Learning from Dora the explorer: Engaging children to the concept of bilingualism (paper review)

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Abstract - This paper aims at finding the impact of TV shows on bilingualism. However, the analysis would be limited to one educational TV show which has been well-known worldwide: Dora the Explorer. This paper is a library research, in which the data were gathered from the related sources. The data then was described in a qualitative description. As the result, it could be concluded that Dora the Explorer was intended to create create a show that would teach children problem-solving skills and make viewers active participants in the events. Besides the interactive element of the series, its further characteristic feature is bilingualism, which is presented in every episode. The bilingual element is presented in the show because the designer of the show believes that introducing a second language to children before the age of 6 or 7 is crucial in assisting them to achieve fluency in the second language. The effect has been proven by research conducted by Länkinen (2013), which aimed at analyzing the impact of watching certain didactic programs in Dora the Explorer (which is in Finnish called as Seikkailija Dora). From the research, it is found that children who watch Dora the Explorer as a supplement to their learning, have a wider range of vocabulary compared to those who did not watch the TV show.

Keywords: active-learning; bilingualism movie; educational tv show; learning media

I. INTRODUCTION

Children today are growing surrounded by media and new technology. In 2015, Ministry of Communication and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia conducted a survey to obtain data of information technology accessibility of people in Indonesia. As the result, most of the respondents (86.7%) have access to television (TV), followed by 84.3% who have access to cell-phone. Other information technologies which are accessed are radio (37.5%), internet (35.1%), computer (29.8%) and wired-phone (4.5%). Only 13.3% of the respondents stated that they do not have any TVs, while there are 64.9% of them are not having access to the internet.

Statistically, in Indonesia, television still plays an important role as it is still being the information source that majorly accessed by the people. However, there is a serious issue nowadays addressed the quality of television programs. According to the result of a survey conducted by Indonesian Broadcasting Commission, *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia,* (2016) who is responsible to monitor the quality of the programs broadcasted in Indonesia, the quality of Indonesian TV's programs are still below the standard, which is on the index of 3.36 while the standard is 4.00. In 2015, quality indexed by television program had once reached the better point of 3.59, although it was also still below the standard.

On the other hand, nowadays it has been a trend that parents encourage their children to learn a foreign language as early as possible. One of the ways to provide exposure to the foreign language is by giving access to foreign TV shows. Dora the Explorer is one of the TV shows that have been adopted by Indonesia. The TV show has a special feature, that is how the characters speak in two languages.

The possibility that early bilingualism affects children's language and cognitive development has been a concern for researchers and educators. Bialystok (2017) stated that "in the first half of the 20th century, the prevailing view was that bilingualism and second-language acquisition early in life made children confused and interfered with their ability to develop normal cognitive functions and succeed in educational environments." Recent research has been more balanced, identifying areas in which bilingual children excel and others in which bilingualism has no effect on their development (Bialystok, 2017).

Seeing those issues as important cases to be discussed, this paper aims at finding the impact of TV shows on bilingualism. However, the analysis would be limited to one educational TV show which has been well-known worldwide: Dora the Explorer.

Bloomfield (1933, in Liddicoat, 1991) defined bilingualism as "native-like control of two languages." However, this definition is objected by Liddicoat (1991) since it excludes many people who speak more than one language but do not have native-like control of one of both their language. Liddicoat (1991) then defined bilingualism as "having some ability to use two (or even more) languages. There can, therefore, be degrees of bilingualism – at one extreme there are those people who have native-like control over two languages and at the other extreme are those people who have just begun to acquire a second language." This definition is supported by Macnamara (1967, in Hamers and Blanc, 2000) who defined bilingualism as an ability of anyone who possesses a minimal competence in only one of the four language skills, such as listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, in a language other than his mother tongue.

According to Pearson (2007), there will be at least five key factors which influence the development of bilingualism. The key factors are input, language status, access to literacy, family language use, and community support.

a. Input

Input is mentioned as the most important key factor because without any input, there is no learning process will take place, and without enough of it, learning can take place, but children do not reach a comfort level in the language so that they will willingly use it

A greater amount of input leads to greater proficiency, which leads to more use, which invites more input and the cycle starts again. Similarly, attitudes of parents, siblings, and peers can add value to the language and accelerate its use and thus add to the effectiveness of the cycle. However, if parents, siblings, or peers share negative attitudes toward a language, they will subtract value, which will lead to less enthusiasm for using the language, attract less input, decrease proficiency, and so on. In some cases, a quantity of input alone will make the difference between successful bilingual learning or not (de Houwer, 2003, 2004; Pearson et al., 1997, in Pearson, 2007; Susanto et al, 2022).

