Investigating a Popular Belief: TV Series’ Roles in L2 Learners’ Speaking Fluency

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ABSTRACT – One of the most popular beliefs among English L2 learners is that watching English TV series can help them speak English language fluently. While it is seemingly genuine, as supported by many English learning websites and successful English L2 learners, further investigations on this subject matter have been minimal. Therefore, this research aims to find out the roles of TV series in improving English L2 learners’ fluency in English. In this qualitative research, in-depth interviews were conducted on two English L2 learners who claimed to have attained a certain level of fluency through intensive and independent watching of TV series. The results found that although TV series were not the primary strategy to obtain fluency in English, they had helped English L2 learners improve their fluency in speaking English in several ways. TV series also played a significant role as a plausible fluency enhancer for English L2 learners by providing learning motivation and exposure, acting as a role model of natural English, supporting linguistic features acquisition, and boosting the learner’s confidence to speak English. These aspects are not typically found while learning English in informal settings such as schools or English courses. These results add insights on how TV series could be a crucial supplementary material for L2 learning. Further research is recommended to determine the extent of TV series features in improving English L2 learners’ fluency in English.

INTRODUCTION

One of the ultimate goals of learning English as a second language (L2) is to speak the language fluently. The purpose is commonly pursued through formal education such as learning English in schools, courses, and special programmes and through informal education through reading, listening, watching, and conversing in English of the learner’s own accord. Despite the various available means for English L2 learners to learn English, one of the most common advice given to learners to obtain fluency in English is by watching English TV series. A TV series is a set of serialised stories in videos broadcasted at regular intervals on television. What has become more attractive nowadays is that TV series can be watched on streaming platforms via the internet, making them even more easily accessible.

Richards (2015) states that successful second language learners often mention that one of their significant sources of learning English is watching television programmes, including TV series. This popular notion is promoted by English practitioners, teachers, learners, and learning websites (Donaghy, 2014). There are public figures who use it as a tool or medium to practice English more casually. For instance, RM, a member of the popular Korean boyband, BTS, concurred that his fluency in English stems primarily from watching an English-based TV series entitled F. R. I. E. N. (Winifred, 2019).

There have been studies that primarily discuss how TV series or movies help English L2 learners improve their vocabulary (Pujadas & Munoz, 2019), formulaic language (Erdemir, 2014), and language learning in general (Dincer & Dariyemez, 2020). In addition, studies have been conducted on the impacts of TV series on L2 learners’ speaking abilities. For instance, Parmawati and Inayah (2019) and Pamula (2020) found that movies could improve students’ speaking abilities. Tajgozari (2019), who investigated the effects of watching English-subtitled TV series on a group of Iranian students’ English-speaking accuracy, found a positive impact on their students’ speaking accuracy. It was also found that media provides valuable and authentic resources through real-life contexts that create opportunities to expose learners to diverse language aspects, including different voices and styles, reduced speech, use of grammar, and slang words. However, the amount of research investigating the benefits of watching TV series in English in improving the speaking fluency of English L2 learners is minimal.

Hence, considering the claimed benefits of this popular belief, the researchers are motivated to explore the extent of this firm belief among English L2 learners. This research aims to find out the roles of TV series in improving L2 learners’ speaking fluency. It attempts to provide some insight into the perspectives of English L2 learners on how TV series have helped them attain their fluency. Discussions of the findings are brought in light of the interrelationships between affective domains and cognition in influencing fluency and language learning.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Interrelationships of Affect and Cognition in Language Learning

Hurd and Lewis (2008) believe that affect, which includes emotions, feelings, moods, attitudes, anxiety, tolerance of ambiguity, and motivation, plays a role in conditioning behaviours and influencing learning. Oxford also added that “the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure” (as cited in Hurd and Lewis, 2008, p. 219). L2 learners’ affective side, which includes negative feelings, could hinder learners from making progress, even those with a good grasp of the technical aspects of learning a language. Cognitive neuroscience research found the influence that affect elements have on how efficiently students could optimise learning (Ehrman, 1996; Damasio, 1994; Schumann, 1999, cited in Hurd & Lewis, 2008). The notion works as humans are believed to use “emotions to guide their reasoning, to encode and retrieve their memories to bias their response” (Rammani, 2006 as cited in Hurd and Lewis, 2008, p. 220). These studies prove the interrelationship of affect and cognition as being increasingly multi-dimensionally overlapping and treated as interdependent constructs.

