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Review Article

Leveraging Animated Cartoons as a Pedagogical Tool to Enhance Speech Proficiency in Children Aged 4–8

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of cartoon viewing on English language proficiency among children aged 4 to 8 years in Nairobi City County. Recognizing the importance of English as the official language and medium of instruction in Kenyan educational institutions, this research addressed the challenges of English language acquisition in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment. Using an experimental research design, the study evaluated the impact of cartoon viewership on speech proficiency, focusing on four key components: watching and listening to cartoons, cartoon imitation, preference for specific cartoon programs, and cartoon viewership patterns. The target population comprised both public and private primary schools, reflecting Nairobi's varied socio-economic landscape. Participants were divided into experimental and control groups, with pre-test and post-test assessments conducted to measure changes in speech proficiency. Additionally, in-depth interviews with teachers of Grades 1 to 4 provided qualitative insights. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests, while qualitative data underwent content analysis. The study found that cartoons significantly enhance speech proficiency in children when integrated with active participation like singing, drawing, and role play. Imitating cartoon characters' speech and gestures improved vocabulary, sentence structure, and expressive communication. Children's preferences, such as genre, language, and character type, also influenced speech development, with dialogue-rich, English-language cartoons proving most effective. In addition, viewing patterns like time of day, frequency, and duration impacted outcomes, with consistent, structured exposure yielding better results. The study recommends that practitioners use cartoons intentionally to enhance speech development in children by encouraging active engagement and imitation of characters' speech and gestures. Educators should integrate dialogue-rich, age-appropriate content into lessons and tailor it to children's preferences. Viewing should be structured, preferably in the morning, and should exceed one hour to ensure effective learning. Policymakers are urged to embed cartoon-based learning in early education frameworks aligned with the Competency-Based Curriculum. Communities and caregivers should support educational cartoon viewership at home and in communal settings, fostering shared learning and reinforcing communication skills beyond the classroom.

Keywords: Speech proficiency, expressive communication.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Language is an important component of all aspects of human life. The main purpose of language is not only in acquiring the culture of people who speak it but also in gaining the ability to get along in the day-to-day activities of normal life. The successful running of day-to-day activities hinges on the ability to communicate effectively (Ciobanu, 2019). The basis of effective communication is in the usage of words, speed in the delivery of words, pitch modulation, and body language. Around the world, the English language is widely recognized as an international language of communication, owing to the increasing rate of globalization and the development of an online world without borders (Klinmalee, 2022). In the international economy and global culture, English has been adopted as the main language of communication. English is also considered the most important and widespread form of information exchange or communication in teaching subjects, such as economics, education, technology, engineering, science, and business. Many countries, globally, in which English is not the mother tongue, use

the English language as a first or second language in their schools for instruction.

As observed by Sajana (2018), the learning of the English language is normally at two levels, which include the receiving level and the sending level. The receiving level involves reading and listening skills, while the sending level involves writing and speaking skills. It is worth noting that, acquisition of a mother tongue or any other language starts with listening to the language and then speaking it. In the current digital era, the learning of language does not take place only in classrooms or with the assistance of adults, but in the interaction with digitally available content. Studies show that today, many children enjoy watching cartoons and attempt to imitate their language (Klinmalee, 2022).

Cartoons may be adopted teaching strategy that supports both the affective and cognitive aspects of the learning process. They are considered a moving diagram made of a sequence of images that are displayed one after the other with sounds and other effects (Salih, 2017). The use of cartoons introduces reading and listening texts provided with motion, sounds, and colors that attract the students to live with the characters and share in their roles. This is a strong type of motivation which facilitates learning, activates learners' imagination, prediction, and high-order thinking skills. Cartoon dialogue is characterized by sentences that are simple and complete, and often deliberate repetition is used. Children, therefore, learn a significant number of words that they can use in real life from the context of cartoons. Moreover, by watching cartoons, children are highly stimulated to speak the target language.

Klin Malee (2022) observed that despite having no prior knowledge of the English language, children learn vocabulary and pronunciation by watching cartoons. Similarly, Sujata (2020) indicates that cartoons influence the motivation of learners and children to acquire more vocabulary than they would obtain using traditional methods of learning. Animated films are appealing to children's imagination, thus capturing their attention and making them less bored when watching cartoons. Another benefit of watching animated films is that children can imitate and mimic the utterances of the characters (Sujata, 2020). According to Sajana (2018), cartoons are very important to the learning of language in children because they improve their imagination, attention, thinking, and memorization of words.

