

# Learning While Being Entertained

The possibilities of entertainment media in language learning

Bachelor's thesis  
Mari Välimaa

University of Jyväskylä  
Department of Languages  
English  
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## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää näkevätkö Jyväskylän yliopiston englannin kielen pääaineopiskelijat yhteyden viihdemedian kulutuksen ja kielen oppimisen välillä. Lisäksi tutkitaan sitä onko niiden vaikutus ollut positiivinen vai negatiivinen, mihin kielenoppimisen osa-alueisiin ne ovat vaikuttaneet sekä onko viihdemedian kulutukseen kannustettu koulussa vastaajien ollessa 7-12 vuotiaita.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen aineistona käytettiin kyselyyn saatuja vastauksia. Kysely suoritettiin verkossa ja se jaettiin muun muassa sähköpostilla Jyväskylän yliopiston englannin pääaineopiskelijoille. Vastauksia kyselyyn tuli 36. 25 vastaajista oli naisia ja 11 miehiä ja vastaajien iät olivat 19-41 välillä. Kysely sisälsi monivalintakysymyksiä sekä avoimia kysymyksiä.</p> <p>Tulokset tukevat ajatusta siitä, että viihdemediaa tulisi hyödyntää enemmän kielten opetuksessa. Kaikki vastaajat näkivät yhteyden viihdemedian käytön ja kielenoppimisen välillä. Suurin osa näistä kokemuksista oli positiivisia. Vaikutuksia oltiin pystytty tunnistamaan useilla eri kielenoppimisen osa-alueilla, mutta kuitenkin yli puolet vastaajista koki, että heitä ei oltu kannustettu peruskoulussa viihdemedian hyödyntämiseen.</p>	
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## 1. Introduction

During my language learning history I have found help from entertainment media to develop my skills. I watched movies with subtitles instead of dubs, I listened English music and played video games in English language. As a child I did not stop to wonder the effects of the entertainment media on my English skills. English as a subject was part of the school curriculum, thus I must have learned the language from school lessons. At the same time I got interested in Japanese entertainment. After a couple years of consuming it I noticed I was able to understand the spoken language, had picked up sentences here and there and yet I had not taken a single Japanese lesson at that point. I returned to consider my English skills, and realised the English media around me must have also helped me to maintain my English skills and even develop them. Thinking of these experiences inspired me to do research on the subject. I wanted to hear about the experience others had had in school and if these experiences could offer something to current and future teachers to consider.

There are previous studies about informal learning, for example Ala-Kyyny's (2012) study about the role of music in informal learning and Autio's (2018) study about how video games affect language learning. I will discuss more about their studies in the background theory chapter. In their studies they focused on one area of informal learning, music for Ala-Kyyny and video games for Autio. In this study, however, I wanted to get a broader picture about how entertainment media can affect one's language learning. The results could possibly bring out some good ideas for future teachers to ponder in their own teaching. The main focus of the study is to see how the learners have experienced the subject themselves. This is why I chose questionnaire as the method of collecting information. I set out to find answers to the two main research questions:

1. Does entertainment media in English, such as video games, movies and TV series, books or music, affect the learning of the English language?
2. What aspects of language skills does it affect?

In chapter 2 I discuss the background theory that is important while considering this study. The chapter is divided into two parts: Traditional learning and Informal learning. The traditional learning part focuses more on the traditional views on how to develop different language learning areas, while the Informal learning part is about previous studies that are related to learning languages in an informal way. The chapter 3 is dedicated to introducing the aims and ways of research in more detail as well as presenting the quantitative results of the questionnaire. Chapter 4 covers the analysis part of the study and it contains a deeper overview of the answers of the questionnaire. The last chapter, chapter 5, is reserved for summarising the results and discussing possibilities for future studies related to the same area of language research.

## 2. How languages are learned

Learning a language has many aspects from grammar to vocabulary to pronunciation. For this study it is first important to consider how languages are learned. This chapter includes an overview of second language acquisition and learning, how grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation is learned, as well as a look into previous studies on how music and video games can affect learning a language.