Comprehensible Input in Second Language Acquisition

Krashen’s (1992) Input Hypothesis claims that “humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input” (p. 80). Language learners progress their proficiency levels when they receive input containing what they have already acquired with new input. This process is symbolised with $i + 1$, with $i$ means the current level and $i + 1$ connotes the next level along with the natural order (Krashen, 1992). Therefore, the consequence of this cognitive process is that speaking is a result of acquisition from the competence that the learners’ built via comprehensible input (Krashen, 1992).

Benefits of Watching TV Series on Language Learning

Azaryad (2018) believes that the addictive nature of TV series is an advantage that provides a positive outcome in learning a foreign language. TV series breaks the traditional classroom’s monotony by motivating and entertaining language learners through rich, authentic use of the language (Azaryad, 2018). Several top-rated series even have the power to ‘enslave’ their viewers, making them willingly follow the storyline from season to season (Azaryad, 2018). Unlike movies, in which a story finishes within two hours, the plots of TV series develop slowly into episodes, forcing viewers to fully invest more time to enjoy the story (Azaryad, 2018). Richards (2015) believes that television viewing, including TV series, has beneficial features such as a practical out-of-class learning activity. The benefits in terms of accessibility, the intensity of exposure, motivation, flexibility, multimodal, and notice gaps are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Benefits of watching TV series.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Accessibility</td>
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<td>2. Intensity of Exposure</td>
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Effects of Movies on English L2 Learners’ Speaking Skills

Several studies have investigated the impacts of audiovisual media, specifically movies, on the speaking skills of English L2 learners. Parmawati and Inayah (2019) conducted a collaborative classroom action research utilising English movies to improve the speaking skills of Indonesian first-year university students in two cycles of approximately one month. Based on the pre-test and post-test results, it was found that using English movies during speaking class had improved the learners’ speaking ability. Further investigation revealed that English L2 learners enjoyed learning to communicate through English movies and believe it helps them improve their speaking skills.

Pamula (2020) also conducted experimental research on 60 Indonesian high school students to determine the effect of movies on the students’ speaking skills using American and British English films. Students were asked to watch English movies and observe their linguistic elements for two weeks before assessing their grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension. The study’s post-test results showed an improvement in the students’ speaking ability. Further investigations on this topic reveal that this improvement is due to the exposure to a real-life context and different English accents, grammar, and slang words provided by the movies.
Fluency in L2 Speaking

According to Brown (2004), L2 speaking skills can be observed directly and empirically as a productive skill. The product of the skill consists of two main categories: accuracy and fluency. While accuracy includes vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, fluency is the ability to produce a language orally without significant pauses and disturbances. According to Gower et al. (1995), fluency is the ability to speak spontaneously, which may be exempt from high accuracy in grammar as long as the utterance can be understood. Meanwhile, Nation (1989) argues that fluency is knowing and using a language effectively, with proper speed and optimism. It aligns with Koizumi (2005), who considers L2 learners’ speed and quantity essential to prove fluency.

Fillmore cited in Nation (1989) found four characteristics of fluency: (1) quick thinking in conveying the message to prevent empty time lag in speaking, (2) coherently conveyed sentences, (3) appropriate content and context of the conversation, and (4) creative delivery of ideas. Therefore, the current study concludes that a speaker does not have to be highly accurate in grammar to be fluent in a particular language. A fluent speaker may produce grammatically inaccurate structures as long as the communication’s speed, quantity, and effectiveness are adequately achieved.

Factors Impacting English L2 Learners’ Fluency

According to Ellis (1985), fluency in second language learning is influenced by several factors, including age, aptitude, intelligence, learning style, attitudes, motivation, and personality. Oyama (1976) and Asher and Garcia (1969) found that native-like accents are more achievable by L2 learners in their childhood than during adolescence or adulthood. The finding is supported by other researchers such as Khasinah (2014), who states that, in comparison, children are better at mastering language than adults. Richards, cited in Khasinah (2014), explains that aptitude, the natural ability to learn a language, gives learners the ability to identify sound patterns in a new language and recognize the different grammatical functions of words in sentences, which is an example of the combination of various skills in language talent.

