

# The role of television in the development of verbal communication skills in children from 3-4 years old

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## **Abstract**

This study was a result of the observation of verbal interaction of children from 3-4, in a kindergarten. There was a wide interest in understanding the different factors which affects their verbal performance. Apart from understanding the role of multimedia and especially television in the whole development of children, in this research we aim to discover how the specific TV shows followed by children from 3-4 years old, affect their verbal communication. It aims to introduce an overview of what children of this category see on TV, how this affects their cognitive and language development, how the expectation of parents about their language development affects it and the most important how the presence of parents while watching TV influences the language development of children. This study is realized with children of Kindergarten Nr. 18 in Tirana falling into the category aimed by the research. The instruments used are questionnaires for parents, semi-structured interviews with care givers and observations of children. Data is elaborated with the SPSS-19 program. The results showed that: the TV shows affect the verbal communication skills of children; the interactive presence of parents while watching TV affects the development of verbal communication skills of children.

**Key words** -- TV shows, verbal communication skills, interactive watching

## **Introduction**

The language is the principal mean of communication. It implies giving messages about ourselves or the others using symbols (Pettihjon, 1996). The language is not only a mean of communication but also a symbol of ethnic and social identity, helping children socializing. According to behaviorist, children learn the language. In this process it is very important, reinforcement (parents should support their children) and imitation (children imitate their parents, TV characters, etc.) The interaction theory gives the same importance to both biological and environmental influence in the development of language. According to Vygotsky, the social interaction plays a crucial role in the learning process. He explained about the “Proximal development area” (PDA), referring to the area in which people create new language through the social interactions (Hewstone & Stroebe, 2002). According to the data of American Society of Speaking, Language and Hearing (Machado, 2010), a child of 3-4 has these verbal skills: replies to simple questions like: “Where? What? Why: tells about the activities happening in kindergarten or friends house; strangers can understand his speech; use sentences with 4 or more words; speak frequently, without repeating words or syllables etc.

Nowadays, we can perceive a digitization of our lives in many aspects, especially in Albania. The technology has developed concerning many services offered to children, youth or adults. There is at least one TV in every house, making the child a listener and watcher from his early age. When do children start watching TV? There are many studies giving different answers to this question. Willbur and his colleagues (referring to Gubter & McAleer, 1997) in one of their studies reported that 3-4 is the average age when children start watching TV.

Rice (1983) refused the theories that TV interferes with language development of children, applying that “There is a tight connection between the child as an individual who learns the language and the child as a TV watcher”. Taking into account the development of language through the “accidental” learning, it was implied that the dialog in TV might serve as a source of learning new words (Rice, 1983). In a study where were participating 51 mothers of children from 3 to 30 months, there were found support for the effect of media on the development of

language. They found out that some of the TV programs compared to the others had a more positive effect in the development of vocabulary at children of 30 months old (Linebarger & Walker, 2005)

### **Research question**

What is the role of TV programs adapted for children from 3-4 years old in their development of verbal communication's skills?

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How does presence of parents while watching appropriate TV shows, adapted for 3-4 year-olds, affect children's understanding of new words?

### **Methodology**

*Subjects:* In this study, there were chosen to participate 50 children of 3-4 (23 males and 27 females), who were going to the kindergarten nr.18 in Tirana and their parents (mother or father). Children were from different social-economical background which helped the study to have a well spread subject. In the study participated also 2 of the care givers which were taking care of the children participating in the study.

*Instruments:* To gather the concern information from the parents, there were administrated a questionnaire in cohesion with the aim of the study. The questionnaire had 11 questions, most of them closed questions and the rest opened, which later got coded. Study reliability is very low, only 0.260, but this can be explained by different reasons: the small number of questions; homogeneity of the answers, the low number of participants etc. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was used, with 8 questions for the care givers. And in the end, but not less important, a short checklist was used for children observation which was implying a list of animated characters' names and their expressions in social games used in kindergarten.

