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A Case Study of Second Language Barriers towards Children's Language Development in Private Kindergarten, Shah Alam

Uvaneswari Anbalagan¹, Lily Muliana Mustafa^{2,*}, Cynthia Ratnadewi²

¹ Management and Science University, 40100 Malaysia

² City University, Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, 46100 Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Language barriers in early childhood education can significantly affect children's communication, academic performance, and emotional well-being, particularly in multilingual contexts. This study investigates private kindergarten teachers' perceptions of second language challenges in children's language development. A total of 52 teachers from private kindergartens in Section 13, Shah Alam, participated in a structured questionnaire survey. The findings reveal that 55.8 percent of respondents recognize the negative impact of second language difficulties on children's academic and social development. Furthermore, 69.3 percent emphasize the importance of integrating cultural and linguistic factors into teaching practices. A combined 70.5 percent of participants consider grammar instruction essential for enhancing language accuracy, while 53.9 percent acknowledge the emotional and academic challenges posed by language barriers. These results highlight the critical need for early language exposure, culturally responsive teaching, and targeted professional development. The study offers practical implications for teacher education and supports the development of inclusive, multilingual curriculum frameworks within the ASEAN educational context.

1. Introduction

The period from birth to age five is critical for a child's overall development. Research has consistently shown that participation in quality preschool education significantly enhances children's academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being [6]. According to SEA-PLM (2019), reading literacy is defined as "understanding, using and responding to a range of written texts, in order to meet personal, societal, economic and civic needs" [18].

Recognizing the connection between early abilities and future academic performance, the SEA-PLM 2019 study explored parental insights on children's literacy skills before entering primary school.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lily.muliana@city.edu.my

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These skills included recognizing letters of the alphabet, reading simple words, writing letters and words, and identifying and writing one's own name.

The SEA-PLM 2019 study also explored the relationship between home language use and school performance. Specifically, it examined the language most frequently spoken at home by children and compared it to the school's language of instruction. This is important because children who do not regularly use the school language at home may face additional linguistic challenges upon entering formal education. Figure 1 below illustrates the percentage of children in selected Southeast Asian countries who speak the school language of instruction at home most of the time.

