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# MICROLEARNING AND SEL PEDAGOGY THROUGH THE AUDIO-VISUAL DESIGN OF AHLAN SIMSIM

Sahar R. Hamzah<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Education and Curricula, College of Education, Administrative, and Technical Sciences, Arabian Gulf University, P.O. Box 26671, Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain.*

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Corresponding Author: Sahar R. Hamzah  
(saharrh@agu.edu.bh)

## ABSTRACT

*This study presents an analysis of Ahlan Simsim, a mass-media early childhood humanitarian educational programme created by Sesame Workshop to reach children experiencing conflict and displacement across the Middle East and North Africa. This research examines how the programme's pedagogical objectives, including its use of language and curriculum are implemented within its audio-visual production methods. It further examines whether the production techniques respond to trends in media consumption. Existing research regarding children's educational television among children is largely concerned with learning outcomes with little attention given to the manner in which the audio-visual form can act as a pedagogy. This study addresses this gap through a study of Ahlan Simsim. The study is qualitative, using textual and visual analysis of Ahlan Simsim episodes and an interview with series writer and actor Rami Delshad. The research is informed by theories of educational pedagogy, such as microlearning and social and emotional learning. The study arrives at the conclusion that Ahlan Simsim, through its audio-visual production techniques, uses microlearning principles in its use of short segments with narrowly focused learning objectives. The programme's choice to move from the franchise's traditional use of Modern Standard Arabic to its strategic use of various regional dialects boosts emotional immediacy, understanding, and engagement without disrupting the educational curriculum. The visual presentation of the programme consists of mid-shots and close-ups with simplified backgrounds, which facilitate emotional readability, reduce the cognitive load, and maximise the viewing experience on mobile devices. The paper shows that Ahlan Simsim is a unique model of methodology where language strategy, microlearning design, and social and emotional learning are directly incorporated into the audio-visual production practice. This study contributes a media-centred lens for analysing educational television produced for learning in digitally constrained and crisis-afflicting environments.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Sesame Street, Iftah Ya Simsim, Ahlan Simsim, Social and Emotional Learning, SEL, Microlearning, Media Studies, Mobile Learning.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its television debut in 1969, Sesame Street, has shown that television can be used to aid the cognitive, linguistic, and social development of young children viewing the show. In 1979, the international co-production of Sesame Street, *Iftah Ya Simsim*, was broadcast in the Arab world. It quickly became a landmark example of early childhood educational media. Most notably, *Iftah Ya Simsim* established Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as a unifying instructional language and influenced children programming for decades (Sakr).

This tradition established the pedagogical foundations of educational children's television in the Arab world. However, since this period, the conditions under which children regularly consume media have changed. It has been seen that mobile devices, along with their implications of on-demand media access, including short-form video content, ever increasingly define how children today engage with educational media (Alroqi, et al.). In 2020, *Ahlan Simsim*, premiered in the Arab world. The programme, created as a spin-off show of *Iftah Ya Simsim*, designed its curriculum to specifically target refugees in the Middle East and North Africa, with an objective to focus on educating children on emotional wellness. The show was made accessible to the public through its official YouTube channel. This distribution choice was well-suited to the mobile and low-access viewing environments of displaced families. Empirical analyses of young audiences of *Ahlan Simsim* have demonstrated measurable improvements in the children's emotional vocabulary and emotional regulations, particularly when the programme was watched together with caregivers (Foulds).

The study of this field is growing, but significant gaps remain in the literature. The current body of research on children's media is primarily focused on the learning or emotional outcomes of viewers, examining what is accomplished by the programme, rather than how those achievements are produced through its media form. Existing studies assess *Ahlan Simsim* in terms of developmental impact, humanitarian reach, or caregiver engagement. Minimal analysis addresses the programme's media methodology. Little scholarly attention has been paid to how *Ahlan Simsim*'s production design, visual composition, and content structure are shaped by contemporary educational theory and changing media consumption practices. There is also a lack of research examining how microlearning principles, dialectal variation, and mobile-first design operate

together within educational television for early childhood. Research on microlearning highlights the pedagogical value of short, modular learning units for the attention and retention of content for learners, as well as positive outcomes for cognitive load management. However, the literature has largely focused on formal education or digital learning platforms as opposed to broadcast children's media (Alias and Razak; Silva et al.). Similarly, while linguistic research has explored the cognitive and educational implications of dialect use, these insights are rarely applied to the design of educational media for young learners in diglossic language environments (Boudelaa, and Marslen-Wilson; Byrd, et al.).

