

Exploring English Language Acquisition in A 4-Year-Old Makassarrese Child: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the acquisition of English by a 4-year-old Makassarrese child. From the moment of her birth, the child has been exposed to the Makassarrese and Indonesian languages. Presently, the child is currently acquiring English as a third language. The present research employed a qualitative case study method, incorporating observation, recording, and interviews with parents. The findings indicate that the child has acquired basic vocabulary and English sentence structures sufficient for daily interaction. The phenomenon of code-switching among English, Indonesian, and Makassarrese languages is a recurrent theme, particularly during play, which illustrates how the child naturally and strategically uses her multilingual skills. The findings indicate that digital media, interaction with English-speaking peers, and consistent parental support are pivotal factors in the language acquisition process. Despite their interaction with a foreign language, children maintain their cultural identity through the incorporation of typical Makassarrese elements into their daily conversations. This research underscores the significance of early exposure to multiple languages and the role of a nurturing socio-cultural and environmental context in facilitating children's language development.

Keywords: Early Multilingualism, Language Acquisition, Makassarrese Child

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana seorang anak Makassar yang berusia 4 tahun memperoleh bahasa Inggris. Sejak lahir, anak tersebut telah terpapar pada bahasa Makassar dan bahasa Indonesia, dan saat ini sedang belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa ketiga. Dengan menerapkan metode studi kasus kualitatif melalui observasi, perekaman, dan wawancara bersama orang tua, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa anak telah memperoleh kosakata dasar serta struktur kalimat bahasa Inggris yang memadai untuk berinteraksi dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Praktik beralih bahasa (code-switching) antara bahasa Inggris, Indonesia, dan Makassar sering kali terjadi, terutama saat bermain, yang menunjukkan penggunaan sumber daya multibahasa dengan cara yang alami dan strategis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa media digital, berinteraksi dengan teman yang mampu berbahasa Inggris, serta dukungan orang tua yang terus-menerus memiliki peranan yang signifikan dalam proses penguasaan bahasa. Walaupun anak berinteraksi dengan bahasa asing, identitas budaya mereka tetap terpelihara melalui penggunaan unsur-unsur bahasa Makassar yang khas dalam percakapan sehari-hari. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya paparan terhadap berbagai bahasa sejak usia dini, serta konteks sosial budaya dan lingkungan yang mendukung dalam membantu perkembangan bahasa anak dengan cara yang efektif.

Kata Kunci: Multilingualisme Dini; Pemerolahan Bahasa; Anak penutur Makassar

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INTRODUCTION

The mastery of foreign languages from an early age, particularly English, has emerged as a pivotal subject in language studies and education research due to the mounting necessity for international

community communication. Consequently, numerous parents across various nations worldwide have opted to introduce multiple languages to their children from an early age. This phenomenon is also evident in Indonesia, where children are frequently introduced to and taught multiple languages from an early age. To illustrate, an individual may first acquire a local language, such as Makassarese, designated as the first language (L1). Subsequently, they may attain proficiency in Indonesian, classified as a second language (L2). Moreover, English is frequently introduced to children as a foreign language (FL) in their early childhood education or informal environment. It can be concluded that early childhood is characterized by a native-like capacity to master multiple languages, in other words, a multilingual environment can greatly stimulate their cognitive flexibility and metacognitive awareness in acquiring a language.

Cognitive flexibility in early childhood is defined as the ability to organize and control attention from one language to another, as well as the ability to select relevant and irrelevant information in the context of communication. In addition, cognitive flexibility is able to be described as improved executive abilities of the brain, such as temporary memory retention and problem-solving skills. Examples of flexible cognitive abilities in young children raised in bilingual and multilingual environment demonstrate the ability to recognize that one object can have two names, such as "anjing" and "dog," as well as to transition between different language rules. It is imperative to acknowledge that the interpretation of meaning is influenced by contextual factors and the nuances of intonation. It is emphasized by Xia, An, and Guo (2022), the use of bilingual language in early development is always associated with cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is defined as an individual's capacity to transition seamlessly between disparate ideas, perspectives, or tasks, demonstrating situational appropriateness and efficacy. In the context of bilingualism, research conducted by Friesen and Bialystok in 2014 demonstrated that bilingual children exhibit superior executive control abilities, which, in turn, enhances their metalinguistic awareness aspects, particularly their capacity to deliberate and adapt language structures with consciousness. These findings lend support to García's argument (2009) that a multilingual environment can enhance cognitive abilities and metalinguistic awareness. This relationship is rooted in the notion that metalinguistic awareness demands not only the capacity to comprehend language, but also the ability to think flexibly, shift perspectives, and process information in an abstract form. These aspects are all hallmarks of cognitive flexibility, a skill children develop more strongly in multilingual environments, leading to greater metalinguistic sensitivity. Therefore, it can be inferred that a multilingual environment stimulates children to learn the languages around them, making it easier for them to become bilingual or multilingual. Consequently, these children will develop language skills that enhance their understanding of language structure and meaning.