There is a difference in language acquisition and language learning. According to Yule (2015) acquisition is used when referring to using language naturally with other people who know the language and the language skills gradually develop with these interactions. Acquisition usually takes place outside of the classroom and without a teacher (Yule 2015: 187). Reinhardt (2019) discussed this type of language learning, but with a different term: incidental learning. In it learning happens through exposure without the learner necessarily noticing it happening (Reinhardt 2019: 31). This exposure can be for example reading, listening or being around another language. Sundman (2014: 91) points out in her article that everyone has learned their native language this way as a child. Learning on the other hand implies a more conscious process. It happens usually with the help of a teacher in an institutional setting (Yule 2015: 187). As an opposite of incidental learning, the conscious process of learning can be referred to as intentional learning (Reinhardt 2019: 31). Teaching language in school is a conscious process thus it can be concerned as intentional learning. My research in this study is based on incidental learning experiences.

### 2.1 Traditional learning

Next I will discuss different language learning areas. I will start with grammar, move on to vocabulary and lastly consider pronunciation. Grammar is a systematic description of a language's structure. Sundman divides grammar into morphology and syntax. In this division morphology is about forming words and their conjugations, when syntax is about the structure of sentences and clauses (Sundman 2014: 90). When it comes to teaching grammar, according to Sundman, the

researchers are divided about whether grammar should be taught separately from the language or should it be included in authentic language learning situations (2014: 96). Learning grammar, as learning any other language areas in school, is intentional learning. Sundman argues that teaching grammar intentionally is necessary because of the learners age and the amount of natural language input. Apparently the ability to acquire language weakens after one's puberty (Sundman 2014: 92). Learning through rules, examples and exercises increases the accuracy when using the language and decreases the amount of mistakes (Sundman 2014: 92).

Niitemaa (2014) explains that when a person is learning words they will create their own individual vocabulary. This individual vocabulary is called mental lexicon (Niitemaa 2014: 114). The native language vocabulary and foreign language vocabulary in the mental lexicon form a network which can expand and contract (Niitemaa 2014: 114). For a word to be found quickly from the memory it needs many connections. For example a dog can be connected to animals, pets or something scary in a person's own mental lexicon. Niitemaa adds that these connections have to be maintained which means the vocabulary has to be in active use. In teaching these connections can be practiced through connection and arrangement exercises (2014: 114).

Henriksen (1999) points out that learning vocabulary, however, is about much more than only memorizing the words. Learning words is about complex semantization, where the knowledge is deepened gradually (Henriksen 1999: 307). In her article Henriksen leans on Jean Aitchison's three phases of learning vocabulary. In the first phase called labeling, a person connects a word to a thing or an object. Word-recognition exercises may be used as a help in this phase (Aitchison 1987, cited in Henriksen 1999: 308). The second phase is about connecting the word to other words, for example to adjectives and verbs that are closely related to that word. This phase is called packaging as the words are in a way packaged together (Henriksen 1999: 308). In the third dimension people are building their network, thus the phase is called network building. In this phase a person discovers intentional semantic links between the words, for example synonyms, different

words with the same meaning, and hyponyms, a word whose meaning is included within another word, for example dog is a hyponym of animal (Henriksen 1999: 308).

According to Lintunen (2014) pronunciation can be divided into two stages; one that focuses on the segments of the pronunciation, phoneme, and another that focuses on larger segments for example the rhythm of the speech, intonation or stress of the words (2014: 131). Lintunen explains that pronunciation is a skill that is both cognitive and motoric (2014: 136). Lintunen adds that another skill, writing, that requires motoric skills is usually practiced a lot in the classroom, unlike pronunciation. Pronunciation is expected to be learned from hearing the language (Lintunen 2014: 136). This is interesting as writing is not expected to be learned from only seeing the language. Hearing the language can be an important part of learning to pronounce the words, but it does not guarantee that a learner knows how to form those sounds. Lintunen supports the idea of how practice is important in pronunciation and says that the practice of pronunciation is about forming customs and leaving marks to the memory (Lintunen 2014: 137).

## 2.2 Informal learning

Jenni Ala-Kyyny researched upper secondary school students' opinions about learning English informally through music. The data collection method Ala-Kyyny used in the study was questionnaire and 97 students took part in it (2012: 44). Ala-Kyyny discovered that the majority of the students who took part in the study listened to music daily and 85% of them listened English-language music most (Ala-Kyyny 2012: 70-71). The majority of the students answered that they paid attention to the lyrics they hear in the music and 86% said that they sometimes looked through different sources to see the lyrics in the written format. When they were asked to estimate the relation between their music listening and English learning, only 3% did not see any connection (Ala-Kyyny 2012: 71). This indicates that listening to music in a different language could help a person to learn that language, at least to some degree. It could work as meaningful support in a sense that there are different music styles where the learner can choose one to their liking.

