

## LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF 4-5-YEAR-OLD TODDLERS: INDONESIAN AND ENGLISH IN THE COVID-19 ERA

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### ABSTRACT

*The novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, has caused a global pandemic, resulting in widespread social distancing measures for all ages, including toddlers. Such policies have significantly impacted toddlers' language acquisition, particularly in terms of their lack of interaction with peers and teachers at Early Childhood Education (PAUD) schools. In light of this, the current study sought to discover how toddlers aged 4-5 fared regarding language acquisition during their early childhood. To accomplish the goal mentioned earlier, the authors of this study attempted to provide maps with animal and fruit images in both Indonesian and English. Toddlers have had fewer opportunities to interact with their peers at school due to the current circumstances, which include the spread of the new coronavirus and strict social restrictions, resulting in a decrease in vocabulary acquisition through minimal interaction. As a result, this study was carried out to evaluate the language acquisition process of early childhood students. The current study used a descriptive research design with an early childhood student sample. This study's data collection methods included observation and interviews. The results of this study revealed that, while the toddlers could name the pictures given to them when they were younger, their English language skills remained very low.*

Keywords: Early Childhood; Language Acquisition; Covid-19 Pandemic

### ABSTRAK

Novel coronavirus, juga dikenal sebagai COVID-19, telah menyebabkan pandemi global, mengakibatkan tindakan jarak sosial yang meluas di segala usia, termasuk balita. Kebijakan tersebut berdampak signifikan pada penguasaan bahasa balita, terutama dalam hal kurangnya interaksi dengan teman sebaya dan guru di sekolah Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD). Sehubungan dengan hal ini, penelitian saat ini berusaha untuk menemukan bagaimana nasib balita berusia 4-5 tahun dalam penguasaan bahasa selama masa kanak-kanak mereka. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut di atas, penulis penelitian ini mencoba menyediakan peta dengan gambar hewan dan buah dalam bahasa Indonesia dan bahasa Inggris. Balita memiliki lebih sedikit kesempatan untuk berinteraksi dengan teman sebayanya di sekolah karena keadaan saat ini, termasuk penyebaran virus corona baru dan pembatasan sosial yang ketat, mengakibatkan penurunan perolehan kosa kata melalui interaksi yang minimal. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini dilakukan untuk mengevaluasi proses pemerolehan bahasa siswa usia dini. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian deskriptif dengan sampel siswa PAUD. Metode pengumpulan data penelitian ini meliputi observasi dan wawancara. Hasil penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa, meskipun balita dapat menyebutkan gambar yang diberikan kepada mereka saat masih kecil, kemampuan bahasa Inggris mereka masih sangat rendah.

Keywords: Anak Usia Dini; Penguasaan bahasa; Pandemi covid-19

## INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is an intricate and specialized cognitive process that is inherently effortless and non-instructive in children. It operates on a level of subconsciousness and transcends differences among individuals by virtue of its universality. Additionally, it remains conceptually distinct from broader cognitive mechanisms, such as information processing and intelligent behavior (Klahr & Wallace, 2022). In this context, English represents merely one of many languages spoken around the globe; as highlighted by Rahman and Saputra (2021), language is what makes people human. While written language enables us to preserve and transmit our past across generations, spoken language is used by people every day for face-to-face conversation. Language is a really complicated thing. It features a sound system that enables us to employ many different words, a vocabulary that ranges from 50,000 to 100,000 terms for many individuals, and various constructs for connecting these words (Lieberman, 2016; Mehrabian, 2017). However, infants begin learning language as soon as they are born rather than speaking when they are born. Babies need to grasp when and where to use certain words, how to combine language with other forms of communication, and how to make themselves and others understand (Cole & Flexer, 2019).

Early childhood refers to children under the age of six. Usually, in early childhood, he is 3-5 years old. According to the National Education System Act, children from 0 to 6 yearsold are early childhood children. Many people refer to the early age as the Golden Age because this period determines what they will be like when they grow up physically, mentally, and intellectually. Early Childhood Education is the level of education that precedes basic education and is a coaching initiative for children from birth to age six. This education is done by providing educational incentives for growth in further education conducted in formal, informal, and non-formal pathways.

