

Beyond Mothers' Talk: Language Acquisition in Kindergarten Children under Father's Care

Miftahush Shalihah¹, Lailatuz Zaidah²

^{1,2}Physiotherapy Program, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universitas 'Aisyiyah Yogyakarta

ABSTRACT: This study investigates early language acquisition in kindergarten children who are primarily cared for by their fathers in multilingual Indonesian households. While previous research on early childhood language development has largely emphasized maternal contributions, the role of fathers as primary caregivers remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western and multilingual contexts. This study aims to examine fathers' everyday language practices and their influence on children's vocabulary development, sentence construction, and pragmatic language use. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the study involved 26 fathers who served as the primary caregivers of children aged 4–6 years. Data were collected through a structured mixed-method questionnaire comprising close-ended questions to identify general patterns of language use and open-ended questions to obtain detailed descriptions of father–child interactional practices. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring language strategies and interaction patterns, supported by descriptive quantitative summaries. The findings indicate that fathers consistently spent more than four hours per day interacting with their children through activities such as play, storytelling, homework assistance, shared household routines, and visits to public spaces. Bahasa Indonesia was the dominant language used in interaction, although frequent mixing with local languages and English was also reported, reflecting the multilingual environments in which the children were raised. Fathers employed various language-support strategies, including repetition, object naming, narrative-based interaction, and contextual language exposure. Most children demonstrated age-appropriate sentence production and communicative competence; however, a small number exhibited delayed speech onset or frequent language mixing. Fathers perceived their caregiving roles as contributing positively to children's vocabulary growth, communicative confidence, and pragmatic awareness. Nevertheless, challenges related to digital media exposure, peer influence, and children's reluctance to communicate in unfamiliar settings were also identified. Overall, the study highlights fathers as active and meaningful contributors to early language acquisition and underscores the importance of recognizing father-led caregiving in discussions of language development within multilingual family contexts.

KEYWORDS: Early childhood language, paternal caregiving, multilingual family, language interaction, kindergarten students

I. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition in early childhood is a crucial developmental process that influences children's cognitive, social, and academic growth. During the kindergarten period (ages 4–6), children experience rapid expansion of vocabulary, increasing grammatical complexity, and growing pragmatic competence as they learn to use language effectively in social interaction (Budiharso, 2019; Sinaga & Damanik, 2022). Psycholinguistic research suggests that children's language development follows relatively predictable stages, shaped by both biological readiness and environmental input (Macca & Lohing, 2023; Safi'i & Harahap, 2024). Beyond linguistic structure, children's language development is also affected by social interaction, family relations, and the communicative environment in which language is used (Indrayani, 2016; Sinaga & Damanik, 2022).

Caregivers play a central role in providing linguistic input during early childhood. Everyday activities such as conversation, play, storytelling, and shared routines offer children meaningful opportunities to acquire vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic skills (Cahyandari et al., 2024; Zurriyati et al., 2023). A language-rich environment characterized by frequent interaction, repetition, and responsive feedback has been shown to support more effective language acquisition (Macca & Lohing, 2023; Nungala, 2024). Consequently, the nature of caregiver–child interaction becomes a key factor in understanding early language development.

Research on caregiver influence, however, has traditionally emphasized mothers as primary caregivers. Many studies on early language acquisition focus predominantly on maternal speech and interaction patterns (Budiharso, 2019; Demirekin, 2023). In recent years, changing family structures and shifting gender roles have led to increased paternal involvement in childcare,

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including daily interaction, play, and educational support (Nungala, 2024). Fathers are no longer positioned solely as economic providers but are increasingly engaged in children's everyday communicative experiences.

Empirical studies indicate that fathers' linguistic input differs in important ways from that of mothers. Fathers tend to introduce more varied vocabulary, use longer utterances, and employ cognitively demanding questions during interaction (Baker & Vernon-Feagans, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2018). Activities such as shared book reading further demonstrate how fathers' language use—particularly vocabulary diversity and mean length of utterance—can predict children's expressive and receptive language development (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2010; Teufl et al., 2019). These findings suggest that paternal input is not merely supplementary but constitutes a distinct contribution to children's language development.

Despite this growing body of evidence, research on fathers' roles in language acquisition remains limited, especially in non-Western contexts. Most father-focused studies have been conducted in Western societies, leaving a gap in understanding how paternal caregiving operates in multilingual environments. This gap is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where children are commonly exposed to Bahasa Indonesia alongside local languages and, in some cases, foreign languages such as English (Warni et al., 2023; Zurriyati et al., 2023). Such multilingual settings encourage code-switching and flexible language use, which may shape children's linguistic development in distinctive ways.

While some local studies describe stages of language development and the impact of general caregiver support (Macca & Lohing, 2023; Sinaga & Damanik, 2022), empirical research specifically examining fathers as primary caregivers remains scarce. Little is known about how fathers' daily language practices contribute to children's vocabulary development, sentence construction, and pragmatic language use in multilingual households. Addressing this gap is essential for expanding current understandings of language acquisition beyond maternal-centered perspectives.

