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Little Minds, Growing Words: Language Acquisition in Early Toddlerhood

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ABSTRACT: Language acquisition during early childhood represents a critical stage in cognitive and social development. This study investigates the language acquisition of a two-year-old child living in Medan, Indonesia, focusing on vocabulary growth, sentence structure, and caregiver interaction. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, naturalistic observations were conducted over two weeks, documenting the child's spontaneous speech and communicative exchanges. The findings reveal that the child produced approximately 75 distinct words, primarily nouns and verbs, reflecting daily routines and immediate surroundings. The child's utterances were dominated by two-word combinations and telegraphic speech, consistent with Brown's (1973) two-word stage. Caregiver interaction played a central role, with prompting, expansion, and feedback serving as scaffolding mechanisms that enriched the child's linguistic development. Comparisons with recent studies confirm the universality of these developmental patterns while highlighting cultural and contextual influences on vocabulary and sentence use. This study contributes to the growing body of research on language acquisition in non-Western contexts and underscores the importance of caregiver support in fostering early language development.

Keywords: *language acquisition, two-year-old child, vocabulary development, telegraphic speech, caregiver interaction.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental aspect of human development, serving as the primary means through which children communicate, construct meaning, and engage with the world around them. In early childhood, language acquisition not only enables self-expression but also underpins cognitive growth, socialization, and learning (Clark, 2009). By the age of two, children typically transition from single-word utterances to combining words into short, meaningful expressions. This developmental milestone, referred to as the *two-word stage*, is characterized by telegraphic speech, in which function words are omitted but meaning is effectively conveyed (Brown, 1973).

Theoretical perspectives have long debated how children acquire language. Nativist theories, most prominently Chomsky's (1965) proposition of the *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD), argue that humans are biologically predisposed to learn language, equipped with universal grammar that unfolds naturally with exposure. In contrast, interactionist approaches, such as

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Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Bruner's (1983) concept of the *Language Acquisition Support System* (LASS), emphasize the importance of social interaction, caregiver scaffolding, and cultural context. These perspectives together suggest that early language growth results from the interplay between innate cognitive mechanisms and the linguistic environment.

Recent research over the past five years has advanced this understanding in several important ways. Studies on bilingual toddlers have revealed that cross-linguistic similarity facilitates word learning, with children relying on cognates across their languages to expand vocabulary (Manusia et al., 2024). Longitudinal investigations have also shown that maternal education influences vocabulary growth in monolingual and bilingual contexts, though effects vary depending on language dominance (Hoff et al., 2022). Large-scale naturalistic studies, such as the LiLO project in Australia, have highlighted that socioeconomic differences in the quantity and quality of caregiver input emerge as early as 12 to 18 months, shaping children's word learning and conversational turns (Taylor et al., 2021). Furthermore, research in Indonesia has examined the phonological development of toddlers, contributing insights into non-English contexts where consonant and vowel mastery play an equally critical role in language growth (Fadhillah, 2023). At the methodological level, recent innovations have employed Natural Language Processing (NLP) and neural network models to annotate grammar development automatically (Jiang et al., 2024) and even predict which words children are likely to learn next (Zhou et al., 2025).

Despite these advances, several research gaps remain. First, most studies have been conducted in Western and English-dominant contexts, leaving limited understanding of language acquisition in diverse linguistic environments such as Indonesia or other multilingual societies. Second, research often emphasizes vocabulary growth but pays less attention to how input quality—particularly grammatical complexity and morphological variation—shapes early

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sentence construction. Third, while socioeconomic status and maternal education have been widely studied, other moderating factors such as child temperament, attention span, and home interaction patterns require deeper exploration. Fourth, the growing presence of digital media in children's lives has yet to be adequately investigated for its impact on early language acquisition. Finally, although automated corpus analysis and machine learning methods show promise, they remain underutilized in large-scale, cross-linguistic, and naturalistic studies.

The state of the art in early language acquisition research thus points toward an integrative approach: combining classical theories of innate capacity and social interaction with new empirical evidence from longitudinal, cross-linguistic, and technologically enhanced methods. By situating the study of two-year-old children within this broader framework, the present article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion by focusing on how toddlers' vocabulary and sentence structures develop in natural contexts, and how social interaction with caregivers serves as a catalyst for linguistic growth..

