



LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Accepted :

19 July 2025

Published :

24 July 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the early language development of children aged one to two years through the lens of Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research involved longitudinal observations of three toddlers Cinta, Adriel, and Arvin over a six-month period, focusing on their verbal output, contextualized speech, and interactional behaviors. The analysis revealed that the children exhibited both expressive and receptive language competencies, manifesting in the use of single-word utterances, two-word combinations, and telegraphic speech structures. Key determinants influencing the trajectory and nature of their language acquisition included familial communication, the presence and responsiveness of caregivers, and the richness of the home linguistic environment. These findings align with Piaget's assertion that language development is intrinsically linked to cognitive maturation, wherein children begin to utilize verbal symbols to represent people, objects, actions, and affective states. The study highlights the foundational importance of early social interaction and emotional bonding in facilitating linguistic growth during the sensorimotor and initial preoperational phases of development.

Keywords: *Poetry Writing, Moral Values, Project-Based Learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language development in early childhood is a fundamental aspect of a child's overall growth and cognitive maturation. Language not only functions as a tool for communication but also serves as a medium for thought, emotional expression, and social interaction (Jaya et al., 2025; Mahesti et al., 2025; Nguyen & Habók, 2022). During the early years particularly between the ages of one and two children undergo a remarkable transformation in their linguistic capabilities, shifting from mere vocalizations to meaningful verbal expressions. This period is marked by the emergence of both expressive and receptive language skills, which are essential for navigating and interpreting the surrounding environment (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Dellicarpini & Alonso, 2013; Becerra-Posada et al., 2022).

Jean Piaget, a prominent developmental

psychologist, emphasized that language acquisition is deeply rooted in cognitive development (Piaget, 2018). According to Piaget (2013), language does not emerge in isolation but rather as a product of the child's growing capacity to form mental representations of objects, actions, and experiences. During the sensorimotor stage (birth to approximately two years), children begin to develop symbolic thought, which lays the groundwork for verbal communication (Mohammed et al., 2024; Hegazi et al., 2024; Meisani & Purnawarman, 2019). As they transition into the early preoperational stage, they start using words not just to label objects, but also to express needs, emotions, and intentions. For instance, a toddler saying "Ma! bobo" (Mom, let's go to bed) demonstrates an understanding of cause and effect, emotional connection, and symbolic representation hallmarks of Piagetian cognitive

development.

The process of language acquisition unfolds gradually, moving from simple utterances to more complex syntactic and semantic structures (De Wilde et al., 2020; Gardner, 2018; Sherine et al., 2020). Initially, children use isolated words that may lack clear meaning. However, with increased exposure to language and social interaction, these words acquire meaning, are combined into phrases, and evolve into coherent sentences (Pike et al., 2021; Sherine et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2023). Vocabulary growth accelerates as children become more cognitively and socially engaged, highlighting the interactive nature of language learning (Almusharraf, 2021; Mavilidi et al., 2015; Aulia et al., 2020).

Environmental factors play a significant role in shaping children's language development. Several studies have shown that the amount and quality of linguistic input, emotional bonding with caregivers, and the frequency of interaction within the family context significantly influence the pace and nature of language acquisition (Hoffman, 2019; Gee & Gee, 2020) Kirk et al., 2022). Children who are exposed to rich and supportive linguistic environments tend to develop more advanced verbal skills at an earlier age than those with limited language exposure.

Based on these theoretical and empirical considerations, this study seeks to explore the language development of children aged one to two years within the framework of Piaget's cognitive development theory. Specifically, the research aims to describe how children at this age produce and understand language, while also examining key environmental factors that may influence this process. These include the amount of time spent with parents or caregivers, the language(s) used in the home, the frequency and type of interpersonal interactions, and the emotional closeness the child feels with family

members. Through this investigation, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of early language development and its cognitive underpinnings, with practical implications for parents, educators, and early childhood practitioners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Children Language Development

Language development in children occurs gradually, beginning in infancy and progressing to more complicated language use. At the age of two, children usually start combining two or three words into basic sentences. This ability demonstrates both cognitive and communicative development.

