THE IMPACT OF EXTENSIVELY EXPOSING IRANIAN VERY YOUNG EFL LEARNERS TO ENGLISH MEDIA ON THEIR LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract:

Teaching and learning to speak English has become increasingly important in Iran mainly due to the fact that English has been identified as one of the world's most widely-spoken languages. Therefore, the present research attempted to probe whether extensively exposing Iranian very young EFL learners to English media has any significant effect on their learning process, operationalized as their learning growth. The study involved 60 non-native very young EFL learners at different private language institutes in Iran. Data collection revolved around several general areas of interest, such as the influence of intervention on their language growth. An 'Individual Growth and Development Indicator' was used as the Pre-and-Post-test. The findings seem to indicate that the students who were highly exposed to films as a result of their own entertainment and consumer choices and their EFL classroom instruction demonstrated statistically significant differences in their English learning acquisition and overall EFL achievements as compared to those students who were less exposed to these films inside and outside the classroom by personal choice and curricular demand. The obtained results are discussed in terms of their relationship with the extant literature and implications for TESOL, especially with regard to the role of exposing EFL children to English multimedia sources in order to promote their learning.

Keywords: English media, TESOL, very young EFL learners, private language institutes

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning to speak English has become increasingly important in Iran mainly due to the fact that English has been identified as one of the world's most widely-spoken languages (e.g. Bae & Bachman, 2010; Jeong, 2011; S. Lee, 2012). The learning of a second or foreign language (English being the dominant one) figures prominently in the preparation of students to meet future demands of intercultural communication in both academic and workplace settings (Hall, 2011). In Iran, too, whose educational system serves as the impetus for this study, proficiency in English as a foreign language is of great importance in the country's growing economy. For this reason, the role of world language instruction in Iran's primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels has been one of major discussion for years (Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014; Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016). In his introduction to foreign language learning and teaching, Johnson (2017) rightly states that educators have entered a new millennium with exponential changes and opportunities in foreign and second language education. The author further states that, along similar lines, innovative teaching approaches have evolved and these new approaches have an enormous effect on language education. On the other hand, as there are critical challenges and concerns for children and teachers given the rapid increase of children learning English as a foreign language in schools across the nation., it is imperative that effective and appropriate teaching strategies be identified that teachers of all grades, but especially preschool, can implement to foster the English language growth and development of children learning English as a foreign language. One such surge of interest is manifest in using technology in the classrooms.

Even though technological innovations emerge daily, not all of them are suitable for or successful in the field of education. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, film, VCRs, telephones, computers, and the Internet have become an important part of everyday life (Salaberry, 2001). Technologies such as television, computers, and networks can be used in designing programs for learners in preschool, primary, upper elementary, middle school, high school, and college. Such inventions can also aid in adult education, English as a Second Language, foreign language classes, bilingual education, special needs classes, home schooling, and places such as libraries and museums (Bruce & Levin, 2003). One of the important tools in this regard has been the use of multimedia to enhance language education at early stages. Within a short span of time, multimedia has become a central part of educational, scientific, technological, industrial, social and political domains. Apparently, as the use of multimedia resources increases, more and more varieties of multimedia tools, technologies, applications and delivery platforms are being born at an increasingly rapid pace (Vaughan, 2008). The

availability and diversity of these multimedia resources has brought to an expansion of the definition of multimedia. According to Vaughan, multimedia is any combination of animated, audio, visual or textual stimuli delivered through electronic or digital means in a way that electrifies the thought and action centers in people's minds. In this new definition, multimedia resources involve any visual or audio stimuli such as images, graphics, videos, texts, sounds and animations which are often used to electronically deliver different types of information and ideas through PC's, TV, radio or other technological devices

All of the mentioned issues are actually portions of the transition that has been made by language learning instruction within various generations. It has been claimed that in line with advancements of the 21st century, the field of the field of English Language Teaching has become more technology dependent (Beatty, 2010). This adjustment in the teaching strategies is in accordance with the learners the educators are receiving in their classroom. Prensky (2001), in this regard, describes L2 students as "Digital Natives" and as he believes and as should be pointed out that a considerable number of L2 students are a part of this generation.

