6.1 INTRODUCTION

So far, the comparative research presented has concentrated on descriptive data on contacts with English, on language proficiency, and media use (see Chapter 4); and a linear model has been developed and tested which explains the variance of attitudes towards English by means of family variables, contacts with English and English proficiency (Chapter 5). This chapter will go one step beyond that, which means one step closer to the context of young people’s everyday lives.

Research which aimed at analyzing media effects in terms of clear causal relationships between independent variables (e.g., the amount of television use) and dependent variables (e.g., proficiency in English) has not been very successful in the past. There is broad consensus in the literature that the model of direct media effects, according to which media characteristics – as determinants – directly lead to specific attitudinal or behavioral effects on the side of the audience, is unsuitable. It is by far too simplistic and thus inappropriate to deal with the complex interdependencies between media use and other areas of behavior (e.g., Webster, 1998). One main argument maintains that the actual media which people use are to a large extent their own selections: the users compose their personal media environment, an individual composition of media offerings. The notion of media environments emphasizes that even when the researcher’s interest is in the particular role of a specific medium (e.g., television or the internet), one important concern is how this medium is embedded in the use of the whole media ensemble. Thus, to study the correlation between media use and language acquisition, the full media environment of a person needs to be examined together with other activities which in turn are understood in terms of specific media-related styles (Hawkins, Reynolds & Pingree, 1991;
Rosengren, 1994). It is necessary to analyze individual patterns of media use, as described, for example, in relation to TV by Hasebrink (1997) and Krotz & Hasebrink (1998). These patterns are based on the assumption that it is the individual who constructs sense and meaning in the organization of his or her life. Yet, an individual is not unique in his or her construction of reality. It is possible to construct various types of media users, which differ with regard to their media environments and which may be compared both within and between cultures.

Given these considerations, the relationship between media use and English proficiency in this chapter is not conceptualized in terms of a media effects model. Instead, the focus is differences between subgroups of young people who are living in different media environments. This approach allows for the analysis of different patterns of contact with the English language, which might be connected with different patterns of English proficiency as well.

The survey as conducted in the four countries involved in this study sets certain limits to a differentiated analysis of patterns of media use and of social background. Thus, the following analyses are necessarily explorative and not meant to provide definite results; rather, they are to increase the attention on and further the understanding of certain types of questions. Since there are just a few media-related variables in the data, the following paragraph briefly presents results of a recent study relevant to our study, namely, that done by Livingstone & Bovill (2001) on young people’s changing media environments.

6.2 YOUNG PEOPLE’S MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

With regard to the deep changes in global media landscapes there are different hypotheses about the consequences of young people’s media use. Young people in contemporary Europe may be selective in their media use, either favoring only certain media and discarding others, or combining different media and adding new ones to their individual menu.

Livingstone and Bovill’s study, based on comparative surveys conducted in 1997 and 1998 among 6-17 year-old European children and young people in twelve countries, is relevant to this hypothesis. There were research teams in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In each of the countries involved (except Denmark), one step of the research was a survey among around 1,200 children and young people using the same questionnaire. Because of the sample size, separated analyses could be calculated for subgroups, for example, the 14-16 year-olds who can be compared with the sample of the current study.