These gaps are of importance in media and education studies. Recognising the way *Ahlan Simsim* incorporates the use of dialectal language, microlearning structure and social and emotional learning (SEL) into its audio-visual presentation offers a framework for how educational media can be used to positively impact interrupted and digitally constrained learning environments. This paper, therefore, explores and discusses *Ahlan Simsim* as a methodological case study to identify how its language strategies, content modularity and visual production techniques are consistent with theories of education in supporting its specific curricular objectives. By analysing the programme's media form and production logic, this research contributes a new analytical perspective to scholarship on early childhood educational media. It offers media production frameworks for designing learning content, especially in contexts in which learners are affected by displacement and trauma, and subsequently because of that, low mobile viewing access.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *2.1 Language and Legacy from Iftah Ya Simsim to Ahlan Simsim*

Since its inception, Sesame Street has established itself as a programme that prioritizes early childhood educational psychology. With its global non-profit Sesame Workshop, Sesame Street has extended its education model globally through its international co-productions, allowing local partners to shape content in response to linguistic, cultural, and educational needs while maintaining Sesame Street's pedagogical framework. Sesame Workshop's first co-production in the Arab world, *Iftah Ya Simsim* aired in 1979 and quickly became the definitive example of Arabic children's television across the Arab world. Scholarship identifies the programme, which ran

until 1989, as being culturally significant. In addition to the significance of its educational content grounded in regional values and social norms, the biggest contribution of the programme was its establishment of a new and innovative way of presenting the Arabic language in children's media (Sakr, 2018).

The issue of language choice has been at the centre of the Arabic educational media. This is due to Arabic's nature as a diglossic language. Diglossia is the linguistic state in which two distinct varieties of the same language exist within a single speech community. This takes the form of a High variety (H) and a Low variety (L). Each variety is assigned to different social functions. In the Arabic language, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) commonly referred to as fusha, is considered the H variety. MSA is used in formal, written, and institutional contexts. This H variety exists alongside multiple L variety spoken dialects. These dialects are used in everyday communications (Ferguson). Arabic's H variety is not typically acquired naturally in early childhood. Instead, it is primarily learned through formal instruction in the classroom. This results in a divide for young learners between their informal dialect spoken at home and their exposure to the formal language at school, often experiencing it as distant from their everyday speech (Ferguson). Scholarship on Iftah Ya Simsim credits the programme in normalizing MSA for young children by presenting it in a conversational and accessible manner (Sakr). Iftah Ya Simsim provided early learners with age-appropriate, sustained exposure that supported the acquisition of MSA itself. This approach was an example of the regional goals at the time for literacy development, working to make MSA recognized as a uniting cultural resource to strengthen regional inclusivity. Iftah Ya Simsim's distinct presentation of the Arabic language established the precedent for the use of MSA in children's television, the effects of which continue to be seen in Arabic children's media today (Sakr).

This legacy was reaffirmed in the 2015 reboot of Iftah Ya Simsim which retained its exclusive use of MSA but placed more focus on the regional identity of Arabian Gulf audiences (Sakr). However, the largest change in the franchise happened with the introduction of Ahlan Simsim in 2020. It showed a departure from its iconic commitment to MSA. Ahlan Simsim, a humanitarian initiative developed by Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), was designed for children suffering from conflict and displacement across the Middle East and North Africa. Ahlan Simsim placed

SEL right at the centre of its curriculum. The show revealed in its pilot episode the use of many different spoken dialects. These varying dialects were used within the show as the primary mode of communication. This choice may have initially seemed off-brand for the franchise. However, linguistics studies indicate that this departure is not a discarding of MSA. Instead, it can be seen as a revisiting of the assumption that exclusive reliance on one standardized variety is the best way to learn. Studies show that there are, in fact, strong cognitive parallels for learners going between standard and dialectal forms of Arabic. It is suggested that children are able to navigate both systems smoothly and simultaneously (Boudelaa and Marslen-Wilson). Additionally, there is indication that moving between the home language and the instructional language can actually increase affect comprehension. This is especially seen in early childhood learners (Byrd et al.). Linguistic and educational fields both indicate the affective and relational functions of dialect use. Speakers associate dialects with intimacy and sincerity as well as emotional immediacy (Arzu and Issa). When a dialect is inappropriately marginalized there can be a negative effect on the speaker's literacy development. In contrast, the strategic inclusion of dialectal varieties can support comprehension (Snell and Andrews). These findings are especially relevant to Ahlan Simsim in how it deliberately incorporates dialectal Arabic alongside MSA to support emotional expression and regulation.

Notably, Ahlan Simsim was not Sesame Workshop's first engagement with dialectal Arabic. Alam Simsim, which aired from 1997 to 2017, was set in Cairo and communicated largely in Egyptian Arabic. However, in 2005, after being acquired by Lebanon's Future Television, the series was subsequently dubbed into MSA for distribution to accommodate the wider viewership across the Arab world (The Communication Initiative, 2011). Despite these bodies of work and the implications of existing research, limited scholarship exists on how dialectal variation is put into practice in educational television for early childhood, and even less within contexts shaped by trauma and displacement.

