

Exploring A Child's First Language Acquisition within a Bilingual Environment

Nurul Anisa

English Education, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Karawang, Indonesia

Email: nurul.anisa@fkip.unsika.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study investigates a child's first language acquisition within a bilingual Indonesian–Sundanese environment, focusing on how environmental bilingualism influences early pragmatic development. In multilingual societies such as Indonesia, children are frequently exposed to both the national language and a regional language from an early age, yet empirical studies examining how such exposure shapes pragmatic aspects of first language acquisition in early childhood remain limited. Addressing this gap is crucial, as pragmatic competence plays a central role in children's ability to participate effectively in social interaction. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, this study analyzes naturalistic speech data from a 3.5-year-old female child acquiring Indonesian as her first language while being continuously exposed to Sundanese in daily interaction. Data were collected through naturalistic observation and audio recordings of the child's spontaneous utterances in everyday contexts. The findings reveal that Sundanese phatic particles emerge consistently in the child's Indonesian speech, indicating bilingual influence at the pragmatic level rather than at the structural level of language. These forms are treated as empirical linguistic data that reflect environmental input and interactional experience. The study concludes that bilingual exposure does not interfere with first language development but instead contributes to the enrichment of pragmatic competence, supporting effective social communication in early childhood.

Keywords: first language acquisition; bilingual environment; pragmatic development; phatic expressions; early childhood

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji pemerolehan bahasa pertama pada anak dalam lingkungan bilingual Indonesia–Sunda dengan fokus pada pengaruh bilingualisme lingkungan terhadap perkembangan pragmatik awal. Dalam masyarakat multibahasa seperti Indonesia, anak-anak sering terpapar bahasa nasional dan bahasa daerah sejak usia dini. Namun, kajian empiris yang secara khusus menelaah bagaimana paparan tersebut membentuk aspek pragmatik pemerolehan bahasa pertama pada anak usia dini masih terbatas. Kajian ini penting karena kompetensi pragmatik berperan sentral dalam kemampuan anak untuk berpartisipasi secara efektif dalam interaksi sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan menganalisis data tuturan alami seorang anak perempuan berusia 3,5 tahun yang memperoleh bahasa Indonesia sebagai bahasa pertama dan secara berkelanjutan terpapar bahasa Sunda dalam interaksi sehari-hari. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi naturalistik dan perekaman tuturan spontan anak dalam berbagai konteks aktivitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa partikel fatis bahasa Sunda muncul secara konsisten dalam tuturan bahasa Indonesia anak, yang mencerminkan pengaruh bilingualisme pada tataran pragmatik, bukan struktural. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa paparan bilingual tidak menghambat pemerolehan bahasa pertama, melainkan memperkaya kompetensi pragmatik anak dalam berkomunikasi secara sosial.

Kata kunci: pemerolehan bahasa pertama; lingkungan bilingual; perkembangan pragmatik; partikel fatis; anak usia dini

A. Introduction

Language acquisition in early childhood constitutes a foundational aspect of human development, as it enables children to communicate, construct meaning, and participate in social interaction. First language acquisition refers to the natural process through which children acquire their initial linguistic system through continuous exposure to language in meaningful contexts. Contemporary research emphasizes that this process is shaped not only by innate cognitive capacities but also by the linguistic and social environment in which children grow (Hoff, 2015; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). Consequently, variation in linguistic environments may lead to differences in how children develop linguistic and pragmatic competence.

From an interactionist perspective, early language development is closely linked to the quality and characteristics of linguistic input available to the child. Children learn language through participation in everyday communicative routines, during which they gradually acquire not only linguistic forms but also the social functions of language use. Recent studies highlight that pragmatic competence, including the ability to manage turn-taking, express stance, and align with interlocutors, begins to develop in early childhood and is highly sensitive to environmental exposure (Hoff, 2015; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). This suggests that examining children's language use in natural interactional settings is crucial for understanding first language acquisition.

