



Home as the First School: A Study of Language Development in Early Childhood (0–3 Years) in Pematangsiantar

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the crucial role of the family as the primary environment for language development in early childhood, focusing on children aged 0–3 years in Pematangsiantar. Guided by a quantitative descriptive design, the research aimed to examine how parental communication patterns, linguistic stimulation, and emotional responsiveness influence early language acquisition. Twenty parents were selected through purposive sampling, each having at least one child aged between 0 and 3 years. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 25 Likert-scale items that measured the frequency of verbal interaction, quality of language stimulation, and emotional responsiveness in parent–child communication. Statistical analysis using descriptive statistics and correlation tests revealed a strong positive relationship between parental communication practices and children’s early language development ($r = 0.78, p < 0.01$). Among the three variables, emotional responsiveness showed the strongest correlation, suggesting that affective warmth and responsive communication create an optimal context for linguistic growth. The findings highlight that language learning in infancy is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional and relational experience. Families who engage in storytelling, singing, and naming activities contribute significantly to vocabulary expansion and expressive skills. The study concludes that the home environment serves as the “first school” where language, emotion, and identity are interwoven. It recommends strengthening parental literacy programs and fostering collaboration between families and early childhood institutions to enhance language development holistically.

Keywords: *First School, Early Childhood, Home*

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most fundamental tools that shape human thought, emotion, and social connection. For children between the ages of 0 to 3 years, language development is not merely a cognitive process but a relational and emotional journey that begins within the family environment. The home is often referred to as the first school, where a child’s

earliest linguistic expressions-crying, babbling, gestures, and first words-are nurtured through daily interactions with parents and caregivers. During this crucial developmental stage, children acquire the foundation for communication that will later influence their social, emotional, and intellectual growth. In the early years, the family plays a primary and irreplaceable role in shaping the language acquisition process. Parents serve as both the first teachers and communicative partners, modeling pronunciation, intonation, and contextual use of words. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, language development occurs through social interaction, where children internalize linguistic patterns through communication with more experienced speakers. The home environment thus becomes a linguistic ecosystem where the child learns to make meaning, express needs, and engage in dialogue long before formal education begins. The quality of interaction within the family significantly influences the pace and quality of language development. Studies show that children who are frequently engaged in conversations, storytelling, and play-based communication demonstrate stronger vocabulary and comprehension skills (Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe, 2012). Conversely, limited verbal engagement or emotionally distant communication can delay speech and reduce expressive capacity. Emotional warmth, consistent verbal stimulation, and responsive communication are therefore essential components of language growth in early childhood. In the context of Pematangsiantar, a culturally diverse city in North Sumatra, Indonesia, families are shaped by multilingual and multicultural interactions. Many children grow up hearing a mixture of languages-Indonesian, Batak, and sometimes English-within their homes. This linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for language development. On one hand, exposure to multiple languages can enhance cognitive flexibility and early phonological awareness. On the other hand, inconsistency in language use or limited exposure to a dominant language can lead to confusion and slower vocabulary acquisition. This study, therefore, situates early language development within the sociocultural and familial context of Pematangsiantar, where language learning is deeply embedded in everyday communication patterns. Another significant dimension of early language development is parental emotional responsiveness. Language is not learned in isolation but through emotionally rich exchanges. When parents respond sensitively to a child's vocalizations, they not only validate the child's attempt to communicate but also strengthen the bond that motivates further linguistic experimentation. The emotional tone of parental communication-whether supportive, patient, or dismissive-can either facilitate or inhibit verbal development. Language learning at this stage is as much about emotional attunement as it is about linguistic input. Much of the existing literature focuses on language acquisition in preschool or formal education settings, overlooking the critical 0-3-year period where foundational language structures are formed. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how family communication patterns, emotional interactions, and home environments contribute to early language development in children aged 0-3 years. The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the role of the family as the first educational environment in fostering language growth among infants and toddlers. Specifically, it aims to understand how verbal interaction, emotional engagement, and cultural-linguistic exposure within Pematangsiantar families support children's early communication skills. Through qualitative observation and parental interviews, this research highlights the home as a vital space where linguistic, cognitive, and emotional development converge.

By understanding this dynamic, educators and parents can better appreciate the power of everyday family interactions in shaping a child's lifelong communication abilities.