In different parts of the world, the use of cartoons has been found to influence the speech proficiency of children. However, the impact of the use of cartoons on language and behavior was determined by the time spent watching the cartoons, the kinds of cartoons preferred, the languages used in the cartoons, the preferred cartoon channels, and the imitation of cartoons. In Ghana, Awinzeligo, Churche, and Wemegah (2022) found that cartoons are a good medium for facilitating the language development of children. Specifically, cartoons help children in the acquisition of new vocabulary and in facilitating their ability to acquire a new language. In addition, cartoons improve the listening skills and speaking skills of the children and boost their confidence when speaking. In a different study, Borzekowski, Lando, Olsen, and Giffen (2019) argue that educational media intervention using an animated cartoon program, like Akili and Me, in Rwanda had a significant effect on content and language use. In Nigeria, Ikwuka and Ubah (2020) indicate that cartoons are available and utilized for teaching the English language in primary schools. The use of cartoons among children aged between 4 and 10 years led to an improvement in speech proficiency in terms of fluency of speech and vocabulary.

In Kenya, the viewership of cartoons has increased considerably in the last two decades due to the increasing penetration of the internet and the emergence of digital gadgets such as mobile phones, tablets, and smart televisions. Njiiri (2019) found that there is an emerging pattern of heavy television viewership tendencies as most of the children watch television cartoons for over four hours during weekends and holidays. According to Kidenda (2018), children watch animated cartoons for entertainment because they are funny, enjoyable, and interesting. Allela (2013) observed that educational cartoons were effective in ensuring cognitive enrichment among standard two pupils in primary schools in Kenya. In addition, Njiiri (2019) established that television cartoon programs in terms of viewership patterns, imitation of characters, and cartoon programs' content have an influence on language use among children. Similarly, Vikiru (2013) observed that children that were watching cartoons had an improvement in their communication in terms of choice of words, fluency, and vocabulary.

Statement of the Problem

Proficiency in the use of the English language is vital as it is the official language and the language of instruction in educational institutions in Kenya. The skills learned in the English language consist of the ability to listen, speak, write, and read with comprehension, while observing the syntactic as well as the morphological rules governing the language. Thus, competence in the English language is important to learners who are expected to submit assignments, reports, exams, and assessments, which are anchored on correct language use. One of the most important aspects of a culture is not only the ability to use language but also the incorporation of vocal symbols, for example, the correct intonation to enhance comprehension.

Besides English being the main language of instruction, many learners fail to attain proficiency in the English language at an early age. As such, learners in primary schools, secondary schools, and higher institutions of learning portray poor mastery of the

language. Many of the form 4 certificate holders cannot sustain a discussion in English. This is because of a failure in attaining proficiency at an early age, which is scientifically proven as the appropriate age for language acquisition (ZhaoHong Han and Gang Bao,2023)

Kenya is culturally diverse, and this is reflected in the country's linguistic diversity with approximately forty-two ethnic groups, each commanding its unique dialect. However, Kiswahili and English are the official languages, while the former is also the national language (Committee of Experts on Constitutional Review, 2010). Thus, English, to most Kenyan children, is a second language, which therefore its acquisition demands a lot of practice to master the different structures of the language, considering that most of the Kenyan dialects are Bantu. To overcome this challenge, proficiency in the English language can be improved at an early stage of children by the use of cartoons. Children between the ages of 4 and 8 years can learn very fast and have great interest in cartoons. Studies done in other jurisdictions have shown that the use of cartoons improves the language proficiency of children in terms of vocabulary, fluency of speech, and choice of words. However, no study has been done in Kenya to investigate how the use of cartoons influences speech proficiency in children between the ages of 4 and 8 years.

Although studies have been carried out on the effect of cartoons on language proficiency, there seems to be no study on its adoption as a formal learning strategy in schools. More importantly, little or no attention has been given to the impact of language proficiency on the acquisition of soft skills in human communication. In light of this, this study aimed to fill this gap.

Objective of the Study

General Objective

The general objective of this study was to investigate how the use of cartoons influences speech proficiency in children between the ages of 4 and 8 years in Kenya.

Specific Objective

The specific objective of the study was to examine how watching and listening to cartoons influences speech proficiency in children.

Theoretical Review

Theoretical Framework

This study will be anchored on Richard Mayer's Principles of Multimedia Learning Theory which emphasizes the crucial role of using both visual and auditory elements to improve learning outcomes. The key principles from his theory include the Multimedia Principle, Contiguity Principle, Modality Principle, Redundancy Principle, and Personalization Principle (Mayer, 2001).