Accordingly, this study investigates language acquisition in kindergarten-aged children who are primarily cared for by their fathers. The study seeks to examine the patterns of language input and interaction fathers provide in their daily caregiving practices and to explore how these interactions support children's vocabulary development, grammatical competence, and pragmatic language use. In addition, the findings of this study are discussed in relation to existing research on maternal language input in order to situate paternal caregiving within broader scholarship on caregiver-child language interaction.

II. METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the roles of fathers in facilitating early language acquisition in natural caregiving settings. This approach was selected for its capacity to facilitate a thorough analysis of everyday language practices, interaction patterns, and parental strategies in real-life contexts. Qualitative descriptive research effectively captures caregivers' lived experiences and perspectives, along with the social and contextual factors influencing children's language development (Creswell, 2018).

The study involved 26 fathers acting as primary caregivers for children aged 4 to 6 years, all of whom were enrolled in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten programs. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling to maintain alignment with the research objectives. Fathers were included in the study if they engaged in at least four hours of daily interaction with their child, participated in caregiving activities such as feeding, play, and educational support, and cared for children during the crucial phase of early language development. The fathers exhibited a range of educational backgrounds, age demographics, and professional fields, enabling the study to encompass diverse caregiving and language interaction practices.

Data were collected from October to November 2024 through a structured questionnaire aimed at capturing general patterns and detailed qualitative insights. The questionnaire comprised 23 items, integrating both close-ended and open-ended questions. Close-ended items were employed to gather background information, language use patterns, and indicators of children's language development, whereas open-ended questions encouraged fathers to articulate their daily caregiving routines, language teaching strategies, perceived challenges, and observations regarding their children's language use. Additionally, participants offered self-reported interactional accounts by describing typical activities—such as play, mealtime interaction, storytelling, and homework assistance—that included verbal communication with their children.

The analysis of the data was conducted through thematic analysis in accordance with the procedures established by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis commenced with multiple readings of the responses to establish familiarity with the data, succeeded by initial coding of the open-ended responses to identify recurring language-related practices, such as repetition, object naming, storytelling, correction, and code-switching. The codes were categorized into broader themes that represent various types of language support, including vocabulary development, grammatical scaffolding, and pragmatic language use. The study is primarily qualitative; however, descriptive quantitative summaries were utilized to reinforce the thematic findings by illustrating the frequency of specific practices and language use patterns among participants. The numerical summaries served to contextualize the qualitative results rather than generalize them.

To improve the reliability of the analysis, coding was performed systematically and subjected to multiple reviews to ensure consistency across responses. Emerging themes were analyzed across participants to discern common patterns and differences in

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paternal language practices. The findings are presented via narrative descriptions supplemented by descriptive statistics, offering a thorough and clear account of father–child language interaction in multilingual caregiving contexts.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This result and discussion show what the study found and talks about how those findings relate to other studies on how children learn language early and how caregivers and children interact. The discussion is structured around key themes derived from the data, encompassing fathers' caregiving involvement, language use patterns, language support strategies, children's language development, and perceived challenges in multilingual environments.

A. Father's caregiving involvement and interactional context

The participants consisted of 26 fathers aged between 30 and 45 years, representing diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. This diversity provided a broad perspective on paternal caregiving practices and language support. All fathers reported spending more than four hours per day with their children, indicating sustained involvement in daily caregiving. Fathers commonly engaged children in play, storytelling, book reading, homework assistance, visits to public spaces, and shared household activities. These routines created rich interactional contexts in which language was used naturally and meaningfully.

Consistent with sociocultural perspectives on language learning, these everyday interactions allowed fathers to provide both structured and incidental linguistic input (Budiharso, 2019; Nungala, 2024). Activities such as play and storytelling supported vocabulary development and narrative skills, while household tasks and public outings encouraged the use of directive, procedural, and pragmatic language. The findings reinforce previous research emphasizing that frequent caregiver–child interaction plays a crucial role in accelerating early language acquisition (Cahyandari et al., 2024; Zurriyati et al., 2023).

B. Language use pattern in father-child interaction

Analysis of language use revealed that Bahasa Indonesia was the primary language used in father–child interaction. However, many fathers also reported combining Bahasa Indonesia with local languages or English, resulting in frequent language mixing. Nearly half of the children were reported to engage in language mixing, reflecting the multilingual environments in which they were raised.

These findings align with previous Indonesian research showing that children in multilingual households naturally draw on multiple linguistic resources (Warni et al., 2023; Zurriyati et al., 2023). From a language-use perspective, such practices can be understood as translanguaging, where speakers flexibly employ elements from different languages to construct meaning (Lust, 2009). Although some fathers viewed language mixing as a potential challenge, it also represents an adaptive communicative strategy that may enhance children's pragmatic awareness and linguistic flexibility, as suggested by psycholinguistic research (Sinaga & Damanik, 2022).