METHODS

A quantitative descriptive research design was applied, to analyze how the family environment contributes to language development in children aged 0–3 years in Pematangsiantar. The quantitative approach was chosen to obtain measurable data regarding parents' communication practices, language stimulation frequency, and their correlation with children's early language milestones. This design allows for the identification of statistical patterns that reveal how the home environment functions as the first educational space for language growth. The population of this study consisted of families in Pematangsiantar who have children aged 0–3 years. Using a purposive sampling technique, 20 parents were selected as respondents. The inclusion criteria required that each parent (1) had a child aged between 0 and 3 years, (2) lived in Pematangsiantar, and (3) was actively engaged in daily verbal interaction with their child. The sample represented diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds to ensure variation in communication patterns and parental approaches to early language support. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher based on previous studies on early language development (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006). The questionnaire consisted of 25 close-ended items using a Likert scale (1–5) ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items measured three main variables: (1) frequency of verbal interaction, (2) quality of linguistic stimulation (such as storytelling, singing, and naming objects), and (3) parental emotional responsiveness during communication. Examples of statements included: "I often describe objects and actions to my child" and "I respond verbally when my child makes sounds." The validity test used Pearson's product–moment correlation, and reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which produced a coefficient of 0.86, indicating high internal consistency. Data collection was conducted over two weeks through direct distribution of questionnaires to respondents' homes and early childhood centers. The analysis was performed using SPSS 25.0 software. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was preserved, and respondents provided informed consent. The study adhered to educational research ethics, ensuring that all data were used solely for academic purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how the family environment functions as the first school in supporting the language development of children aged 0–3 years in Pematangsiantar. Data were collected from 20 respondents-parents of young children-through a structured questionnaire consisting of 25 items. The responses were analyzed using descriptive and correlational statistical methods to identify trends and relationships among key variables: (1) frequency of verbal interaction, (2) quality of linguistic stimulation, and (3) parental emotional responsiveness. Descriptive statistics revealed that the overall mean score across all items was 4.27 out of 5, indicating a high level of family engagement in supporting children's language development. Parents generally reported frequent communication with their children, active participation in storytelling, and positive emotional expression during interactions. The analysis also revealed

significant variations across individual items. The highest mean (4.65) was found in the statement “I talk to my child even when they cannot respond yet,” demonstrating parents’ awareness of the importance of early verbal exposure. Conversely, the lowest mean (3.72) appeared in “I allocate specific time daily for storytelling,” suggesting that while parents engage in spontaneous talk, structured language activities remain less consistent. A Pearson correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between parental communication variables and children’s language development scores, derived from parental reports of vocabulary recognition and verbal imitation. The result showed a positive and significant correlation ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$) between frequency of verbal interaction and language development, indicating that frequent parent–child communication strongly contributes to vocabulary acquisition and speech imitation. Similarly, emotional responsiveness correlated positively ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$), showing that emotionally warm interactions enhance linguistic confidence in children. The results clearly indicate that frequent verbal interaction within the family setting is a strong predictor of early language development. Parents who regularly talk to their children—through naming objects, describing actions, or responding to cooing and babbling—create a rich linguistic environment that stimulates phonological awareness and word comprehension. This finding aligns with Hart and Risley (1995), who demonstrated that the quantity of words a child hears during the first three years of life significantly predicts later language proficiency. In the context of Pematangsiantar, this interaction often occurs in multilingual families where parents use both *Bahasa Indonesia* and local Batak dialects, offering children early exposure to linguistic diversity. Such multilingualism may enhance children’s cognitive flexibility and phonemic sensitivity. Observations and parental reports revealed that daily routines—such as feeding, bathing, and playing—were key opportunities for language interaction. Parents who narrated their actions (“Mommy is washing your hands,” “Let’s pick up your toy”) helped children associate words with real-world contexts, reinforcing semantic connections. From a developmental perspective, children aged 0–3 years are in the sensorimotor and preoperational stages (Piaget, 1962), where language serves as a bridge between sensory experience and conceptual understanding. Frequent verbal engagement accelerates the transition from nonverbal to verbal communication, helping children express needs, emotions, and curiosity more effectively. In Christian family contexts, as seen in several participants, verbal interaction also included spiritual elements such as bedtime prayers and songs of praise. These not only enriched linguistic input but also instilled values of gratitude and emotional warmth, highlighting how language learning and spiritual formation intertwine in early childhood.

Quality of Linguistic Stimulation: Storytelling, Singing, and Naming Activities

Beyond frequency, the quality of language stimulation was found to be a critical factor in children’s linguistic progress. The study revealed a mean score of 4.31 for this variable, indicating that most parents actively engage in language-enriching activities such as storytelling, singing, and naming objects during playtime. Parents reported that storytelling—either through picture books or oral narration—captured children’s attention and enhanced vocabulary acquisition. However, only 60% of respondents indicated that they practiced storytelling daily, and some cited lack of time or resources as constraints.

