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Language Acquisition and Vocabulary Enhancement through Television Series: A Study of *Young Sheldon*

Dr.J.Srikala, M.A., B.Ed.,M.Phil...
Assistant Professor-III of English
Kumaraguru College of Technology
Coimbatore.
Email: srikala.j.sci@kct.ac.in

Mohitra Sri.B
Iyr -26BAD084
Kumaraguru College of Technology;
Coimbatore.
Email: mohitraasri.26ad@kct.ac.in

Abstract

Television is one of the most common sources of out-of-class English input, yet it is seldom used in a planned way to build vocabulary. This conceptual paper examines the potential of the American sitcom *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) as material for second language acquisition and vocabulary enhancement. Drawing on the Input Hypothesis, dual coding theory, multimedia learning and research on incidental vocabulary learning, the paper reviews empirical studies of vocabulary gains from viewing television. It argues that the series combines features that research links with learning: a large body of related episodes that recycle words, a narrator who explains events, picture-supported spoken input, and a mix of academic and everyday registers. A pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design with three groups is proposed to test these claims with intermediate learners, using a target-word list drawn from episode transcripts and the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale. Guidelines for before-, during- and after-viewing activities are also offered. The paper reports no new data, and its descriptions of the series' language are illustrative and need to be checked against transcripts in future work.

Keywords: incidental vocabulary learning, extensive viewing, television, captions, *Young Sheldon*, English as a foreign language; Coming-of-age genre, Cultural Transition, television series, Cultural Identity, Otherness; emotional intelligence

Introduction

Television is one of the most common sources of out-of-class English input, yet it is seldom used in a planned way to build vocabulary. This conceptual paper examines the potential of the American sitcom *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) as material for second language acquisition and vocabulary enhancement. Drawing on the Input Hypothesis, dual coding theory, multimedia learning and research on incidental vocabulary learning, the paper reviews empirical studies of vocabulary gains from viewing television. It argues that the series combines features that research links with learning: a large body of related episodes that recycle words, a narrator who explains events, picture-supported spoken input, and a mix of academic and everyday registers. A pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design with three groups is proposed to test these claims with intermediate learners, using a target-word list drawn from episode transcripts and the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale. Guidelines for before-, during- and after-viewing activities are also offered. The paper reports no new data, and its descriptions of the series' language are illustrative and need to be checked against transcripts in future work.

Many learners of English meet the language more often on a screen than in a classroom. In a study of Flemish learners, *Peters* (2018) found that EFL learners spend considerably more time watching television than reading in English. *Lindgren and Muñoz (2013)* likewise reported that exposure outside school, including television and film, was related to young European learners' foreign language comprehension. Webb (2015) argued that this habit can be turned into a learning method he called extensive viewing, in which learners watch large amounts of television for meaning and pick up language as a by-product.

Research on vocabulary learning from television has grown quickly, but two gaps remain. First, many experiments use a single documentary: Peters and Webb (2018) used a one-hour BBC documentary and Feng and Webb (2020) used a television documentary. Documentaries are useful because they can be controlled, but they differ from the scripted, conversational comedies that many learners choose to watch. Second, in the literature searched for this paper I did not find an experimental study of any particular family sitcom as a vocabulary resource. Such series are worth studying because their many episodes share characters, settings and topics, and this repetition is exactly what narrow-viewing research suggests helps vocabulary learning (Rodgers & Webb, 2011).

Sheldon Cooper, a bona fide genius, has been promoted four grades. Meanwhile, he struggles to fit in with his unintellectual family in Texas. A 9-year-old genius, begins his first day of high school in the ninth grade with his older brother, George "*Georgie*" Cooper Jr. Having shown more skills than a typical child his age, he skipped several grades. On his first day, he questions his teachers and informs students of their rule breaking. He tries to find his place in the new school and Georgie must deal with having a younger sibling in his class.

Young Sheldon is a good case. It is a prequel to *The Big Bang Theory*, aired for seven seasons on CBS between 2017 and 2024, and follows a gifted boy growing up in Texas, with the adult Sheldon narrating (Wikipedia, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). It offers science talk, family conversation, school and church settings, and a narrator who comments on events. This paper therefore asks how such a series might support vocabulary growth, and how a study could test it. The research questions are:

RQ1. What kinds of vocabulary does a long-running sitcom such as *Young Sheldon* expose learners to?