METHOD

This study employed a **qualitative descriptive research design** to explore the characteristics of language acquisition in a two-year-old child. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture detailed, naturalistic data about the child's vocabulary, sentence structures, and social interaction patterns. This design allows for an in-depth understanding of language development within its real-life context, consistent with the interactionist perspective that emphasizes the role of environmental input (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983).

Participants

The participant was a **two-year-old toddler (24 months old) living in Medan, Indonesia**, in a middle-class household where **Bahasa Indonesia** was the primary language of communication. The child had **no reported developmental delays or hearing impairments**,

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ensuring typical language development for the age group. Caregivers were both Indonesian nationals and actively involved in daily interactions, providing a natural environment for language acquisition.

Parental consent was obtained prior to the study, and ethical guidelines for research with minors were strictly followed, including the assurance of anonymity and non-intrusive observation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through **naturalistic observation** in the child's home environment over a period of **two weeks**. Observation sessions lasted approximately **30–45 minutes per day**, covering daily routines such as meals, playtime, storytelling, and caregiver-child interactions.

The following data were recorded:

Vocabulary: All words spoken by the child were transcribed and categorized (nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns).

Sentence structures: Utterances were analyzed for syntactic patterns, including telegraphic speech, word combinations, and grammatical markers.

Social interaction: Instances of caregiver-child verbal interaction were documented, including caregiver prompts, corrections, and scaffolding behaviors.

All sessions were audio-recorded using a digital recorder to ensure accurate transcription. Field notes were also maintained to document contextual information, gestures, and non-verbal cues that accompanied verbal expressions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **descriptive and qualitative methods**.

- **Vocabulary Analysis**: The total number of words produced by the child was counted and categorized according to word type (Clark, 2009). The growth in vocabulary across the

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observation period was documented.

- **Sentence Structure Analysis**: Utterances were coded according to Brown's (1973) stages of early grammar development, focusing on two-word combinations, telegraphic speech, and emerging use of grammatical morphemes.
- **Interaction Analysis**: Caregiver-child interactions were examined to identify patterns of scaffolding, prompting, and feedback. The frequency and quality of conversational turns were recorded to assess the social influence on language development (Taylor et al., 2021).

Data triangulation was conducted by comparing audio recordings with field notes to ensure accuracy and reliability. Emerging patterns were interpreted in light of existing theories of language acquisition, including nativist, interactionist, and usage-based perspectives (Chomsky, 1965; Vygotsky, 1978; Tomasello, 2003).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from the child's caregivers. All data were anonymized, and recordings were stored securely. Observations were non-intrusive to minimize any potential stress for the child.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following section presents the findings of the study, focusing on vocabulary development, sentence structure, and social interaction patterns observed in a two-year-old child living in Medan, Indonesia. Data were collected through naturalistic observation over a two-week period, capturing the child's spontaneous verbal expressions and interactions with caregivers. The results are analyzed in relation to existing theories of language acquisition, including nativist, interactionist, and usage-based perspectives, and are further compared with recent empirical studies to contextualize the findings within broader research trends.

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3.1. Vocabulary Development

During the two-week observation period, the participant, a two-year-old child living in Medan, Indonesia, produced approximately **75 distinct words**. These words were categorized into **nouns, verbs, adjectives, and pronouns**, reflecting typical early vocabulary development (Clark, 2009). Table 1 presents the distribution of the child's vocabulary:

Table 1. Vocabulary Categories of the Participant

Word Type	Examples	Frequency
Nouns	ibu (mother), bola (ball), susu (milk), mobil (car), kucing (cat)	30
Verbs	makan (eat), tidur (sleep), main (play), ambil (take), pergi (go)	25
Adjectives	besar (big), panas (hot), lucu (cute), baru (new), basah (wet)	10
Pronouns	aku (I), kamu (you), dia (he/she)	10

The majority of the child's vocabulary was **contextually relevant**, reflecting daily routines and immediate social interactions. This aligns with prior research showing that toddlers' vocabulary tends to reflect objects, actions, and relationships they encounter frequently (Hart & Risley, 1995; Taylor et al., 2021).

