

# THE LANGUAGE PRACTICES OF PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS IN RAISING MALAY-ENGLISH BILINGUALS – A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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## Abstract

Parents and caregivers play an important role in their child's language development. Ideally, all Malaysians should be Malay-English bilinguals, as it is stated in the National Language Act that Malay is the National Language and English is the Official Second Language of the nation. However, in reality, not all Malaysians are Simultaneous or Sequential Early Malay-English bilinguals. Studies have shown that the language practices of parents and caregivers are an essential aspect in developing children as bilinguals. Raising children as Malay-English bilinguals can be challenging due to the inadequate input and exposure to both languages that the children may receive. Therefore, this study is aimed at exploring the language practices among parents and caregivers in raising their young child into Malay-English bilinguals. To achieve this aim, a community-based online survey will be distributed to parents and caregivers of 1- to 6-year-old Malay-English bilingual child throughout Malaysia. The survey consists of a set of parental report questions comprising four constructs based on Bandura's social learning theory, Skinner's theory of learning, Vygotsky's social development theory, and Krashen's comprehensible input theory. These four constructs employed are to identify the language practices of parents and/or caregivers to the children's language development via behavioral social learning, behavioral reinforcement and responses, cognitive development and language learning ability through scaffolding and social interaction, and language acquisition and language comprehension based on  $i + 1$  and comprehensible input. The implications of this future research may provide information on the right language practices that parents and caregivers may employ to raise their children as Simultaneous or Sequential Early Malay-English Bilinguals. In short, this study will hopefully materialize the Malaysian government's policy to strengthen the Malay language as the National Language and uphold the English language as the Official Second Language to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-16).

**Keywords:** *Language exposure, parental language strategies, child language development, Malay-English bilinguals, bilingualism.*

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## 1. Introduction

Bilingualism is a common phenomenon and is growing in the majority of nations around the world (Fibla, Kosie, Kircher, Lew-Williams, & Byers-Heinlein, 2022). Malaysia, for example, is known for its multiracial population and high number of bilingual speakers. Mahmud and Salehuddin (2023) state that the Malay and English languages are the two dominant languages widely spoken and practiced among Malaysians. The issue of bilingualism in Malaysia has been a central issue since the English language is the Official Second Language in Malaysia, alongside the Malay language as the National Language as stated in the National Language Act. Ideally, all Malaysians therefore, should be Malay-English bilinguals. However, in reality, not all Malaysians are Simultaneous or Sequential Early Malay-English bilinguals; not all Malaysians end up being proficient in the English language. This could be due to the lack of language exposure to English towards Malay-English bilinguals, especially the younger children aged 1- to 6- years old. Studies have shown that the language practices of parents and caregivers are an essential aspect in developing children as bilinguals (Ronderos, Castilla-Earls, & Marissa Ramos, 2022; Gámez, Palermo, Perry, & Galindo, 2022).

## 2. Bilingualism

Bilingualism is common among children globally, as 43% of the world's population are bilinguals, including in Malaysia (Salehuddin & Mahmud, under review). The number of bilinguals in Malaysia may have increased due to language and education policy; it is compulsory for all Malaysians to

learn English in schools, and it is a common practice to use English alongside the Malay language in formal settings (Pillai, Kaur, & Chau, 2021). Even though using both Malay and English is a common practice in the Malaysian context, the majority of Malaysians still have difficulties being fluent and eloquent in both languages. This is because not all Malaysians are exposed to these two languages early in their lives and receive an adequate amount of input and interaction opportunities. The root of this problem could be due to the lack of English exposure at home, where many parents do not regard this as an essential practice; they may have the perception that their children will get exposure and input to English once they start schooling (Renganathan, 2021). This may result in children not being simultaneous and sequential early Malay-English bilinguals because of the inadequate input and exposure to both languages that the children may receive starting from home. Therefore, this study aims to explore the language practices among parents and caregivers in raising their young child to be bilinguals in Malay and English. To achieve this aim, a community-based online survey will be distributed to parents and caregivers of 1- to 6-year-old Malay-English bilingual children throughout Malaysia with the objectives:

1. To identify the practices that the parents and caregivers of 1- to 6-year-olds provide for their children to raise them as Malay-English bilinguals through a survey,
2. To measure the child's linguistic abilities in terms of children's expressive and receptive languages,
3. To investigate the effect of parents' and caregivers' language practices on the children's linguistic abilities.