Ellis (1986) also believes that learning styles affect the fluency of L2 learners. According to him, learning style is a strategy for accumulating new L2 rules and automating existing ones. As there are three learning styles: auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual, Richard (1985) explains audio learners as those who need grammatical rules explanation; kinaesthetic learners learn by writing down words or sentences to memorise things; visual learners acquire by associating with pictures to help them remember things. Ellis (1985) defines attitude as a set of beliefs about factors such as a target language culture, one’s own culture, and classroom learning. In the case of classroom learning, teachers and learning determine learners’ language attitude when learning a foreign language as a second language.

Furthermore, motivation and self-confidence are needed in learning. According to Khasinah (2014), motivation is one of the most critical factors in acquiring a second language, as a person’s desire to do something is determined by their motivation. In SLA, motivation is defined as the goals or overall orientation of learners and attitudes. It is “the persistence exhibited by the learner in striving for a goal” (Gardner & Lambert as cited in Khasinah, 2014, p. 258). Moreover, Park and Lee (2005) have found significant effects between L2 learners’ self-confidence and oral performance: the more confident the learners are, the higher their oral performance is. On the other hand, learners who are more anxious about speaking English would score lower oral performance scores.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study aimed to explore and analyse how TV series helped English L2 learners be fluent in speaking and the roles of TV series in improving the learners’ fluency. The method used was a case study, where the research subjects underwent in-depth interviews. The research participants were two high school graduates who watched TV series at their own will and time. The details of participants remained confidential. They were coded as Participant O and Participant D.

Semi-structured Interviews

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten predetermined questions to explore the participants’ experiences on how TV series had helped them with their speaking fluency. These questions aimed to determine the participants’ academic and personal backgrounds and their TV series watching habits. The information was needed to relate to their claim on the impact of TV series watching on their fluency in speaking English. The questions were:

1. How often do you watch TV series?
2. What TV series do you watch?
3. How long have you watched TV series?
4. What are your purposes for watching TV series?
5. Why do you like watching TV series?
6. Do you think TV series improve your English skills? How?
7. What are the English skills that you learn from the series?
8. What are specific linguistic features that you learn from TV series?
9. Do you think TV series help improve your fluency in speaking? How?
10. What’s the difference between learning English from a series and at school?
FINDINGS

How TV Series Help Improve L2 Learners Fluency in Speaking English

The participants were avid viewers of English TV Series. They spent a minimum of three hours watching English TV series almost every day during the pandemic and six to eight hours a week on average days. They were highly engaged and immersed with the story and characters of TV series, and they subconsciously identified themselves better in using the language personally. The findings from the interviews revealed five significant points on how TV series helped the participants to learn English subconsciously: (1) engage with the TV series’ story and characters, (2) be introduced and familiarised with new vocabulary, (3) improve day-to-day English conversational skills, (4) be provided samples to speak English naturally and adequately, and (5) be supported to speak English more fluently. The following subsections contain the interview excerpts that present the participants’ elaboration on how TV series had helped them learn and eventually improve their fluency in speaking English.

TV series’ story and characters engage the participants on a personal level

Participants D and O revealed that they both were very engaged and immersed in the story and its characters that they believed they had unconsciously learnt English. Participant O felt that his attachment to how the TV series progressed and the development of the characters had given him opportunities to learn English. He could remember the stories watched and the characters’ lines very well as if the two had been imprinted in his brain and heart. He thought this obsession had made him and others learn from what they enjoyed watching. He explained,

“If you really get attached to a TV series that hard, you will know how to create a good sentence indirectly... It will definitely help you in day-to-day conversation. You will copy a certain character type of speaking, or you will copy a character’s culture.”

“because you are attached to the character, you are engaged in trying to think the ways the characters think....”