UU Sisdiknas No. 20/2003 said that early childhood education is a coaching effort directed at a child from birth to six years of age, carried out by providing educational stimuli to improve physical and intellectual (Shobihi et al., 2022). It promotes growth and developmental support and shows children that they are ready for further education. As for linguistic abilities, a child from an early age can always be surprised when interacting with the interlocutor, in this case, making vocal contact. The preverbal stage usually occurs at this point. Nevertheless, also linguistically, depending on the driving factors. Parents need to instruct their children in their original tongue formally. The child can expand their language skills by learning a language while engaging in play

with other kids. There are a variety of environmental elements that can facilitate language learning, but exposure to language usage in social settings is the key one. Children pick up language the same way they pick up walking. Children learn languages not because they go through a similar conditioning process as adults do but because they have the innate ability to do so as part of their normal maturational process. This ability exists everywhere. The youngster has a built-in method for learning languages.

Language development in young children has always been a fascinating but complicated area of research (Leseman et al., 2019; Nippold et al., 2017; Luk et al., 2020). We have conducted numerous studies and come to various findings due to our curiosity about how children learn a language or languages. Many linguists think that children begin learning languages even before they are born. Babies can hear the voices coming from outside their mother's wombs. They hear and appreciate hearing the voices of their parents and other caretakers, including their elder siblings, as soon as they are born. Then, children rapidly acquire language from infancy until they are five years old. Most of the time, repetition and imitation of their surroundings help children learn to speak. Experts concur that children beginning at age two can form short phrases, and by the time they are three, they should be able to form complete sentences. By age four, kids should be able to speak fully; however, they might still need to correct some grammatical mistakes. Then, by age five, they ought to be able to speak in simple terms.

Rice in Apriana and Sutrisno (2022) mentions that language acquisition has three significant components. The first is the language itself, the second is the child and his/her abilities to acquire language, and the third is the environmental setting. Early childhood language is a novelty that encourages ongoing brain activity because the language they vocalize has meaning and intent that may be difficult for interlocutors to understand due to unclear pronunciation or intelligibility (Fröhlich et al., 2019).

Based on the above explanation, early childhood language acquisition is critical for a child's overall development, and lack of exposure to language during this period can result in long-term negative consequences. To ensure that young children receive quality language acquisition opportunities, it is essential to provide them with a stimulating and language-rich environment, interactive experiences with caregivers, and access to age-appropriate educational resources. However, many children aged 4 to 5 years who did not participate in PAUD (Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini) in Indonesia during Covid-19 may be constrained in the process of acquiring language. While language acquisition begins in the womb, children still need a language-rich environment

to fully develop their linguistic abilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced young children to practice social and physical distancing, limiting their opportunities for socialization, play, and language acquisition. Therefore, it is urgent to conduct research on the impact of the pandemic on early childhood language acquisition in Indonesia, particularly among children who did not attend PAUD. This research can shed light on the challenges faced by young children in the current situation and help policymakers develop effective strategies to support their language development.

Accordingly, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on throughout districts and provinces in Indonesia, including Sumatera Utara, the researchers decided to conduct a study focused on PAUD Al Mukhlisin in Medan, Sumatera Utara as a representative sample. This decision was made because the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a lack of language acquisition among children aged 4-5 years at PAUD Al Mukhlisin. Due to the pandemic, children have been spending more time on devices and avoiding language contact, which has led to a deficiency in their language development. Moreover, there has been a lack of intelligibility in pronunciation and communication among children in the early childhood stage of 4-5 years at PAUD Al Mukhlisin. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the impact of the pandemic on language acquisition and development in early childhood at PAUD Al Mukhlisin in Medan, Sumatera Utara.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Language is the only means of communication in this world, especially for children. Language is inseparable from the speakers who use it. Wilkins (1974) in Ellis (1990) Convey an understanding of the difference between the terms acquisition and learning, such *“The term acquisition is the process where language is acquired as a result of natural and largely random exposure to language while the term learning is the process where the exposure is structured through language teaching. In other words, that acquisition and learning were synonymous with informal and formal language learning context”*.