In a study of trilinguals by de Houwer (2004, in Pearson, 2007), parental input patterns accounted for 84% of the variation in children's language patterns. This finding revealed that although input factors are key, attitudes, values, and social circumstances may modulate the amount of input available and the amount needed.

b. Language Status

In general, children need a greater percentage of their input in the minority language than in the majority language for the same measure of learning (Pearson et al., 1997; Vihman, Lum, Tierry, Nakai, & Keren-Portnoy, 2006, in Pearson, 2007). Part of this asymmetry may derive from the background presence of dominant languages such as English in the environment through television, neighbors, advertisements, and so forth. In addition, input from bilingual speakers cannot be counted as 50% in each language. Individuals are not always aware of which language they are speaking in (Goodz, 1987, in Pearson, 2007), and circumstantial evidence points to less minority use when there are no monolingual speakers in the equation (Eilers, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2006, in Pearson, 2007). In conversations where everyone is bilingual, there is little chance that all or even half of the interactions will be in the minority language.

c. Language Factors

Written materials in a language, whether in children's literature or mass media, can extend input even in the absence of many language speakers. For slightly older children, reading is an important consolidator of their language skills and contributes to both greater proficiency and retention of a language. Some bilingual programs hesitate to introduce reading in two languages for fear of confusing the child, but the research evidence is just the opposite. Reading skills transfer from one language to another. Even when the scripts are different, there is evidence of carryover, not interference (Bialystok, 2006, in Pearson, 2007). The child does not have to learn the basic process all over again, just the particular details of a second spelling system or a second script. In the study reported in Language and Literacy in Bilingual Children (LLBC; Cobo-Lewis, Eilers, Pearson, & Umbel, 2002, in Pearson, 2007), children who learned to read in both English and Spanish scored significantly higher in reading in English as well as Spanish.

d. Family Factors

In addition to aspects of the language itself that enhance its chance of being learned, factors closer to home make a difference in how likely it is that there will be enough minority language interaction to support learning that language. The most potent family

predictors of child outcomes was immigrant status, which related to parents' beliefs about dual language learning and their own patterns of language use.

The popular wisdom about immigrants' language shift, sometimes called "the three-generation rule" (Veltman, 1988, in Pearson, 2007), suggests that the first generation (those who were born abroad) are somewhat bilingual, but they remain strongly dominant in their native language. Their children, the second generation, are fluently bilingual, and their grandchildren, the third generation, will be monolingual in the new language in just a few words in the heritage language. "Generation" here is a simplifying generalization that describes a complex picture, efficiently, if not completely. Beyond generation or immigration depth, social class and economic status have a demonstrated effect on learning a majority language, but their role in minority language maintenance is less consistent.

e. Community Factors

A cohesive community of heritage language speakers can make a difference in the vigor of that language and its ability to motivate and create opportunities for young speakers. By community, we can mean a formal structure like the Welsh Language Board, which recognizes a role for government intervention to help ensure their national identity through the heritage language (Gathercole, 2005). Alternatively, we can mean a single parish church or social agency that shelters new immigrants, provide services in the minority language, and in many ways keeps the culture of the old country vibrant. By creating an ethnic enclave, a context is created for maintaining the minority language and culture (Lambert & Taylor,1996, in Pearson, 2007).

A key element of community support provided to a minority language is through education. It was found that found that by fifth grade (age 11, the oldest age tested) the effect of the language of instruction at school could more than counterbalance the effect of less Spanish in the home on the children's Spanish scores (Pearson, 2007).

According to Bialystok (2017), there are three main impacts of bilingualism. First, for general language proficiency, bilingual children tend to have a smaller vocabulary in each language than monolingual children in their language. Nonetheless, their understanding of linguistic structure, called metalinguistic awareness, is at least as good and often better than that of comparable monolinguals.

Second, the acquisition of literacy skills in these children depends on the relationship between the two languages and the level of proficiency in the second language. Specifically, children learning to read in two languages that share a writing system (e.g. English and French) show accelerated progress in learning to read; children whose two languages are written in different systems (e.g., English and Chinese) show no special advantage, but neither do they demonstrate any deficit relative to monolinguals. The benefit of learning to read in two languages, however, requires that children be bilingual and not second language learners whose competence in one of the languages is weak.