Apparently, when considering what aspect of language learning music can have an effect on, grammar stood out as the students thought that listening to music did not affect it. The other aspects, pronunciation, listening comprehension, vocabulary and expression, were seen to benefit from this media. Ala-Kyyny herself thought that perhaps the traditional way of learning grammar as a concept is overpowering and it could prevent students from seeing grammar in songs (Ala-Kyyny 2012: 73-74).

Petri Autio researched the effects of video games on language learning in his study "Secondary school student's views of video game's effect on language learning". As for a data gathering method Autio chose to have the students answer a questionnaire and there were approximately 200 responses (Autio 2018: 9). In this study, it was discovered that the vast majority of the students that participated in the study thought that video games have a positive effect on their language learning. Apparently only 5% did not feel that there was any effect. The students considered that vocabulary and communication skills were the language learning aspects that were affected the most (Autio 2018: 22). Furthermore, the students seemed to think that playing video games gave them more confidence to use English. Autio theorizes that this could be because when they use English every day it becomes more natural to them, compared to the students who do not play English games and only use English at school (2018: 23).

### 3. Methodology

In this study, the focus is on the relationship between entertainment media and learning English language. The phenomena is hard to measure, thus learners' own experiences are important to this study. The intention was to find out if Jyväskylä university's English major students have experienced any effects of entertainment media in their language learning.

The main research questions are the following:

1. Does entertainment media in English, such as video games, movies and TV series, books or music, affect the learning of the English language?
2. What aspects of language skills does it affect?

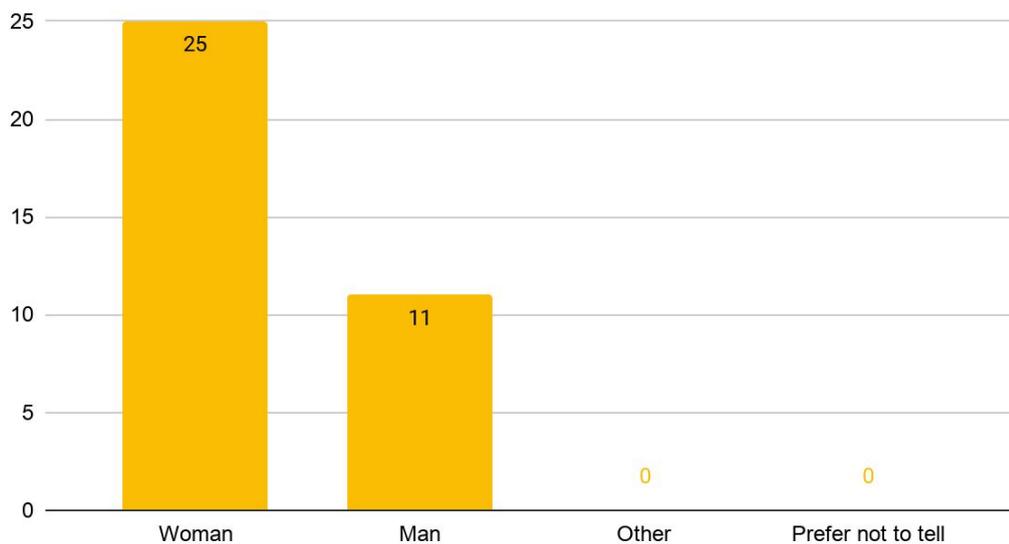
In this section I discuss the methods I used to find answers to these questions. There are reasonings for why these specific methods were chosen as well. In addition I present the answers to the quantitative questions of the questionnaire. In the end of this chapter I also discuss the chosen methods for analysing the answers to the questionnaire.

The data collection method used in this study questionnaire. Questionnaire as a data collection method was chosen because of the advantages it possesses. Questionnaire enables a large group of people to take part in the study. In a short time it is possible to collect a huge amount of information (Dörnyei & Taguchi 2010: 6). In addition, it has been noticed that questionnaires can reduce the amount of bias that the interviewer could create. This would mean that the results' reliability and consistency increases (Bryman 2008 as quoted by Dörnyei & Taguchi 2010: 6).