Recent studies on the impact of multimedia resources on independent language learning have demonstrated the valuable role of these resources in enhancing students' satisfaction, motivation, confidence and disposition which is crucial for life-long language learning (Anisoara, 2010). Studies show encouraging results for the use of multimedia, including films, for developing different L2 skills, including L2 listening comprehension (Stempleski & Arcario, 1992; Baltova, 1994; Sherman, 2003). For example, the authors of these studies concluded that visual and body languages of the speakers in the films not only facilitate students' understanding but also provide more clues for them while practicing listening. Feature films are made for native speakers, so in that sense video provides authentic linguistic input. However, critics blame children's excessive viewing for limiting the acquisition of reading skills, impairing social development, and lowering school performance.

Cox (2003) claims

"Although there have been many film and media arts advocates among English language arts educators over the years, the research on the media arts in relation to English language arts learning and teaching is limited".

(p. 658)

Despite these claims, the research on learning and teaching English through media arts, especially films, need to be more widely explored and studied and this what

this study aims to do in the context of Iran and in relation to children learning English as a foreign language.

2. Using Media and Films as a Learning Tool in Language Education and Beyond

With technology increasingly accessible in schools (Diez, Pleban, & Wood, 2005), films can be an alternative pedagogical tool (Marcus, 2005). Visual media can vicariously transport students out of the classroom (Heinich, Molenda, Russell & Smaldino, 1996). In addition, movies are a familiar medium (Diez et al., 2005) and can facilitate discussion (Dittmer, 2006; Marcus, 2005), motivate students with low literacy levels, inspire students, and increase participation (Dittmer, 2006). Educators can use films in conjunction with text or before text is presented to interest students (Heinich, et al., 1996). When visual media is shown before text is presented, students bring visual images of a subject to their reading and are better prepared to understand text and be more motivated to endure a difficult text (Peregoy & Boyle, 1993). Through film, students can also develop historical empathy because the visual form and narrative context enable students to relate to characters and the content (Marcus, 2005).

In the context of language learning, it has been claimed that movies are authentic materials that provide learners with contextualized vocabulary and show how people communicate in life (Seferoglu, 2008). When employed properly, films can develop fluency in speaking, reading, writing, and listening (King, 2002). Mayer's Generative Theory (as cited in Akbulut, 2007) laid the foundation for using multimedia in the language learning classroom. Mayer (as cited in Akbulut) stated that learners construct and integrate visual and verbal representations of the material. This is based on two theories. Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (as cited in Akbulut) suggests that there are two separate systems (imagery and verbal) and when they work simultaneously, information is remembered better. Chandler and Sweller's (as cited in Akbulut) the Cognitive Load Theory, on the other hand, suggests that the mind can become overloaded when too many elements are processed in the visual and verbal working memory. Mayer suggested that students select information from visual or verbal stimuli, organize the information, and then integrate new information with existing knowledge (i.e. schemata) (as cited in Akbulut). For example, Webb and Rodgers (2009) have mentioned that watching movies with L2 subtitles can have the same influence as using L2 glosses in reading, and that they facilitate comprehension which results in incidental vocabulary learning.

Moreover, movies can be as valuable as reading a textbook in promoting incidental L2 vocabulary learning. Additionally, watching captioned or uncaptioned

movies and TV programs can also lead to a considerable development of other L2 skills such as pronunciation, speaking, reading and listening comprehension (e.g. Harji, Woods & Alavi, 2010; Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011). Interestingly, watching movies with L1 subtitles, usually discouraged by practitioners in ESL learning, have also proved to be useful for learning technical and specialized vocabularies just like a good dictionary, whereas L2 subtitles were reported useful for learning slang, idioms and culture-specific expressions (Katchen, 1996). Overall, according to Markham, Peter and McCarthy (2001), L1 subtitled movies are more useful for vocabulary, listening comprehension, pronunciation and oral abilities than L2 subtitled movies. Another multimedia resource that has been found useful for developing language skills and for providing authentic learning environment is TV and Radio news (Bahrani & Sim, 2011; Evans, 2006). According to Bahrani and Sim (2011), extensive exposure to audio and/or visual news provides L2 learners with an authentic language input that enhances their speaking proficiency, more than non-news media, such as music, movies and other general language listening materials of miscellaneous speech genres.