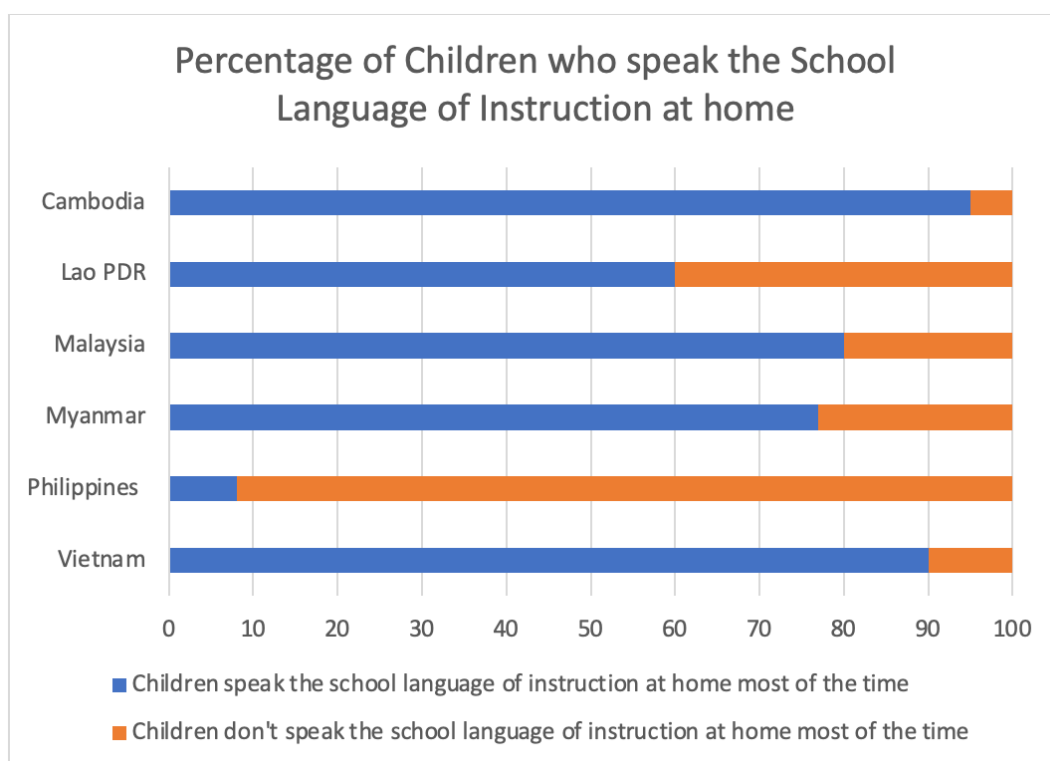


Fig. 1. Percentage of children who speak the school language of instruction at home

As shown in Figure 1, countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia have high percentages of children who speak the school language at home, suggesting stronger language continuity between home and school. In contrast, the Philippines displays the lowest percentage of children using the school language at home, with a significant proportion speaking a different language most of the time. Malaysia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR fall in between these two extremes, reflecting varying levels of home-school language alignment.

This data highlights a key concern: when there is a mismatch between the language used at home and the language of instruction, children may face significant language barriers that affect their ability to engage, learn, and thrive in school. It further emphasizes the importance of early childhood education strategies that accommodate multilingual realities, particularly in linguistically diverse countries such as Malaysia.

The study also investigated the language children most frequently use at home and compared it to the language of instruction used in schools. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of children in selected Southeast Asian countries who speak the school language at home. Countries like Cambodia and Vietnam showed high alignment between home and school language use, whereas the Philippines reported the lowest.

Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes language and communication as essential to children's right to participate in society (Murray, 2021). Language development, which includes the ability to understand and use language, plays a central role in interpersonal communication and personal growth. This study begins with a global overview of multilingual education and narrows its focus to the Malaysian context.

Malaysia, a linguistically diverse country where Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil are widely spoken, faces challenges in balancing national language policies with multiculturalism in early education [19]. Although multicultural education is emphasized in preschool curricula, limited exposure to second languages at home or in the classroom can hinder communication and learning. This study explores how second language barriers affect children's development, offering insights to inform educational policy and teacher training across ASEAN nations.

Entering preschool marks a pivotal point in a child's linguistic journey. Children begin acquiring their first language at birth, and preschool represents the onset of structured second language exposure. Unlike first language acquisition, which is organic and immersion-based, second language learning involves navigating unfamiliar linguistic and cultural systems [2].

The roles of parents and teachers are central towards the children language development process [12]. Preschool teachers, together with parental and institutional support, significantly influence how children acquire a second language. Skilled educators create nurturing environments that support both language and cognitive development [15]. In addition, teachers also play a vital role in helping children cope with challenges such as cultural adjustments and trauma [10]. Effective instructional plans, as suggested by Hampton, Stern, and Rodriguez [8] and developed in collaboration with parents, are essential for overcoming obstacles in language acquisition.

Since learning extends beyond the classroom, parents are instrumental in providing continuous support. Parents' involvement strengthens children's social, emotional, and linguistic development [13]. Open communication between parents and teachers, as highlighted by Abdullah, Poetri, Saputra, and Al Haddar [1], may enhance learning outcomes and support the resolution of language difficulties both at school and at home.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Development

First and second language acquisition differ fundamentally. While first language learners begin from a blank slate, second language learners must navigate new linguistic systems using their established native language frameworks. Teachers' perceptions of language development barriers are shaped by numerous factors. For instance, Filimon and Cartwright-Lacerda [7] revealed that many teachers lack formal training in second language acquisition, leading to misconceptions and an overreliance on self-contained classrooms.

This study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks. The first is Jean Piaget's Constructivist Theory, which posits that children construct knowledge by integrating new experiences with existing cognitive structures. The second is Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT), which highlights the significance of social interaction and cultural context in learning, particularly through the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [16].