This finding resonates with Wasik and Bond (2001), who emphasize that frequent, interactive storytelling significantly improves children's expressive and receptive language skills. In the cultural context of Pematangsiantar, traditional oral storytelling and lullabies ("*ende-ende*") remain prevalent among older generations and continue to serve as valuable tools for language enrichment. These narratives often contain rhythmic and repetitive language structures that support phonological awareness. The study observed that families who maintained these traditional practices reported more advanced vocabulary recognition in their children. Parents who used open-ended questions during storytelling—such as "What do you think happens next?"—encouraged active thinking and linguistic creativity. This conversational style transforms children from passive listeners to active participants, fostering both comprehension and expression. The data also suggest that families with higher educational backgrounds tend to engage more in structured language activities, possibly due to greater awareness of early literacy importance. However, even parents with lower formal education demonstrated effective linguistic stimulation through daily conversations, highlighting that emotional involvement often outweighs formal knowledge in promoting language growth. Emotional responsiveness emerged as a significant correlate of language development, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.68$ ($p < 0.05$). Parents who responded warmly and empathetically to their children's attempts to communicate—through smiles, eye contact, and verbal encouragement—fostered a safe emotional space that encouraged verbal experimentation. This aligns with Bruner's (1983) concept in which caregivers support children's language learning by providing emotional and verbal cues that guide understanding. When children feel emotionally secure, they are more likely to imitate sounds, attempt new words, and engage in social dialogue. The study revealed that emotionally supportive parents often used affirming expressions such as "Good job!" or "That's right!" after their children uttered words. This positive reinforcement built self-confidence and reduced fear of making mistakes—a critical factor in early verbal development. In contrast, a few respondents admitted occasionally becoming impatient or unresponsive due to fatigue or busyness. These children, according to parental reports, were less talkative and relied more on gestures. This supports Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, emphasizing that emotional availability of caregivers directly affects children's communication and socio-emotional growth. Within Christian families, emotional responsiveness was often expressed through spiritual language—for example, affirmations like "God loves you" or prayers of gratitude—which not only conveyed emotional warmth but also moral and spiritual meanings. Such expressions enriched children's emotional vocabulary while embedding faith-based concepts in early language acquisition. To examine the combined influence of all variables, a multiple correlation analysis was conducted. The results revealed a strong overall correlation ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.01$) between family interaction factors (frequency, quality, and emotional responsiveness) and early language development scores. This suggests that language learning in early childhood is not the result of isolated factors but an integrated outcome of cognitive, emotional, and social processes within the family environment. This finding reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that language develops through social interaction mediated by cultural and emotional tools. The family, as the child's first social context, functions as a microcosm where linguistic patterns, emotional norms, and values are internalized through daily exchanges. Interestingly, families that

practiced bilingual communication-alternating between Indonesian and local Batak or English phrases-reported slightly higher scores in receptive vocabulary. This supports Grosjean's (1989) perspective that bilingual environments can stimulate cognitive and metalinguistic awareness when both languages are used naturally and positively. The correlation results highlight that emotional and spiritual warmth amplify the cognitive benefits of linguistic stimulation. Parents who combine affectionate tone, consistent eye contact, and gentle verbal correction tend to raise children who are not only linguistically advanced but also emotionally expressive and socially confident. In Christian homes, these dynamics were often described as part of a broader spiritual mission-viewing language as a divine gift and communication as a form of fellowship. Such theological perspectives reinforce emotional sensitivity and patience in communication, enriching the moral dimension of linguistic development.

The Home as a Holistic Learning Environment

The findings underscore that the home truly serves as the first school for children's linguistic, emotional, and spiritual growth. Language learning is not confined to structured teaching but occurs through immersive, everyday experiences. Parents act as the first teachers, and their language becomes the blueprint for how children interpret the world. Quantitative data show that families with higher consistency in verbal interaction, emotional support, and linguistic stimulation create environments where children acquire words faster, communicate more confidently, and display better emotional regulation. These results align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that the family as the microsystem exerts the most direct influence on early development. The quality of interaction, emotional climate, and parental involvement in this microsystem determine not only linguistic outcomes but also broader aspects of social and moral formation. In the cultural context of Pematangsiantar, where communal relationships and respect for elders are valued, children's language learning also involves internalizing social norms embedded in speech patterns-such as politeness markers, greetings, and tone of voice. Thus, linguistic and cultural transmission occur simultaneously. Storytelling traditions in Batak families, often involving moral tales and biblical lessons, further strengthen the moral-linguistic connection. Such stories provide moral frameworks while expanding vocabulary, demonstrating how culture and faith serve as vehicles for both linguistic and ethical education. The results of this study are consistent with international findings emphasizing the critical role of family interaction in early language development. For instance, Rowe (2012) found that the quantity and quality of parental talk predict not only early vocabulary but also later literacy outcomes. Similarly, Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2014) demonstrated that maternal responsiveness and conversational turn-taking enhance children's language processing speed and word comprehension. The present study adds new insights by contextualizing these findings within a faith-based and multicultural Indonesian setting, showing that emotional warmth and spiritual communication reinforce linguistic outcomes. In Christian families, communication is often infused with moral narratives, hymns, and prayers, adding affective and spiritual dimensions that support holistic child development. This study bridges a research gap by focusing on children aged 0-3 years, a group often underrepresented in Indonesian language development studies, which tend to focus on