Participant D also had the same experience. His attachment to some of the TV series’ characters allowed him to learn new English expressions, especially famous catchphrases effectively. He said,

“I feel like I got carried away with the characters in the series ... I learnt new expressions that I can use to express my feelings in English in the right context, such as hyperbolic expressions.”

Moreover, the atmosphere created after watching TV series incessantly accommodated him to speak and express his ideas in English more comfortably. Participant D claimed that he “feels like I am in the US [or an English-speaking country].”

TV series enable the participants to learn new vocabulary and words in contexts

Both Participants D and O claimed that they learnt a lot of new vocabulary, phrases, idioms, and expressions from the TV series they watched. Participant O mentioned several times how he also learnt a lot of vocabulary from the TV series. For instance,

“The greatest thing that TV series gives is basically the enrichment of vocabulary. You get lots of vocab[ulary] here.”

“Visual representation is that important, for me at least, to learn vocabulary.”

Participant D also had similar responses. He felt that watching TV series had improved his vocabulary and English expressions. He said,

“[by watching TV series] I know expressions that I can use to describe my feelings in English, like hyperbolic expressions.”

“I feel my vocabulary and expressions are enriched [by watching TV series] that I can use to express my ideas.”

These transcriptions prove that Participant O and Participant D had experienced the benefits from watching TV series which enriched their English vocabulary, phrases, and expressions.

Apart from vocabulary improvement, TV series also helped them understand meaning from context. Participant O mentioned that TV series helped him know the connotations of words well through how the words, idioms, or expressions were used. He explained,

“[by watching TV series] you know when to use the word. You don’t know what the words actually meant, but considering [how] the characters use it so much ... you just know what it meant”

“[By watching TV series, I know] how an adjective is used [and] when people actually used it. It’s better to see it [the word] simultaneously when you are learning it.... We know the context of using the words. I mean, there’s a lot of Aim High (the English textbook he uses during high school) vocab[ulary] I learn from TV series.”

Participant D shared a similar sentiment. He felt that TV series helped him enhance his understanding of the previously learnt language in class. He claimed that the learnt grammar and vocabulary at school had served as a “foundation” or for
background information, which he further associated and reinforced through the context and experience that TV series provided. He mentioned,

“Formal education at school is the foundation [of my English] for me to watch TV series which taught me the structures, grammar, and tips on understanding conversations using basic English vocabulary.”

TV series helped both Participant O and Participant D understand how to use English words they had learnt in their classrooms in the correct context based on what they watched from the TV series.

**TV series assist the participants in learning day-to-day conversational English**

Both participants claimed that TV series played a significant role in helping them learn day-to-day conversational English. They both stated that the English they had learnt at school was quite formal and academic; therefore, it limited their understanding of how the language is used in real life. Participant D mentioned,

“At school, it is more formal, but not in TV series. I watched the native speakers talking in their daily conversation. So, I got accustomed to it and felt more natural speaking English.”

Watching native English speakers talking in TV series enabled participants to learn daily conversations and speak English more fluently and naturally in everyday life.

**TV series provide role models to speak in English naturally and adequately**

Another benefit from watching TV series was that the native English speakers became role models for speaking proper and natural English. Quoting from the last category of the interview, Participant D believed that he felt more natural in speaking English as a result of intensely watching native English speakers use English in their daily conversation. Participant O also stated,

“In terms of fluency, it helps that you now have a role model or a good example of what a native speaker actually is [like when speaking].”

This testimony confirmed that Participant O also found native English speakers as role models for English learning, which helped him speak more naturally and fluently.

**TV series support speaking in English more fluently**

Both participants agreed that watching TV series with high intensity helped them improve their speaking fluency. The series improved his English speaking fluency because it enabled him to find vocabulary and expressions he wanted to use quickly. Participant D said,

“TV series improves my fluency because when I want to speak in English, I won’t be confused nor need a long time to think of the words and expressions I want to use. What I want to say will just come across my mind.”

Meanwhile, participant O mentioned,

“When my vocabulary is improved, and I have lots of vocabulary, my fluency is also so much improved. It’s easier to speak, right, with lots of vocab. It also helps you to become fluent because you have a good example of a native speaker, so it’s a role model for you.”