Language acquisition is closely connected with the human ability to create the perception and understanding of the speech of others. Moreover, a child is able to produce speech or speech if he knows the rules derived from childhood (Soenjono, 2010). Language acquisition is one of humankind's most impressive cognitive feats. A 6-month-old can do little more than babble, but by 2 or 3 years of age, children show generative knowledge of their language patterns. That is, they can extend the words they hear to new situations and use grammatical constructions in new contexts (Gentner & Namy, 2006).

Although there are many other understandings of the two terms by experts, we distinguish between the two, saying that 'acquisition' is the natural process that occurs as a child learns their mother tongue (native language) learning. It can be concluded that the process of language acquisition is "Learning," which is a process carried out in a formal setting (usually by adults), i.e. a process taught by a teacher in in-class/external learning (indoors and outdoors).

The human race is distinct. They exist because God made them and because everything depends on them. They are entirely governed by their environs, not only by themselves. Humans acquire language not because they learn it but because it is merely what they acquire (Collins, 2011). Vice versa, they learn the language because they have acquired it. Language is a customary process acquired through a conditioning process (Brown in Arung, 2016). This is in line with the views of behaviorism experts who believe strongly that children come into the world with a tube of taste, a clean slate with no previous understanding of the world and of the language, and that the children are then shaped by their environment and slowly conditioned through a diverse schedule of reinforcement (Brown in Arung, 2016).

The social aspect is crucial to a child's learning and acquisition of a second language. This aspect is closely related to the child's language environment and the types of formal or informal interactions. If we think about the difference between acquisition and learning once more, this formal engagement takes place during the learning phase. In contrast, informal interaction takes place during the acquisition process. One crucial highlight by Steinberg et al. (2001) shows that informal interaction suits young children better. This is due to the fact that they prefer language exposure in settings where the induction pattern can function better, like at home or a playground. For older children, however, who already understand their role in language learning, a more formal interaction that takes place in a learning process, such as in a classroom setting, will function well.

The capacity to learn and comprehend a language is genetically inherited, but the specific language children speak is passed on to them through culture and environment (Muntasir & Akbar, 2023). Without any tutoring, all children around the world learn their first language. A youngster who is exposed to an English-speaking community starts out speaking English fluently, whereas a child who is exposed to an Indonesian-speaking community starts out speaking Indonesian fluently. Thus, learning a language is distinct from learning a talent like swimming, dancing, or gymnastics. Compared to acquiring other intellectual skill activities, learning a native language is far less likely to be impacted by mental retardation.

Krashen in Ratnaningsih (2017) put the idea of two separate systems as the subordinated performances of a second language. The first is an acquisition system that develops organically

when a person is exposed to a somewhat unlimited amount of unfiltered material, concentrating on communication and other essential language functions. If all these requirements are met, the language enters the learner's LAD and acquires in the brain, which is an entirely unconscious process. One advantage of learning a language is that it becomes a natural part of the learner's linguistic repertoire and can be used in interactions with the target culture. The learning system is activated when the learners are aware of a language and focused on the form and the rules of language (Krashen in Ratnaningsih, 2017).

Several things influence language acquisition. These elements consist of the linguistic environment, neurological components, routines, and patterns. The skill of the individual and the environment in which he or she lives determine how quickly a person picks up a language. Everything around the learners, both auditory and apparent, constitutes their language environment. In general, the language environment can be divided into two, namely (1) a formal environment or artificial that is found in the learning process; (2) an informal or natural environment, which is found in the life of society (Krashen in Ratnaningsih, 2017). The major language acquisition factors are neurological elements and the connection between language lateralization and the human brain.