Interaction with the social environment is crucial for preschool children who are not yet literate. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, as referenced by Biyikoğlu Alkan, Bora Güneş, Özsavran, and Kuzlu Ayyıldız [4], emphasized that children develop learning and behavioral patterns primarily through the observation and emulation of others. Corrective feedback from peers and adults helps refine their language use. For instance, Chekan, Kasianenko, and Barna [5] asserted that

mispronunciations or grammatical errors in speech frequently elicit social corrections, which play a significant role in facilitating language acquisition. Therefore, this study draws upon Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories to examine how children learn language through interaction and how educational environments can support second language learners using scaffolding and social guidance.

2.2 Language Barriers

Children's proficiency in multiple languages during early childhood is often constrained by second language barriers, which can hinder language development. This study conceptualizes second language barriers as the independent variable (IV) and children's language development as the dependent variable (DV). Through classroom observations and parental engagement, this research investigates how to overcome these barriers by leveraging each child's unique strengths. By documenting individual progress and involving parents in the process, the study promotes an additive bilingualism model and encouraging English acquisition without sacrificing the child's mother tongue.

3. Research Gap

Although substantial research has been conducted on second language acquisition, there is a lack of studies focusing on preschool-aged children in Malaysian private kindergartens within the broader ASEAN context. Existing literature seldom addresses how early childhood educators perceive and respond to language barriers in linguistically diverse settings. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the experiences of teachers and offering practical recommendations to enhance early childhood language instruction in multicultural environments.

4. Methodology

This study employed a purposive sampling method to gather data using a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from a previous study titled *Phonological Acquisition in a Multidialectal and Multicultural Context: The Case of Bilingual Preschoolers in Singapore* (2022). The revised instrument was distributed to kindergarten teachers in Section 13, Shah Alam, Selangor.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, divided into two sections: (A) Demographic Information, and (B) Teachers' Perceptions of Second Language Barriers toward children's language development. The items in Section B were rated using a five-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree. Section A gathered information on gender, age, nationality, academic qualifications, and teaching experience. Section B addressed the teachers' views on challenges related to second language acquisition in early childhood settings.

5. Data Collection Procedure

Since the researcher has chosen to use the quantitative method, they also must use a method where surveys are distributed among the teachers from the surrounding area of Section 13, Shah Alam, Selangor. The researcher searched for a set of questions to adopt from the previous thesis. In this thesis, the researcher adopted some questions from *phonological acquisition in a multidialectal and multicultural context: The case of bilingual preschoolers in Singapore* (2022).

The questionnaire was divided into four categories, which were section A, section B and section C. In section A, the participants' demographic information needs to state their gender, age,

nationality, qualification and teaching experience. Section B focuses on teachers' perceptions of children's language development barriers towards a second language. Lastly, section C presents those children's challenges while translating languages into a second language.

After constructing the questionnaire's first draft, the researcher reviewed the questions to see if there were any grammatical errors and if the questions were relevant to the topic. The questions were also processed in Grammarly software to check for spelling, grammar, or errors in the sentence structure. Next, in a self-evaluation of the questionnaire, the researcher adapted the set of questions as a final questionnaire including with the experts' validation to check if all the questions were correct or not. Then, after the experts' comments, researcher proceeds with the questions and pilot study.

Once the questionnaire was completed, a pilot test was done before proceeding with the main study. 52 teachers participated in the pilot study, and the results were processed in the SPSS software to check the reliability. After obtaining the results from the pilot study, the researcher was instructed to process the results in SPSS software to check the questions' reliability. It was recommended that the Cronbach alpha should be within $0.70 > 0.90$. The researcher then received 0.84 as a reliability score.

Then, the questionnaire was shared with teachers in six kindergartens. This survey study was distributed during the teachers' break time at the private kindergarten that will take roughly five minutes to complete for each of the respondents within three weeks. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to the teachers and requested to scan the QR code that leads to the questionnaire. Once the respondents have completed their responses, the data will be immediately collected and gathered using this Google Form application. As a result, this is a convenience, given the remote possibility of not losing the data acquired. This is the procedure that was done to collect the data.

