

STIMULATION OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: OPTIMALIZATION OF A MOTHER'S ROLE IN FAMILY EDUCATION

Suardi, Sulaiman Samad

Faculty of Educational Sciences, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia
Jalan Tidung Raya, Tamalate, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: suardi@unm.ac.id

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Abstract: This study was conducted to examine daily practices of stimulation carried out by mothers at home as an initial support for their children's language development. This study employed a descriptive design and involved 75 mothers as respondents who were selected using the non-probability sampling method. The research data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire containing four indicators of early support for children's language development. The data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel application version 16.10-assisted descriptive statistics. The results of the study showed that daily practices of stimulation carried out by the participants as an initial support for their children's language development in their first five years of life were included in the 'very likely' category. Even so, some practices of stimulation were not properly optimized. This finding promotes the need to increase the ability of mothers to carry out stimulation practices at home so that their involvement in providing initial support for the development of children's language is more optimal, which in turn can improve the quality of family education at home.

Keywords: family education, stimulation, language development, early childhood

Early childhood is a period where children are undergoing a rapid development process which is fundamental to their next stage of life. The first years of children's life are the most critical because children experience major developmental changes in various domains during this period (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009), including in the domain of language. According

to AlHammadi (2017), language development constitutes an important part of the entire children's development. The importance of children's language development can also be understood from the paradigm saying that development is a cumulative process so that current stages of development provide a fundamental basis for the next stages of development (Hergenhahn &

Olson, 2015). Thus, in the perspective of language development, it can be argued that the optimization of children's language capabilities in the future highly depends on the efforts to support children's early language development in their first five years of life.

Parents, as children's first teachers, intentionally or unintentionally educate their children through daily activities. Parents participate in a variety of activities that can help develop their children's potential optimally (Cullen et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2015; Suardi et al., 2019; Tadesse, 2016; Takahashi et al., 2015). In similar fashion, Reid et al., (2015) state that parenting constitutes one of the factors that can affect the domains of childhood development. In addition, home environment also plays a significant role in children's language development (Ronfani et al., 2015; Sethna et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2011). In conclusion, the parent-child interaction has a strategic role in optimizing children's language development in their first five years of life. Thus, stimulation of children's language development requires parental involvement at home.

One of the parties that has a pivotal role in children's language development at home is mothers (Cabrera et al., 2007). It has been empirically proven that there is a positive correlation between language quantity used by mothers and the average length of children's speech. Besides, it has also been shown that mothers' intervention which is adjusted and focused on children's behaviors are strongly correlated with the range of vocabulary and language produced by the children. Mother-child reading activities stimulate the use of highly complex language and broaden children's vocabulary. In addition, maternal utterances that refer to something that children pay attention to and labeling during an engagement episode are important ways that contribute to children's language development. There is also a strong correlation between language stimulation factors and children's language development at home (Dale et al., 2015; Majorano et al., 2013).

The descriptions of many published studies on the importance of maternal involvement in facilitating the needs of children's language development in their first five years of life have indicated that home environment as an important indicator of early language development requires the presence of a mother (Iltus, 2007). There-

fore, mothers as the main party who are entrusted with the responsibility to organize parenting at home should possess an adequate ability to perform sufficient and proper stimulation in facilitating their children's language development needs.

The stimulation of early childhood language development cannot be performed by providing as much knowledge through learning activities as in adult education, but rather by giving as many opportunities as possible to children to interact with their environment. Children at an early age learn languages and get ideas for speaking from listening, seeing, and imitating people around them. They learn how to make sounds from the language that they hear everyday. Thus, the environment and everyday experiences are more important than mere conscious language learning for children at an early age. This is consistent with Bruner's (Curtis, 1998) explaining that language development depends on a number of practices that children do in talking, interacting with adults, and conducting quality conversations.

In relation to that, research is needed to understand daily practices of stimulation carried out by mothers at home as a form of initial support for their children's language development in their first five years of life. This study has become exceptionally strategic because language development is important for children to succeed in life (Visser-Bochane et al., 2019). In fact, poor language development in the early years has a long-term and long-lasting impact on children. Hoff (Sethna et al., 2017) explains that early language skills can best predict children's school readiness and future school success. Furthermore, Blanden et al., (2006) state that children who enter school with proper language development have better opportunities at school, better opportunities to enter higher education, and better economic success in adulthood. Similarly, Vygotsky (Papalia et al., 2001) underlines that the deficiencies in a child's language development may influence the child's learning outcomes.