Instead of emphasizing communicating with the language, language learning encourages students or learners to concentrate on planning and modifying the language. Grammar, repetition, and instructional practice are frequently the basis for learning. Even though learning is crucial for picking up a second language, Krashen in Ratnaningsih (2017) believes that the usefulness of a language that is really for communicative purposes, language learners should first acquire the language before learning is introduced. Language acquisition is defined as the acquisition of the first language where the child lives. This language acquisition process happens naturally and subconsciously. Thus, early childhood language acquisition varies greatly and is influenced by native language, environment, peers, and interlocutors. The more young children are often invited to speak, the more vocabulary they have that can address the linguistic meanings made by their interlocutors.

Based on neurological studies, a baby's brain at birth contains about 100 billion neurons, ready to make connections between cells during the first few years. Babies brains are growing very quickly, making trillions of connections between neurons more than they need. These trillions of connections need to be reinforced by various psychosocial stimuli. This is because if connections are not strengthened by psychosocial stimulation, they atrophy (shrink) and disappear, ultimately affecting a child's level of intelligence, said Jalal. 80% appear by age 8, peaking around age 18.

Montessori found that between birth and age 6, children experience a golden age of sensitivity to various stimuli. During this sensitive period, children easily pick up on environmental stimuli. The golden age of child development is when children become sensitive to different stimuli and educational endeavors in intentional and unintentional environments. Each child's sensitive period is different, as is the rate of growth and development of each child. During this golden age, maturation of physical and psychological functions occurs, and children are ready to meet and fulfill all the developmental tasks expected of them in their everyday behavioral patterns.

The process of language acquisition that someone does unconsciously, implicitly, or informally. Dardjowidjojo (2003) states that language acquisition is a natural language acquisition process that occurs when children learn their mother tongue. You only suddenly have complete grammar with some rules in your head. Children acquire their first language in several stages, and each subsequent stage approaches the grammar of the adult language. The term acquisition corresponds to the word acquisition. The term is used in acquiring a first language as one of the developments that occur in humans from birth (Darmojuwono, 2005: 24). Of course, children perceive language as a way of communicating with the people around them. The first language a child learns and acquires is the mother tongue (mother tongue) (Dardjowidjojo, 2003). Acquisition of a first language is closely related to a child's social development.

A child's first language is the language they have been exposed to since birth. First language, often known as mother tongue. A second language, however, is learned after becoming fluent in the first and is typically a foreign language. Realizing that humans need to grow their language abilities is important concerning the development of language needs. Human language abilities can be enhanced in two ways: learning and acquisition. The process of learning a language without intent is known as acquisition. It is typically unstructured, social, and informal, focused on communication needs, and has social repercussions (related to the community or neighborhood). With learning, that will change. Learning is the process of acquiring a deliberate, structured, and formal language, which refers to the requirements of education and knowledge in the classroom (Muntasir et al., 2022).

Identity Formation Learning a first language is an expected development in which a child becomes a social member (Yogatama, 2011). It has several meanings when it comes to language acquisition or mastery of language. According to Tarrigan (Tarrigan, 1988), language acquisition is the process of acquiring language skills in the form of comprehension or natural expression without formal learning activity. Furthermore, Dardjowidjojo (Dardjowidjojo, 2003) states that

language acquisition is a natural process of language acquisition that occurs when a child learns his or her mother tongue.

Children's language acquisition has a continual feature and is a continuum, beginning with simple word utterances and continuing through more complex combinations of words and phrases (Salnita, 2019). Language acquisition is usually distinguished from language learning. Language acquisition tends to occur spontaneously and subconsciously as part of everyday life, whereas language learning is acquired after formal study of the applicable grammatical rules (Chaer, 2003). According to Troike (2006), in acquiring a second language, all of the essential characteristics of being adopted as a second language are adopted as an early childhood language, usually beginning at the age of three, to get people to talk to you. According to Palenkahu's study by Ingram (Palenkahu, 2005), first language acquisition can be divided into four stages. First, the preparatory stage is characterized by the three actions of imitation, imitation, and initial understanding. Secondly, in the first period (ages 1-1.6), children receive sequences of sounds with particular meanings that express the idea of whole sentences, whereas evidence that children understand grammar is Not. Third, in the second trimester (1.6-2.0), the child acquires words and, in a series of spurts asking about the names of objects, realizes that everything makes sense. Fourth, children of periods (2.0-2.6) begin to form sentences appropriately because they contain words that indicate the most critical grammatical subject-predicate relationships.