5. Results

5.1 Respondent Demographics: Teachers' Educational Background

The analysis of respondents' educational qualifications, as presented in Figure 2, indicates a diverse academic background among private kindergarten teachers participating in the study. The majority of respondents (44.2%) possess a Bachelor's degree, followed by 28.8% holding Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) qualifications, and 23.1% holding a Diploma. A smaller percentage hold a Master of Education in Early Childhood Education (2.9%) or Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (STAM) qualifications (1%).

This distribution indicates that while a considerable number of teachers have attained higher education, a significant portion (28.8%) are only qualified at the secondary or pre-university level. This may raise concerns regarding the readiness and competency of some educators in applying effective second language teaching methodologies, especially when addressing the linguistic needs of children in a multilingual environment. Teachers with bachelor's degrees may possess a stronger academic foundation; however, the specific field of study was not indicated, which suggests that not all teachers had a degree holder which specialized in early childhood or language education. The low percentage of postgraduate holders in early childhood education (ECE) resulted 2.9% also highlights a potential gap in advanced pedagogical training, which is essential for addressing second language acquisition barriers among young learners.

Consistent with the findings of Yang, Shi, Lu, and Huang [22], the present study highlights the pivotal role of teacher qualifications in ensuring high-quality language instruction. A lack of formal training in early childhood education may lead teachers to adopt informal or inconsistent instructional practices, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of second language learning among young children. Overall, the data indicate a clear need for sustained professional development and

specialized training in bilingual and multilingual instructional approaches, enabling educators from diverse academic backgrounds to effectively support children's second language development.

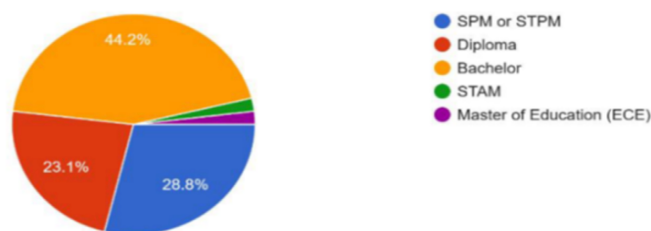


Fig. 2. Teachers' educational background qualifications

5.2 Teachers' Perceptions of Second Language Barriers

As shown in Figure 3, the responses to the questionnaire item measuring perceptions of second language barriers in children's language development revealed that a significant portion of participants acknowledged the issue. A total of 42.3% of respondents agreed, and 13.5% strongly agreed that second language use presents a barrier to children's language development in private kindergarten settings. This combined majority (55.8%) reflects a high level of concern among educators regarding the potential challenges that arise when young learners are exposed to a second language without adequate support or scaffolding.

In contrast, 30.8% of respondents maintained a neutral stance, possibly indicating either uncertainty or the belief that the impact of second language use is context-dependent and influenced by other factors such as teaching strategies or the home language environment. A smaller percentage of teachers expressed disagreement (9.6%) or strong disagreement (3.8%), suggesting that a minority of educators may view second language exposure as either non-problematic or beneficial in early education settings.

These findings highlight a generally positive awareness among educators about the complexities of second language acquisition and its implications for early childhood development. The high percentage of agreement may also suggest that teachers have first-hand experience with language delays, communication difficulties, or reduced participation among children who are not proficient in the language of instruction.

The findings align with existing literature highlighting that language barriers can impede children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, particularly in environments where the primary language used by teachers and peers is unfamiliar to the child [20]. These results underscore the need for inclusive bilingual teaching practices and the implementation of language support programs that are responsive to the needs of linguistically diverse learners.

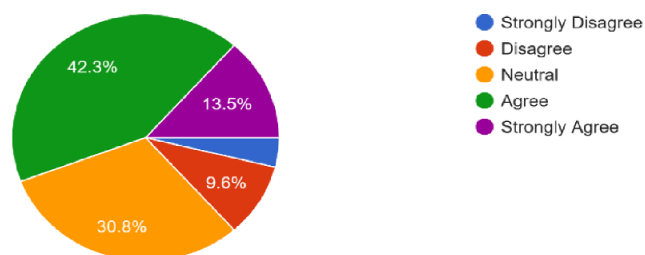


Fig. 3. Teachers' perceptions of second language barriers

5.3 Teachers' Beliefs about the Importance of Language Support Strategies

Figure 4 presents the responses to a statement regarding the importance of language support strategies in addressing second language barriers in private kindergarten settings. The findings reveal that a clear majority of respondents acknowledged the necessity of providing structured support to children learning a second language.