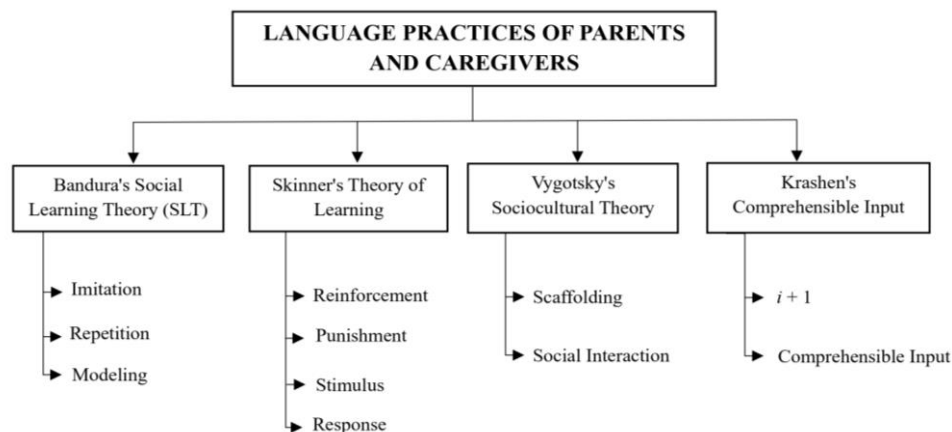
### 3. Method

We employ a quantitative approach via survey design as we are interested in exploring the language practices of parents and/or caregivers in raising children as Malay-English bilinguals. This study involves descriptive questions and questions about the effect of parents' and/or caregivers' language practices on children's language development (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, this study consists of a survey in the form of a set of parental report questionnaires comprising four theories related to children's language development concerning social interaction, behavioral social learning, language acquisition, and language comprehension.

#### 3.1. A conceptual framework on parents' and caregivers' language practices

The survey consists of a parental report questionnaire comprising four constructs based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) (1977), Skinner's theory of learning, Vygotsky's social development theory, and Krashen's comprehensible input theory. These four constructs employed are to identify the language practices of parents and/or caregivers to the children's language development via behavioral social learning, behavioral reinforcement and responses, cognitive development and language learning ability through scaffolding and social interaction, and language acquisition and language comprehension based on  $i + 1$  and comprehensible input.

Figure 1.



**3.1.1. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT).** Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) is to encourage self-efficacy to promote modeling and observational behaviors, which are similarly essential in language practices. Koutroubas and Galanakis (2022) highlight that Bandura justifies self-efficacy into four foundations, namely, 1) mastering past experiences (i.e., previous experiences or practices), 2)

vicarious experiences (i.e., achieved social modelling), 3) social persuasion (i.e., power of individuals which leads to success), and 4) emotional state (i.e., attributing emotions to performance). Given the context, these four foundations of self-efficacy in Bandura's SLT may impact children's language development via the language practices of parents and/or caregivers. In other words, Bandura's SLT triggers people (i.e., children) to learn from each other (i.e., parents and/or caregivers) through observation and modeling (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). Bandura (1975) highlights that "the influential role of modeling processes in language acquisition is provided by naturalistic studies employing sequential analyses of children's verbalizations and the immediately following parental responses" (p. 36). Taken together, Bandura's SLT (i.e., modeling and observational behaviors) can accelerate the children's language acquisition when parents and/or caregivers perform language activities such as playing while demonstrating the act towards the children.

This is regarded as repeated behaviors which stimulate the children to imitate afterwards, in which acquiring language(s) through imitation and modeling can be effective. Samuelsson (2021) proposes that "imitation is not only restricted to words and phrases, but also can extend to the ability to read the intention of human movement and behaviors in context" (p. 25). Therefore, this explains that language and behaviors are intertwined with each other, which leads to successful attempts to acquire language(s) when carrying out routines such as rules, play roles and playful activities that can stimulate the children's emergent linguistic means.

**3.1.2. Skinner's Theory of Learning.** Salehuddin (2018) argues that children's behaviors are developed or conditioned through stimulus and response, and their developments are influenced by operant conditioning (i.e., reinforcements and punishments). In this regard, this condition contributes to how the children respond based on learned experiences, including when acquiring language(s). Given the importance of developed and conditioned behaviors, Aktan-Erciyes (2021) explains that language acquisition can be developed through operant conditioning, namely reward mechanisms. Skinner's theory of learning proposes that conditioning has a 3-state procedure, which are stimulus, response, and reinforcement, in which he argues that "every learning is the establishment of habits and the result of reinforcement and reward" (Demirezen, 1988 as cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Ugochukwu, 2021, p. 50). According to Akpan (2020), there are two types of reinforcements that Skinner believes act as operant conditioning, namely positive and negative reinforcements. Positive reinforcement is achieved by giving a desirable stimulus after the behavior is demonstrated, whereas negative reinforcement results by taking away a desirable stimulus after a behaviour is displayed (Salehuddin, 2018; Akpan, 2020). Saracho (2021), for instance, notes that reinforcement occurs when a behavioral response is rewarded, such as by saying "That's good," "Good Job," or providing a physical reward like toys, food, or extra playtime. This increases the likelihood that the behavioral response will be repeated.

