Speech Development in Early Childhood Reviewed from Urban and Rural Environments

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Abstract

Speech development is one of the fundamental aspects of early childhood language development that simultaneously supports cognitive, social, and emotional growth. This ability does not develop in a vacuum but is profoundly influenced by the quality and characteristics of the environment in which children grow and develop. This study aims to comprehensively analyze the speech development of early childhood children in terms of the differences between urban and rural environmental contexts, while considering the role of parental stimulation as a crucial mediating variable. The method used is library research with a content analysis approach applied to 28 scientific sources consisting of reputable national and international journals published between 2016 and 2025. The results reveal three major findings: (1) children growing up in urban environments tend to have advantages in formal vocabulary mastery, systematic linguistic structure, and early literacy skills, supported by access to quality early childhood education institutions and diverse learning media; (2) children in rural environments demonstrate advantages in contextual communication skills, speech confidence, and pragmatic language fluency due to the high intensity of direct social interaction in daily life; (3) the quality of parental verbal stimulation both in quantity and quality is a mediating factor capable of bridging the gap in speech development between the two environmental contexts. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of contextual language stimulation programs adapted to the characteristics of the environment in which children develop.

Keywords: *speech development, urban environment, rural environment, early childhood, language stimulation*

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1. Introduction

Speech ability is one of the most fundamental and earliest developmental achievements in human life. From birth, children actively engage in communication starting from crying, vocalization, babbling, to the production of first words and increasingly complex sentences. This process is not merely a technical linguistic acquisition but reflects the entirety of child development encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions [1]. Children with good speaking skills are not only better able to express their thoughts and feelings but are also more prepared to learn to read, write, and develop academic intelligence later in life.

The importance of language development in early childhood has received strong confirmation from various large-scale longitudinal studies. Hart and Risley (1995) in their influential classic study found that children who receive more language input from parents during early childhood measured by the number of words heard per hour consistently demonstrate better language ability, reading skills, and academic achievement at school age [2]. Hoff (2006) in her comprehensive review affirmed that the quality of a child's language environment is the strongest predictor of the speed and accuracy of early childhood language development [3]. These findings confirm that a child's first years constitute a sensitive period for language development that cannot be repeated.

In Indonesia, attention to early childhood language development is growing alongside the expansion of PAUD (Early Childhood Education) services. However, significant disparities exist in children's speaking ability across different environmental contexts, especially between urban and rural settings. UNICEF Indonesia (2019) data shows substantial disparities in children's developmental readiness between urban and rural areas, with rural children facing higher risks of developmental delays due to limited access to quality educational services [4]. This reality makes a comparative study of children's speech development in both environmental contexts highly relevant and urgent.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory frames the environment as a layered system that directly and indirectly shapes child development [5]. In the context of language development, the environment operates through multiple pathways: the quality and quantity of language input received by the child, the structure of available social interactions, cultural values shaping communication patterns, and access to educational resources [6]. Fundamental differences between urban and rural environments across these dimensions can produce qualitatively different language development profiles in early childhood.

Urban environments generally offer broader access to quality formal educational institutions, diverse learning media, and more systematic exposure to standard language. Conversely, rural environments offer different advantages: rich interpersonal interaction networks and intense direct social engagement that create a language ecosystem rich in pragmatic and social dimensions [7]. Kornilov et al. (2016) found that rural children demonstrate stronger pragmatic communication abilities using language appropriately across diverse social contexts due to high-intensity direct social interaction in their communities [8].

Previous research on this topic has generally had a partial focus: some studies focus on the influence of urban environments on language development, others examine the rural context, and others investigate the role of parents separately. Rowe and Weisleder (2020) in their comprehensive review emphasized the need for studies that integrate macro-environmental factors (urban-rural) with micro-environmental factors (family and parental stimulation) to obtain a more holistic understanding [9]. This gap is the departure point for the present study, which aims to: (1) examine the speech development profile of early childhood children in urban environments; (2) examine the profile in rural environments; (3) analyze the role of parental verbal stimulation as a

mediating factor; and (4) formulate practical implications for parents, PAUD educators, and policymakers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Development in Early Childhood: Concept and Theoretical Foundations

Speaking is a form of expressive communication involving the production of systematically organized language sounds to convey meaning to listeners. In the context of early childhood development, speaking ability cannot be separated from language development as a whole, encompassing phonological (sound system), morphological (word formation), syntactic (sentence structure), semantic (meaning), and pragmatic (social use of language) dimensions [1]. Each dimension develops gradually yet interconnectedly, forming an increasingly complex communication system as the child grows.