## ***2.2 Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Early Childhood Media***

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the learning process through which children acquire the knowledge and skills that are necessary to be able to understand and manage emotions, establish and maintain relationships, demonstrate empathy, and

make responsible decisions. SEL frameworks emphasize that emotional development is not separate from cognitive learning. It is foundational to it. This is especially important in early childhood as emotional regulation and social understanding directly impact their memory and learning readiness (Zieher, et al.). The concept of SEL is not to be understood as something to be taught in a vacuum, but as a developmental process that develops through modelling, contextualising, socialising, and repeating behaviour. Strategies to promote successful SEL include the repeated exposure to positively modelled emotional behaviour. Giving children opportunities to observe and imitate behaviour validates their own emotional experiences (Zieher et al.). SEL interventions are especially important for children who are exposed to adversity and chronic stress. In these environments, the ability of children to regulate their emotions can function as a layer to protect them. This layer can support resilience and mental health, on top of providing learning continuity (Foulds et al.). In crisis-affected settings SEL supports children's capacity to manage distress.

In this context, *Ahlan Simsim* is an implemented SEL intervention that uses these principles of narrative modelling, repetition, caregiver co-viewing, and emotionally resonant audio-visual design. Empirical studies have demonstrated that regular exposure to the programme is associated with gains in children's emotional vocabulary, including improved coping strategies, and even increased caregiver participation in emotion-focused conversations (Foulds). This reinforces the role of SEL as a relational and context-embedded participatory learning process (Abdulrazzak et al.; Kohn et al.). These studies discuss the importance of co-viewing the programme as a mechanism for extending learning and reinforcing SEL through everyday interactions. This literature establishes the effectiveness of *Ahlan Simsim*'s curriculum, but it offers limited analysis of how SEL goals shape the programme's audio-visual language. Research rarely examines how SEL influences choices related to camera movement. This includes elements such as blocking, pacing, performance, or visual style elements. There is even less research when exploring these elements in the context of mobile and low-access viewing.

### ***2.3 Media Production and Microlearning for Mobile Audiences***

The study of film and media recognizes that the changes in the distribution platforms and viewing

practices directly affect the aesthetics of media production. David Bordwell's analysis of cinematic style when discussing the transition from full-screen to widescreen cinema provides an early theoretical account of how changes in screen dimensions shape cinematographic framing and visual legibility. Writing in the context of late twentieth-century film, Bordwell discusses how shifts in the size of screens caused filmmakers to adopt a tighter framing in order to preserve the narrative and emotional clarity under these new viewing conditions (Bordwell). Bordwell did not address digital or mobile media. However, it does offer a framework for understanding how screen size and viewing conditions exert pressure on film production practices.

These considerations became even more significant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures and emergency remote education intensified children's reliance on digital media. In these situations, children often access media through shared or limited devices of caregivers (Sosa Díaz; Cheshmehzangi et al.). In many households, smartphones were the primary and sometimes only point of access to educational content. This was particularly the case for families who were experiencing socioeconomic insecurity or were displaced (Leurs and Patterson). This shift toward informal mobile viewing also had effects on the audio-visual and cinematographic style of media. In informal viewing settings, attention is frequently interrupted by multitasking and other demands that compete for attention (Alroqi et al.). Viewers are therefore more likely to engage with material that does not require sustained attention and therefore can be consumed more quickly. Platforms that support short-form media, such as YouTube, further reinforce these patterns of viewing (Alias and Razak, 2025; Silva et al.). Appropriately aligned with these trends, *Ahlan Simsim*'s production format expanded to include short-form videos filmed in portrait orientation alongside their traditional landscape-format episodes.

This has contributed to increased research in short-form media as a microlearning pedagogical strategy. Microlearning is defined as the delivery of content in short, focused units designed to reduce cognitive load, and support repetition. This supports the short attention patterns of viewing seen with contemporary media use. Studies of educational social media and video platforms indicate that brief, modular videos are more likely to sustain attention and support self-paced learning in high-distraction environments (Alias, and Razak). Examples of this

are seen in short-form media that is delivered through mobile devices. (Silva et al.). Research on microlearning in higher education, workplace training, and online learning environments, emphasize microlearning's compatibility with current media consumption habits. Despite these insights, studies that focus on media production techniques remain rare in research on educational children's television. Existing scholarship tends to prioritize the content of the curricula, the learning outcomes, or the levels of caregiver engagement (Foulds et al.). This causes media to be treated as a neutral container instead of as an active mediator of learning. Developed for broadcast television, streaming platforms, and phone-based viewing, Ahlan Simsim provides a useful case for examining audio-visual design and *mise-en-scène* of its content. *Mise-en-scène* is defined as all elements seen on screen. This includes but is not limited to set design, cinematography, costumes, music, and editing (Bordwell). The programme allows for analysis of how the *mise-en-scène* is adjusted to support the cognitive and emotional needs of young learners through its understanding of the way learners consume media. Focusing on these formal choices clarifies how educational objectives can be realized audio-visually.