A total of 46.2% agreed, and 23.1% strongly agreed with the statement, making up nearly 70% (69.3%) of the total responses. This reflects a strong consensus among educators on the need for intentional teaching approaches and intervention strategies to enhance second language development in early childhood education. Meanwhile, 25% of respondents remained neutral, which could suggest a lack of certainty about what constitutes effective support strategies or limited exposure to training in this area. A minimal percentage of respondents disagreed (3.8%) or strongly disagreed (1.9%), indicating that opposition to language support practices is very low.

The overall positive response indicates that most educators recognize that second language acquisition requires more than passive exposure. This supports theories in second language pedagogy which emphasize scaffolding, contextual learning, and interactive communication as essential for young learners. Ruiz [17] quoted that teachers' acknowledgment of the importance of these strategies may also reflect their daily encounters with children struggling to express themselves or comprehend instruction in a non-native language.

Moreover, these findings reinforce the need for professional development programs focused on bilingual instructional methods, as well as for policy interventions that mandate or encourage such practices within the private kindergarten system. The responses align well with previous findings in this study regarding the variation in teacher qualifications further emphasize that even those without advanced degrees are aware of the practical necessity of language support.

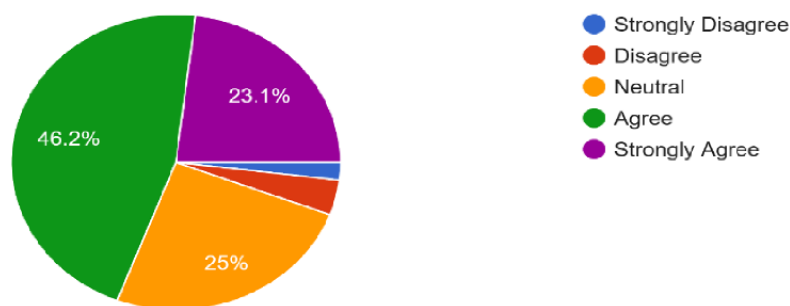


Fig. 4. Teachers' beliefs about the importance of language support strategies

5.4 Teachers' Perspectives on the Importance of Emphasizing Grammar in Second Language Instruction

Figure 5 illustrates respondents' views on the importance of incorporating grammatical elements in second language instruction for young learners. The survey results indicate that a substantial majority of educators (57.7%) agreed, and a further 13.5% strongly agreed with the belief that grammar plays a vital role in children's second language development. This results in a total of 71.2% of respondents affirming the value of grammar-focused instruction in early childhood language acquisition.

In contrast, only a small proportion (7.6%) of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that opposition to grammar instruction is relatively limited among educators in private kindergarten settings. Additionally, 21.2% of respondents maintained a neutral position, which may reflect uncertainty or a lack of clarity regarding the appropriate integration of grammar within developmentally appropriate language teaching practices. Promoting early awareness of language structure can enhance children's ability to construct meaning, formulate accurate sentences, and prevent the fossilization of incorrect forms during the critical period of language acquisition.

The overall distribution of responses suggests a broad recognition among early childhood educators of the importance of grammar in promoting linguistic accuracy, clarity, and proficiency. Although traditional early childhood education has often emphasized naturalistic or play-based approaches to language development, the findings indicate a shift toward a more comprehensive instructional model. This approach integrates explicit grammatical instruction with interactive and communicative teaching methods that are suitable for young learners.

According to Weadman, Serry, and Snow [21], the findings are consistent with recent literature emphasizing that grammatical competence serves as a foundational element for later academic achievement in both oral and written communication. Furthermore, this positive perception may be shaped by the growing linguistic diversity in Malaysian classrooms, where structured grammatical input is often essential to support learners managing multiple languages concurrently. These findings underscore the need for teacher training programs to include practical, child-friendly strategies for teaching grammar, ensuring that language instruction is both engaging and linguistically robust.