Multimedia Principle posits that people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone. Using cartoons can provide both visual and auditory stimuli, enhancing children's understanding and retention of language concepts. The Multimedia Principle asserts that students learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented simultaneously rather than successively. Cartoons naturally integrate visual and auditory information, catering to different learning styles and helping reinforce language concepts through multiple channels. This, in turn, makes it easier for children to draw connections and enhance their English language proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the pragmatist paradigm was used to investigate how the use of animation influences speech proficiency in children between the ages of 4 and 8 years in Kenya. Students were divided into two groups: the experimental group watched selected cartoons for a specific period, while the control group did not watch cartoons during this time. Both groups underwent pre-test assessments to establish their baseline scores and post-test assessments to evaluate their scores after the experiment. This design helped determine the impact of watching cartoons on speech proficiency among the children (Cash, Stanković, & Štorga, 2016). The study made use of primary data, which was collected by the use of speech proficiency assessment tools and an interview guide.

Key findings

The study examined the relationship between children's entertainment by cartoon animations and their speech proficiency. Table 1.1 presents findings that highlight how emotional engagement with cartoons may influence language development.

Table 1.1: Entertainment and Speech Proficiency

	Entertainment	N	%	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Speech Proficiency	No	123	12.4	21.67	4.758	.429
	Yes	871	87.6	30.76	4.053	.137

The results presented in Table 1.1 show a substantial difference in speech proficiency scores based on whether children appeared to be entertained by cartoon animations, defined by visible behaviors such as laughing, clapping, smiling, or showing excitement. Children who exhibited signs of entertainment recorded a higher mean speech proficiency score of 30.76 (SD = 4.053), compared to a mean of 21.67 (SD = 4.758) for those who were not entertained. This suggests a possible

link between a child's emotional engagement with cartoons and their language development.

To determine whether the observed difference in speech proficiency scores based on children's entertainment by cartoons was statistically significant, an Independent Samples t-test was conducted as summarized in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Speech Proficiency	Equal variances assumed	3.889	.049	-22.773	992	.000	-9.095	.399
	Equal variances not assumed			-20.191	148.069	.000	-9.095	.450

The Independent Samples t-test results in Table 1.2 confirm that this difference is statistically significant. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances returned a p-value of 0.049, just below the 0.05 threshold, suggesting a slight difference in variance between the two groups. Nonetheless, the t-test under equal variances assumption shows a t-value of -22.773 with a p-value < .001, indicating a highly significant difference. The mean difference of -9.095 (95% CI not shown but implied to exclude zero) supports the conclusion that children who were visibly entertained by cartoon animations had significantly higher speech proficiency scores. These findings imply that enjoyment and emotional engagement during cartoon-based learning may play a meaningful role in enhancing speech development among children.

The study also explored the relationship between cartoon-inspired play activities and children's speech proficiency, focusing on various forms of play influenced by cartoon content. Children were assessed on whether they engaged in play activities influenced by cartoons, including pretend play, mobile or TV-based games, and drawing cartoon characters. This sought to examine whether engaging in cartoon-inspired play activities influenced children's speech proficiency, as shown in table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Independent Samples Test for Playing games and Speech Proficiency

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		**t-test for Equality of Means**				
		F	**Sig.**	**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**Std. Error Difference**
Speech Proficiency	Equal variances assumed	9.968	.002	-14.120	992	.000	-6.638	.470
	Equal variances not assumed			-12.744	132.103	.000	-6.638	.521

Those who participated in cartoon-inspired games had a higher mean speech proficiency score of 30.38 (SD = 4.592) than those who did not, at 23.74 (SD = 5.241). This difference is further supported by the results of the Independent Samples t-test in Table 4.20, which shows a statistically significant difference in speech proficiency between the two groups (t = -14.120, p < .001). The mean difference of -6.638 points, with a 95% confidence interval that does not cross zero, confirms that playing cartoon-related games is positively associated with improved speech proficiency.

These findings are in concurrence with Zeidan (2020) and Nhung & Dieu (2020) who argue that animations expose children to varied accents, vocabulary, and speech patterns, enriching their language acquisition. Similarly, Syeda and Mahwish (2018) emphasized that cartoons support language comprehension by combining visual and auditory cues,

aligning with this study's findings that attention and expressive engagement (e.g., singing and play) promote speech development. Alghonaim (2020), studying pronunciation in Saudi children, found that exposure to cartoons helped overcome articulation challenges, an outcome mirrored in this study's emphasis on pronunciation improvement. The experimental results by Puspitaningrum (2017) in Singapore, which showed that animated movies enhanced learners' speaking abilities, affirm cartoons' effectiveness in building vocabulary, grammar, and fluency. Zeidan's (2020) findings from Palestine on grammar improvement through animated films further reinforce the results of this study.