The questionnaire was conducted via Google forms and it has seven questions which include multiple choice questions and open answer questions. No personal information, for example names or addresses, were collected in the questionnaire. It was completely anonymous. The participants' answers and the whole questionnaire were deleted after this study was finished. The questionnaire was sent via email to Jyväskylä's university students whose major subject is English. In addition, the questionnaire was shared on Jyväskylä's university's English students' Facebook

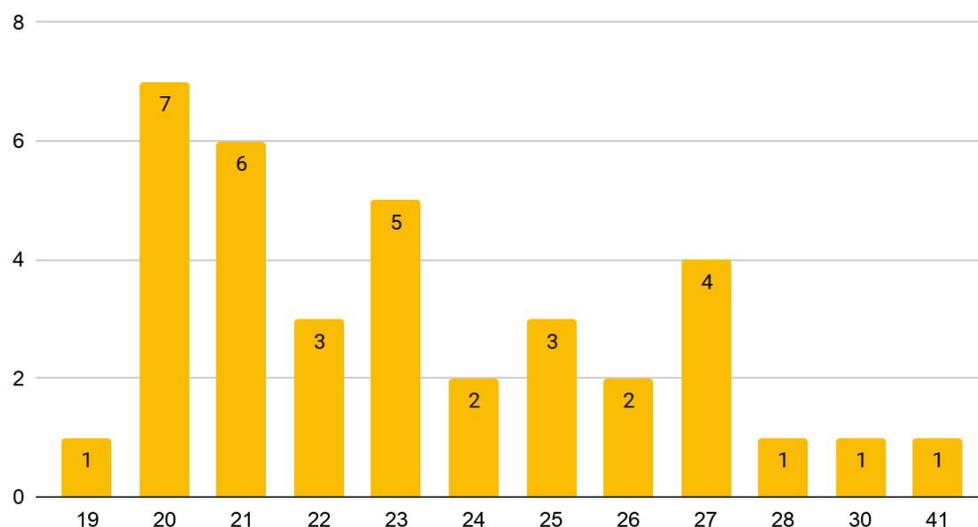
group. Participants were able to access the questionnaire through a link. The questionnaire was open for two weeks and 36 people answered it. 25 of those people were women and 11 men.

### Gender



The age range of the people who took part in the questionnaire was from 19 to 41. Most of the people who answered were in their 20's, 32 of the respondents, and age 20 was the biggest age group overall. The participants also could specify if they were

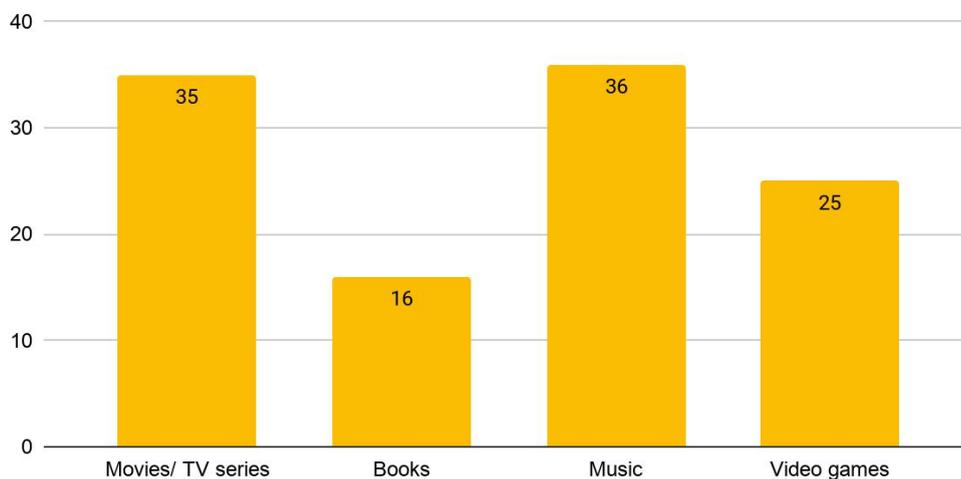
### Age



a native Finnish student or an exchange student. All of the participants said that they were native Finnish students.