The need for research that focuses on the practice of stimulation, can also be understood from the reality that there is no process that is specifically passed by someone to prepare themselves to be a mother. Therefore, in providing stimulation that is appropriate for children's language development needs, mothers are more

likely to use their instincts and previous experiences from their parents whose accuracy and safety cannot be ascertained. Thus, studies on the practice of stimulation carried out daily by mothers at home are very strategic in nature because they can describe the weaknesses of stimulation practices that have been implemented so far, and in turn various recommendations can be formulated to maximize the role of mothers in carrying out family education, especially in facilitating children's language development.

Research has identified early forms of support that can help children develop language at home, including the provision of printed reading materials; mother and son/daughter conversations; story telling; and reading for children (Curtis, 1998; Ribot et al., 2018; Tadesse, 2016). Therefore, this study aimed to explore: (1) the availability of printed materials as the main feature of a conducive home environment for children to develop their language; (2) children's active involvement in conversations with mothers which provide them the opportunity to listen and understand oral language; (3) opportunities for children to recognize words and develop narration skill through storytelling; (4) opportunities for children to acquire understanding of how to handle printed materials.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive design to explain a phenomenon related to home envi-

ronment designed by mothers to facilitate children's language development as well as to describe forms of stimulation performed by mothers for children to develop their language at home.

The current study involved 75 mothers as respondents who were selected using the non-probability sampling method with a purposive technique. Criteria used to determine the sample included (1) the age of the mothers (must be in between 22-43 years old); (2) the age of the child/children (must be in between 2-5 years old); (3) the occupation of the mothers (working or household mothers); (4) the condition of the house (the family was living separately from relatives); (5) the use of babysitter services (the mothers were not using babysitter services); (6) the domicile of the family (which is in Makassar); and (7) the willingness of the mothers in providing information needed for the study.

The data of the study were collected using a questionnaire containing four indicators of early support for children's language development. The four indicators that are home environment rich with reading materials, mother and child conversations, storytelling, and reading for children were developed based on the theory and the results of the study conducted by (Curtis, 1998; Ribot et al., 2018; Tadesse, 2016).

Prior to the distribution, the questionnaire was examined for content validity through consultative interviews with the experts in child development and early childhood education. The

Table 1. Criteria for Indicators Based on Score Range

Indicator	Score Range	Category
Environment rich with printed materials	13 ≤x≤ 16	Extremely likely
	10 ≤x< 13	Very likely
	7 ≤x< 10	Very unlikely
	4 ≤x< 7	Extremely unlikely
Conversation between mother and son/daughter	26 ≤x≤ 32	Extremely likely
	20 ≤x< 26	Very likely
	14 ≤x< 20	Very unlikely
	8 ≤x< 14	Extremely unlikely
Storytelling	19.5 ≤x≤ 24	Extremely likely
	15 ≤x< 19.5	Very likely
	10.5 ≤x< 15	Very unlikely
	6 ≤x< 10.5	Extremely unlikely
Reading for children	20 ≤x≤ 25	Extremely likely
	15 ≤x< 20	Very likely
	10 ≤x< 15	Very unlikely
	5 ≤x< 10	Extremely unlikely

Table 2. Criteria for Indicators Based on Score Range

Score Range	Implementation Criteria
3.25 ≤x≤ 4	Extremely likely
2.50 ≤x< 3.25	Very likely
1.75 ≤x< 2.50	Very unlikely
1 ≤x< 1.75	Extremely unlikely

analysis was then followed by some revisions into the instrument draft. The result of the expert judgment analysis was used in a tryout to measure its reliability and practicality. The tryout was conducted to mothers of 0-5-year-old children who were not included as the participants of this study. The tryout was performed as a one-on-one tryout. The result of the tryout was used to collect the data of the current study.