Indonesia represents a highly multilingual setting in which the acquisition of a first language often occurs within bilingual or multilingual environments. Although Bahasa Indonesia functions as the national language and is widely used in formal domains, regional languages remain dominant in informal communication within families and local communities. Children in many parts of Indonesia are therefore exposed simultaneously to Indonesian and a regional language from early childhood, resulting in bilingual Indonesian–regional language contexts (Musgrave, 2014; Nurjaleka & Supriatnaningsih, 2021). This

linguistic situation provides a valuable context for examining how environmental bilingualism influences early language development.

In the Indonesian context, early language development is closely related to processes of language socialization that occur within family and community interaction. Language socialization theory emphasizes that children acquire language through participation in culturally situated communicative practices, where linguistic forms are learned alongside social norms, values, and interactional expectations (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017). In multilingual communities, children are socialized into using different linguistic resources depending on the social setting and interlocutors. Indonesian children, therefore, do not acquire language in isolation, but through daily engagement with both the national language and regional languages that function as markers of social intimacy and community belonging. This perspective highlights the importance of examining first language acquisition within its broader sociocultural environment, particularly in settings where bilingual exposure is an integral part of everyday interaction (ROWE & SNOW, 2020).

In such contexts, bilingualism is not necessarily characterized by balanced proficiency in two languages, but rather by differential patterns of exposure and use across domains. Indonesian typically serves as the dominant language for formal communication, while regional languages are frequently used to express intimacy, emotion, and social alignment. Research indicates that these functional differences may influence which linguistic features are acquired first, with interactional and pragmatic elements often emerging earlier than complex grammatical structures (PARADIS, 2023). This functional distribution of languages is especially relevant for understanding early pragmatic development.

Recent studies on bilingual first language acquisition indicate that exposure to more than one language does not impede children's linguistic development. On the contrary, bilingual children are capable of developing phonological, lexical, and

grammatical competence comparable to that of monolingual peers, provided that sufficient input is available in each language (PARADIS, 2023). However, bilingualism does not only affect structural aspects of language. Increasing attention has been given to the development of pragmatic competence, which involves the ability to use language appropriately in social interaction.

One important yet often underexplored aspect of pragmatic development in bilingual environments is the acquisition of phatic expressions and discourse particles. Phatic elements serve interactional functions such as maintaining conversational flow, expressing stance, emphasizing information, and managing interpersonal relationships. Examining this aspect is important because the use of phatic expressions reflects children's emerging ability to participate appropriately in social interaction, which is a core component of communicative competence beyond grammatical accuracy. Understanding how children acquire these interactional resources also provides insight into how bilingual environments shape early sociopragmatic development and support children's social integration within their communities. Research suggests that children acquire these elements through repeated exposure in everyday interaction, particularly in informal settings where regional languages are actively used (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996; Wahyudin et al., 2024). In Indonesian regional languages, such as Sundanese and Javanese, discourse particles play a prominent role in daily communication and are frequently embedded in spoken interaction.

Several Indonesian studies have documented the influence of regional languages on children's Indonesian speech, particularly in the form of code-switching and lexical borrowing (Nurjaleka & Supriatnaningsih, 2021; Aruwiyantoko, 2023). Nevertheless, these studies tend to focus primarily on vocabulary development or language alternation patterns, while the acquisition of phatic particles as markers of early pragmatic competence remains relatively neglected. This gap is significant, as pragmatic markers reflect children's sensitivity to social norms and interactional

expectations within their linguistic environment.

Furthermore, existing international studies on bilingual pragmatics often examine school-aged children or adult bilingual speakers, leaving early childhood contexts underrepresented (PARADIS, 2023). As a result, there is limited empirical evidence that captures how very young children incorporate regional language discourse features into their first language during natural interaction. Addressing this gap is particularly important in Indonesia, where bilingual exposure is not an exception but a common linguistic experience.

In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to explore first language acquisition within a bilingual Indonesian–regional language environment, with a specific focus on the emergence of phatic expressions in early childhood speech. By examining naturalistic data from a young child's daily interactions, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how bilingual environments shape pragmatic development in first language acquisition.

B. Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore first language acquisition in early childhood within a bilingual environment. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to describe and interpret naturally occurring linguistic phenomena rather than to test hypotheses or measure variables statistically. Descriptive qualitative research is particularly suitable for language acquisition studies, as it allows researchers to capture authentic language use and contextual meaning in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

1) Research Subject and Context

The participant in this study was a 3.5-year-old female child who was acquiring Indonesian as her first language while residing in a bilingual environment where Indonesian and Sundanese were used in daily interaction. Indonesian was predominantly used in the household, whereas Sundanese

frequently appeared in neighborhood communication and informal social interaction. Previous studies emphasize that describing the linguistic environment is essential in qualitative language acquisition research, as environmental input plays a central role in shaping early language development (Hoff, 2015; PARADIS, 2023).

2) Data Collection

Data were collected through naturalistic observation, a method commonly used in early child language research to ensure that language data reflect genuine communicative behavior. Naturalistic observation enables researchers to examine children's spontaneous speech without artificial intervention, thereby preserving ecological validity (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Syamsiyah, 2017). The observation was conducted over a period of four weeks to capture recurring patterns in the child's spontaneous speech across different daily activities.

The child's utterances were recorded during daily activities such as playing, interacting with family members, and engaging in casual conversation. Audio recordings and field notes were used to document the data. The recordings served as a reference to ensure accurate transcription and detailed analysis of linguistic features, particularly phatic expressions and discourse particles. Ethical principles in qualitative research were applied by maintaining participant anonymity and focusing solely on observable language behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3) Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. This approach was selected because the aim of the study was to describe and interpret naturally occurring language use as it appears in early childhood interaction, rather than to develop abstract theoretical categories or conduct detailed linguistic microanalysis. Qualitative descriptive analysis is particularly appropriate for studies of first language acquisition, as it allows researchers to remain close to the data while capturing meaningful patterns of language use in natural contexts.

The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of recorded utterances, followed by data reduction to identify relevant linguistic forms. The researcher then categorized instances of phatic expressions and discourse particles appearing in the child's speech. The analysis focused on naturally occurring utterances in which phatic expressions appeared, treating these forms as indicators of pragmatic development rather than as independent linguistic units.

Subsequently, the identified data were interpreted based on their pragmatic functions within interactional contexts. Qualitative descriptive analysis allows researchers to present findings in a manner that remains close to the data while providing interpretative insight into language use (Sandelowski, 2010; Sirajuddin, 2017). The analysis focused on how discourse particles functioned to express emphasis, stance, encouragement, and interpersonal alignment within bilingual communication.

4) Trustworthiness of the Data

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, repeated observations were conducted across different interactional contexts, allowing consistent patterns of language use to emerge. The use of audio recordings supported transcription accuracy and reduced potential researcher bias. Regarding ethical considerations, the participant in this study was the researcher's own child, a 3.5-year-old female, which permitted direct and prolonged observation within naturalistic contexts. Informed consent was obtained from the child's parent prior to the commencement of data collection, and all observational procedures were conducted with full awareness and authorization. To safeguard the participant's privacy and confidentiality, no personally identifiable information is disclosed in this publication. Providing detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis procedures further contributes to transparency and credibility, as recommended in qualitative research methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

C. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the child's first language acquisition is shaped by continuous exposure to a bilingual environment in which Indonesian functions as the dominant language, while Sundanese is frequently used in daily social interaction. This bilingual context is reflected in the child's spontaneous speech, particularly through the appearance of Sundanese phatic expressions and discourse particles embedded within Indonesian utterances.

In this study, the occurrence of Sundanese particles such as *atuh*, *mah*, *sok*, and *teh* is treated as empirical linguistic data emerging from the child's spontaneous speech. These forms are not analyzed as independent linguistic units, but are reported as research findings that indicate the influence of a bilingual Indonesian–Sundanese environment on first language acquisition, particularly at the pragmatic level.