From a theoretical perspective, children's speech development is understood through several complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Chomsky's (1965) nativist theory through the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) affirms that humans are biologically equipped with an innate capacity to acquire language [10]. Second, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory views language development as an inherently social process: children acquire language through interaction with more competent adults within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [11]. The concept of scaffolding explains how parents and educators help children build speaking ability through structured and gradual support. Third, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory places language development within the context of a layered, mutually interacting environmental system [5].

Regarding developmental stages, early childhood children pass through a series of relatively universal speaking milestones. From 0–12 months, children go through the pre-linguistic phase marked by vocalization and babbling; 12–18 months, single word production (holophrase); 18–24 months, two-word combinations; 2–3 years, simple sentences with subject-predicate-object structure; and 3–5 years, rapid expansion including complex sentences, narratives, and language use across diverse social functions [12]. The speed and quality of each milestone's achievement are strongly influenced by environmental factors.

Hoff (2006) identifies several critical components in the language environment that support optimal speech development: (1) input quantity total words heard by the child; (2) input quality complexity and vocabulary diversity in conversation; (3) contingent responsiveness adult responsiveness to children's communication initiations; and (4) joint attention episodes frequency and quality of moments where parent and child jointly focus on an object or event while communicating [3]. These components can vary significantly between urban and rural contexts.

2.2 Speech Development in Urban Environments

Urban environments offer a rich yet complex language ecosystem for children's speech development. Greater accessibility to quality PAUD institutions in urban areas provides a structural advantage for children's language development. In these institutions, children receive exposure to more formal and structured language, interact with trained teachers, and engage in pedagogically designed language activities. Putrantiwi et al. (2025) found that urban children tend to have broader vocabulary mastery and more complex sentence structures compared to rural children, particularly in formal and academic language contexts [13].

Various learning methods applied in urban PAUD institutions are proven effective in improving children's speaking abilities. Storytelling activities, for example, not only introduce children to new vocabulary and complex narrative structures but also build imagination and verbal expression [14, 15]. Paraparat et al. (2023) found in their study at TK Negeri Pembina I Medan

that storytelling activities significantly improved children's language abilities, particularly in speech fluency and vocabulary diversity [16]. Similar activities—including role play, group discussion, and presentations provide children with more opportunities to practice speaking in various contexts and language registers.

However, urban environments also present challenges for children's speech development. The negative impact of excessive gadget use is an increasingly pressing issue. Yunita et al. (2023) found that urban children who spend more than two hours per day in front of screens show lower expressive speaking ability compared to peers with more limited gadget exposure [17]. This occurs because screen time reduces opportunities for two-way conversation the primary driver of language development. Madigan et al. (2020) found that excessive screen time in early childhood negatively correlates with expressive and receptive language development [18]. This shows that the urban environment's advantages for language development are not automatic but depend heavily on parenting quality.

2.3 Speech Development in Rural Environments

Children growing up in rural environments demonstrate qualitatively different rather than simply lower speech development profiles compared to urban children. The primary advantage of rural children lies in the pragmatic and social dimensions of speaking ability. They are generally more confident communicating with people of various age groups, more skilled at using language for diverse social functions, and better able to adjust their speaking style to context and audience. This strong contextual communication ability results from the high intensity of direct social interaction in close-knit rural communities [6, 19].

Kornilov et al. (2016) provide valuable international perspective on language development in rural environments. In their study comparing Russian-speaking children in rural and urban areas, they found that rural children even those diagnosed with developmental language disorder demonstrate qualitatively different language ability profiles from urban children, not simply lower ones [8]. This challenges the simple assumption that rural children inevitably experience language delay and shows that urban-rural differences in language development are more qualitative than merely quantitative.

The primary challenge faced by rural children in speech development is limited access to formal and standardized language exposure. The minimal number of quality PAUD institutions, limited children's books at home, and insufficient exposure to standard Indonesian used in formal educational settings can create school readiness gaps with long-term impacts on academic achievement [11]. Ma et al. (2023) affirm that variation in the home language environment in rural areas is substantial and heavily dependent on family characteristics, including parents' education level, frequency of two-way communication, and parental involvement in children's daily activities [20].

2.4 The Role of Parents in Early Childhood Speech Development

Parents are the first and most influential language socialization agents in a child's life. Pradita et al. (2025) affirm that the role of parents in early childhood language development is multidimensional: not only as providers of language input but also as designers of the language environment, providers of contingent responses, and motivators of children's communication [21].