RQ2. How much incidental vocabulary learning can sustained viewing of related episodes produce?

RQ3. Do viewing tasks add to the learning that viewing alone produces?

The paper first sets out the theoretical framework (Section 2) and reviews empirical studies (Section 3). It then describes the series as learning material (Section 4), proposes a research design (Section 5), draws out teaching implications (Section 6), and ends with limitations and conclusions (Sections 7 and 8). No new data are reported.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Comprehensible input

Krashen (1982) proposed that learners acquire language when they understand input that is slightly beyond their current level. Television is well suited to this idea because pictures, gestures, tone of voice and plot give learners clues that help them understand speech they could not follow from sound alone. Understanding is not a guarantee of learning, however, which is why the next three ideas matter.

2.2 Dual coding and multimedia learning

Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory holds that information is stored in a verbal system and an image system, and that items coded in both are easier to remember. Mayer (2009) developed this into a theory of *Multimedia learning*, which says that people learn more deeply from words and pictures together than from words alone, provided the channels are not overloaded. Television joins spoken words, images and often written captions, so it can support both coding routes, but fast speech with captions and busy images can also overload a beginner.

2.3 Incidental learning and task involvement

Hulstijn (2003) described *Incidental learning* as learning that happens without a deliberate intention to learn, while attention is on something else such as the story. *Laufer and Hulstijn (2001)* added that how much is learned depends on involvement: the need to know a word, the effort of searching for its meaning, and the act of evaluating it against other words. Passive viewing is low in involvement, which suggests that short tasks around the viewing may raise learning. *Schmitt (2008)* likewise concluded that vocabulary learning depends on repeated encounters and some engaged attention to the words.

2.4 Lexical coverage

Learners can only infer new words from context if they already know most of the surrounding words. *Nation (2006)* estimated that about 9,000 word families are needed to reach high coverage of written text, whereas *Webb and Rodgers (2009)* found that around 3,000-word families give 95% coverage of television programs. Television is therefore lexically more accessible than reading, which makes it a realistic source of input for intermediate learners.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Out-of-class viewing and language knowledge

Early evidence came from children. *d'Ydewalle and Van de Poel (1999)* studied children who watched subtitled foreign-language television and reported incidental foreign-language learning. *Lindgren and Muñoz (2013)* later found that exposure to subtitled television and film, together with other factors, was related to comprehension in young European learners. *Peters (2018)* studied learners' exposure to English-language media and its relation to vocabulary knowledge, and noted that the learners spent more time watching than reading. Together these studies show that viewing is common and is linked to language knowledge, although such correlational findings cannot prove that viewing caused the gains.

3.2 Vocabulary learning from a single program

Peters and Webb (2018) ran two experiments with Dutch-speaking EFL learners (63 in the first and 62 in the second) who watched a one-hour documentary containing 64 target items. Viewing led to incidental learning at the level of meaning recall and meaning recognition, and the gains were modest, roughly 8% to 14% of the target words depending on the measure. Learning was affected by how often a word occurred, whether it was a cognate, and how much the learner already knew. *Feng and Webb (2020)* compared reading, listening and viewing with 76 Chinese university EFL learners using material from a television documentary. All three modes produced learning that was kept after one week, with no significant difference between them, and prior vocabulary knowledge predicted success. These findings suggest that viewing is as effective as other forms of input, and that learners with a larger starting vocabulary gain more.

3.3 Extensive and narrow viewing

Because gains from one program are small, *Webb (2015)* proposed extensive viewing, in which learners watch many programs so that words recur. *Webb and Rodgers (2009)* showed that television has a manageable vocabulary load, and *Rodgers and Webb (2011)* examined narrow viewing, the idea that related episodes, such as those of one series, share more vocabulary than unrelated programs, so each repeated word is easier to learn. *Webb* (2011) further compared programs from the same genre as a basis for selecting viewing material. When *Rodgers and Webb (2020)* studied viewing over several sessions, they reported gains of roughly 23% to 30% of target words, which is larger than in single-program studies. This pattern fits the claim that a long series offers more learning than a single program.