The findings reveal that the child's first language acquisition is strongly shaped by continuous exposure to a bilingual environment in which Indonesian functions as the dominant language, while Sundanese is frequently used in daily social interaction. This bilingual exposure is reflected in the child's spontaneous utterances, where Sundanese phatic particles consistently appear within Indonesian sentence structures. The presence of these particles is observed across various interactional contexts, including play activities, requests, expressions of persuasion, mild complaints, and emotional responses. This pattern is consistent with previous studies on bilingual language acquisition, which report that pragmatic and discourse-level elements tend to emerge earlier than structural features due to their high frequency and functional salience in everyday interaction (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996; Wahyudin et al., 2024).. Linguistically, the child's utterances remain structurally Indonesian, indicating that Indonesian is firmly established as her first language. However, the frequent insertion of Sundanese particles demonstrates that bilingual influence manifests primarily at the pragmatic and discourse level rather than at the level of syntax or core vocabulary. This

constitutes a significant scientific finding, as it suggests that early bilingual exposure may shape how children use language socially before it affects grammatical structure.

From a developmental perspective, this phenomenon can be explained by the nature of pragmatic acquisition in early childhood. Recent research highlights that pragmatic competence emerges through repeated participation in social interaction and is highly sensitive to environmental input (Rowe & Weisleder, 2020; (Hoff, 2015). In Sundanese-speaking communities, phatic particles are an integral part of everyday communication, functioning to express emphasis, soften requests, indicate personal stance, and maintain interpersonal harmony. Continuous exposure to these interactional patterns enables the child to internalize their communicative functions even without full productive mastery of the Sundanese language system.

Table 1. Data 1.

Particle <i>atuh</i>
/Neng mau main bola <i>atuh</i> /
/Jangan diambil <i>atuh</i> mainan eneng/

The utterances express strong desire and mild complaint. In these contexts, the particle *atuh* functions to add emotional emphasis and to soften requests or complaints, allowing the child to express insistence without sounding confrontational. The use of *atuh* indicates an emerging sensitivity to affective and interpersonal meaning in interaction.

The frequent appearance of *atuh* in the child's speech illustrates this process clearly. In Sundanese interaction, *atuh* commonly conveys emotional involvement, mild insistence, or persuasion. The child's ability to position this particle appropriately within Indonesian utterances indicates an emerging sensitivity to affective and interpersonal meaning. This finding aligns with usage-based theories of language acquisition, which argue that children acquire linguistic forms that are frequent, salient, and functionally

meaningful in their communicative environment (Syamsiyah, 2017).

Table 2. Data 2.

Particle <i>mah</i>
/Neng <i>mah</i> mau yang ini aja/ /Neng <i>mah</i> gak suka itu/

The utterances emphasize the speaker's personal preference or stance. In these contexts, the particle *mah* functions as a stance marker that allows the child to highlight her own perspective and to contrast it with alternative choices or viewpoints. The use of *mah* indicates the child's emerging ability to manage subjectivity in interaction by foregrounding personal position within discourse.

Research on bilingual child language acquisition shows that discourse markers related to stance and emphasis are often acquired earlier than complex syntactic structures because they require minimal structural adjustment (PARADIS, 2023). The child's use of *mah* within Indonesian utterances thus represents pragmatic borrowing rather than grammatical interference.

Table 3. Data 3.

Particle <i>sok</i>
/Sok ibu main duluan/ /Ya udah <i>sok</i> ayah ambil/

The utterances function as invitations or encouragements to act. In these contexts, the particle *sok* is used to issue polite directives and to encourage joint action, reflecting the child's emerging persuasive and directive competence. The use of *sok* appears primarily in interactional settings such as play and peer engagement, indicating that the child employs language not only to describe events but also to influence the behavior of others. This pattern reflects early pragmatic development, as children learn to use linguistic resources strategically through repeated social interaction and feedback.

Consistent with previous findings, the presence of *sok* demonstrates that bilingual exposure supports functional language use by fostering directive and persuasive abilities rather than merely passive lexical acquisition (ROWE & SNOW, 2020).

Table 4. Data 4.

Particle <i>teh</i>
/Ibu teh gak betul masang puzzle-nya/ /Susu coklat teh enak tau/

The utterances emphasize a specific referent or evaluation. In these contexts, the particle *teh* functions as a discourse marker that highlights topical focus and maintains conversational continuity. The child's use of *teh* indicates an emerging awareness of discourse organization, as it helps foreground information considered important within interaction. The appearance of *teh* further supports the conclusion that the child's bilingual environment contributes to the development of interactional competence. In Sundanese discourse, *teh* commonly serves to mark topical focus and sustain conversational flow, and its early use by the child aligns with Indonesian studies reporting that regional language particles frequently emerge as pragmatic tools in children's Indonesian speech prior to broader lexical transfer (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996; Wahyudin et al., 2024).