Both participants agreed that intense exposure to TV series had allowed them to retrieve vocabulary quickly, construct sentences, and choose the most commonly used English expressions, which all are beneficiary for their speaking fluency process.

**DISCUSSION**

The in-depth interviews with the two participants brought up two main study discussions. The first corresponded with the study objective on the roles of TV series for L2 speaking fluency. The discussion then led to the interrelationships between the affective domain and cognition in language learning. The aspects of affective and cognitive are further expanded in the following subsections.

**The Roles of TV Series in Improving English L2 Learner’s Fluency in Speaking**

According to the findings of previous research and theories in second/foreign language learning, it can be inferred that the central role of TV series in improving L2 learners’ fluency in speaking is as an enhancer. However, this role can be divided into two specific functions: affective and cognitive aspects. The participants’ testimony that TV series support and enhance their speaking fluency in English is only possible with the foundational knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from formal or conventional education. Krashen (1992) explains this through the comprehensible input hypothesis by concluding that language input is essential for language acquisition. Kim et al. (2016) also discover that the higher an L2 learner’s proficiency is, the more fluent they are.
The Affective Aspect of TV Series in L2 Learner’s Fluency in Speaking

Oxford, as cited in Hurd and Lewis (2008), believes that the affective side of students is one of the crucial factors in learning a language, in which “the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure” (p. 219). Based on the findings, TV series have impacted the participants’ affective aspects. The participants’ identified the media as a learning motivator and confidence booster in speaking English.

TV Series as a Learning Motivator

Motivation is one of the fundamental keys to any successful second language learning and acquisition process. With TV series, the participants are reported as intrinsically motivated to expose, engage, and immerse themselves in authentic English resources, which help their language acquisition process. Azaryad (2018) explains that TV series also have addictive nature, which motivates learners to continue watching them and learning the language.

The participants testified that they enjoyed watching TV series for typically more than three hours a day. However, this demanded the participants to focus on and immerse themselves in an audiovisual medium of English. Watching TV series is not an activity that English teachers can easily carry out in classrooms as L2 learners struggle to focus on and immerse themselves in a 3-minute video in English. The participants also mentioned that while their initial intention of watching TV series was primarily for entertainment purposes, they subconsciously learnt English throughout the process. This strong motivation to keep watching has exposed them to authentic and natural English audiovisual media, which has indirectly helped them improve many aspects of their English, including their fluency in speaking.

TV Series for Learner’s Confidence Booster to Speak English

According to Krashen (1982), many affective variables are connected to second language acquisition. Motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety are the three main variables investigated. Park and Lee (2005) explained that confidence correlates significantly with an L2 learner’s speaking performance because low self-confidence or high anxiety levels negatively affect students’ oral performances. In contrast, the higher the confidence level an L2 learner possesses, the better their oral performance or speaking. As previous studies suggest, TV series help improve learners’ vocabulary and formulaic language/expressions. The participants in the current study testified that after watching the series, they could still feel the atmosphere of English speaking, which encouraged them to speak the language to their surroundings. In other words, watching TV series can enable L2 learners to use the language even more frequently.

Cognitive Aspect of TV Series in L2 Learner’s Fluency in Speaking

Cognitively, watching TV series also supports L2 learners improve the linguistic aspect of their proficiency. Again, the higher an L2 learner’s proficiency, the more fluent they would be. Therefore, TV series provide exposure to English, role models of natural English, and linguistic features acquisition support.

TV series gives exposure to authentic and natural English

Exposure is crucial for L2 learners to receive comprehensible input in the language they are learning to improve proficiency and support language acquisition (Krashen, 1981). In second and foreign language learning, exposure refers to the learner’s experience of the language they are learning directly, whether in natural or artificial environments or through media, whether spoken or written. The participants in the current study experienced natural English learning by intensely watching TV series even though they were not directly involved. The participants were exposed to and could observe how the language was naturally used in the correct context.