Through their YouTube shorts, Ahlan Simsim offers an example for analysis of microlearning principles. These Shorts function as self-contained learning units that range in topic from arts and crafts to reinforcing emotional concepts and coping strategies. This creates opportunities to identify how to strategically support the constraints of low-access mobile viewing characteristic of crisis-affected learning environments. Existing studies do acknowledge that young children now regularly consume educational content informally through mobile devices. Studies including the highly valuable body of research produced by Sesame Workshop provide critical insight into curriculum development and learning outcomes (Foulds et al.; Abdulrazzak et al.). However, the media form itself is often treated as a neutral delivery mechanism rather than an active pedagogical agent.

As a result, relatively little attention has been given to how the curricula can be enhanced through language choice, content segmentation, visual framing, and *mise-en-scène* to shape comprehension (Bordwell; Silva et al.). This absence is particularly pronounced in studies of media for children living in crisis-affected contexts, especially as how low-access mobile viewing and emotional vulnerable conditions impact how learning is able to occur (Leurs and

Patterson; Alroqi et al.). This research aims to examine not only what educational television seeks to achieve, but how those objectives are translated into screen-based practice. This research offers a media production-focused analysis of Ahlan Simsim that explicitly examines how the programme's educational curriculum and humanitarian objectives are translated into audio-visual form.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The research is a qualitative study, examining how pedagogical principles are embedded in the media form, language practices, and production techniques of Ahlan Simsim. The study relies on interdisciplinary fields like educational media studies, early childhood pedagogy, linguistics, and audio-visual analysis. It is informed by established educational frameworks such as scaffolding, microlearning, and SEL. This approach was selected in order to explore the way in which pedagogical principles are incorporated into the formal and linguistic construction of Ahlan Simsim. This approach was also used for analysing meaning-making processes, production decisions, and pedagogical intent within children's educational media. This approach allowed media production form, language use, and instructional content structure to be closely examined in relation to educational theory and cultural context. These frameworks guided data collection and analysis to investigate the way pedagogical strategies are implemented by media.

The research is based on three main sources of qualitative information, Ahlan Simsim full-length episodes in landscape framing, short video segments in portrait framing, and a semi-structured interview conducted with Ahlan Simsim writer and actor of Ahlan Simsim, Rami Delshad. Full-length episodes were examined to identify SEL themes, variation in linguistic registers, and instructional segments designed for modular viewing. Specific attention is given to episodes with narratives that focus on emotional identification, regulation strategies, and repeated patterns of instruction. This focus was chosen as these aspects are consistent with the stated educational goals of the programme (Kohn, et al.). Episodes were examined to identify consistent patterns in the audio-visual production in relation to the episode content or curriculum.

Besides whole episodes, short-form clips are examined to identify characteristics relating to microlearning and mobile viewing. Such clips allow for a more detailed study of segment length, pacing, instructional density, and visual simplicity, of all of

which are described in the literature as key to learning in environments with high-distraction and low access (Alias, and Razak; Silva, et al.). The interview with Rami Delshad, focuses on the creative and technical processes that resulted in the creation of the final curriculum and output of the programme. This included elements such as choices surrounding language, SEL content, framing, performance style, and the influence of platform-specific constraints. The interview provided practitioner insight into how educational frameworks can be translated into production practice.

The scope of analysis is directed by an integrated pedagogical model that relies on theoretical educational practices including scaffolding, microlearning, and SEL, as well as cultural-linguistic identity. Scaffolding theory guides the analysis of how learning is structured progressively within episodes. Focus is given to how gradual a new concept was introduced, what was the amount of repetition in the episode, and reinforcement of emotional vocabulary and strategies. Microlearning principles were used to analyse content segmentation, duration, and instructional focus. Episodes and clips were examined for the presence of short, self-contained learning units, a single-concept instructional focus, and their designed repeatability. This was analysed in relation to research on cognitive load and mobile learning.

SEL frameworks were used to identify how emotions were presented within the narratives. It is analysed in terms of how the characters model feelings of empathy, self-awareness of their own emotions, and coping strategies for how to regulate them. These elements were examined in accordance to SEL research that explores emotional regulation in early childhood, particularly in contexts of adversity. A cultural and linguistic lens was applied to examine language use. Shifts between MSA and dialectal Arabic were identified to determine the contexts in which each variety is used. Drawing on diglossia research, this method treated language as a pedagogical and affective strategy to support emotional development (Boudelaa, and Marslen-Willson; Snell, and Andrews).

Analysis is focused on the technical components of audio-visual production practices and *mise-en-scène*, with Ahlan Simsim being considered a constructed screen. These elements were analysed in relation to cognitive load, emotional legibility, and the qualities of mobile and small-screen viewing. Insights from the interview were integrated into the analysis to link the analysis of the screen practices based on the final media output to the decision-

making processes within the production environment.

After preliminary familiarisation with the episodes, a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to manual coding is performed with the specific focus on audio-visual characteristics. Pedagogical frameworks informed deductive categories consisting of, but not limited to, the emotional focus, instructional repetition, timing of segments, and linguistic shift moments. Emergent visual and stylistic patterns such as recurring framing strategies and pacing conventions are then documented through inductive coding. Close formal analysis is examined the fundamental elements of audio-visual production such as the framing of shots, camera distance, background composition, camera movement and editing rhythm.