In the questionnaire it was asked what entertainment media the respondents thought had affected their English learning and four options were offered, movies/TV series, music, books and video games. In addition, respondents could add other fields of entertainment media if they wanted. The participants could also choose multiple options from this question. Everyone who took part in the questionnaire thought that music affected their English learning. Almost everyone, 35 people, felt that movies and Tv series had had an effect. 16 people thought that books affected their learning and 25 that video games. It is worth noting that 4 people mentioned comics as an 'other' option, youtube received two mentions and news, magazines, forums and social media all got one mention.

Which English entertainment media participants have consumed when they were 7 to 12 years old



The analysis of this study will merge two different approaches together. Quantitative approach uses methods such as questionnaires that are greatly structured (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest & Namey 2005: 1). The study's analytical objective, however, is to describe and explain the relationship between entertainment media and learning English language and in a way describe individuals experiences of the subject. Describing and explaining relationships and

describing individuals experiences fits better with the qualitative approach (Mack et al. 2005: 1). In addition the questionnaire includes both multiple choice questions, that are typical for quantitative approach, and open-ended questions that are typical to qualitative approach (Mack et al. 2005: 1). This means that the analysis of this study merges both quantitative and qualitative approaches together, and this merge can be called mixed methods (Creswell 2015 as quoted by Schrauf 2016: 7). The purpose of the combination is to overcome the weaknesses of the approaches separately and benefit for both of their strengths (Schrauf 2016: 7).

## 4. Analysis and discussion

In this section of the study, I will explore the issues the respondents raised in their answers to the questionnaire. The section is divided into three parts according to an open question that is being discussed. First I will look into the effect that the participants felt that entertainment media has had to their L2 learning, then I will focus on what language learning areas the participants experienced that the effect had happened on and lastly there will be discussion about the encouragement to consume entertainment media in English that the participants had received in school.

### 4.1 Effect of entertainment media in L2 learning

When asked to consider whether the English entertainment media affected their language learning, all 36 participants saw a connection between their learning and the media. Furthermore, everyone saw the influence of the media having a positive effect on their learning. Two people also saw one negative aspect to English entertainment media. Several of the participants were able to recognize the effects the English entertainment media had in their language use later. Interestingly, a couple of the participants even brought up how the media motivated them to learn more. They pointed out that they were interested in the subject of the media and this motivated them to learn English to understand the subject matter better.

(1) yes, great impact on my vocabulary and it was easier to start learning English. Negative effects might be bad and inappropriate words and maybe some informal ways to say things (gonna vs. going to) which can affect negatively in your writing.

(2) I believe that watching TV shows and movies, listening to music and playing games in English affected my language skills in a very positive way. I think it both developed my language skills and motivated me to learn more at the same time.

All in all the answers were very positive about the impact that entertainment media can have on learning English. Interestingly two people mentioned a negative effect in addition to positive. These participants saw that they learned some informal sentences from the media as in for example using “gonna” instead of “going to”.

According to Sundman (2014) learning through rules increases accuracy and decreases mistakes. When consuming entertainment media the grammatical rules are not present the same way they can be in a classroom. The two participants also mentioned learning inappropriate words as in learning curse words. One added that in the present time they see that they were too young to learn such words. Movies and TV series, songs, books and video games can all include swearing and as well as picking up useful vocabulary a person can also pick up the swear words from them. It is important to consider the age limits set for these forms of media. The limits are most of the time set for a reason and they should be followed. Following them would help to avoid at least inappropriate language.

The answers support the idea of learning a language when being exposed to it. The participants recognized that they were able to recognize words they had heard or seen in entertainment media and that this helped them when studying the language in a more traditional language learning environment, for example in school. There is also an endorsement for the idea that things that interest a student can motivate them to learn further. Especially in cases when learning the language can help the person to understand their interest better. These interests can be anything from dance to crafting skills and cooking. For example by watching cooking shows one can learn new recipes or techniques or vocabulary that helps them read recipes later in that language or one can follow dancing instructions from a video and learn new techniques.