C. Paternal language support strategies

Most fathers reported actively supporting their children's language development through deliberate strategies embedded in daily interaction. These strategies included sustained conversation during routines, repetition and reinforcement of new words, object naming in everyday contexts, storytelling and singing, and exposure to broader social environments. Such practices indicate that fathers were not passive interlocutors but actively structured language-learning opportunities within natural settings.

These findings are consistent with earlier research showing that caregivers function as facilitators and motivators of language learning by providing repeated, meaningful, and responsive input (Macca & Lohing, 2023). The frequent use of repetition and reinforcement reflects behaviorist principles of language learning, while storytelling and contextual interaction resonate with interactionist and sociocultural approaches that emphasize scaffolding and engagement (Nungala, 2024; Safi'i & Harahap, 2024). In this sense, fathers' caregiving practices contributed not only to vocabulary growth but also to children's grammatical and pragmatic development.

D. Children's language development outcomes

In terms of developmental milestones, most children were reported to have produced their first recognizable words between the ages of one and two, which is consistent with established timelines of early language acquisition (Cahyandari et al., 2024; Safi'i & Harahap, 2024). At the time of the study, the majority of children were able to produce complete sentences, indicating age-appropriate grammatical development. However, a small number of children remained limited to single or two-word utterances or displayed frequent language mixing.

This variation highlights the influence of individual and environmental factors on language development, as noted in previous research (Warni et al., 2023). While language mixing may be perceived as delayed differentiation, it can also be interpreted as a natural outcome of multilingual exposure rather than a deficit. These findings support the view that early language acquisition follows universal patterns while allowing for local variation shaped by sociolinguistic context (Kranjc et al., 2006).

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E. Perceived contribution and challenges of paternal caregiving

All fathers perceived their involvement as having a positive influence on their children's language development. Fathers reported contributing to children's vocabulary expansion, communicative confidence, and pragmatic awareness, particularly through modeling polite speech and encouraging conversational initiative. These perceptions align with international findings that fathers often provide richer vocabulary and cognitively demanding interaction, which supports expressive and receptive language skills (Baker & Vernon-Feagans, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2018).

At the same time, fathers identified several challenges in supporting language acquisition. These included children's preference for digital media over conversation, peer influence on vocabulary use, reluctance to speak in unfamiliar settings, and limited peer interaction. Similar challenges have been reported in recent literature, particularly regarding the impact of unsupervised media exposure on reduced verbal interaction (Demirekin, 2023; Zurriyati et al., 2023). These findings suggest that although paternal input plays a vital role in language development, it operates within broader social and technological environments that may either support or constrain children's linguistic growth.

Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of recognizing fathers as active agents in early language acquisition, particularly in multilingual family contexts. Fathers' daily interaction, language choices, and instructional strategies contribute meaningfully to children's linguistic development and communicative competence. These results support calls to move beyond maternal-centered perspectives in language acquisition research and to consider father-led caregiving as a significant site of language learning. For language education and parenting programs, encouraging fathers' active involvement in storytelling, conversation, and vocabulary-building activities may enhance children's early language experiences, especially in multilingual settings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that fathers function as active and meaningful contributors to early language acquisition when they serve as primary caregivers. Through sustained daily interaction—including conversation, storytelling, repetition, object naming, and shared routines—fathers provide children with rich linguistic input that supports vocabulary development, sentence construction, and pragmatic language use. The findings also show that father-child interaction frequently occurs within multilingual environments, where Bahasa Indonesia, local languages, and English are used flexibly. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, such language mixing reflects children's adaptive use of available linguistic resources.

The study further reveals that fathers perceive their involvement as contributing not only to children's linguistic development but also to their communicative confidence and social awareness. At the same time, challenges related to digital media exposure, peer influence, and limited opportunities for interaction highlight the complex social contexts in which language acquisition takes place. These findings underscore the importance of considering paternal caregiving alongside broader environmental factors in discussions of early language development.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, which may not fully capture the dynamics of father-child interaction. The absence of direct observational or recorded interactional data also restricts more detailed analysis of fathers' linguistic input and children's responsive language use. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalizable.

Future research is encouraged to involve larger and more diverse participant groups and to incorporate naturalistic observation or audio-visual recordings to examine father-child interaction in greater depth. Comparative studies between paternal and maternal language input, as well as further investigation into multilingual practices and digital media influence in the home, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of early language acquisition. Overall, this study contributes to expanding language acquisition research by foregrounding father-led caregiving as a significant site of language use and learning in multilingual family contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universitas 'Aisyiyah Yogyakarta for the financial support that made this research possible. The authors also acknowledge the valuable academic and practical support provided by the second author, which contributed significantly to the completion of this study.

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