoj predškolaca. Deo njihovih kritika je u suprotnosti sa rezultatima naučnih istraživanja, na šta se ukazuje u radu. Pedagoške implikacije odnose se na univerzitetske i predškolske edukatore, logopede, roditelje, istraživače i kreatore obrazovnih politika. Rad promovise uravnotežen pristup animiranim crtanim filmovima na stranim jezicima, predlažući dnevne limite za korišćenje ekrana i uključivanje interaktivnih, vanekranskih aktivnosti za učenje i usvajanje jezika. Ukazuje se na važnost učešća stručnjaka u javnom diskursu u cilju informisanja roditelja o značaju ranog izlaganja drugim i stranim jezicima, kao i značaj interdisciplinarnog pristupa, koji je ključan za kreiranje efikasnijih obrazovnih strategija, koristeći prednosti animiranih crtanih filmova i istovremeno otklanjati potencijalne nedostatke.

Ključne reči: crtani filmovi, usvajanje drugog jezika, učenje stranih jezika, predškolska deca, vreme ispred ekrana, obrazovni alati, logopedi.

Received: 8 July 2024

Accepted: 11 October 2024