Third, bilingual children between four- and eight-years-old demonstrate a large advantage over comparable monolinguals in solving problems that require controlling attention to specific aspects of a display and inhibiting attention to misleading aspects that are salient but associated with an incorrect response. This advantage is not confined to language processing but includes a variety of non-verbal tasks that require controlled attention and selectivity in such problems as forming conceptual categories, seeing alternative images in ambitious figures, and understanding the difference between the appearance and functional reality of a misleading object. These differences persist across the lifespan conferring cognitive benefits to bilinguals at all ages, and even providing a

cognitive reserve that allows bilinguals to function independently even though the early stages of dementia.

Dora the explorer which is an educational TV show has been created by Chris Gifford, Valerie Walsh, and Eric Weiner; The series was first broadcasted in the U.S. on August 14, 2000, and new episodes are still made. The target audience of the series is preschool children all over the world. By 2010, the series had been translated into 30 languages. Originally the series taught Spanish to American children, but since its success worldwide, the series has taught Spanish also to children in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland and English in other countries.

The designers wanted to create a show that would teach children problem-solving skills and make viewers active participants in the events. The execution of the series supports these goals: the main character, a 7-year-old Latina girl named Dora, invites the viewer to solve problems with her. In every episode, there is a goal Dora needs to reach, and in order to do so, she asks the viewer to guide the way, assist her through various obstacles and help her solve problems. The execution of the series resembles a computer game: after Dora asks the viewer to say or do something, there is a little pause after which an arrow (looking like a cursor on the computer) appears and clicks the right answer which is usually apparent in the image. Besides solving problems verbally, Dora also asks the viewer to physically execute some movements to help her. This interactive element of the show is quite unique and is one of the reasons behind the popularity of the show (Länkinen, 2013).

Besides the interactive element of the series, its other characteristic feature is bilingualism, which is present in every episode. In addition to the main character Dora speaking both English and Spanish, there are also other bilingual characters (for example. Map and Backpack) and some characters only speak a language that is foreign to the audience (for example, Tico and Sr. Tucan). In other countries besides the U.S., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland, the bilingual element is present in such a way that the language being taught in English and the other language used is the native language of the country where the series is broadcast (Länkinen, 2013). However, unfortunately, in Indonesia Dora, the Explorer was dubbed totally into Bahasa Indonesia.

The bilingualism of the series is carefully considered; Valerie Walsh, one the creators, states that the bilingual element is present in the show because educators believe that introducing a second language to children before the age of 6 or 7 is crucial in helping them to achieve fluency in the second language (Ananyeva, 2022; Arnaiz-Castro et al, 2022; Bialystok, 2017; Frederiksen et al, 2022; Javier-Rivero, 2018; Matrat et al, 2022; Mirchevska-Bosheva & Medvedeva, 2022; Yang, 2017; Wu et al, 2022; Valencia, 2005). By introducing a foreign language to children who form the audience, Walsh hopes to teach them some words and make them interested in learning more, or at least to raise their awareness and acceptance of foreign languages. Over 20 educational and cultural consultants have assisted in making the series since it first premiered, so the educational aspect of the show is taken seriously by the creators (Länkinen, 2013).

Länkinen (2013) conducted a study to analyze the impact of watching certain educational programs Dora the Explorer (which is in Finnish called as Seikkailija Dora) targeted at children resulted in greater vocabularies and higher expressive language scores compared to children's programs without that much. The focus of research has mainly been on the first language learning, an educational aim.

The program was chosen to be studied because its way of combining Finnish and English is quite unique among Finnish children's programs. In addition to aiming to

entertain children, the program also offers English input and suggests enhancing children's learning of English incidentally outside a school. It seemed reasonable to study the program a bit further in order to analyze the quantity and quality of input it provides. The aims of the study were to investigate how much and what kind of English vocabulary the program contains and whether any methods of teaching vocabulary in a foreign language are used and if they are, to what extent. As the result, it is found that children who watch Dora the Explorer as a supplement to their learning, have a wider range of vocabulary compared to those who did not watch the TV show.

II. CONCLUSION

Based on the description, it could be concluded that Dora the Explorer was designed to make a show that would teach children problem-solving skills and make viewers active participants in the events. Besides the interactive element of the series, its further characteristic feature is bilingualism, which is present in every episode. The bilingual element is present in the show because educators believe that introducing a second language to children before the age of 6 or 7 is crucial in assisting them to achieve fluency in the second language. The effect has been proven by research conducted by Länkinen (2013), through a study which aimed at analyzing the impact of watching certain educational programs Dora the Explorer (which is in Finnish called as Seikkailija Dora. As the result, it is found that children who watch Dora the Explorer as a supplement to their learning, have a wider range of vocabulary compared to those who did not watch the TV show.

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