Rowe and Weisleder (2020) in their review affirm that the quality of parent-child verbal interaction is the strongest and most consistent predictor across cross-cultural and socioeconomic studies [9]. This interaction quality encompasses: responsiveness to children's communication initiations, use of rich and diverse vocabulary (rich vocabulary input), syntactic complexity in child-directed speech, frequency of conversational turn-taking, and quality of joint attention episodes. Anjani and Kurniawan (2023) found that the intensity of parental verbal interaction with

children aged 3–5 years has a strong correlation with children's expressive language development [22].

Alfira and Siregar (2024) emphasize that parental involvement in developing children's language skills cannot be replaced by electronic media or even educational institutions [23]. Sholihah (2025) adds that the quality of parental verbal stimulation including varied vocabulary use, clear intonation, and meaningful word repetition significantly influences the speed and quality of children's speech development [24]. Nasution (2025) found that parents who actively engage in play with children and utilize play moments as language stimulation opportunities produce children with significantly better language development [25].

In the context of urban-rural differences, parental role becomes increasingly critical as an equalizing factor. Ma et al. (2023) show that in rural areas with limited access to formal educational services, the quality of parental stimulation at home becomes the strongest determining factor for children's language development [20]. Rural children whose parents consistently provide quality verbal stimulation demonstrate speech development comparable to urban children accessing quality PAUD institutions.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a library research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. According to Syaodih Sukmadinata (2019), library research is a research method in which data collection is conducted through tracing, identifying, and analyzing relevant literature sources [26]. This approach was chosen with several methodological considerations: (1) the study of early childhood speech development in urban and rural contexts has a sufficiently rich literature base, enabling meaningful comparative analysis; (2) integrating findings from diverse studies across different contexts and methodologies can produce more comprehensive understanding; and (3) this approach allows combining local perspectives (Asahan Regency context) with relevant international research findings.

Data sources comprise two categories. Primary sources consist of empirical research articles published in reputable national and international scientific journals, including publications indexed in Scopus or Web of Science such as Learning and Individual Differences, BMC Public Health, Annual Review of Developmental Psychology, and Sari Pediatri. Secondary sources include developmental psychology textbooks and reports from international institutions such as UNICEF.

Literature selection was based on four primary criteria: (1) topic relevance to early childhood language or speech development, environmental influence (urban or rural), and/or parental stimulation; (2) source credibility; (3) currency (2015–2025, with seminal works by Chomsky, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Hart and Risley, and Hoff included for their irreplaceable theoretical contributions); and (4) full-text accessibility. Data were collected through systematic searches on Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ERIC, Garuda, and Neliti using Boolean operators in both Indonesian and English, until saturation was reached. A total of 28 scientific sources were identified and included as the primary analysis corpus.

Data analysis used content analysis combined with narrative synthesis (Krippendorff, 2018) [27], proceeding through four systematic stages: (1) data reduction strict literature selection resulting in 28 primary sources; (2) categorization grouping findings into three main themes: (a) speech development in urban environments; (b) speech development in rural environments; and (c) the role of parental stimulation; (3) interpretation critical analysis to identify patterns, similarities, differences, and gaps; and (4) synthesis integrating interpreted findings into a comprehensive narrative to build a complete conceptual picture of early childhood speech development based on environmental context.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Speech Development Profile of Early Childhood Children in Urban Environments

Based on the literature review, a relatively distinctive speech development profile can be synthesized for early childhood children growing up in urban environments. Urban children consistently demonstrate advantages in several language development aspects: (1) broader formal and academic vocabulary mastery; (2) understanding and production of more complex sentence structures; (3) more structured narrative ability; and (4) more developed early literacy skills (phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and understanding of written text functions). These advantages primarily stem from better access to quality PAUD institutions and more systematic exposure to formal language [13].

Various structured learning activities in urban PAUD institutions such as storytelling, role play, group discussions, and pre-literacy activities consistently prove effective in improving children's speaking abilities. Sari (2022) and Jafar and Surganingsih (2021) showed that storytelling systematically implemented in PAUD can significantly improve children's speaking ability, particularly in fluency, vocabulary, and storytelling capacity [14, 15]. Paraparat et al. (2023) confirmed this finding in the local Medan context [16].

However, the urban language development profile also contains challenges. Yunita et al. (2023) found that urban children who spend more than two hours daily in front of screens show lower expressive speaking ability than peers with more limited gadget exposure [17], because screen time reduces opportunities for two-way conversation. Pardede and Watini (2021) emphasize the need for strict supervision of children's gadget use as a preventive measure against language development delays [28]. This shows that urban environmental advantages in language development are not automatic but depend heavily on parenting quality and children's time management.