2.1. Early English Education in Iran and Children's Perceptions or Motivation

A common belief amongst advocates for early English education is that due to the nature of our globalized world and English serving as the lingua franca, the need to speak English becomes more of an imperative for future generations (M.N. Kim, 2008). This kind of shared belief or attitude may work as a part of "*the power of unplanned (invisible) language planning*" (Kachru, 1991). Kachru (1991) described that "*invisible language planning is determined to an extent by the attitude of parents toward a language, the role of the media, the role of the peers, and the societal pressures*" (p.8). In the following, this belief regarding English as necessity is described more along with English as an international language and a language ideology of English. Nunan (2003) emphasized that the emergence of English as a global language has considerably impacted educational policies, particularly in relation to the age at which English education begins in countries such as Iran and those within the Pan- Asia region. Especially in private schools in Iran. English proficiency has been a main emphasis so as to create a more prosperous, English-friendly Iran. For instance, despite the efforts to push English education reforms within the Iranian school system from the government, a new educational reform policy was proposed that sought to "*teach non-English subjects in English starting from 2010*", but the proposed policy was rejected amidst intense debate (Alavi, 2010).

Young children's perceptions of English learning have rarely been the focus of different studies. Hsieh's (2011) study, for example, explored young children's

experiences in EFL learning in a kindergarten in Taiwan. In this study, three 5- to 6-year-olds were observed and interviewed; their drawings were analyzed. The researcher reported that the children could explain what they did and what they liked about the English lessons implemented in drill-focused practices, but they thought English was a difficult language to learn. Brumen (2010) investigated how young children perceived and were motivated in foreign language (English and German) learning. The research participants were 120 children from 7 kindergartens involved in the Network Innovative Project in Slovenia; the children were interviewed. The majority of them was highly motivated in their foreign language learning and had positive attitudes toward the learning contexts. They wanted to learn the foreign languages, because they enjoyed the activities and their comfortable environments. The children, however, perceived English learning not only as a fun activity, but also as an activity related to intellectual challenges or personal achievement. The researcher highlighted the importance of establishing in kindergartens a safe, enjoyable, and encouraging classroom environment for foreign language learning. In a study on foreign language learners' motivation, Nikolov (1999) examined Hungarian children's thinking on why they studied English. This study compared results from three age groups (6-8, 8-11, and 11-14). Some of interesting results of this study were: (a) the youngest group mainly showed motivations related to their English teacher, whereas the other two groups gave more reasons related to their English class; (b) the oldest group much more brought up utilitarian reason; and (c) family pressure on English learning were reflected in the answers of some children of the oldest group. Overall, despite all the importance and popularity, research on the use of films in promoting Iranian EFL children's language learning is almost non-existent. To this end, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *"Does extensively exposing Iranian very young EFL learners to English media have any significant impact on their learning processes, operationalized as their individual growth?"*

It was also hypothesized that students who were highly exposed to films as a result of their own entertainment and consumer choices and their EFL classroom instruction, would not demonstrate any significant differences in their English learning acquisition and overall EFL achievements as compared to those students who were less exposed to these films inside and outside the classroom by personal choice and curricular demand.

3. Methodology

The methodology section of the present research work presents the research design, instrumentation, procedures, target population and sampling, and the statistical analyses utilized for this study. It also contains discussions about the appropriateness of the research method and design.

3.1. Research design

In order to maximize the pedagogical benefits of using technology-related materials, such as films, instructors and researchers are required to assign students a task with sound instructional design (Blake, 2008). Since this exploratory study uses existing groups, randomization will be unachievable and therefore a quasi-experimental design, Nonequivalent Control Group Design, was used. According to Cohen (2000), when randomization is impracticable, the researcher uses a quasi-experimental method. The specific quasi-experimental design that was used in this study is called "*comparison groups pretest and posttest design*" (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2013). The study used two groups: the experimental group who received extensive exposure to films and the control group (traditional training), and this design answered the research question. Using this approach (quasi-experimental study) allowed the researcher to compare the experimental group, who received the intervention with the control group who did not receive such intervention.