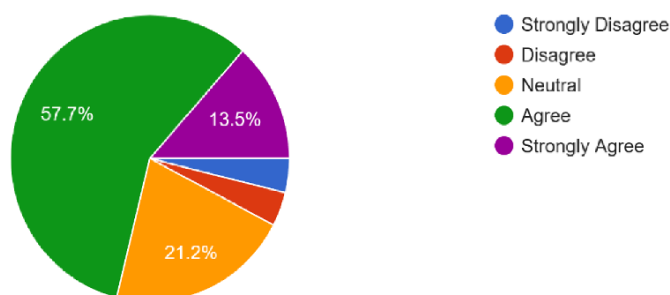


Fig. 5. Teachers' perspectives on the importance of emphasizing grammar in second language instruction

5.5 Educators' Awareness of Language Barriers Affecting Students' Emotional Well-Being and Academic Engagement

As illustrated in Figure 6, the survey results reflect a notable degree of awareness among educators regarding the impact of language barriers on children's emotional well-being and academic engagement. A total of 40.4% of respondents agreed, while 13.5% strongly agreed with the statement, resulting in 53.9% who acknowledged that second language challenges may negatively influence children's emotional and academic experiences in the classroom. Conversely, only 7.7% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed, indicating limited rejection of this perspective.

Notably, 38.5% of participants selected a neutral response, suggesting that while a significant portion of teachers recognize the issue, a sizeable group may remain uncertain or lack sufficient evidence or training to make a definitive judgment. The data suggests that many educators are conscious of the emotional strain children may experience when they are unable to effectively communicate in a second language. These challenges may manifest as reduced confidence, anxiety, reluctance to participate, or feelings of isolation, which can directly affect both social-emotional development and academic involvement.

This aligns with existing literature highlighting that language difficulties can lead to reduced classroom engagement and self-esteem, especially in early childhood settings where communication is foundational to peer relationships, teacher interactions, and instructional comprehension. Aziz and Kashinathan [3] assert that difficulties in comprehension or self-expression may lead children to become socially withdrawn or demotivated, thereby negatively influencing both their educational attainment and holistic development.

Furthermore, the high neutral response rate (38.5%) points to a need for greater professional awareness and training in recognizing the emotional and academic signs of second language stress among young learners. These findings reinforce the importance of incorporating socio-emotional support strategies in second language instruction and ensuring that teachers are trained to identify and respond to the subtle ways language barriers may hinder children's participation and well-being.

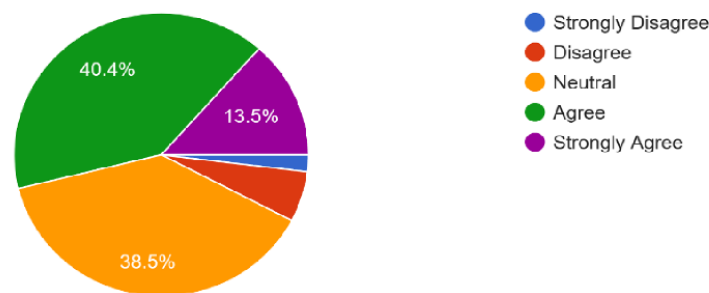


Fig. 6. Educators' awareness of language barriers affecting students' emotional well-being and academic engagement

6. Discussion

This study sets out to examine the barriers faced by children in acquiring a second language within private kindergarten settings, with a particular focus on how educators perceive and address these challenges. The results derived from the survey questionnaire revealed several noteworthy trends that contribute to our understanding of the second language learning environment in early childhood education.

Firstly, the data highlighted a significant variation in teacher qualifications. While a substantial proportion of respondents (44.2%) possessed a bachelor's degree, a considerable number (28.8%) held only secondary-level qualifications such as SPM or STPM. This discrepancy points to an important concern in the professional preparedness of early childhood educators. Teachers without formal training in language acquisition or early childhood pedagogy may face limitations in implementing effective strategies to support second language learners, which may affect children's developmental outcomes.