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## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Curriculum Design

The programme's curriculum was the product of careful and sustained institutional collaboration. Ahlan Simsim writer and star Rami Delshad discussed how all of the major content, including the language and the production decisions, were developed through continuous negotiation with Sesame Workshop. Delshad describes this collaborative workflow and how the creative proposals were repeatedly assessed against the objectives of the programme. This process involved the reviewing and refinement of the scripts through extensive back-and-forth discussions. This ensured the preservation of the standards of Sesame Street's pedagogical logic while still accurately responding to the regional, linguistic, cultural, and emotional needs of viewers. In a personal interview, Delshad stated, "From the very beginning everything was under the supervision of Sesame Workshop from New York. They already had proposals prepared for episodes, ideas...The stories we wrote matched the mindset they were looking for. They requested changes. Sometimes we would do them. Other times we refused because they didn't represent our culture. For

example, the way of celebrations for them...we were always trying to make the thing more local, to the spirit of it...birthday parties...how they see them...surprise parties...things that feel very American."

Adaptations were done in such a way that ideas would be meaningful and significant to Arab children, especially those who have suffered displacement and unsteadiness. This process involved changes made to everyday scenarios of family dynamics and social interactions on screen. Content was adjusted to reflect familiar family customs including modes of address, intergenerational relationships, and patterns of caregiving common across Arab societies. Delshad continued, "There were times...we would cut out the topic of buying expensive things. We preferred to create items in the episode where you make it yourself using things around you. This way, any person, any child watching, wouldn't feel like they can't do this. Or that they can't afford it. Or that they aren't from that social class." These changes ensured that emotional lessons were situated within recognizable domestic and social contexts. This created the opportunity for children to see their own lived experiences reflected in the narrative of the show. Rather than presenting abstract or culturally distant situations, Ahlan Simsim grounded learning in routines and interactions that make sense within the child's cultural environment to strengthen their comprehension and emotional engagement. "We tried to take stories that happen to the Arab child, in the neighbourhood (Al-Hara), with friends in the neighbourhood, with neighbours, stories with the dentist, stories with the vegetable seller, things that happen to us every day. Electricity cuts, fear of the dark, things that represent every child." Ahlan Simsim integrated educational intent and cultural relevance at every stage of development.

Another example of Ahlan Simsim's inclusivity was the show's introduction of a Muppet character named Ameera. She uses arm crutches and a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury. Ameera participates in the everyday shared activities and friendships of the show, without being presented as something special or making her story stand on its own. Her appearance is an intentional pedagogical decision to familiarise disability in common family and community contexts as opposed to viewing it as an issue that needs to be explained or solved. The character of Ameera promotes SEL through the normal interaction with her peers and not through instructions. Placing the character of Ameera into the culturally relatable contexts, Ahlan Simsim enhances

its overall dedication to representation and belonging. This further strengthens the idea of inclusion as an integral and ordinary part of social life. By including Ameera's character within these culturally familiar settings, Sesame Workshop presents the idea that the sense of comfort and belonging is an essential part of life for everyone (Sesame Workshop International).

### **3.2 Language Use and SEL**

The results prove that the language choice in Ahlan Simsim is not used only as an instrument for the cultural accommodation of its audience. It is an essential part of its instructional strategy. As Delshad states:

"The language, there was a very long debate on the subject. There were many proponents of Fusha [MSA], arguing it should all be in Fusha so the Arabic language unites all Arabs and the target audience would be all the Arabs. However, in the end, everyone concluded that no, the focus should be on the Levant region...The Levant is mixed, more than one dialect. There is the Jordanian, the Syrian, the Lebanese, the Iraqi. They are very different from each other. So we tried to bring characters from these countries. Consequently, the viewer sees a character from Egypt speaking Egyptian, an Iraqi character speaking in Iraqi...the child becomes more exposed to the dialects around him."

Fear, sadness, frustration, calm, and other emotional states are consistently introduced through multiple dialectic linguistic registers. Scholarship on Arabic diglossia suggests that children are able to move fluidly and simultaneously between Arabic dialectal varieties, drawing on each for different cognitive or communicative purposes (Boudelaa and Marslen-Wilson).

The programme's use of dialect is consistent with SEL pedagogy by using communication forms that children already associate with safety and care. This is due to the home language that is used with caregivers and peers acts as affective scaffolds (Vygotsky). This use of the home language helps children interpret and respond to emotional information. The use of familiar linguistic registers can reduce cognitive load. It does this by reducing the effort required to process the language. This frees up their cognitive resources so that they can be used for deeper emotional processing. This is especially useful during early childhood as well as other emotionally significant learning situations (Brown et al.; Snell and Andrews). The programme decreases linguistic and affective distance by integrating emotional learning into conversational dialogues

familiar to the children, enabling the children to concentrate on meaning instead of code switching or formal understanding.