The findings from the quantitative analysis were further supported by insights from key informant interviews with teachers who interact daily with children across various grades. The teachers widely observed that children's verbal expression in class had been improving, especially among those exposed to engaging animated content. They described such children as more articulate, confident, and expressive. They often used full sentences, spoke fluently, and shared stories with clear narrative structure. This supports Elshanawany's (2020) conclusion that animation-based programs create a positive climate for verbal expression. These learners often speak in full sentences, show excitement when sharing stories, and exhibit a clear sense of narrative structure when recounting experiences. Teachers noted a stark contrast between children who engage with cartoons and those who don't, with the former demonstrating a more natural and rhythmic flow of language in classroom conversations. Teachers also observed that children mimicked cartoon speech patterns and vocabulary, consistent with the findings of Muhammad, Syeda, and Mahwish (2018), who showed that cartoons improve children's language competencies through repetition and entertainment. Teachers also highlighted that verbal expression among cartoon-exposed children is often characterized by expressive intonation, emotional vocabulary, and interactive gestures, which enhance communication. One teacher emphasized,

> *"You can always tell the difference, children who regularly watch cartoons are not just talkative, they use better vocabulary and speak more fluently compared to their peers"* KII01

Many teachers noted that cartoons expose children to standard language patterns, correct pronunciation, and varied vocabulary. Through repeated exposure, children learn how to pronounce words accurately and form grammatically correct sentences. Teachers observed that learners often imitate cartoon characters' speech patterns and intonation, which contributes to improved articulation. Some even start using expressions or phrases from cartoons in appropriate contexts, enhancing their overall language use. The teachers also pointed out that cartoons serve as language models, especially for children from non-English-speaking households. Animated content bridges the gap between spoken and written language by reinforcing word recognition and context-based usage. This supports the quantitative evidence in this study showing that attentive cartoon viewing leads to statistically higher speech scores. As one teacher explained,

> *"After watching cartoons like 'Peppa Pig' or 'Dora', they start using words like 'brilliant' or 'let's explore!'It's clear the language is sticking."* KII03

Teachers shared vivid examples of children mimicking cartoon phrases and gradually incorporating them into everyday speech. One teacher described a Grade 1 student who had previously been shy but began speaking in English more frequently after watching cartoons that involved song and dialogue. The child not only sang along with the shows but also started using similar sentence structures in class discussions, showing improved fluency and engagement. These outcomes mirror the findings by Nhung and Dieu (2020) in Vietnam, who demonstrated that cartoons enhanced learners' communicative English skills. Another example involved a child who frequently referenced characters from *Paw Patrol*, repeating lines such as "I'm on a roll!" when volunteering in class. This phrase, initially said in play, eventually evolved into the child using complete sentences during learning activities. Teachers recognized this behavior as a sign of language acquisition through observation and imitation, reinforcing the findings on the positive impact of cartoon-based interventions. One teacher summarized it well:

> *"I remember a boy who couldn't say a full sentence in English. After some time watching cartoons, he came to class saying things like 'Let's go on an adventure!'clear, correct, and confident."* KII09

The findings of this study contribute significantly to Richard Mayer's (2001) Principles of Multimedia Learning by demonstrating that children learn more effectively when verbal and visual information are presented together in a meaningful, engaging way. The cartoon-based instruction enhanced speech proficiency through active participation, focused attention, and repeated exposure, confirming Mayer's principles such as modality, multimedia, and contiguity. The study validates that when children engage with both auditory dialogue and visual cues in cartoons, they process and retain language more effectively, supporting the idea that well-structured multimedia environments can optimize language acquisition in early childhood.

Thus, educators and practitioners should recognize that watching and listening to cartoons can be a highly effective method for enhancing speech proficiency in children. The study found that children who showed emotional and cognitive engagement, such

as laughing, focusing, or singing along, achieved better language outcomes. Early childhood educators and speech development professionals are encouraged to purposefully incorporate cartoon content into lesson plans, focusing on dialogue-rich shows that promote vocabulary acquisition, sentence structure, and pronunciation. Activities that encourage active engagement, like drawing cartoon characters or acting out scenes, should be integrated into classroom routines to reinforce auditory learning with verbal output. Practitioners can structure viewing schedules during times when children are most attentive, such as morning sessions, to maximize language absorption and retention.

Last, future studies could adopt a longitudinal design to investigate the long-term effects of cartoon exposure on speech development. While the current study measured short-term gains, it would be valuable to examine whether such improvements are retained over time and how they influence later literacy outcomes.

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