The data that had been collected were analyzed using Microsoft Excel application version 16.10-assisted descriptive statistics which were specially directed to the search for percentage, mean, median, and mode. For each indicator and sub-indicator, the results of the descriptive statistical analysis in the form of mean scores were tabulated into one of the criteria based on the score range that had been determined according to the number of questionnaire items answered by the respondents (Table 1 and Table 2).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

First of all, the research findings were described based on the participants' understanding of the importance of providing initial support to facilitate their children's language development at home, including the availability of printed materials, the initiation of mother and child conversations, storytelling, and reading activities for children (Curtis, 1998; Ribot et al., 2018; Tadesse, 2016). Findings on this matter showed that the majority of the participants or mothers were quite informed about their children's language development needs: (1) In general, the mothers realized that they needed to introduce printed reading materials, such as books or other materials containing pictures or written, to their children as early as possible; (2) the mothers were aware that through mother-child conversations, their children's vocabulary can be enrich-

ed; therefore, they asked their children questions frequently and answered their questions patiently; (3) the mothers understood that storytelling was highly beneficial for their children's language development, so they told stories to their children before sending them to bed; and (4) the mothers acknowledged the importance of reading for their children; thus, they read books available at home for their children, especially when the children showed great enthusiasm towards the books or simply enjoyed seeing the pictures in the books. These findings are described in details in Table 3.

The implementation of the four indicators indicated that the mothers were fully aware of their children's language development needs. The understanding of the mothers as visualized in Table 3 signified that the mothers had conducted some proper stimulation practices to help their children develop their language. However, the results of the study suggest that in order to optimize children's language development, complete attention also needs to be given to some sub-indicators as follows.

The Availability of Printed Materials at Home

The availability of printed materials at home is the key to creating a conducive home environment for children to develop their language. Printed materials include writings that contain letters and words that are most commonly used in everyday life, such as children's books, magazines, labels, and others. Based on the results of the analysis, it was found that: (1) the mothers put some word or picture labels on the containers containing their children's toy or personal belongings; (2) the mothers prepared a wall of words containing most commonly used letters and words; (3) the mothers prepared a special room for children to explore printed materials containing books, magazines, pieces of newsprint, pictures, product packaging, advertising leaflets, and so on; (4) the mothers provided their children with children's books, indicating that the mothers had designed a home environment that is rich in printed materials. This indicator obtained an average score of 10.52 that can be categorized into the "very likely" category. In details, the statistics of this finding were recorded in Table 4. The Table 4 explained that two indicators, which are the availability of

Table 3. Mother’s Understanding of Early Support for the Fulfillment of Children’s Language Development Needs at Home

No	Description	Implementation
1	Designs an environment at home for children to develop their language	81.33% Intentionally provides children with books or other reading materials that are specially
		18.67% Designed for children; Has no intention to provide children with books or other reading materials, but there are children’s books at home.
2	Conduct a conversation with children	70.67% Talks with children all the time;
		29.33% Speaks when necessary or when to answer questions.
3	Tell a particular story to children	64.00% Always tells bedtime stories to children;
		36.00% Rarely tells bedtime stories to children
4	Read for children	62.67% Always reads for children;
		37.33% Sometimes reads for children.

Table 4. Home Environment Designed by the Mothers

	<i>Sub Indicator</i>				<i>Indicator</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	
Mean	2.25	2.63	2.31	3.33	10.52
Standard Error	0.05	0.10	0.05	0.09	0.14
Median	2	2	2	3	10
Mode	2	2	2	4	10
Standard Deviation	0.44	0.83	0.46	0.74	1.20
Range	1	2	1	2	5
Minimum	2	2	2	2	8
Maximum	3	4	3	4	13
Sum	169	197	173	250	789
Count	75	75	75	75	75

word or picture labels and the availability of special spaces for children to explore printed materials, were still in the ‘very unlikely’ category.

Conversation between Mother and Children

Conversation is a process that provides a very rich language experience for children; through conversations, children learn how to act, express, and produce a language. According to Tomasello & Farrar (Majorano et al., 2013), the parent-child interaction provides children with the context of reference that is predicted to make language acquisition more meaningful. In fact, the way mothers talk to their children contributes to the children’s ability to speak. The experience will be at its best when, in conversations, mothers can: (1) establish an interaction with their children by asking them about what they have done that day; (2) use open-ended instead of closed-ended questions; (3) minimize interruptions

when their children are talking; (4) wait patiently for the children to answer their questions; (5) model the correct use of words instead of correcting the children’s mistakes immediately; (6) introduce new words to the children when responding to them; (7) provide responses to most of the children’s words and confirm that they already understand them; and (8) use gestures and facial expressions (Tadesse, 2016).