Korrel et al. (2017) categorizes children's language acquisition into four stages: prelinguistic, one-word (holophrastic), two-word, and simple sentence stage. Two-year-old children typically fall into the stage of two words and begin to use basic sentences. They begin to express their preferences, name items, and communicate their emotions verbally. According to Wilymafidini (2018), at 12 months, most children can produce three or four words and comprehend 30 to 40. Additionally, some kids understand and use up to 80. By 14 months, the number of words known has increased to 50 to 100, with even the slowest 1/4 knowing 20 to 50. By the age of 18 months, most children can form 25 to 50 words on their own and understand hundreds. Furthermore, between 18 and 24 months (approximately), children begin to articulate two-word phrases and telegraphic speech. They demonstrate a range of grammatical functions that are replaced by the simple conjunction of two words.

Family environment, parenting style, and the frequency of verbal interaction between the child and adults significantly influence language development. Children who are often spoken to, read to, and

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included in simple conversations tend to develop their language skills more rapidly.

Jean Piaget's Theory of Language Development

Piaget, a well-known expert in developmental psychology, emphasized the tight relationship between language and cognitive development (Piaget, 2017). He hypothesized four levels of cognitive development:

1) Sensorimotor Stage (0–2 years)

Infants and toddlers use their perceptions and motor activities to explore the world. Their verbal communication is still limited and focused on fundamental bodily requirements (Rojo-Ramos et al., 2025). However, around the end of this stage, youngsters begin to utilize symbols and signs, such as words, to depict objects or actions. This represents the beginning of language.

2) Preoperational Stage (2–7 years)

Children begin to utilize symbols for play and communication. During this time, language development is rapid. They begin to compose short words, pose inquiries, and express themselves (Linder & Falk-Ross, 2024). However, their thinking is still selfish and lacks rationality.

Piaget highlighted that children begin to use language only when they have acquired the cognitive ability to recognize and employ symbols. Thus, language is more than just the copying of sounds; it is a result of the child's cognitive process in relation to the surrounding world.

3. METHODS

This study applied a descriptive qualitative research design to observe and analyze the language development of young children aged one to two (Patton, 2020; Sugiyono, 2021). According to Glaser and Strauss (2017), descriptive research is used to gather information on the current state of phenomena, with the goal of describing "what exists" in terms of variables or conditions in a specific setting. Cinta, Adriel, and Arvin were three toddlers' ages one to two years old when they participated in this study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, with a focus on children of the appropriate age for the developmental stage under inquiry.

The researcher used direct observation to track children's language acquisition over six months. They recorded spontaneous utterances in daily environments, focusing on context. The data was compared with established theories, particularly Jean Piaget's, to assess if children's linguistic behavior aligned with theoretical expectations for their developmental stage. The data were analyzed using a descriptive method, as defined by Mauliddiyah (2021) and Anufia (2019), which entails interpreting and describing the data as it exists. The analysis aimed to detect patterns and trends in language development, such as word types, utterance frequency, sentence structure, and contextual language use. The findings were subsequently given in textual form, accompanied by tables and examples of the children's genuine speech. This method gave a comprehensive picture of each child's linguistic development and the impact of environmental and social factors on that development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Family Background

In this research analysis, there is a description of children language development. The children's family background can be shown in this table below.

Table 1. The Data of Subject.

No	Name of Children	Age	Siblings	Parents	Languages used at home
1	Cinta	2 years old	1	Oloan and	Indonesian and Batak

				Disdawati	language
2	Adriel	1 year 8 months	2	Hilbert and Puspa	Indonesian language
3	Arvin	1 years 9 months	2	Badram Rau and Lidia	Indonesian language

Cinta lives with his parents and siblings; the person who spends the most time caring for her every day is her mother and sister. The constant interaction significantly influences the words, expressions, and even full sentences that Cinta has started to produce. Similar to Cinta, Adriel also lives with his parents and siblings; the person who spends the most time caring for her every day is their mother and nanny. It influences the words, expressions, and even full sentences that they have started to produce. Arvin lives with his parents and siblings, the person who spends the most time caring for him every day is his babysitter, Ma'am Bia. Because of this daily closeness, Arvin is closest to Ma'am Bia compared to other family members. This strong bond and constant interaction significantly influence the words, expressions, and even full sentences that Arvin has started to produce.

b. Children Language Development

Prior to uttering speech sounds, infants make a variety of sounds, crying, cooing, gurgling and then babbling. Cinta, Adriel and Arvin, who were around two years old, were already able to say not only single words or short phrases but also full sentences to express his needs, feelings, and

thoughts. Observing how their language develop from babbling to forming actual sentences, helps us see how daily social interactions, especially with his babysitter and family, play a crucial role in his language development.