3.2. Participants and Participant Recruitment

The population of this study was EFL children aged between 7-9 and who study in private language institutes in Iran. In addition, there were 35 females and 25 males within the sample. Table 1 presents a summary of teachers' biographical information. The sample included 60 very young EFL learners. One class was assigned as the control class. In the control class, there were 30 students. Students engaged in traditional teaching that were part of the institutes' curriculum. The other class was the experimental class. The experimental class similarly consisted of 30 students. Students in this class were extensively exposed to English media through different animations suitable for very young EFL learners both in terms of language and content. These students were selected as participants of the study because they were all L2 learners learning English as a foreign language in Iran. Although the number of the participants may seem small, according to Lin (2014), such classes always seem to have a small number of students.

Table 3.1: Participants' background

	Mean age	Gender	
		Male	Female
Participants	8	25	35

3.3. Materials and Instruments

3.3.1. Pre-and-Post-test Individual Growth and Development Indicator: Picture Naming

For the current study, the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator (University of Minnesota, 2006), was collected and used to assess language growth and development in Iranian very young EFL learners. The Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator (IGDI; University of Minnesota, 2006) is an assessment used with children ages 3-12 to measure expressive communication. It was administered to each child individually weekly by the researcher by showing the child a series of pictures of objects found in their natural environments, such as ball, train, fish, belt, banana, and orange (Missall, McConnell, & Cadigan, 2006). The assessment was first demonstrated to the child using four pictures, an apple, a baby, a bear, and a cat. After the four pictures had been shown to the child, the child was told to name the presented pictures as quickly as possible during one minute. The number of correctly named pictures in English within the one minute was the child's score (Missall, et al., 2006). One study has examined the technical adequacy of the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator. In a study of 23 children learning English as a second language and of children whose first language is English, Nitsiou (2006) found the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator to be a valid and reliable measure of the children's expressive language skills.

Benchmarks for the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator have been developed and are available for registered users on the University of Minnesota Individual Growth and Development Indicator website – Get It, Got It, Go (ggg.umn.edu). Teachers can input their data and compare the intercept and slopes with typically developing children. They can then determine if a child has met the benchmark, a normative reference point that is expected of typically developing children. More importantly, the growth trajectories can demonstrate if meaningful progress is being made toward desired outcomes, even if a child has not met the established age benchmarks. Knowledge gained from examining children's growth can be used to evaluate and improve outcomes for children. Teachers can generate reports for an individual child or groups of children to determine how classrooms of children are progressing to evaluate instruction or intervention efforts through the use of the Get it, Got it, Go website.

3.4. Procedure and Data Analysis

The participants for the present study voluntarily accepted to take part in it and were recruited through personal contact with their parents and the supervisors of the private language institutes in Iran. Furthermore, the parents, the supervisors and also the students received a letter containing information about the purpose of the study. It should also be pointed out that it took the participants approximately 20 minutes to complete the pre-test and post-test at each level. It is also worth mentioning that the data were collected anonymously. As for the students in the experimental class, after the pretest, they received specific extensive exposure to feature animations in English. This exposure began from the second week and ended at the seventh week (i.e., totally 8 weeks). Moreover, for our data analyses, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program version 21 was used. This program has several characteristics which make it ideal as a data analysis tool. Among them are its wide usage, being user-friendly, and its comprehensive collection of statistical tools. After the data are entered into the program, SPSS performs the analysis and then presents the output in different formats (e.g. charts or graphs).