#### 4.2 Specifying the areas of effect

I asked the participants if they are able to specify which areas of language skills the entertainment media has affected. Almost everyone, 35 people, saw the effect on their vocabulary. Effects to listening comprehension came up in 30 answers. Next were grammar, 16, and pronunciation, 12, the first being a bit unexpected. Reading and writing received several mentions and body language related to different cultures was mentioned twice.

(3) Grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension... basically all areas. Also becoming acquainted with different types of body language related to different cultures.

(4) Mostly vocabulary, but also grammar (by seeing and hearing how people actually use the language), listening comprehension, and reading comprehension. I also believe reading affects one's writing skills, thus media also made me better at expressing myself in English.

According to the answers, vocabulary was the most affected area of language learning. By listening and seeing the words people were able to pick them up to their own use. Sometimes the context helps the reader/ watcher/ listener to understand the meaning of the word and sometimes the participants mentioned that they themselves looked up the word in the dictionary after being exposed to it. Vocabulary is a huge part of learning a language and improving it can help one to use the language more easily. As Niitemaa (2014) mentioned in her article the vocabulary needs to be in active use for the learner to be able to access it quickly in their mental lexicon. Hearing and seeing the word in use in the entertainment media can help to maintain the link to the word in the mental lexicon.

In a previous study related to learning English language from music written by Jenni Ala-Kyyny (2012), the participants of the questionnaire thought that listening to music did not affect their grammar. Ala-Kyyny offered an explanation that perhaps the traditional views of learning grammar are still overpowering. Unexpectedly 16 participants in this study saw the effects of entertainment media in their grammar skills. This could be due to the fact that the questionnaire was not only focused around music, but also included written and spoken language media. Written sentence forms can offer examples to how to use language to the readers and this can resemble the traditional way of learning grammar more than listening to music. Ala-Kyyny also mentioned in her study that the participants saw the informal language as an obstacle to learn grammar from music. This might be true because when writing songs one can often take liberties in writing form for the sake of the lyrics fitting the melody of the song.

In addition it is interesting how in the answers to this question if writing or reading was mentioned often also was the other one. This would indicate some level of

connection in learning to read and write. As both of these include written media, one is about interpreting it and other about producing it, it seems logical. It is worth mentioning how couple people included understanding body language related to specific cultures. This would indicate the understanding of that interpreting the message from someone speaking includes more than just words. Non-verbal communication is a widely researched subject and for example Manusov suggests that hand gestures can have symbolic meanings and that facial expressions can convey emotions (2006: 102-103). Language skills include being able to use language in real situations and this does possibly include communicating with people from other cultures who might have different ways of expressing meanings with their whole body. Facial expressions can sometimes tell more than the words the person is speaking. Seeing these different ways to communicate in TV shows and movies can offer some sort of examples of how people in that culture communicate. It is a good idea, however, to take into consideration that the interactions in TV shows and movies can often be a bit dramatized or they can even be very stereotypical. There are two sides for this. People can mirror their identities from what they see in the media and understand themselves better (Herkman 2007: 39). On the other hand entertainment media has been criticized for luring young people in with superficial things (Herkman 2007: 46). In schools these matters could be taken into consideration through teaching media reading skills alongside language learning. Critical media education will help the students gain knowledge of how media works, why it works the way it does, the possible motives the media could have and so on (Herkman 2007: 47).

#### 4.3 The encouragement of consuming entertainment media

Lastly in the questionnaire I asked the participants if they were encouraged to consume English language entertainment media when they were in school. Major part, 19, of the participants answered no. 7 of them answered yes, but also as many answered that they do not remember. 3 answers mentioned that they were encouraged to just consume one type of media, reading books.

(5) Yes, especially listening to music and watching movies/tv shows with subtitles. Teachers said it would be both entertaining and beneficial – and it was!

(6) Not really as far as I can remember. It was my interest that lead me to English media rather than anyone encouragin me towards it.

When considering the results of previous questions one could see the benefits of encouraging the consuming of English entertainment media to language learning. The participants were able to point out several benefits that consuming entertainment media can have on a language learner. The results to this question, however, reveal that it is not necessarily given that teachers would encourage this. More than half said that they were not encouraged to consume media of their interest in English. As the learners' experiences about learning from entertainment media were so positive, why the teachers would not take advantage of this. It could be because they favor more traditional ways of teaching. There is no denying that one can learn from doing exercises and reading and practicing. It could, however, be very beneficial to add an aspect of the students interest in the equation.