*Data analyses:* For data analyzing, the program SPSS-19 was used. For the open questions, the answers were coded in order to be elaborated with SPSS-19. Descriptive analyses and cross-

tables were used mostly. The data collected from the interviews with care givers and observations are attached to the data provided by the questionnaire in the discussions of results.

## **Results**

We came out with some results that are very interesting and worthy mentioning. About 33% of children watch TV from 60-120 min a day and 25% of them watch about 120 min a day. Parents emphasize the fact that their children watch scheduled TV, fact that is doubted by the below mentioned results. They mainly watch cartoons, educative and musical programs which might or not be appropriate for them. 52% of parents confirm that they are present while children watch TV; 25% of children watch TV in the presence of their sisters or brothers, while the rest watch it alone or with grandparents. In 90% of cases, children repeat the words they hear on TV while in 78% of cases they ask care givers or parents about their meanings. Most of the parents say that their children have normal verbal skills or higher compared to others their age. Their vocabulary is enriched with more than 5 new words a week and supported by a good spelling. 86% of parents think that TV has a positive impact on the verbal skills development of children, even though they confirm that the role of kindergarten, collaboration with other children and the games has a better effect than the TV.

The results delivered by the cross-table analyses showed that: 72% of children who repeat the words listening on TV were watching more than 30-60 min to 60-120 min a day. Children who watched TV 30 – 60 minutes a day used more new words than all others, followed by those who watched 60 – 120 minutes, behind them were those who watched more than 120 minutes, and in the end, those who didn't watch TV at all. An important result showed that 50% of children who were watching TV in the presence of at least one of their parents, were more predisposed to ask about the meaning of new words. From the interviews with the caregivers, it was found out that TV has an effect on the way children use to express their thoughts with each other and with caregivers; from the amount of words used and intonation used.

Yet, caregivers say that children of this age are limited in answering questions more than initiating conversation. This fact was also proved by the observation of children. During the social interaction with each other, their conversations were more detailed and were characterized

by the use of different words used in different TV shows. Children were using names of TV shows characters like: Dora the explorer, Miki Mouse etc

## **Discussion**

From the interviews administered with parents of children from 3-4 years old, we found out that most of the children watch TV more than 60 min a day. These findings support our hypotheses that the TV has a large effect on the verbal communication skills of children, while how it affects their cognitive development, or their imagination, need further studies. According to Winn (2002), watching TV for several years negatively affects the ability of children to develop their writing and reading skills clearly. He affirms that watching TV mainly affects the way we use to express ourselves more than developing the language.

Taking into account that the children ask about new words they hear shows that they memorize the words and make them part of their vocabulary. Furthermore, the caregivers have confirmed that many times children use words without knowing their meaning, saying that they heard it on TV. Parents accept that watching appropriate TV shows helps children with their verbal communication. Nevertheless, they are sure about the fact that the most profitable activity for children to develop their verbal skills is to attend kindergarten and get involved in peer activities. Through the interviews with care givers, we found out that the kindergarten was attended by children who were there for less than a year and had excellent verbal communication skills while there were children attending for more than a year showing limited verbal skills.

Therefore, we should accept that there are many components affecting children's verbal skills, and that the moderated watching of appropriate shows has a positive effect on this development. It is very important that children watch TV in the presence of their parents. In this study, children who were watching TV in parents' presence were mainly first or unique children, while the others tend to watch TV in the presence of their older sisters and brothers. The children who were watching TV in the presence of their parents were the ones asking more about the meaning of new words.

Considering the results of this study, we can come out with answers about our research questions. Moderate watching of appropriate TV shows have a positive impact in the verbal communication skills of children. Also, watching TV in the presence of a third person helps children of 3-4 understand and memorize more of the new words.

## Recommendations

- Applying a moderated schedule for children and parents to watch TV;
- Parent's assistance of children while watching TV creates an interactive atmosphere helping children better understand what they watch by asking;
- Stimulating alternative forms of developing verbal skills like reading books appropriate for children's age.

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