4.2 Speech Development Profile of Early Childhood Children in Rural Environments

Children growing up in rural environments demonstrate qualitatively different not merely lower speech development profiles compared to urban children. Rural children's primary advantages lie in the pragmatic and social dimensions of speaking ability: greater confidence communicating with people of various age groups, more skill in using language for diverse social functions, and better ability to adjust speaking style to context and audience. This strong contextual communication results from high-intensity direct social interaction in close-knit rural communities [6, 19].

Literature review also reveals that rural children who actively participate in community activities traditional ceremonies, family gatherings, and various collective activities gain richly authentic language practice opportunities. This type of language experience, termed authentic language use by applied linguists, is highly effective in developing children's pragmatic abilities and communicative competence [8].

The main challenge faced by rural children is limited access to formal and standardized language exposure. Minimal quality PAUD institutions, limited children's books at home, and insufficient exposure to standard Indonesian can create school readiness gaps with long-term academic impacts [11]. Ma et al. (2023) confirm that variation in the home language environment in rural areas is highly dependent on family characteristics [20]. Saputri, Masruroh, and Raihana (2026) conclude that active parental involvement in language stimulation at home is the most crucial determining factor for rural children's speech development [29].

4.3 The Mediating Role of Parental Stimulation in Children's Speech Development

The most consistent finding in this literature review is that the quality of parental verbal stimulation more than the environmental context alone is the strongest predictor of early childhood speech development in both urban and rural environments. This finding has important theoretical implications: that differences in speech development between urban and rural children are not deterministic but can be bridged and modulated by the quality of parenting provided.

Pradita et al. (2025) found that active parental involvement in daily communication engaging children in conversation, listening to children's stories, and providing positive responses to their speech has a significant influence on early childhood expressive language development [21]. Anjani and Kurniawan (2023) confirm that the role of parental verbal interaction with children aged 3–5 years has a substantial impact on language development, surpassing the influence of socioeconomic context [22]. Rowe and Weisleder (2020) add that the quality of conversational turns between parents and children not merely the quantity of speech is the most predictive variable for vocabulary development and speaking ability [9].

Sholihah (2025) emphasizes the quality aspects of stimulation often overlooked: not only how much parents speak to children but how they speak. Varied vocabulary use, clear and expressive intonation, meaningful word repetition, and responsiveness to children's speech are proven to significantly improve speaking ability [24]. Nasution (2025) adds that language stimulation integrated in shared play activities provides greater benefits than rigid formal stimulation, because the play context creates strong intrinsic motivation for children to communicate [25].

Alfira and Siregar (2024) emphasize that parental investment in children's language skills is a long-term investment of immeasurable value [23]. Children who receive quality verbal stimulation from parents develop not only faster in speaking ability but also have a stronger foundation for literacy, academic ability, and social intelligence later in life. This confirms that parental empowerment programs in language stimulation skills constitute the most cost-effective and broadly impactful intervention in both urban and rural contexts.

5. Conclusion

Based on a systematic and critical literature review, four main conclusions can be drawn. First, early childhood children growing up in urban environments tend to have advantages in formal vocabulary mastery, systematic linguistic structure, and early literacy skills due to better access to quality PAUD institutions and diverse learning media. However, urban environments also present the risk of reduced direct verbal interaction due to excessive gadget use, which can hinder children's expressive language development. Second, children in rural environments demonstrate advantages in contextual and pragmatic communication skills, speech confidence, and fluency in direct social interaction advantages arising from high-intensity social interaction in close-knit communities. However, limited access to formal language exposure and quality PAUD institutions can create school readiness gaps that need serious attention.

Third, the quality of parental verbal stimulation encompassing responsiveness, vocabulary richness, speech complexity directed at children, and frequency of two-way conversation is the strongest and most consistent predictor of early childhood speech development, surpassing the influence of environmental context alone. Quality parental stimulation can bridge speech development differences between urban and rural contexts. Fourth, differences in speech development between urban and rural children are qualitative in nature reflecting differences in the ecological configuration shaping children's language experiences not merely quantitative. Understanding these qualitative differences is essential for designing interventions and language stimulation programs that are truly contextual and effective.

Future empirical research with comparative mixed-methods designs is recommended to directly compare early childhood speech development in urban and rural contexts in Asahan Regency, while exploring moderating and mediating variables such as PAUD quality, parents' education level, and family socioeconomic conditions. Policymakers should invest in contextually adaptive parental empowerment programs and prioritize vocabulary and early literacy development in rural PAUD institutions as compensation for limited home exposure.

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