It is good to notice that 7 participants had good experience and had felt encouragement towards consuming media of their choice. It would seem these teachers saw the benefits of motivating their students with something that interests them. As one person mentioned their teacher had said it will be both entertaining and beneficial. Sometimes children can find it hard to find motivation without instant gratification for their efforts. When the medium of studying includes something they are interested in, studying could be easier and almost happen without noticing. 7 people answered the questions that they cannot remember. This can either mean they have no specific memories of this happening to either way, or they do not remember being encouraged meaning they did not get encouraged. One answer specifically put this in words by saying “I don’t remember, so probably not really”. One should consider these ‘cannot’ remember answers with a grain of salt as they cannot be counted to either yes or no answers. It is nonetheless an interesting aspect to ponder.

Some answers mentioned that they had been encouraged to consume one type of media, and usually that was reading books in English. Reading books could be considered to be a more traditional way of learning a language through something possibly entertaining. Interesting point is that no one mentioned that video games would have been recommended by any teachers. One specific respondent even said that they were encouraged to use all the other types of media, except video games. There are now studies that have found out the positive effects that playing video games can have on learning languages. For example Petri Autio's (2018) research that I mentioned earlier found out only 5% of the respondents did not see any connection between playing video games and learning a language.

## 5. Conclusion

When I began planning this study I decided to look at answers to two main research questions: 1. Does entertainment media in English, such as video games, movies and TV series, books or music, affect the learning of English language? 2. What aspects of language skills it affects? When considering the answers to this study it seems like there definitely is a way that entertainment media can affect the learning of English language. In addition it seems those effects are mostly beneficial. The participants saw a connection between their interests and their motivation to learn the language. When the language had something to do with something they liked they were motivated to learn the language more. As one of the participants described "it was both beneficial and fun". Encouraging the use English media could be a very beneficial tactic to add motivation, especially as children might have trouble finding motivation in themselves.

It seems that the entertainment media can affect pretty much all of the areas of learning language. The entertainment does not only offer entertainment, but also vocabulary to be learned, models for pronunciation and examples of writing. It was very surprising to learn that many saw the possibilities of learning even grammar from entertainment media. In the background theory I mentioned that traditionally grammar is taught in schools and mostly through rules. The results I received support the idea of grammar being taught in more authentic language situations rather than separated from the rest of the language learning. Gaining vocabulary through entertainment media is probably an aspect that could be easiest to connect to traditional learning. Hearing and seeing the word in use offers support for maintaining the links in a person's mental lexicon. Some participants also were able to point out the importance of learning body language and how they were able to learn it from TV series and movies. There were some participants that saw the benefits in more than one area, and some even in all of the areas. This brings out the gains that teachers should take in consideration when thinking methods to motivate learners. If a student is having problems with English it could be worthwhile to see if

they have interests that could be somehow connected to using the language. Perhaps they could watch movies or play video games in English.

These results apply to students in Finland, and especially to students who have continued to further their English education as their main subject in Jyväskylä university. There could be variation among different universities inside Finland or between English major and not English major students and I think these subjects would be worth studying further. In addition investigating the relationship between including entertainment media in education and critical media education could be very beneficial. Entertainment media can be a very motivating way for students to learn, but it has its downsides, especially if the students do not have media reading skills. The amount of the participants who saw the connection between learning grammar and entertainment media was very surprising, and investigating the phenomenon on a larger scale could be very interesting. Nevertheless I think that current and future teachers could benefit from considering their methods in teaching and if they take into consideration the students interests. Maybe entertainment media is able to offer more than just entertainment.

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## Appendix

### The questionnaire questions

1. Gender
  - a. Man
  - b. Woman
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to tell
  
2. Age
  
3. Are you Finnish student or exchange student?
  
4. Which English entertainment media have you consumed when you were 7 to 12 years old (You can choose multiple)
  - a. Movies / Tv series
  - b. Books
  - c. Music
  - d. Video games
  - e. Other...
  
5. Do you feel that these media have affected your English learning in some way? Was the effect positive or negative?
  
6. Which areas of language skills have they affected? (grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension etc.)
  
7. Was consuming English media encouraged in school in your experience? In what ways did the encouragement happen?