Cinta, Adriel and Arvin began showing signs of language development at around 6–10 months with babbling, producing repetitive consonant-vowel sounds like “ma-ma” or “ba-ba.” This stage, although not yet “talking,” is important because it exercises the muscles and patterns required for speech. At the age of one, Arvin was able to say single words like “*susu*” (milk), “*mama*” (mother), “*papa*” (father), “*mamam*” (eat), “*minum*” (drink), “*mau*” (want), “*habis*” (all done), “*kunci*” (key), “*mandi*” (shower), “*ummah*” (kiss), “*aa*” (brother), “*Wak*” (uncle), “*Akong*” (grandfather), and “*Dada*” (bye). This marked his entry into the holophrastic stage, where one word can express a whole idea or request.

The researcher recorded various forms of utterances spoken by the children to express needs, convey emotions, respond to instructions, or simply interact. The following is the data collected from the observations:

Table 2. Table of the Children’s Utterances

Name	Child's speech	Indonesian meaning	English Translation	Contextual Situation
Cinta	<i>Ma bobo</i>	<i>Mak, ayo bobo</i>	Mom, let's sleep	The child was sleepy and wanted to sleep with her mother
	<i>Mam</i>	<i>Minum</i>	Drink	The child was thirsty or asking for milk
	<i>Tata mana</i>	<i>Di mana kakak?</i>	Where is sister?	She asked this when she did not see her sister nearby
	<i>Nana uop</i>	<i>Mana selop?</i>	Where are the slippers?	Said while looking for her slippers before going out
	<i>Gepa Anis</i>	<i>Jangan nangis</i>	Don't cry	Said to comfort her crying sister or friend

Name	Child's speech	Indonesian meaning	English Translation	Contextual Situation
	<i>Mama cantik</i>	<i>Mama cantik</i>	Mom is beautiful	Expressed after seeing her mother dressed up
	<i>Bapak cinta</i>	<i>Aku cinta Bapak</i>	I love Dad	Said while expressing affection to her father
	<i>Itut</i>	<i>Ikut</i>	Join/Follow	Expressed when she wanted to go along with her mother
	<i>Mama susui</i>	<i>Mama, aku mau menyusui</i>	Mom, I want to breastfeed	Said before bedtime
Adriel	<i>Ma-ma</i>	<i>mama</i>	Mama	Calling his mother
	<i>pa</i>	<i>papa</i>	Papa	Calling his father.
	<i>Nak Mamam</i>	<i>Aku mau makan</i>	I want to eat.	Expressing hunger/wanting to eat.
	<i>Nen</i>	<i>Aku mau minum asi</i>	I want to breastfeed..	Wanting to breastfeed
	<i>Ndong!</i>	<i>Aku minta digendng!</i>	I want to be carried!	Asking to be carried
	<i>Ola?</i>	<i>Ada bola?</i>	Is there a ball?	Pointing at a ball
	<i>Mbil...</i>	<i>Itu mobil.</i>	That's a car.	Pointing at a car
	<i>Mbrum..</i>	<i>Aku mau naik sepeda motor.</i>	I want to ride a motorcycle.	Pointing at a motorcycle.
Adriel	<i>Guk!</i>	<i>Ada anjing.</i>	There's a dog.	Imitating a dog's sound
	<i>Da-da/paypa</i>	<i>Dada</i>	Bye-bye.	Waving hand/saying goodbye
	<i>Nonono!</i>	<i>Tidak</i>	No.	Refusing something
	<i>Ma mamam</i>	<i>Mama, ayo makan</i>	Mama, let's eat.	Wanting to eat with mom
	<i>Papa nja</i>	<i>Bapak pergi kerja.</i>	Papa went to work.	Informing that dad has gone to work.
	<i>Ma Nas</i>	<i>Mama sakit.</i>	Mama is sick.	Informing that mom is sick.
	<i>Auk baju!</i>	<i>Baju itu bau!</i>	That shirt smells!	Informing that the shirt smells bad.
	<i>isang naknak</i>	<i>Pisangnya enak.</i>	The banana is tasty.	Informing that the banana tastes good.
	<i>Bahk</i>	<i>Bakh!</i>	Pick a boo!	Wanting to startle someone nearby.
	<i>U num</i>	<i>Aku mau minum.</i>	I want to drink.	Wanting to drink.
	<i>Bobobo</i>	<i>Aku mau tidur.</i>	I want to sleep.	Wanting to sleep.
	<i>Yo ini!</i>	<i>Ayo ke sini!</i>	Come here!	Asking someone to come.
Arvin	<i>Mama, __ susu!</i>	<i>Mama, aku mau susu!</i>	Mom, I want some	In the night, whining before sleeping.