It has been demonstrated that children who are raised in a bilingual or multilingual environment exhibit a heightened level of metalinguistic awareness. This ability to comprehend, analyze, and reflect on the structure and meaning of language is a hallmark of advanced language proficiency. The advantages of children's metalinguistic awareness are attributable to the influence of the different types of language they encounter, active social interaction, and the development of cognitive control that commences at an early age. Hofer and Jessner (2022) posit that children who are able to use multiple languages exhibit a high level of metalinguistic awareness, which enables them to recognize and compare language structures in a more reflective manner. This assertion aligns with the perspective articulated by Tribushinina et al. (2025), who emphasize that early-age bilingualism fosters language transfer and accelerates foreign language acquisition by enabling the discernment of grammatical patterns across languages. Furthermore, Roehr-Brackin (2024) posits that metalinguistic awareness is the result of a combination of explicit knowledge of language and cognitive control, with bilingual children demonstrating superior ability to manage these two aspects. This is reflected in the way the subject in this research exhibits awareness of multiple language systems and alternates between them with ease.

Children exposed to multiple languages from an early age, whether in multilingual environment or bilingual context, exhibit enhanced language development, particularly with regard to vocabulary, language structure, and communication skills. The acquisition of a second or third language in young children is demonstrably influenced by the quality and quantity of language input received through interactive and meaningful contexts, such as singing, storytelling, or play. Unsworth et al (2014) indicates that the frequency of language exposure is the most significant factor in the vocabulary development of bilingual and multilingual children. This finding is particularly salient in light of the observation that the age at which exposure first occurs is a less significant factor than one might initially presume. This finding is further corroborated by the observations of Ramirez and Kuhl (2020), who reported in the SparkLing research that preschoolers demonstrate a faster rate of foreign language acquisition when exposed to socially intense language environments, independent of economic background factors. This assertion is further substantiated by Thordardottir's (2017) findings, which underscore the pivotal influence of the quantity and consistency of language input on the acquisition of multiple languages in children, extending beyond the initial stages of learning. Consequently, it can be concluded that the most effective method for facilitating language acquisition in multilingual children is through the implementation of language-rich learning environments and meaningful social interactions.

In accordance with the preceding explanation, researcher conducts this research on a 4-year-old child who has the ability to speak multiple languages and has been raised in a multilingual environment.

She is a Makassarese who being from South Sulawesi, Makassarese is her first language and Indonesian as her second language, and she is also acquiring English as her foreign language

This research focuses on multilingualism, whereas the majority of immediate research focuses on bilingualism. Consequently, there remains a dearth of empirical research examining early childhood dynamics in trilingual or multilingual contexts, particularly in the domain of sociolinguistics in Indonesia. Consequently, this research attempts to address this gap by exploring how a 4-year-old child acquires and uses three languages within a natural multilingual environment.

METHOD

This research employs the qualitative case study method to examine the process of English language acquisition in a 4-year-old child. The participant is a child who speaks Makassarese and also has a high level of proficiency in Indonesian in which given initial as BHN (an initial name). The subject has been exposed to English informally since the age of three, through various digital media, including educational videos and games on mobile phones. The data was collected through three methods, which are 1) Observation, 2) Video recording, and 3) A parent interview. The collected data are then transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify language patterns, vocabulary use, and reactions to linguistic stimuli.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to investigate the English acquisition process of BHN, a four-year-old child from Makassar who is fluent in Makassarese and Indonesian. Information was collected through direct observation, video recording, field observation, and interviews with BHN's parents. The ensuing findings are enumerated below:

Lexical Ability

For a child of her age, BHN demonstrated a fairly diverse mastery of English vocabulary. Based on research's observation, it is found that:

- a. BHN can name colors such as red, black, green, and blue
- b. She can mention simple adjectives such as big, small, and smart.
- c. She can name simple verbs such as eat, drink, sing and play.
- d. She can mention surrounding objects such as book, pen, car, doll, apple, and chair.
- e. She can understand simple greetings such as hi, hello, good morning and thank you.
- f. She can understand simple English instructions such as sit down, let's play, give me, and don't cry.