## **METHOD**

The study utilized a descriptive method with a qualitative approach, as per Nazir (2011). Descriptive methods focus on examining groups, topics, or people's thoughts. The current research aimed to provide a summary of data collected through interviews (parents, early childhood, and teachers), storytelling, or "storytelling" to enrich the financial vocabulary of the research subjects, specifically the utterances of the PAUD Al Mukhlisin research subjects.

The descriptive method was chosen because it provides an accurate overview of a person, situation, language, symptom, or group, especially in the current era of the "new normal." This research involved reading stories and fairy tales to the children who were the research subjects and directly observing them. The first stage of language acquisition is related to a child's language development. This is because a person's first language is acquired during early childhood.

The researchers employed the technique of engaged listening, which involved actively listening to the words the children could say, encouraging and interacting with the subjects. Data collection involved observing and recording every word and utterance spoken by the subjects. This research was conducted over six months.



The data analysis phase in this study involved three stages. The initial stage involved reducing data in four ways. The second stage involved identifying the posted data, followed by the classification process. Finally, the third stage involved interpreting the previously classified data. The presentation phase followed, where the categorized data was presented in tabular form. The third and final stage involved drawing conclusions, which entailed revalidating the collected initial data (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The objective of the present research was to investigate the language acquisition abilities of children aged 4-5 years, with a particular focus on the challenges associated with data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings shed light on the difficulties of conducting research with young children, especially in the absence of peer interaction and the presence of unfamiliar observers.

One of the primary challenges identified in this study was the limited opportunities for peer interaction during the pandemic, resulting in a significant reduction in language exposure and practice available to young children. This lack of peer interaction made it difficult for observers to accurately assess the language abilities of young children, which are often best evaluated in naturalistic social interactions. Moreover, the study discovered that children aged 4-5 years exhibited a significant lack of trust in unfamiliar observers, especially when their regular PAUD teacher was absent. This lack of trust resulted in reluctance to engage with the observer and a general disinterest in the study, further complicating data collection efforts.

The implications of these findings are significant for researchers and practitioners involved in early childhood language education. The study underscores the need for innovative and adaptive research methods to effectively capture young children's language abilities in the absence of peer interaction. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of building trust and rapport with young learners to facilitate their engagement and participation in research efforts.

During the research, observers showed cards with pictures of fruits and animals to the children, which aroused their interest and willingness to follow instructions. The children were enthusiastic and focused during this activity and did not feel threatened or pressured. Since young children are continuously scanning their interaction partners psychologically, the observers were perceived as non-threatening friends to them. After the interview session, observers asked the children to say their names. This activity showed that the children were satisfied and happy with the experience. Both boys and girls were happy, with the girls receiving gifts and singing. Following the observation, the data obtained were collected and categorized in the following table.

**Table 1.** Indonesian Language Acquisition

NO	NAMA ANAK	USIA	PEMEROLEHAN BAHASA (LANGUAGE ACQUISITION) DALAM BAHASA INDONESIA								
			1. LABU	2. ANGGUR	3. KODOK	4. PESAWAT	5. UNTA	6. JERUK	7. SAPI	8. BURUNG MERPATI	9. ROTI LAPIS
1	FATUR	5	LABU	ANGGUL	KODOK	PESAWAT	UNTA	JELUK	SAPI	BULUNG MELPATI	WOTI LAPIS
2	FARID	5	LABU	ANGGUW	KODOK	PESAWAT	UNTA	JEWUK	SAPI	BUWUNG MELPATI	WOTI LAPIS
3	FATHAN	4	LABU	ANGGUL	KODOK	PESAWAT	UNTA	JELUK	SAPI	BULUNG MELPATI	LOTI LAPIS
4	AFIQA	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	NAILA	4	WABU	ANGGUW	KODOK	CEWAWAT	UNTA	JEWUK	SAPI	BUWUNG MEWPATI	WOTI LAPIS
6	ZIA	4	LABU	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7	HAFIZA	4	LABU	ANGGUL	KODOK	SAWAT	UNTA	JELUK	SAPI	BULUNG MELPATI	LOTI LAPIS
8	AINI	4	LABU	ANGGUL	KODOK	PESAWAT	UNTA	JELUK	SAPI	BULUNG MELPATI	LOTI LAPIS