Name	Child's speech	Indonesian meaning	English Translation	Contextual Situation
			milk!	
	___ <i>kan apa?</i>	<i>Itu ikan apa?</i>	What fish is that?	Every time, when he sees the fish in the aquarium at his house.
	<i>Mama, ___ nasi!</i>	<i>Mama, aku mau nasi!</i>	Mom, I want some rice!	When asking for rice, every time when he was eating.
	<i>Papa ___ mana?</i>	<i>Papa ada dimana?</i>	Where is daddy?	In the evening, looking for his father. Because the father back home from working in the evening.
	___ <i>Mama Sindu!</i>	<i>Panggil mama Sindu!</i>	Call mama Sindu!	In the afternoon, wanting to see mama Sindu.
	___ <i>Mamam!</i>	<i>Aku mau makan!</i>	I want to eat!	Any mealtime, morning, noon, and night.
	___ <i>Minum!</i>	<i>Aku mau minum!</i>	I want to drink!	Afternoon, after playing with his friends and his babysitter.
	___ <i>Mau!</i>	<i>Aku mau itu!</i>	I want that!	Anytime when he wanting something what he saw.
	___ <i>Habis!</i>	<i>Sudah habis!</i>	It's finished!	Anytime, after meal.
	___ <i>Mandi!</i>	<i>Aku mau mandi!</i>	I want to take a bath!	In the evening before bath.
	___ <i>Kunci!</i>	<i>Minta kunci!</i>	Give me the key!	Every morning, wanting to play.
	___ <i>Ummah!</i>	<i>Minta cium!</i>	Give me a kiss!	In the afternoon, wanting affection.
	<i>A'a!</i>	<i>Abang!</i>	Brother!	In the afternoon, calling his brother when he saw him.
	<i>Wak!</i>	<i>Paman!</i>	Uncle!	In the afternoon, calling his uncle when he saw him.
	<i>Akong!</i>	<i>Akong!</i>	Grandpa!	In the afternoon, calling his grandpa when he saw him.
	<i>Dada!</i>	<i>Dadah!</i>	Bye-bye!	In the evening saying goodbye to his friends.
Arvin	<i>Kan asin.</i>	<i>Ikan asin.</i>	Salted fish.	While eating salted fish, usually noon.
	___ <i>Osok gigi!</i>	<i>Gosok gigi dulu ya!</i>	Brush teeth first!	Before bedtime at night.

Name	Child's speech	Indonesian meaning	English Translation	Contextual Situation
	_____ <i>Lampu hidup!</i>	<i>Hidupkan lampunya!</i>	Turn on the light!	Evening, when the room is dark.
	___ <i>Anti pempes! ___.</i>	<i>Ganti pampersnya!</i>	Change the diaper!	After feeling wet, usually at night.
	_____ <i>Mba ana!</i>	<i>Panggilkan mba ana!</i>	Call Miss ana!	Afternoon, wanting his baby sitter.
	_____ <i>Pesawat terbang!</i>	<i>Lihat, ada pesawat terbang!</i>	Look, there is airplane!	Morning or afternoon, when seeing airplane.

Based on the results, Cinta as a two-year-old child is indeed capable of speaking in simple two-word sentences. Sentences such as "*Mam susu*" (want milk), "*Ma bobo*" (let's sleep), and "*Tata mana*" (where is sister?) are forms of verbal communication that clearly convey intention. This aligns with language development theories stating that at this age, children begin to enter the stage of using basic phrases commonly referred to as telegraphic speech.