Moreover, the findings revealed that most educators were aware of the impact second language barriers can have on children's learning. A combined 55.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that such barriers hinder language development. This demonstrates a clear awareness among practitioners that language proficiency is essential to children's success in both communication and learning. Additionally, 69.3% of teachers affirmed the need for targeted language support strategies, indicating a general recognition that language learning in young children must be scaffolded through intentional pedagogical approaches. This finding aligns with current research in early language acquisition, which emphasizes the importance of guided support in vocabulary development, comprehension, and communication skills [9].

The study also examined teachers' attitudes toward grammar instruction in second language teaching. A large majority (71.2%) of participants supported the integration of grammatical elements into early language instruction, suggesting a shift from purely naturalistic approaches to a more balanced pedagogy that includes explicit language awareness. This result underscores the educators' understanding that grammar, when taught in age-appropriate and contextualized ways, can enhance children's language accuracy and fluency, ultimately supporting stronger language competence.

Another important dimension explored was the emotional and academic impact of language barriers on children. More than half of the respondents (53.9%) recognized that difficulties in language acquisition could affect children's emotional well-being and classroom engagement. While this reflects a growing sensitivity to the socio-emotional side of second language learning, a

significant percentage (38.5%) remained neutral, possibly indicating a lack of clarity or training in identifying these issues. Lau and Shea [11] aligned with the findings that educators should be equipped not only with linguistic tools but also with the emotional insight required to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for all children, especially those facing language challenges.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, there is a clear need to strengthen teacher training and qualifications, particularly in the areas of second language acquisition and early childhood education. Professional development programs should be designed to enhance teachers' competencies in language pedagogy, classroom strategies for multilingual learners, and the integration of grammar instruction suited to young children. Second, structured language support programs should be implemented within kindergartens to ensure that children receive systematic exposure to language in ways that are developmentally appropriate and engaging.

Furthermore, increasing teachers' awareness of the emotional dimensions of language barriers is essential. Training modules should include content on how to recognize and respond to signs of frustration, anxiety, or social withdrawal that may result from communication difficulties. This would support teachers in fostering emotionally responsive classrooms that nurture both language and social-emotional growth. Additionally, education policy makers should consider revising the language component of the early childhood curriculum to emphasize a balance between immersive experiences and structured language teaching, tailored to the diverse needs of learners in multilingual settings.

Finally, further research is encouraged to build on these findings. Future studies could explore the relationship between teacher qualifications, years of experience, and their effectiveness in managing second language learning challenges. Longitudinal research may also provide insights into the long-term impact of early language interventions on academic performance and social development.

7. Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this study. First, the brief data collection period may have limited the ability to observe long-term trends or contextual variations. Extending the research timeline could have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of changes in teacher perceptions and evolving language use among children. Second, limitations related to available resources, including time, funding, and personnel, may have influenced both the scope and depth of the study. These constraints likely affected geographical coverage and reduced the diversity of participant backgrounds.

Furthermore, the demographic variables collected were relatively limited. The absence of data on factors such as socio-economic status, regional language differences, and the types of schools involved reduces the generalizability of the findings. Future research would benefit from incorporating a broader demographic profile to better capture how these variables interact with challenges in second language acquisition.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on early childhood second language development by examining teachers' perceptions of linguistic barriers in private kindergartens. The findings underscore the importance of early language exposure, grammar instruction, and cultural context, while also revealing gaps in teacher training and awareness of emotional impacts. The study highlights the need for inclusive pedagogical approaches and targeted professional development to

support both language acquisition and emotional well-being in multilingual learning environments. Ultimately, the study enhances our understanding of the complex factors influencing children's second language development and provides a foundation for future educational strategies and policy considerations.

9. Recommendation

Future studies are encouraged to employ longitudinal research design to monitor developments in teachers' perspectives and children's language progress over an extended period. This approach would enable researchers to capture shifts in teaching strategies and language outcomes more accurately. It is also advisable to include a more diverse sample of participants, representing various geographical areas, school systems, and cultural settings. Doing so would allow for broader generalizability and deeper insights into how second language barriers manifest across different contexts. Furthermore, incorporating qualitative approaches such as interviews and classroom-based observations would enrich the data by providing first-hand accounts of teaching experiences and language interactions in authentic learning environments.

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