3.4 Captions

Captions add a written channel to speech. A meta-analysis by *Montero Perez et al. (2013)* found a positive overall effect of captioned video on L2 listening comprehension and vocabulary learning. *Danan (2004)* argued that captioning and subtitling are undervalued learning strategies, and *Vanderplank (2016)* reviewed the use of captioned media in language teaching at book length. Captions can help learners connect sounds to written forms, but learners may begin to depend on reading rather than listening, so teachers need to decide when to use them.

3.5 Summary and gap

The studies above agree that television can produce incidental vocabulary learning, that gains are small per program and larger over repeated exposure, and that frequency, cognateness and prior knowledge shape what is learned. What is missing is work on a specific multi-season family sitcom, with a word list built from its transcripts and with tasks that raise involvement. The next section considers why *Young Sheldon* is a suitable candidate.

4. Young Sheldon as Learning Material

4.1 The series

Young Sheldon was created by Chuck Lorre and Steven Molaro for CBS. It premiered on September 25, 2017, and ended on May 16, 2024, after seven seasons and 141 episodes (Wikipedia, n.d.-a). Iain Armitage plays the young Sheldon Cooper, and Jim Parsons narrates as the adult Sheldon (Wikipedia, n.d.-b). The story is set in Texas, and Wikipedia's synopsis places the seasons between 1989 and 1994 (Wikipedia, n.d.-b). Sheldon is a child prodigy in mathematics and science who starts high school at a very young age, and the family includes his mother, father, brother, twin sister and grandmother. Because every episode returns to the same home, school and neighbourhood, the same words and phrases tend to come back across the series.

4.2 Language features with learning potential

Table 1 summarises features of the series that research suggests are useful for language learning. The descriptions are based on the series' premise and on the research reviewed above, not on a corpus count, so they are proposals to be tested against transcripts.

Table 1 *Features of Young Sheldon and their learning potential*

Feature	Description	Learning potential
Recurring cast and settings	141 episodes return to the same family, school and neighbourhood.	Repetition of words and phrases; suits narrow viewing (Rodgers & Webb, 2011).

Feature	Description	Learning potential
Academic and scientific talk	A gifted child discusses science and mathematics with adults and classmates.	Exposure to academic and technical words; learning may depend on frequency and on whether words resemble the learner's L1 (Peters & Webb, 2018).
Adult narration	Adult Sheldon, voiced by Jim Parsons, comments on events.	Reformulation and explanation of what is shown; helps comprehension (to be verified in transcripts).
Family conversation	Dialogue among parents, siblings and a grandmother in a Texas home.	Informal, spoken English and a regional variety; useful for listening practice.
Everyday domains	Home, school, church and community scenes.	Vocabulary of education, family life and community.
Visual and comic context	Gestures, expressions and physical comedy support meaning.	Dual coding and inference from context (Paivio, 1986; Mayer, 2009).

Episode titles themselves show the mix of topics. The second episode is titled "Rockets, Communists, and the Dewey Decimal System," and an early episode is titled "Dolomite, Apple Slices, and a Mystery Woman" (Wikipedia, n.d.-a). Titles like these suggest that single episodes can contain both specialised and everyday vocabulary, which is useful for learners but also means teachers will need to choose target words carefully.

4.3 Challenges

The series also poses difficulties. Speech may be fast, humour often depends on wordplay or on cultural references from late twentieth-century America, and regional accents may be unfamiliar. Scientific words may be too rare for lower-intermediate learners to infer, and the series may be easier for learners whose first language shares word roots with English science vocabulary, since cognates are easier to learn *(Peters & Webb, 2018).* These difficulties support the proposal in Section 5 that viewing be supported by captions and tasks rather than left unguided.

5. Proposed Methodology

5.1 Design

A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest–delayed-posttest design with three groups is proposed. Group A -watches selected episodes with English captions and completes vocabulary tasks. Group B -watches the same episodes with English captions but completes no tasks. Group C- is a control group that continues regular classes without viewing. Comparing A and B tests whether tasks add to viewing (RQ3, following Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), and comparing both with C tests whether viewing produces learning (RQ2). Quantitative and qualitative evidence together address RQ1 and the learners' experience.