Table 1 provides essential insights into the complexities of Indonesian pronunciation, emphasizing the importance of accurate and proper articulation of certain phonetic sounds. The current study, in particular, sought to investigate the difficulties associated with pronouncing words beginning with the letter [r].

The study discovered that replacing the letter [r] with either [w] or [l] resulted in a more accurate and authentic pronunciation of specific words through a systematic analysis of phonetic patterns in the Indonesian language. Existing research in phonetics and phonology supports this finding, indicating that sound phonetic substitution can effectively improve pronunciation accuracy in language learners. These findings have important implications for language education and pedagogy, emphasizing the need for targeted and explicit instruction in pronunciation for Indonesian learners. The study also emphasizes the importance of incorporating phonetic patterns and substitution strategies into language instruction materials and resources, giving learners the tools they need to improve their pronunciation and fluency in the target language.

**Table 2.** English Language Acquisition

NO	NAMA ANAK	USIA	PEMEROLEHAN BAHASA (LANGUAGE ACQUISITION) DALAM BAHASA INDONESIA								
			1. PUMPKIN	2. GRAPES	3. FROG	4. AEROPLANE	5. CAMEL	6. ORANGES	7. COW	8. PIGEON	9. SANDWICH
1	FATUR	5	PANGKIN	GLEPS	FLOG	ELOPLEN	KEMEL	OLENCH	KAW	PIJEN	SWANWIT
2	FARID	5	PAMKIN	GEPS	FOG	EWOPLEN	KEMOL	OWENCH	KAW	PIJEN	SENWITS
3	FATHAN	4	PAMKIN	GLEPS	FLOG	ELOPLEN	KEMOL	OLENCH	KAW	PIJEN	SENWICH
4	AFIQA	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	NAILA	4	PAMKIN	GWEPS	FWOG	EWOPEN	KEMEL	OWENCH	KAW	PIJEN	SENWICH
6	ZIA	4	PANGKIN	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7	HAFIZA	4	PAMKIN	GEPS	FOG	ELOPLEN	KEMEL	OLENCH	KAW	PIJEN	SENWICH
8	AINI	4	PAMKIN	GLEPS	FLOG	ELOPLEN	KEMEL	OLENCH	KAW	PIJEN	SENWICH

Table 2 reveals an essential aspect of early childhood language acquisition: the need for assistance when attempting to understand a foreign language, specifically English. While young children have an innate ability to imitate and reproduce sounds, proper pronunciation and intonation require guidance and support. Educators and caregivers are critical in this context, as they play a critical role in fostering language development during this critical period. Furthermore, early childhood learners' acquisition of a foreign language is more comprehensive than sound pronunciation. It is a multifaceted process that includes vocabulary development, sentence structure, and grammatical rules. As a result, educators must employ various pedagogical strategies, including interactive and communicative language teaching approaches, to facilitate language acquisition.

Just like in Indonesian, young children clearly pronounce the vowels [a], [i], [u], [e] but still struggle to pronounce the letter [r]. The ability to accurately pronounce individual sounds is a critical component of language acquisition, particularly in the early stages of development. Findings from the study revealed that young children demonstrated an apparent proficiency in correctly pronouncing the vowel mentioned above sounds. However, pronouncing the letter [r] proved to be a persistent challenge for these learners. Specifically, children appeared to struggle with producing the correct phonetic sound, resulting in an overall inconsistency in pronunciation. The difficulty in accurately pronouncing the letter [r] can be attributed to a range of linguistic and phonetic factors, including the inherent complexity of the sound itself and the unique developmental stage of young children's oral motor skills.