One advantage of this feature is that it saves time. Moreover, all the potential risks of participating in the present research, including the risk of breach of confidentiality, were mentioned informally while distributing the tests. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and measures of central tendency, were calculated for the data. Moreover, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare the posttest mean of the experimental group with the posttest mean of the control group where the pretest scores were used as a covariate. This statistical practice allowed the researcher to attribute observed gains, if found, to the effect of the experimental treatment rather than to differences in initial pretest scores. Also, the Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances was used to determine the homogeneity of variance assumption

4. Results

The main purpose of this study was to explore whether extensively exposing Iranian very young EFL learners to English media has any significant effect on their learning process. To this end, a Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator was used as the research instrument. The results are presented below.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics for the Data: Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator

The research question in this study aimed to examine and probe whether extensively exposing Iranian very young EFL learners to English media has any significant effect on their learning process. The results of the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator are presented in Table 2. Some missing data were also present which were due to the child not being at school on that particular day, typically due to illness or the weather, or the researcher being unable to travel due to weather. The mean scores of the two participant groups are presented in. This table provides detailed and comprehensive information about the means and standard deviations. As the data indicate, the total mean of the experimental group on the pre-test was 10.80 and on the other hand the control group's total mean was 13.00. The rather large standard deviations within each group clearly indicate that the results were not so clustered around the mean, which means that there were some fluctuations in the scores obtained by the participant groups.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the Pre- test Traditional and Film Exposure
(maximum score = 23)

Groups	Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Treatment Group (Film Exposure)	Pre-test Picture Naming	30	8	14	10.80	1.96281
Control Group (Traditional)	Pre-test Picture Naming	30	7	15	13.00	3.09499

Moreover, Table 2 displays, the results of the post-tests used in the present research work. A quick look at the data reveals that the total mean score of the experimental group who received the extensive exposure through films was 16.50 and, on the other hand, the group exposed to the traditional way of teaching translation scored a total mean of 13.45. This shows that the experimental group's score has largely increased.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the Post- test Traditional and Film Exposure
(maximum score = 23)

Groups	Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Instruction Group (Film Exposure)	Post-test Picture Naming	30	9	20	16.50	3.09499
Control Group	Post-test Picture Naming	30	8	18	13.45	1.98945

4.2. Inferential Statistics (Hypotheses Testing)

To further analyze the data and also to carefully test the hypothesis posed in the present research work, inferential statistics were run which help us decide whether or not the null hypothesis is rejected based on the data.

H0 Extensively exposed Iranian EFL children to films as a result of their own entertainment and consumer choices and their EFL classroom instruction, would not demonstrate any significant differences in their English learning acquisition and overall EFL achievements as compared to those students who were less exposed to these films inside and outside the classroom by personal choice and curricular demand.

Before examining the above hypothesis, the assumptions that a test of ANCOVA should be met, including the assumptions of normality, homogeneity of regression slopes, and homogeneity of variances are presented.

A. Normality of the distribution

In order to test the normality of data distribution, the non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was used. It is a goodness-of-fit measure for continuous scaled data. It tests whether the observations could reasonably have come from the specified distribution, such as the normal distribution (or poisson, uniform, or exponential distribution, etc.), so it most frequently is used to test for the assumption of univariate normality (Hall, 2012). Based on the data presented below, we can conclude that the data come from a normal distribution.

Table 4: Kolmogorov-Smirnov Normality of the distribution

Control group		Experimental group		Variables
Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	
556/0	**625/0**	**836/0**	**788/0**	Kolmogorov-Smirnov
917/0	**830/0**	**487/0**	**564/0**	Sig.

B. Homogeneity of regression slopes

There needs to be pointed out that the assumption of the homogeneity of regression slopes should be satisfied, which in particular means that there is no interaction between the covariate and the independent variable. It is interesting to note that although the linearity of the pre-test and post-test scores by group showed some deviation away from linearity, based on the obtained data presented in Table 4.4 the slopes were sufficiently and satisfactorily parallel to satisfy the assumption of homogeneity of regression.