This benefit could also be strengthened with audiovisual media and enjoyable storytelling that TV series offer to engage L2 learners. Previous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of audiovisual media in improving L2 learners’ proficiency. It provides a visual representation of what is said or portrayed in the scene and its context. This experience allows L2 learners who watch TV series to create connections of how the language is used to support learning and acquisition of the language elements, especially vocabulary and pronunciation, which help improve their speaking fluency. Furthermore, storytelling can enhance L2 learners’ language mastery as it is highly motivating, provides comprehensible input, and promotes social interaction (Lucarevschi, 2016). The participants in the current study also mentioned that they were intensely engaged with the story and its characters. They were personally invested in and desired to imitate their expressions and actions. Consequently, this enhanced exposure supports L2 learners in improving their speaking fluency.

Role model of natural English (expressions, pronunciation, and accent trainer)

A TV series is an example of audiovisual aids used in teaching and learning, including English. Mehmet (2019) identifies audiovisual learning objects and tools, such as television and radio. The AUT Library website explains that audiovisual media may have audio and visual components (e.g., films, TV shows, YouTube videos). Maharani (2017) asserts that by using audiovisual aids in the teaching-learning process, L2 learners will be more interested in learning pronunciation because they can see and listen to the correct sounds produced by the native speaker of English. With audiovisual, L2 learners will be more interested in learning the targetted language components, such as pronunciation and accent. These visual elements are more interesting than the standalone audio element.

In addition, Adela (2017) states that audiovisual media provides a good model, which is the native speaker of English, for teaching pronunciation. L2 learners can imitate the language modelled by the characters in the TV series. It makes L2
learners more sensitive to the pronunciation and accent of the language (Merisuo-Storm, 2007). Pronunciation is a significant part of speaking (Bhattacharya, 2017) because good English-speaking skills can be seen from pronunciation. In other words, pronunciation and accent are the keys to good speaking skills. The audiovisual aids in TV series are an appropriate learning medium to provide examples of L2 learners learning languages, pronunciation, and accent. An attractive and friendly perception towards the people whose language is being learnt sensitises learners to the audiolingual aspects of language.

**Linguistic Feature Acquisition Support for English L2 Learners**

Based on the findings, watching TV series help L2 learners acquire several English linguistic features: vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, conversational English, and grammar. The acquisition of these linguistic features is supported for various reasons. Research has shown that videos help L2 learners learn new words well because they are given context, visual representation, and auditory information that helps them retain the words longer (Webb, 2015). These features help L2 learners learn new words and pronounce words that they have learned. The association between TV series and previously learnt words could also help L2 learners contextualise and retain words in their memory. Similarly, it also applies to other linguistic features.

The stories in the TV series and their characters have successfully created a personal attachment in the English L2 learners who have been the series’ viewers. This engagement and passion substantially help L2 learners learn the language as they can remember the stories and the characters’ lines, which they watch very well. Some of the dialogues in the story are profoundly imprinted in L2 learners that they can recall, visualise, and restate them. Moreover, the atmosphere created from watching TV series also accommodates L2 learners to speak and express their ideas in English as this activity’s after-effect. The intense exposure, commitment, and engagement to the English-speaking environment have helped L2 learners be more fluent in speaking English. It plays an essential role in improving the learners’ fluency.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

TV series can help English L2 learners improve their fluency in speaking English as they expand their vocabulary, day-to-day English conversational skills, fluency, pronunciation, and naturalness of their English. They also play a substantial role as the learner’s convincing fluency enhancer by providing learning motivation, exposure, a role model of natural English, supporting linguistic features acquisition, and boosting the learner’s confidence to speak English. These aspects are what English L2 learners do not typically find while learning the language in formal settings such as schools or English courses. Nevertheless, while TV series can support the L2 learners to be fluent, it is not the sole reason for their speaking fluency.

The current study found that formal education is still necessary to learn English grammar, vocabulary, and other language aspects to provide L2 learners with a foundation and background knowledge to associate with TV series. Despite its significant contribution as supplementary materials for L2 learning, for formal learning aids, TV series are recommended to be utilised under guided instructions from teachers. Therefore, further research can determine how TV series can improve English L2 learners’ fluency. A quantitative analysis can also investigate the impact of watching TV series on L2 learners’ speaking fluency, whether the activity is done independently or guided by the teacher as a classroom activity.

**REFERENCES**