The following is an example of usage:

Researcher: What color is this?

BHN : This is red.

Sentence structure

BHN has begun to grasp the fundamentals of English sentence structure. For example: "I like mango", "This is my car", and "What is that?". However, the sentence structures used are still limited to the simple S-V-O (subject-verb-object) and S-V-C (subject-verb-complement) patterns.

Code-Switching

BHN often engages in code-switching in daily life, especially during play. She sometimes uses English in combination with Indonesian or Makassarese. BHN also occasionally uses all three languages in one utterance. An example of it is as follows:

BHN: Ini my apple Janganki kanrei, please! ("This is my apple. Don't eat it, please!").

Here, a mixture of English (my apple, please), Indonesian (ini, jangan), and Makassarese (kanrei) can be seen, as well as a typical polite Makassarese particle (-ki).

Pronunciation

BHN made some mispronunciations, which are common in early childhood. Examples include:

- a. The word Zebra is pronounced as sebra
- b. The word Blue is pronounced as bluh
- c. The word Three is pronounced as tri

However, this does not interfere with BHN's understanding of communication. Rather, she exhibits typical phonological development for a child her age.

Language comprehension

Based on researcher's observation, it is found that:

- a. BHN can respond to English commands such as "Take the phone" or "Open the door."
- b. She can respond verbally to questions or commands appropriately. Sometimes her responses are in English, and sometimes they are in Indonesian or Makassarese.
- c. She can follow simple stories in English through children's videos such as Cocomelon, Baby Shark, or Peppa Pig.
- d. She can show emotional reactions appropriate to the communication context.

Environmental and Parental Influence

The results of the interview with BHN's parents revealed that:

BHN's father: BHN likes to watch English Kids YouTube channels from about 2 years old. In addition, we deliberately also often invite her to talk in English even though it is a little bit. On occasion, she is

also spoken to in English by our neighboring junior high school children who are enrolled in English courses.

BHN's Father : BHN dari umur sekitar 2 tahun suka nonton channel YouTube bahasa Inggris. Selain itu, Kani sengaja juga sering ajak dia bicara pakai bahasa Inggris meskipun sedikit-sedikit. Terkadang dia juga diajak bicara bahasa Inggris deh anak-anak SMP tetangga kami yang ikut kursus bahasa Inggris.

BHN's Mother: BHN frequently mixes English with Indonesian and Makassarese in her speech. Sometimes when she wants to say thank you, she says Thank you, mom. She also sometimes still says Terima kasih, ibu. So her way of speaking likes to be mixed.

Ibu BHN : BHN suka berbicara bahasa Inggris campur-campur. Kadang dia kalau mau mengucapkan terima kasih, dia bilang "Thank you, mom". Dia juga terkadang masih bilang "Terima kasih, ibu". Jadi cara bicaranya suka campur begitu.

Parents state that they do not use a formal teaching approach to BHN, but encourage habituation through media which is YouTube and daily conversation. Thus, through frequent exposure, interaction, and repetition in the child's linguistic development unfolds naturally, therefore proving a learning process that subconsciously adheres to the principles of social interactionist theory.

Discussion

The early multilingual phenomenon

The phenomenon experienced by BHNs reflects the existence of early multilingualism, where children from an early age have mastered more than two languages, namely Makassarese and Indonesian, and are currently learning English concurrently. This condition suggests that BHNs not only experience simultaneous bilingualism (Genesee, 2008), but also fall into the category of simultaneous multilingualism. This view is corroborated by Genesee and Genoz (2001), who posit that children can effectively develop competencies in three or more languages from an early age, particularly in a language-rich environment with consistent exposure. The introduction of language through various means, such as interaction with family and digital media, has also been demonstrated to enhance language skills. It is further substantiated by Lightbown and Spada (2006), who underscore the pivotal role of both the quality and quantity of language input in fostering children's multilingual competence. Furthermore, Kuhl (2011) posits that children exhibit a high degree of sensitivity to auditory stimuli from an early age. However, the efficacy of acquiring a foreign language is significantly influenced by active social interaction rather than solely by

passive exposure. Consequently, the role of parents and the surrounding environment becomes paramount in the development of children's multilingual language skills.