Table 5: Homogeneity of regression slopes test for Strategies-based Teaching

Sig.	(F)	Sum of Squares	df	Sum of Squares	DS
245/0	26/2	499/53	1	499/53	Pre-test
351/0	87/1	16/44	1	16/44	Group *Pre-test
		58381/23	26	017/849	Error

C.   Homogeneity of variances

A formal statistical test of the assumption of homogeneity of variances should be used. The hypothesis is that variances are homogeneous, so that a *p*-value of less than 0.05 means we must accept the hypothesis that those variances are heterogeneous. As the dada indicate, the variances homogeneity is more than 95%, which indicates that the variances meet the assumption.

Table 6: Levene Statistic for *Homogeneity of variances (Strategies-based Teaching)*

Levene Statistic (F)	df1	df2	Sig
2.65	1	28	0.098

Now that we have tested the assumptions required, it could be concluded that we can use the analysis of covariance in order to test our first hypothesis.

Table 7: ANCOVA *for Scores as a Function of Film Exposure*

	Sig.	F	Mean Square	df	Sum of Squares	Source
037/0	242/0	413/1	373/24	1	373/24	Vocabulary Pre-test
887/0	001/0	383/289	287/4991	1	287/4991	Instruction (Onomatopoeic)
			248/17	2730	177/638	Error
					32615	Total

The difference between the two groups was analyzed with ANCOVA using the picture naming pretest score as a covariate. The results in Table 7 indicate that (P= 001/0, df= 27 and F=383/289) the picture naming pretest scores and the wiring posttest scores were significantly correlated. Overall, these results suggest that the children showed signs of language growth during the intervention. Children learning English as a foreign language showed gains in expressive language skills on the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator. Most of these children had moderate to high effect sizes for the amount of language acquired during the study. Based on the children's language growth, it is important to identify appropriate and effective language-based teaching strategies, including film exposure, that can be used in with very young EFL

learners and the early elementary grades to help them continue their language acquisition. Being able to reduce the language gap between children learning English as a foreign language is one way of reducing the academic achievement gap between native English speakers and children learning English as a second language (Xu & Drame, 2008). However, it is important that through the process of acquiring English as a second language children do not lose their language skills in their first language (Baker, 2006; Valdes & Figueroa, 1994). The results also support other research regarding the effectiveness of film strategies on children's language growth when the child is acquiring language skills (Kaiser, Ostrosky, & Alpert, 1993; Yoder, Kaiser, Goldstein, Alpert, Mousetis, Kaczmarek, & Fischer, 1995). While these studies focused on children with language delays, there are some parallels with children learning a foreign language. One parallel is that with scaffolded language through intentional use of film exposure strategies, children acquire language and social skills they previously did not have. Another parallel between the research and the current findings is these strategies can be embedded easily into daily routines and activities with children, which promotes engagement and learning (Kaiser, Hancock, & Nietfeld, 2000). Additionally, the results of the current study support the research (Noell, et al., 2005) describing the need for on-going training and feedback to maintain fidelity of an intervention or of a new skill, such as language-based teaching strategies.

5. Limitations and Conclusions

The findings indicated that lack of extensive exposure to English films can cause the loss of many of these benefits and objectives. It will not escape me to note that my pursuance of the errors made by children during the picture naming task is by no means intended to underestimate and depreciate the children's great work. Their acceptance of the challenge of picture naming is enough to give them a great amount of credit. Although this study sought to measure children's language growth over a period of time, there are several limitations to the results of the study. The first limitation is that while there were language gains in all of the children participating in the study, their language gains could be partly due to natural language acquisition processes. Despite the use of the present research design to provide greater strength to the results, it is impossible to remove language input from children to determine the absolute effectiveness of an intervention. A second limitation of the study was that only Farsi speaking children were used as the target children to receive the language-based intervention. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to other languages. However, it is likely there would be similar results with other languages. A third limitation was the

small sample size, which also affects the ability to generalize the results to other preschool programs and young children learning English as a foreign language. Additional research is of course needed to determine the effectiveness and benefits of using films with preschool-aged children learning English as a foreing language. More research is needed to examine if shorter interventions would result in similar levels of effectiveness. Also, more research is needed with film strategies when used in the child's first language to determine if the strategies can positively influence the child's first language maintenance.

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