Referring to the results of the study, it was known that the average score of the eight sub-indicators (23.64) was categorized into the ‘very likely’ category (Table 5).

The Tabel 5 indicated that the majority of the conversational practices conducted by the mothers were categorized into the ‘very likely’ category. However, the sub-indicators “asking open-ended questions” and “waiting patiently for the children to answer the question” perched on the “very unlikely” category.

Table 5. Conversation between Mother and Son/Daughter

	<i>Sub Indicator</i>								<i>Indicator</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	
Mean	3.00	2.47	3.11	2.49	3.20	3.16	3.09	3.12	23.64
Standard Error	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.23
Median	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	24
Mode	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	24
Standard Deviation	0.43	0.64	0.63	0.50	0.64	0.70	0.77	0.61	2.02
Range	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	2	9
Minimum	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	19
Maximum	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	28
Sum	225	185	233	187	240	237	232	234	1773
Count	75	75	75	75	75	75	75	75	75

Table 6. Storytelling

	<i>Sub Indicator</i>						<i>Indicator</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	
Mean	3.39	3.05	2.68	3.11	2.41	3.53	18.17
Standard Error	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.10	0.07	0.25
Median	3	3	3	3	2	4	18
Mode	3	3	3	3	3	4	21
Standard Deviation	0.61	0.73	0.79	0.61	0.87	0.64	2.18
Range	2	2	3	2	3	2	10
Minimum	2	2	1	2	1	2	13
Maximum	4	4	4	4	4	4	23
Sum	254	229	201	233	181	265	1363
Count	75	75	75	75	75	75	75

Storytelling

Storytelling has highly significant effects on children because it provides access to various types of information that can enrich children's vocabulary. (Moschovaki, 1999) specifically mentions that children develop an awareness that language is a symbolic system when listening to a story and learn to concentrate when paying attention to a story. Similarly, (Tadesse, 2016) argues that listening to a story allows children to develop listening and narration skills as well as recognize sound patterns. These effects can be optimal if mothers: (1) ask their children to recall and mention the title of the story that has been told; (2) introduce new words to the children after telling the story; (3) pause to explain new words to the children; (4) talk about the story with the children; (5) encourage the children to create their own stories; (6) encourage the children to play a role (imitating words and sentences that have been heard and used by other people).

The results of the study showed that the

practices of storytelling conducted by the mothers were included in the "very likely" category (mean 18.17). In details, the results were visualized in Table 6. Table 6 indicated that the storytelling practices conducted by the mothers were categorized into the 'very likely' category. However, sub-indicator "providing children with the opportunity to tell their own stories" was placed in the "very unlikely" category.

Reading for Children

Reading for children is a field of activity in a family context that can mediate children's literacy experiences (Moschovaki, 1999). Research also shows that the involvement of mothers in reading activities at home supports child development (Iltus, 2007). In particular, reading for children at an early age can have an optimal impact when: (1) books that mothers read use a simple narrative so that children can easily point to the letters or objects contained in the books; (2) mothers read with clear articulation and loud voices; (3) mothers use appropriate expressions;

Table 7. Read for Children

	<i>Sub Indicator</i>					<i>Indicator</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	
Mean	3.24	3.13	2.92	3.16	2.87	15.32
Standard Error	0.05	0.06	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.20
Median	3	3	3	3	3	15
Mode	3	3	2	4	3	15
Range	1	2	3	2	2	9
Minimum	3	2	1	2	2	11
Maximum	4	4	4	4	4	20
Sum	243	235	219	237	215	1149
Count	75	75	75	75	75	75

(4) mothers provide the children with the opportunity to ask questions during the reading process; and (5) mothers repeat several parts that can help the children to build their vocabulary reference (Colker, 2014; Tadesse, 2016).

The findings of this study referring to the five sub-indicators showed that reading practices conducted by the mothers were included in the 'very likely' category (mean 15.32). In detail, the results were visualized in Table 6.

Table 7 indicated that 'reading for children' practices conducted by the mothers were categorized into the 'very likely' category. This finding suggests that the mothers have provided great support for their children's language development through reading.