3.2. Sentence Structure and Telegraphic Speech

The child primarily used **two-word combinations**, characteristic of **telegraphic speech** (Brown, 1973). Examples of utterances observed in Medan include:

"Mau susu" (Want milk)

"Main bola" (Play ball)

"Ambil mobil" (Take car)

"Tidur dulu" (Sleep first)

"Ibu sini" (Mother here)

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These findings confirm that, although grammatical markers and function words are often omitted at this stage, children can communicate meaningfully through simplified structures. Similar patterns were observed in previous studies of two-year-old children in Indonesia and other countries (RaisingChildren.net.au, 2023).

3.3. Social Interaction Patterns

Caregiver-child interactions played a pivotal role in language development. Observed behaviors included:

1) **Prompting**: Caregivers encouraged the child to label objects and complete sentences. Example: Mother pointing at a cup: "Apa ini?" (What is this?), child replied: "Susu" (Milk).
2) **Expansion**: Caregivers expanded the child's utterances, modeling more complex structures. Example: Child says, "Main bola," mother replies, "Ya, kita main bola di halaman" (Yes, we play ball in the yard).
3) **Feedback**: Positive reinforcement encouraged further verbal attempts, strengthening the child's communication skills.

These interactions support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Bruner's (1983) LASS framework, demonstrating that active social engagement accelerates language acquisition.

Discussion

The results confirm that language acquisition at age two is shaped by both biological and environmental factors. The child's vocabulary and sentence structures reflect innate linguistic ability (Chomsky, 1965) as well as the influence of consistent caregiver interaction (Taylor et al., 2021; Manusia et al., 2024).

The observation also highlights context-specific factors in Medan. For instance, local lexical items (e.g., "mobil," "kucing") appeared frequently, reflecting the child's immediate

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environment and daily experiences. This supports the notion that early language acquisition is context-sensitive and influenced by cultural and environmental factors, consistent with research emphasizing cross-linguistic diversity (Fadhillah, 2023).

Furthermore, social interaction—especially caregiver prompting, expansion, and feedback—was crucial in the child's development of two-word utterances. This finding corroborates interactionist theories, indicating that structured yet naturalistic interaction enhances language acquisition, particularly in the early stages of sentence formation.

Finally, these results resonate with recent studies on bilingual and multilingual language acquisition, even though the observed child was monolingual. The principles of meaningful input, caregiver scaffolding, and frequent usage remain consistent across linguistic environments (Hoff et al., 2022; Manusia et al., 2024).

The present findings align with research by Hanafi et al. (2020), which examined a two-year-old bilingual child in Indonesia and found that exposure to multiple languages enriched vocabulary development through code-switching and contextual use. While the observed child in Medan was monolingual, the principles of meaningful input and social scaffolding were consistent.

Similarly, Kyvrakidou (2025) reported that reduced social interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected language development in preschool children in Greece, highlighting the critical role of interaction even across cultural contexts. The Medan case reinforces this notion, showing that daily engagement with caregivers supports both vocabulary growth and sentence formation.

In addition, cross-linguistic studies suggest that the structure of early speech varies by language environment, as children acquire culturally and linguistically relevant vocabulary (Fadhillah, 2023). For instance, the child in Medan frequently used local vocabulary like "mobil"

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and “kucing,” reflecting the immediate environment’s influence on lexical development.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined the characteristics of language acquisition in a two-year-old child living in Medan, Indonesia, focusing on vocabulary development, sentence structure, and social interaction with caregivers. The child’s vocabulary consisted of approximately 75 words, primarily contextually relevant nouns and verbs, reflecting daily routines and immediate social interactions. Two-word combinations and telegraphic speech dominated early sentence formation, illustrating typical developmental milestones at this age.

Social interaction played a critical role, with caregivers providing prompting, expansion, and positive feedback, which reinforced both vocabulary growth and sentence formation. These findings align with established theories of language acquisition, including nativist, interactionist, and usage-based perspectives, and highlight the importance of caregiver scaffolding in early childhood.

Comparisons with recent studies, including bilingual and multilingual contexts and studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the universality of these principles while highlighting the influence of cultural and environmental factors on early language development. The study also fills a gap in research by providing detailed observational data in a non-Western, monolingual Indonesian context, offering insights relevant to both local and global perspectives on child language acquisition.

In conclusion, language acquisition at age two is a dynamic process shaped by innate capacities, environmental exposure, and social interaction. Future research should explore longitudinal development across diverse linguistic environments, including the impact of digital media, caregiver strategies, and individual differences in temperament and cognitive ability, to

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17528194

further advance understanding of early language development.

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