In addition, the use of phatic particles in the child's speech appears to be context-sensitive and closely related to the interactional setting. The data suggest that these particles predominantly emerge in informal situations and in interaction with familiar interlocutors, such as family members or peers, rather than in more regulated communicative contexts. This pattern indicates that the child is beginning to differentiate language use based on social relationships and situational appropriateness. Such sensitivity is considered a key aspect of early sociolinguistic competence, which develops as children learn not only what to say, but also when and how to say it in socially meaningful ways (Ochs &

Schieffelin, 2017; ROWE & SNOW, 2020). This finding further supports the argument that bilingual environments provide rich interactional input that facilitates early pragmatic and sociolinguistic development.

Importantly, the child's use of these particles does not indicate language confusion or delay. Indonesian grammatical structure remains stable and dominant, supporting research that demonstrates bilingual exposure does not hinder first language development (PARADIS, 2023). Instead, bilingual environments may enrich communicative competence by expanding children's pragmatic resources. This finding is also consistent with Indonesian research showing that regional language influence often appears at the discourse level rather than through extensive code-switching (Nurjaleka & Supriatnaningsih, 2021); Aruwiyantoko, 2023).

The findings of this study also contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the relationship between bilingual exposure and first language development. Concerns are often raised that exposure to multiple languages in early childhood may lead to confusion or delayed language acquisition. However, the present findings provide evidence that bilingual exposure, particularly in the form of regional language input, does not hinder the development of the child's first language. Instead, it supports the development of pragmatic flexibility and communicative effectiveness. This supports recent research emphasizing that bilingualism in early childhood should be viewed as a developmental resource rather than a risk factor (PARADIS, 2023; Hoff, 2015), especially in sociolinguistic contexts where bilingual exposure is a natural part of everyday life.

Overall, the findings of this study provide empirical evidence that first language acquisition in a bilingual Indonesian–Sundanese environment involves dynamic interaction between dominant language structure and regional language pragmatics. The child's use of phatic particles reflects early sociolinguistic awareness and sensitivity to interactional norms within her community. These results directly address the research objective by demonstrating how

bilingual exposure shapes first language acquisition through pragmatic enrichment rather than structural interference, reinforcing the view that bilingual environments function as a resource for early language development.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study was conducted to explore a child's first language acquisition within a bilingual Indonesian–Sundanese environment, with a particular focus on how environmental bilingualism influences early pragmatic development. The findings indicate that the child's acquisition of Indonesian as a first language is not isolated from the surrounding linguistic context. Instead, continuous exposure to Sundanese in daily social interaction contributes to the emergence of pragmatic features associated with the regional language, as reflected in the use of phatic expressions in the child's spontaneous speech.

The study concludes that bilingual exposure does not interfere with the structural development of the first language. Rather than causing linguistic confusion or delay, the bilingual environment functions as a source of pragmatic enrichment that supports the child's ability to manage interaction, express stance, and engage effectively with others. These findings confirm that first language acquisition in multilingual settings involves dynamic interaction between dominant language input and environmental pragmatic influence.

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports interactionist and usage-based approaches to language acquisition, which emphasize the role of social interaction and environmental input in shaping early language development. In the context of Indonesia's multilingual society, first language acquisition should therefore be understood as a socially embedded process influenced by both national and regional languages. The scientific contribution of this study lies in its focus on phatic expressions as empirical indicators of bilingual influence, offering a more nuanced understanding of how bilingual environments shape early pragmatic competence.

Based on these conclusions, further research is recommended to address limitations and expand the scope of investigation. Future studies may involve a larger number of participants to determine whether similar pragmatic patterns occur across different Indonesian–regional language contexts. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in examining how the use of regional pragmatic features evolves as children’s linguistic and cognitive abilities develop. Comparative studies across regional languages could further contribute to a broader theoretical framework for understanding first language acquisition in multilingual societies.

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