In Ahlan Simsim, the Muppets always speak in regional dialects. Each character speaks in the dialect of the actor who plays that part. The Muppets are always responsible for articulating the episode's main emotional vocabulary. The narrative of each episode is written so that the Muppets model how to express their emotions in a relatable social exchange and then how to regulate those emotions. This enables children to connect the linguistic expression directly to the experience of the emotion. This narrative structure adheres to SEL pedagogy by helping children understand emotions as a part of everyday life. This emotional understanding is reinforced through identification with characters, observation of modelled behaviour, and the imitation of language and coping strategies within familiar communicative contexts. Delshad states:

"Simsim wasn't for language. This new season, or the seven new seasons that came out, their goal was never language teaching. They were for character development, emotions, understanding what their feelings are. After the research conducted in the region, since the International Rescue Committee (IRC) helped us develop Simsim, they did a lot of research in the region, especially in refugee areas, [finding] that many children don't know what emotions are. Emotions for them are limited only to happy and sad. But in between, there are a million different emotions; anxiety, excitement, jealousy... It's much more complex than just sad and happy... They saw, of course, that many children, especially refugees, were exposed to traumas. They have fear, for example, of loud noises. So, one of the characters we had, we made him have a fear/phobia of loud noises. The first season was defining emotions; the second season was defining your emotions and the emotions of those around you, and how to deal with them; in the third and fourth seasons, even though you are a child, you have a role in society, what your role is, and how you can have a role. So, this was the agenda we followed, or the curriculum we followed in these new seasons."

An example of this curricular approach to SEL is in season two, the episode Snowman. This episode shows viewers a very ordinary conflict and repair story. Both characters are frustrated and disappointed when Basma accidentally knocks down a snowman which Jad has spent a lot of time working on. Basma shows her genuine regrets and accepts responsibility that she is the one to blame. This acknowledgment of responsibility models this

behaviour for viewers. The episode presents a self-regulation plan showing the characters count to five and take five deep breaths. This helps Basma and Jad regulate their feelings so that they can regain emotional control. This made them able to focus on each other and work together to come to a resolution. Together they decide that they will not be defeated and commit to building the best snowman ever. This narrative reframes the setback of the smashed snowman as a shared moment of resilience and success for the characters (Ahlan Simsim). The familiarity of the dialectic language in this situation positions emotions as a natural part of everyday experiences. This language strategy creates an exposure to SEL content that feels intuitive without children needing to rely on formal instruction. Delshad describes this process, stating, "On set there was a language expert, a child psychologist expert, people from the IRC, teachers, and people from New York, five filters. All of them had monitors; everything being filmed. They were watching and giving their points."

This on-set production environment described by Delshad shows that the show is deliberate on all levels. The choice of permanently employing a linguist and a child psychologist also serves as a guarantee to the quality of the SEL curriculum of the programme, including its use of Muppets. Puppet play therapy is already established in child therapeutic practice as puppets can be utilised as objects through which children can externalise their emotions and practise social situations in a psychologically safe manner (Drewes, and Schaefer). The way the programme uses its Muppets follows established therapy strategies for puppet play. By allowing emotions, conflicts, and coping strategies to be articulated through puppet characters rather than directly through human actors, the programme lowers affective risk and facilitates SEL processes such as emotion labelling, perspective-taking, and problem-solving. In this regard, the Muppets are therapeutic intermediaries, and SEL is incorporated in the show's performance. Delshad explains the impact of the Muppets and states:

"I used to see the love in the children's eyes. I played the character "Hadi", just a human, but the love or the excitement was different when there were puppets. We would go out sometimes for live shows. The kids would come to say hello, take pictures, laugh. But when Jad or Basma, their mascots, came out, the kids would lose control there. Yeah, there is something about puppets that is magical, it's mystical."

The emotional connection that the children have to the Muppets themselves also contributes to why

they are so effective at conveying the emotional lessons of the show. The incorporation of the dialectic language strategy adds another pedagogical layer to the show.

However, the linguistic SEL strategy that Ahlan Simsim uses does still utilize Iftah Ya Simsim's legacy. Building on Iftah Ya Simsim's establishment of MSA's symbolic status as a shared linguistic medium, Ahlan Simsim introduces Abu'l Fihem, a character who only speaks in MSA. MSA has been a symbolic and pedagogic phenomenon as a common language across national and dialect lines in the Arab world. Abu'l Fihem, whose name translates as "Father of Knowledge," is a cartoon character that makes up part of a painted wall mural in the neighbourhood of the show. He comes to life to observe the happenings of the neighbourhood and offering wisdom and guidance to those around him. His exclusive use of MSA distinguishes him from the surrounding characters. These segments with Abu'l Fihem are always narrative moments of explanation and reflection.