In addition, the influence of the learners' first language and accent cannot be discounted, as these factors can impact the ability to accurately reproduce sounds that are not present in their

native language. In light of these findings, the present study highlights the importance of incorporating targeted pronunciation instruction and support into early childhood language education programs. Strategies such as visual aids, repetition, and explicit instruction can aid in acquiring challenging phonetic sounds such as the letter [r].

The present study's findings on early childhood language acquisition are consistent with previous research on the critical period hypothesis, which suggests that children are more adept at acquiring language during their early years due to the plasticity of their developing brains (Hartshorne & Nair, 2015). However, the process of acquiring multiple languages simultaneously can be challenging and requires support from caregivers and educators. The linguistic relativity theory, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggests that language shapes how people perceive the world around them, emphasizing the importance of providing young children with a solid foundation in multiple languages during the critical period of language development (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996).

In terms of pronunciation difficulties, previous studies have highlighted the significance of phonetic patterns in language acquisition. The study by Wang and Munro (2004) found that learners' ability to recognize and produce phonetic patterns was positively correlated with their pronunciation accuracy. Similarly, the study by Flege et al. (1995) found that learners who received explicit instruction in phonetics exhibited more significant improvements in pronunciation accuracy than those who did not receive explicit instruction. These findings suggest the importance of incorporating targeted pronunciation instruction and support into early childhood language education programs.

The present study's findings on data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic are consistent with previous research. The study by Han and colleagues (2021) found that data collection during the pandemic has been challenging, particularly in the context of research with young children. The lack of peer interaction and the presence of unfamiliar observers can result in reduced engagement and participation, making it difficult to obtain accurate data. Therefore, innovative and adaptive research methods are necessary to account for the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

Regarding Table 1, existing research suggests that phonetic substitution can effectively improve pronunciation accuracy in language learners. The study by Derwing and Munro (2009) found that explicit training in phonetic identification and production led to significant improvement in second language learners' pronunciation accuracy. Similarly, the study by Bohn and Flege (1990) demonstrated that teaching learners to use phonetic similarity between their native language and

the target language can lead to improved pronunciation accuracy. The finding that substituting the letter [r] with [w] or [l] can result in more accurate and authentic pronunciation is also supported by previous research. For instance, a study by Sohn and Lee (2013) found that Korean learners of English frequently substitute the sound [r] with [l] due to the phonetic similarity between the two sounds in Korean.

Regarding Table 2, the finding that young children struggle with pronouncing the letter [r] is consistent with previous research on early childhood language acquisition. Studies have shown that acquiring specific phonetic sounds can be challenging for young children due to their developing oral motor skills (Gildersleeve-Neumann, 2010). Additionally, the influence of the learners' first language and accent on pronunciation accuracy is a well-established finding in the field of second language acquisition (Flege, 1987).

In summary, the present study's findings on language acquisition and pronunciation difficulties are consistent with previous research, highlighting the importance of targeted and explicit instruction in pronunciation for language learners. The use of phonetic substitution strategies and incorporating targeted pronunciation instruction into language education programs can aid learners in acquiring challenging phonetic sounds, resulting in improved pronunciation accuracy and fluency in the target language. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed unique challenges to data collection, emphasizing the need for innovative and adaptive research methods.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings discussed above, this study emphasizes the critical role that pronunciation plays in language acquisition and proficiency. Accurately producing challenging phonetic sounds such as the letter [r] can be a persistent challenge for learners, whether they are young children acquiring their first language or second language learners attempting to master a foreign language. However, the incorporation of targeted and explicit instruction in pronunciation, including the use of phonetic substitution strategies and visual aids, can lead to improved pronunciation accuracy and fluency in the target language. These findings have important implications for language education and pedagogy, emphasizing the need for educators and caregivers to provide targeted support and guidance to learners at all stages of language development. By incorporating these strategies into language instruction materials and resources, learners can develop the tools they need to overcome pronunciation challenges and achieve greater proficiency in their target language.

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