Discussion

Some experts in child language development believe that experiences gained within the everyday environment are more important than merely language learning (Curtis, 1998). It means that language development in children depends in part on a number of practices that children do in interacting with people and their surrounding environment. Therefore, children's language development must be supported by appropriate environment and stimulation.

The results of this study showed that the environment and stimulation obtained by the children at home were in the 'very likely' category. Even so, some practices of stimulation have not been optimally implemented, including the availability of labels that contain words and pictures, the availability of special spaces for children to explore printed materials, the use of open-ended questions, the willingness of mothers to always wait for their children to answer

their questions, and encouragement for children to create and tell their own stories.

The availability of labels that contain words and pictures and the availability of special spaces for children to explore printed materials are two important aspects that need to be concerned. Labels help children understand that things can be identified by written words, get acquainted with letters indirectly, and see the importance of reading and writing in everyday life. Likewise, the provision of special spaces for children to explore printed materials stimulate children's curiosity of pieces of writing and pictures (Tadesse, 2016). Labels containing words and pictures can be affixed to various items that are often found by children, such as containers that contain toys or other children's play materials, children's personal belongings, and even children's rooms. Special spaces for children to explore printed materials can be provided by preparing a location in the house that contains books, magazines, pieces of newspaper, drawings, leaflets, and interesting letter cards. The existence of the objects and locations should be appealing to children so that they can see them on a daily basis.

The next stimulation practice is mother and son/daughter conversations. As is explained in (Brooks, 2011), since a child is born until s/he reaches the age of six, s/he has stored 10,000 words and improved from two-word phrases into more complex sentences containing multiple words (Hart & Risley, 1995). Data in Table 5 explained that the entire conversation practices performed by the mothers were categorized into the 'very likely' category, yet the mothers performed 'very unlikely' in two sub-indicators, that are asking open-ended questions and wait-

ing patiently for the children to respond to their questions'. This finding suggests that improvements in these two sub-indicators are necessary in order that children can optimize their language acquisition process. Asking open-ended questions as well as waiting patiently for the children to respond to the questions posed by the mothers are two activities that can help stimulate children word production and vocabulary elaboration (Brooks, 2011). These activities also invite children's verbal/output participation that has been recognized as a crucial factor to impact on children's language development (Tulviste & Tamm, 2019) and better predict children's verbal IQ and reading ability, compared to children's vocabulary growth (Hart & Risley, 1995). In addition, through these activities, children are also given the opportunity to develop speaking and listening skills, start learning to make connections between spoken words, and develop spoken language skills (Tadesse, 2016).

In relation to that, the optimization of these two sub-indicators is highly important since it can provide great support for the children's language development. Brooks (2011) states that conversations may help develop not only children's ability to speak, but also the ability to deliver information about what they think and feel.

Besides conversations, storytelling in various literature is seen as a process that provides a platform for mother and child to discuss something that can develop children's vocabulary and comprehension of words. As a matter of fact, storytelling is actually a way of bringing family members closer together, forming children's views about themselves, others, and events in life, and introducing children to the world and culture and the values held by the family. One important aspect that must be created in the storytelling process is the encouragement for children to tell their own stories. As shown in

Table 6, providing opportunities and encouragement for children to tell their own stories has not been carried out optimally by the mothers. Therefore, to optimize the storytelling stimulation to develop children's language at home, mothers are required to provide encouragement for children so they can tell their own stories. This encouragement includes listening attentively and showing interest in the stories told by the children. Mother's attention and interest can be displayed through smiles, sighs, facial expressions, and repetition. (Engel, 1999).

Another crucial practice is reading for children. As suggested by (Noble et al., 2019), reading brings positive impacts on children's language development. Reading can help improve children's language skills. Data presented in Table 7 showed that 'reading for children' practices performed by the mothers were included in the 'very likely' category, suggesting that the stimulation practices conducted by the mothers had met the sub-indicators of appropriate 'reading for children' stimulation activities.

CONCLUSION

The stimulation practices performed by the participants or mothers at home on a daily basis as an initial support for children's language development in their first five years of life were categorized into the 'very likely' category. However, some practices of stimulation were not yet properly optimized. This finding promotes the need to increase the ability of mothers to carry out stimulation practices at home so that their involvement in providing initial support for the development of children's language is more optimal, which in turn can improve the quality of family education at home.

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