When MSA is heard in Ahlan Simsim, the continuity and the sense of affective memory is strong among viewers, in particular, the caregivers and the older viewers whose childhood experiences have been influenced by Sesame Street and Iftah Ya Simsim. This response can be understood as restorative nostalgia, a desire to reconnect with the experience of earlier viewing (Leitch). Feelings of nostalgia are able to operate through the familiarity of linguistic form, enabling viewers to have a sense that something meaningful has been preserved through time. Delshad states:

"From families, I received a lot, a lot of lovely feedback. That they feel safe when their children are watching Ahlan Simsim. They are reassured...They feel safe when they watch Simsim. The principles in it, the ethics being spoken about. No one disagrees with them from any religious background. Even religious, you know? No one disagrees on respect for the other, love for the other, that one should be helpful, that one should be kind. For example, don't assume something, because you might be wrong. No, ask and ask for help. All these things, no one disagrees with them."

For caregivers, Abu'l Fihem's maintaining of the use of MSA helps to evoke this sense of return by establishing trust and emotional comfort during hours of shared viewing, especially during times of difficulty. For children, MSA in the form of Abu'l Fihem offers some form of order and stability, using his segments as a source of instructional continuity when formal education can be inconsistent, or may

not exist at all. There are also suggested linguistic benefits for localizing MSA within one clearly defined character. Abu'l Fihem's speech makes him a stabilising figure in a soundscape that is otherwise dialectally varied. From a diglossic perspective, this linguistic consistency supports the acquisition of functional differences of language varieties, as the reality of the language is that high and low varieties exist together with their own distinct social and cognitive roles (Boudelaa, and Marslen-Wilson). The literature on dialect variations and understanding also implies that as long as language cues remain consistent, they may aid comprehension as learners are trying to switch between registers, especially when faced with emotionally charged situational conditions (Brown, et al.; Byrd, et al.).

Abu'l Fihem is positioned to support children in several ways. Because he is part of the Sesame Steet franchise, children are familiar and not distracted by his use of MSA. At the same time, his use of MSA gives children exposure to the language of formal school instruction. Even if children with low or limited access cannot watch regularly, they still have the opportunity to hear small sections of academic language in every episode they watch. Because the character of Abu'l Fihem is confined to the mural wall, he appears in short segmented units. These small units function as individual microlearning modules. In this way, Abu'l Fihem can provide emotional comfort and language learning in one short format. The cartoon style of these segments works to further isolate these learning modules. In addition to MSA exposure, these modules present moments of guidance and reflection on the lessons of the episode. Although he frequently features in the presence of the three cartoon birds, Reeshah, Bulbul and Hassoon, and the three little dabka dancers, who also appear in other segments of the show, Abu'l Fihem himself remains only in the mural. This provides a fixed visual demarcation, which segregates MSA. This creates a unique linguistic strategy that sees MSA and dialects not clashing together but co-existing to help understanding within one educational media environment.

### **3.3 Audio-visual and Cinematographic Form**

One of the benefits of media streaming platforms, is that Ahlan Simsim does not have to rely on its self to cover all of the educational content required by early childhood learners. It can preserve the continuity of its educational history through the choice to have earlier episodes of Iftah Ya Simsim available on Ahlan Simsim's official channel. This open access to the legacy content, gives viewers the

ability to draw on the entire oeuvre of the franchise. This enables children and caregivers to revisit the educational material without the need for repetition of the content in new episodes of Ahlan Simsim. The franchise is still providing this continued exposure to MSA, while giving Ahlan Simsim the space to focus its curriculum on SEL. Free access to previous learning materials reflects the programme's understanding of changing media habits. Audiences expect on-demand availability and access. Accompanying this acknowledgement of viewing habits, Ahlan Simsim makes many changes to its audio-visual and cinematographic form when compared to its predecessors.

Significantly, it will guarantee further exposure to Modern Standard Arabic, which will guarantee linguistic continuity, but will enable Ahlan Simsim to structure its new materials around emotional learning, access to dialect, and modern challenges. The availability of past learning material without charges is reflective of the realisation of the evolving media consumption patterns whereby viewers are expecting on-demand content and cumulative learning experiences as opposed to sequential broadcasting programmes. It also allows the show to not focus so hard on the MSA acquisition and education as it can already be found by the viewers who might want to access it.

In comparison with its predecessors Ahlan Simsim shows a major difference in audio-visual and cinematographic form. The initial modification that can be observed is that it has left the traditional soundstage-related aesthetic that is associated with Sesame Street and Iftah Ya Simsim. Past versions of the franchise relied heavily on studio-style filming, wide establishing shots, and theatrical blocking designed for fixed viewing on a television. In contrast, Ahlan Simsim uses a more cinematic production style. In addition to reflecting trends in contemporary television production staging, this change in style more importantly responds to the specific qualities of mobile and small-screen viewing. The programme almost exclusively uses mid-shots and close-ups. Wide shots are used sparingly to establish the location if needed. The editing rhythms are calm and predictable. There are never moments of suspense created through the editing style. This prioritizes the emotional legibility and instructional clarity. Delshad confirms that these choices were driven by the reality of how children now encounter media across platforms, particularly on smartphones and tablets, saying, "The filming method works for TV, for mobile. The framing of the characters fills the screen in the places that need to fill the screen."