Adriel demonstrated the ability to pronounce simple single words such as: mama, papa, mam (eat), nenen (want to breastfeed), and ndong (want to be carried); imitate sounds from the environment, such as "Guk" (dog's sound) and "vroom" (car's sound); show interest in communicating by pointing to objects while saying one syllable, such as pointing to a ball and saying "ba"; and respond to name calls and some simple instructions like "come here" and "bye-bye."

Arvin said words about food (milk, rice, and salted fish) and people around him (mother, father, brother, uncle, Miss Ana, and grandfather), demonstrating that he is integrating language with his surrounding environment. His ability to employ expressions like "what fish?" demonstrates that he is starting to ask questions, which is a crucial sign of curiosity and cognitive maturation.

Discussion

The language development observed in children such as Cinta, Adriel, and Arvin demonstrates key milestones aligned with Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, particularly within the sensorimotor and early preoperational stages. At this age, children begin to construct meaning from their environment through symbolic representation, which is evident in their use of two-word utterances like "Ma, bobo" to express concrete needs or desires. Although not syntactically complete, these expressions carry intentional meaning and serve essential communicative functions. According to Piaget (2018), the early preoperational stage (beginning around age two) marks the child's growing capacity to use symbols words, gestures, or images to represent real objects and events, even those not immediately present. This is reflected in the child's ability to recall and verbalize experiences, as seen when Cinta asks "Tata mana?" showing mental representation and object permanence.

Receptive language skills, such as understanding simple commands ("ayo makan", "mana bola?"), coupled with expressive abilities (e.g., labeling familiar people or objects), highlight the parallel growth of comprehension and speech production. This corresponds with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social

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interaction in language development, where imitation and guided participation play pivotal roles. For instance, Arvin's capability to combine two or more words at 1 year and 9 months illustrates early productive speech, shaped by routine interactions with caregivers like Ma'am Bia and other family members.

Furthermore, children's early use of language is characterized by egocentric speech, where they assume shared knowledge with the listener, as Piaget (2018) explained. When a child says "Itut" (meaning "want to come along"), they do not clarify whom they are referring to or the context, assuming the adult listener understands. This is not a deficiency but rather a developmental trait consistent with their limited ability to take others' perspectives (Sutini & Hanifah, 2020).

Processes of assimilation and accommodation are also central in language acquisition. For example, when a child initially uses the word "mam" to refer to all types of beverages and later differentiates between milk, water, and juice, it illustrates accommodation adapting an existing schema to new linguistic input (Piaget, 2017). These evolving language behaviors suggest that expressive and receptive language development is tightly interwoven with cognitive growth. As noted by Manurung et al. (2021) and Taylor & Leun (2020), symbolic language use in early childhood is foundational for later abstract thinking and social communication.

Thus, children's consistent and meaningful use of language in contextually appropriate situations is not merely repetition but reflects active cognitive engagement with their environment. This interplay of cognition and language underscores the importance of a rich linguistic environment in fostering early developmental competencies

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the language development of children aged one to two years aligns with Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. At this stage, children begin to utilize language not only as a tool for communication but also as a medium to express desires, needs, and emotional states. Observations revealed that the children demonstrated an emerging capacity to understand and respond to simple instructions, such as reacting to greetings or complying with verbal cues, and exhibited social awareness for instance, showing shyness or distress when encountering unfamiliar individuals. In addition, they were capable of producing isolated words, combining two-word phrases, and responding to familiar songs or verbal prompts. These linguistic behaviors are characteristic of the transition into the preoperational stage, wherein verbal symbols are employed to represent internal thoughts and engage with the external environment.

A key factor influencing this developmental trajectory is the home environment. Interactions with close family members particularly the mother and siblings as well as the dominant language spoken at home, were found to significantly shape the children's language use. Emotional attachment and a sense of security in familial relationships, especially with the mother, facilitated verbal expression and confidence in communication. These findings support existing literature emphasizing the importance of early social-emotional bonds in promoting language acquisition.

To further expand the understanding of early language development, future studies are encouraged to explore longitudinal trajectories of children's linguistic growth beyond the age of two, examining how language evolves as children advance through later cognitive stages. Additionally, comparative studies across diverse sociocultural and multilingual contexts could provide insights into the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in shaping language acquisition. It would also be valuable to investigate the specific roles of fathers, extended family members, or caregivers outside the home in influencing language development. Finally, integrating observational methods with standardized language development assessments could

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enhance the accuracy and depth of developmental analysis in future research.

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