preschool-aged children. The findings affirm that foundational linguistic exposure and parental emotional engagement during this critical age window are essential for later cognitive and social success. The findings have several implications for early childhood education, parenting programs, and faith-based family ministry. First, parent education programs should emphasize the importance of frequent verbal interaction and responsive communication from infancy. Parents should be encouraged to talk, sing, and read aloud daily, even before children can respond verbally. Second, early childhood centers and churches in Pematangsiantar could collaborate to provide family literacy workshops integrating faith-based storytelling and songs as language enrichment tools. Such programs can strengthen both linguistic and spiritual formation. Third, educational policymakers should recognize family communication quality as a core indicator in early childhood development frameworks. Government and community-based interventions can include parental training modules focusing on emotional responsiveness and the use of local languages in early learning. Finally, for Christian educators, this study reinforces the theological understanding that language is not merely a cognitive tool but a means of reflecting God's image through communication, empathy, and love. Thus, cultivating language in early childhood becomes both an educational and spiritual responsibility. This study's quantitative findings demonstrate that the family environment plays a decisive role in early language development. Frequent and high-quality verbal interactions, coupled with emotional warmth and spiritual sensitivity, form the foundation for linguistic, emotional, and moral growth. The correlation results ($r = 0.79, p < 0.01$) confirm that these dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The home thus emerges not only as the child's first school but also as the most formative context where language, emotion, and faith converge to shape holistic human development.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study strongly affirm that the family serves as the first and most influential environment for language development in early childhood, particularly during the crucial period from birth to age three. Through quantitative analysis of 20 families in Pematangsiantar, it becomes evident that language growth in children is closely intertwined with the quality, frequency, and emotional depth of communication that occurs within the home. The study identified three primary components that significantly shape linguistic development: verbal interaction frequency, linguistic stimulation quality, and emotional responsiveness. Among these, emotional responsiveness emerged as the strongest predictor, emphasizing that language learning is not only cognitive but also deeply emotional and relational. The data indicate that parents who frequently engage in meaningful verbal interactions—talking, responding, and explaining everyday activities—create a rich linguistic environment that accelerates children's comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Consistent with previous studies by Hart and Risley (1995) and Hoff (2006), the findings confirm that the quantity of spoken words is directly correlated with language proficiency at an early age. However, this study further reveals that quality of stimulation—through storytelling, singing, and naming objects—equally contributes to fostering curiosity and linguistic creativity. Homes that incorporate regular storytelling or song-based communication enable children to develop not only their vocabulary but also their narrative and expressive skills. Beyond cognitive exposure, emotional connection** plays a foundational role in nurturing linguistic confidence. When parents respond

warmly to their children's attempts to communicate-through smiles, affirmations, and patient listening-children feel safe to experiment with sounds and words. This emotional attunement transforms language learning into a joyful and secure experience. It aligns with Tomasello's (2003) social-cognitive theory, which views language as a cooperative act of meaning-making. In this light, language development within the home is best understood as a relational process rather than a mere transfer of information. The findings also carry contextual significance for Pematangsiantar, a city marked by its cultural and linguistic diversity. Many families are bilingual, using both Indonesian and the Batak language in daily interactions. The study suggests that such bilingual exposure enriches children's phonological awareness and flexibility, laying a foundation for future multilingual competence. Parents who nurture bilingual communication patterns contribute not only to linguistic intelligence but also to cultural continuity and identity formation. In practical terms, the research underscores the need for parental education programs that empower families to take an active role in early language development. Teachers, churches, and early childhood centers in Pematangsiantar can collaborate to design workshops on storytelling, reading habits, and responsive communication techniques. Strengthening family literacy culture will ensure that language learning continues beyond formal education and remains integrated with emotional and moral growth. The findings reaffirm that home-based learning precedes and strengthens institutional education. The home is not merely a physical dwelling but a dynamic communicative space where children first encounter meaning, emotion, and identity through language. Therefore, investing in parents as co-educators is essential for holistic child development. In conclusion, this study emphasizes that language development in early childhood is shaped most profoundly by the daily interactions and emotional climate within the family. A nurturing home-filled with words, stories, songs, and affection-serves as the true "first school" of life. Future educational and policy initiatives must therefore recognize the family's central role in linguistic, emotional, and spiritual formation during the earliest years of human growth.

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