This change of cinematography has several purposes. The use of a closer framing of shots helps to make sure that the emotional cues of the characters, such as their facial expressions and gestures, can be seen and understood even on smaller screens. The use of close-ups and mid-shots improves emotional accessibility as they focus on faces, eye contact, and subtle expressions (Bálint, and Rooney), which are essential in SEL. Along with the emotions that are conveyed through dialogue and framing, they are also communicated through the proximity of the device. This gives children a chance to read and understand more clearly. This closeness is important on small screens because emotional cues are more difficult to recognize in wider or more visually complex compositions. These more intimate shots are used to make sure that these emotional hints are seen and readable on smaller screens.

The use of simplified backgrounds is also another design decision of Ahlan Simsim. This is frequently coupled with the camera using shallow depth-of-field which softens or blurs the visual detail in the background of the main subject. The method is used to draw attention to the face, gestures, and expression of characters and minimise distractions in the background. In addition to the camera technique, the set design also features simple backgrounds. With the use of the shallow depth-of-field, these backgrounds often blur to a solid color. This decrease in extraneous visual information allows the limiting of competing stimuli in terms of cognitive load and promotes more efficient processing of information. When used in Ahlan Simsim, these audio-visual techniques aid in the comprehension of the emotional cues. Interrupted viewing conditions can also amplify distraction and visual clutter. In this sense, the programme's use of shallow depth of field and simplified mise-en-scène is an instructional strategy that integrated the audio-visual form and modern mobile media consumption patterns. As Delshad says, "Many times, for example, in the middle of filming, they would say, 'Cut... the background is very busy. Make it, please, less busy, simplify the subject. One element is enough.' So yes, they would think about this, that the background is distracting. The point you are making isn't getting across because the background, there is something distracting."

The change in the programme's aesthetics is a methodological decision that links its audio-visual form to its learning objectives. The production of short-form video content, as well as the full-length episodes, also supports this strategy. Delshad discusses how Ahlan Simsim deliberately produces video shorts in portrait framing for platforms such as

YouTube, recognizing the dominance of watching vertical videos on mobile devices, saying, "There were also specific takes that were taken specially for social media vertically. They would rotate the camera. We shoot the thing vertically and it gets posted according to the device it will be viewed on."

Portrait framing allows the characters' faces to cover a larger portion of the screen. This provides more emotional immediacy during brief viewing times on mobile devices. These shorts are independent units of content, acting as another example of microlearning in the show.

These production choices show that the audio-visual design of Ahlan Simsim is interwoven with its pedagogical and humanitarian objectives. The movement to a more cinematic style that includes close-ups and the use of portrait-oriented video shorts, in addition to the strategic distribution of new and legacy content via digital media are tailored for the needs of its target audience. Sesame Workshop's humanitarian initiatives recognize that smartphones are not luxuries for displaced families but rather are the pillars of infrastructure in their daily lives. Studies on displaced communities have shown that mobile phones often serve as primary means of communication. Mobile phones are often the sole way to access information and sustain social and familial connections. This makes mobile-first educational media especially limited for these contexts (Göransson, et al.; Leurs, and Patterson).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that Ahlan Simsim is a unique and methodological model of educational children's media whereby the curriculum design, language strategy, pedagogical theory, and audio-visual production work as an integrated system. Ahlan Simsim integrates its educational goals within its production processes. Its strategic use of regional dialects and Modern Standard Arabic, microlearning, and SEL as a narrative logic and a style of cinematic production, enhances its curriculum in a way that best suits mobile and small-

screen display. As the analysis demonstrates, these aspects are not post-hoc additions but are instead premeditated, curriculum-based choices that are formed through sustained collaboration with the educational teams of Sesame Workshop.

This research treats the media form itself as a pedagogical practice. The mid and close-up framing, simplified mise-en-scène, and portrait framed short-form video are instructional tools that support emotional development to reduce cognitive load and facilitate learning in displacement conditions, interrupted schooling, and unreliable and intermittent media access. For children whose education has been disrupted, listening to familiar dialects can help them feel emotionally supported and belonging to their culture. Listening to MSA through characters like Abu'l Fihem as well as Ifah Ya Simsim episodes available online maintains their exposure to academic language and educational continuity. Strategically using both together supports learning while providing the feelings of stability that come from a shared sense of cultural belonging. Placing Ahlan Simsim in the context of modern trends in mobile media use, especially in displaced populations, this study contributes to current literature by elaborating on how learning and emotional well-being can be achieved through the creation of educational media. In this way, the paper adds an interdisciplinary paradigm that interrelates the educational theory, diglossia, microlearning, social and emotional learning, and audio-visual analysis.

This research builds on the existing literature by explaining how educational media can better support children's learning and emotional well-being. Future studies could explore how children from different cultures or dialects respond to the strategies identified in this research. Comparisons could be made between Ahlan Simsim and other similar global educational media projects. Research could test which specific audio-visual techniques influence emotional comprehension and regulation most efficiently.

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