5.2 Participants

About 90 undergraduate EFL learners at intermediate level (roughly B1 to B2 on the CEFR) would take part, with 30 in each group, assigned by intact class. Participation would be voluntary with informed consent, and an initial vocabulary-size check would confirm that the groups are comparable, because prior knowledge predicts learning (Feng & Webb, 2020; Peters & Webb, 2018).

5.3 Materials and target words

Ten episodes from the early seasons would be chosen, and their transcripts would be compiled into a corpus. A vocabulary-profiling program would then be used to list words above the learners' known frequency level, following the approach of earlier lexical studies *(Webb & Rodgers, 2009).* About 60 target words that occur several times across the ten episodes would be selected, because frequency affects learning *(Peters & Webb, 2018).* Both high-frequency and low-frequency items, and cognates and non-cognates, would be included so that their effects can be compared.

5.4 Instruments

Learning would be measured with the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996) and with meaning-recall and meaning-recognition tests, the two levels used by Peters and Webb (2018). A short listening-comprehension quiz on the episodes would check understanding. A questionnaire and brief interviews would collect learners' attitudes and viewing habits.

5.5 Procedure

Table 2 shows the proposed timeline. Learners would watch two episodes a week for five weeks. The delayed posttest would measure how much is retained.

Table 2 *Proposed timeline*

Stage	Timing	Activity
Pretest	Week 0	Vocabulary Knowledge Scale, meaning-recall and recognition tests; viewing-habits questionnaire.
Treatment	Weeks 1–5	Groups A and B watch two captioned episodes a week; Group A also completes before-, during- and after-viewing tasks; Group C follows regular classes.
Immediate posttest	End of Week 5	Parallel forms of the vocabulary tests; listening quiz; attitude questionnaire.
Delayed posttest	Week 9	Vocabulary tests repeated to measure retention; interviews with a sample of learners.

5.6 Analysis and hypotheses

Group differences would be analysed with a mixed analysis of variance, with effect sizes reported. Word-level results could be analysed with mixed-effects regression to test the roles of frequency, cognateness and prior knowledge, as *Peters and Webb (2018)* did. Interview data would be coded thematically. The hypotheses are: (H1) Groups A and B will outperform Group C; (H2) Group A will outperform Group B; (H3) words that occur more often in the episodes will be learned more often; and (H4) part of the gain will remain at the delayed posttest.

6. Pedagogical Implications

Even before such a study is carried out, the research reviewed suggests practical steps for teachers who want to use a series such as *Young Sheldon*:

- Before viewing: choose related episodes, pre-teach a small set of words (for example, eight to ten) with pictures, and ask learners to predict what happens.

- During viewing: use English captions at first, pause on key scenes, and ask learners to note words they cannot guess from the picture.
- After viewing: have learners match words to meanings, retell scenes using the target words, and replay short clips without captions to practise listening.
- Over time: select episodes from the same series so words recur (Rodgers & Webb, 2011), and encourage learners to keep a personal word list and watch further episodes at home *(Webb, 2015).*

These steps raise involvement *(Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001),* reuse words *(Schmitt, 2008)* and give learners both sound and image for each word *(Mayer, 2009).*

7. Limitations and Future Research

This paper is conceptual. It reports no new data, so its claims about the series' language are proposals, not findings. The series facts come from Wikipedia and should be checked against primary sources where precision is needed. Most of the empirical studies cited used documentaries or short programs, and their results may not carry over to sitcoms with fast, humorous dialogue. The learning gains cited also come from specific groups, such as Dutch-speaking and Chinese-speaking learners, and results may differ for other first-language backgrounds. Future work should build the transcript corpus, test the proposed design, compare *Young Sheldon* with other sitcoms, and examine how captions and cultural knowledge affect comprehension and learning.

8. Conclusion

Television is already part of many learners' English diet, and research shows that it can lead to incidental vocabulary learning, with gains that are modest from one program but larger across repeated viewing (Peters & Webb, 2018; Rodgers & Webb, 2020). *Young Sheldon* offers a long run of related episodes, a mix of academic and everyday language, a narrator and strong visual support, which together make it a promising resource. Its value will depend on how it is used: captions, pre-teaching and follow-up tasks are likely to turn enjoyable viewing into reliable learning. The design proposed here gives a way to test this claim and to guide teachers in the meantime.

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