Skinner's theory of learning also proposes that children can learn and/or acquire language (s) when receiving punishment, which can be regarded as a stimulus to create a response. Children's language can be developed and triggered based on punishments, for example, 1) positive punishment (i.e., by giving something that the child like such as praising the child after completing a language task to encourage good behaviours) and 2) negative punishment (i.e., by removing something that the child does not like to encourage good behaviours (to encourage good behaviour)). Such punishments result from the sense of stimulus that leads to a response (Akpan, 2020), which later contributes to consequences (i.e., a sort of reinforcement) because it involves prior action and/or instruction that can trigger a behaviour to initiate an action (e.g., playing) that influence the ability to communicate from the early stage. As a result, these operant conditionings can ensure that desirable attention and behaviors are triggered in order to enable children to absorb the language practices from their parents and/or caregivers through reinforcement and punishment.

**3.1.3. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory.** According to Vygotsky and Dongyu, Fanyu, and Wanyi (2013), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context in language acquisition. For instance, an individual's capacity to acquire language is influenced by their social and cultural surroundings. One of the concepts in sociocultural theory which is relatively used in language development is "scaffolding". Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) introduced the idea of "scaffolding" in sociocultural theory; it describes how language is acquired based on environmental factors or on the assistance of an experienced individual (as cited in Dongyu et al., 2013; Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018; Yildiz & Celik, 2020; Pacheco, Smith, Deig, & Amgott, 2021). In other words, scaffolding is seen as "a metaphor to theorise aid mediated through interaction to help a youngster do a new skill or function", as stated by Bruner (1983, as referenced in Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018) (p. 2).

Based on Vygotsky's theory, scaffolding helps individuals develop new language skills by giving them clues or indications to help them respond to difficulties above their competency level (Huang, 2021). For instance, when acquiring a language, scaffolding can be given to someone who is struggling to

read until they can do it on their own (Sulaiman, 2021). At that point, the scaffolding can be taken down to allow the learner to read on their own. Apart from that, Nkamta (2020) proposes that scaffolding can occur during language acquisition when children acquire language(s) through code-switching and social interaction with more experienced individuals, such as parents and caregivers. In this regard, the one-person, one-language (OPOL) method that was previously discussed and is utilised by parents and caregivers might encourage code-switching in children, which will assist in their language development. This supports the use of Vygotsky's theory in this study since it allows us to assist children's effective language development by providing the proper input and exposure to begin developing their language(s) at home.

**3.1.4. Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory.** In addition, Krashen's Comprehensible Input is also considered to illustrate significant influences in all areas of language learning and acquisition. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, learning a language can occur either through a conscious process called language learning or through a subconscious process called language acquisition (Zheng, 2022). Krashen (1981) argues that language acquisition is "a subconscious process in two senses: people are often not aware that they are acquiring a language while they are doing so" (p. 68). As per this theoretical model, language acquisition is contingent upon learners being exposed to language input that is marginally beyond their present level of language proficiency ( $i+1$ ); that is, where  $i$  represents the learner's current language level in Interlanguage and 1 denotes one stage (the input) above  $i$ . This is also addressed as 'comprehensible input', as Spada & Lightbown (2019) mentioned.

Krashen believes comprehensible input is crucial in language acquisition because learners require exposure to meaningful and relevant interactions in the target language to naturally acquire and grasp the language (Zheng, 2022). Therefore, understanding the language's structure and form should come after acquiring its meaning. Language acquisition occurs spontaneously and does not require formal instruction, according to Krashen, if children are exposed to sufficient comprehensible input. Regarding this theory, child-directed speech (CDS) can be explained by considering how parents and caregivers modify and adapt their speech to provide more comprehensible input for their children, understanding that their children cannot understand complex speeches. Furthermore, as Spada and Lightbown (2019) suggested, comprehensible input exposes language learners to language input and encourages them to acquire more complex input. Hence, it explains that language acquirers' success in improving their language skills is triggered by this input hypothesis, which exposes them to language input slightly above what they already know. Overall, Krashen's theory emphasizes the importance of the right kind of exposure to language and the role of subconscious acquisition in language learning and acquisition.

#### 4. Conclusion and implications

The implications of this future research provide information on the right language practices that parents and caregivers may employ to raise their children as Simultaneous or Sequential Early Malay-English Bilinguals. In short, this study will materialize the Malaysian government's policy to strengthen the Malay language as the National Language and uphold English as the Official Second Language to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-16).

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