Code-Switching as a language strategy

The employment of code-switching in BHN's utterances, including code-switching among English, Indonesian, and Makassarese, signifies a versatile approach to communication that prioritizes social objectives and identity expression. This phenomenon corroborates Grosjean's (2001) assertion that code-switching does not serve as an indicator of language incompetence. Rather, it is a functional and contextually appropriate bilingual skill. This assertion is further substantiated by the aforementioned statement in BHN's utterance, "This is my apple" "Janganki kanrei, please" An analysis of the Makassarese reveals that the particle -ki functions not only to reinforce the meaning of ownership and emotional politeness, but also to signify cultural closeness and solidarity between groups. This assertion is further substantiated by the Identity and Accommodation Theory proposed by Giles and Coupland (1991), which posits that code switching is frequently employed as a strategy to accommodate social identity, fortify relationships, and cultivate intimacy with interlocutors. Furthermore, Dewaele and Wei (2013) posit that numerous language users deliberately employ code-switching to convey meaning, emotions, and social relationships. Therefore, code-switching in this context is not solely associated with language, it also functions as a medium for articulating complex and dynamic cultural and social identities.

The role of media and family and social interaction

The results from the interviews and observations demonstrate that digital media plays a significant role in the introduction of English to young children. This finding aligns with Tomasello's (2003) proposition that children acquire language through social interaction and imitation. The extant research indicates that the primary factors conducive to success in BHN language acquisition are as follows: parental consistency in providing exposure to English, interaction with neighboring peers, some of whom utilize basic English when communicating with BHNs, the use of audiovisual media as a source for vocabulary and sentence structure, and support for the use of both languages without pressure.

Makassarese Identity

The incorporation of Makassarese particles, such as "ji," "mi," "ta," and "ki," and Makassarese vocabularies such as *nganre*, *anggunung* and *aktingo* into sentences demonstrates the resilience of local cultural identity in the face of external linguistic influences. This phenomenon suggests that the use of two or more languages (bilingualism/ multilingualism) does not inherently lead to a shift or loss of the mother

tongue. Conversely, bilingual or multilingual contexts have been shown to enhance children's communication abilities, both in terms of linguistics and sociocultural. Cummins (2000) posits that bilingualism can facilitate children's cognitive development and cultural identity, contingent upon the presence of a social and educational environment that fosters the perpetuation of the mother tongue. Furthermore, Garcia and Wei (2014) posit that language practices involving the combination of different linguistic codes, as exemplified by Makassarese local particles utilized in conjunction with Indonesian and English, represent a form of linguistic creativity that mirrors a profound comprehension of the social and cultural milieu. Consequently, the presence of local particles in bilingual discourse is a positive indicator of children's cultural resilience and literacy development in a multilingual context.

Based on the findings and analysis, the multilingual phenomenon in BHNs shows that exposure to language from an early age, whether through family, digital media, or social environment, allows children to develop language skills in more than two languages simultaneously. Code-switching strategies and the use of local particles not only demonstrate language proficiency, but also maintain cultural identity. Good environmental support is crucial in developing children's language skills and cultural resilience in multilingual settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that BHN has developed her English vocabulary and grammar skills sufficiently for daily communication. In her communication, BHN frequently utilizes code-switching between English, Indonesian, and Makassarese as part of a natural and contextually appropriate communication strategy. The acquisition of English by the BHN is primarily influenced by media exposure, family support, and social interaction. Nevertheless, the local cultural identity is sustained through the incorporation of Makassarese elements in daily discourse, thereby demonstrating BHN's profound connection to her cultural heritage.

The results of the research indicate that it is recommended that parents regularly introduce English to their children through interesting and interactive daily activities, such as playing or reading stories. Digital media should be utilized judiciously and with guidance by parents for ensuring that children do not merely passively absorb information. Furthermore, it is imperative to persist in the support of the implementation of regional languages, such as Makassarese, as a strategy to preserve children's cultural identity. Early childhood education institutions are expected to support the development of diverse language skills by creating language-rich and inclusive learning environments.

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