Fostering Child Empowerment Through English Language Competency in Speaking Skills

Marudut Bernadtua Simanjuntak

Applied Linguistic, State University of Jakarta, Indonesia
DOI: 10.31004/obsesi.v8i2.5400

Abstract

This research delves into the intricate relationship between English language competency, specifically in speaking skills, and the empowerment of young learners within the context of early childhood education. Combining descriptive qualitative research with an extensive literature review, the study elucidates the profound implications of language proficiency on child empowerment. The research employs a methodology involving in-depth interviews, systematic classroom observations, and content analysis. Subjects comprise young learners in early childhood education, with a focus on their English language proficiency in speaking. Data collection includes semi-structured interviews with educators, parents, and learners, alongside literature review findings. The outcomes reveal that language proficiency functions as a transformative tool, fostering self-confidence, self-expression, and active learning participation. Proficient speakers exhibit enhanced agency and autonomy, equipping them with cognitive tools for academic success and global navigation. Disparities in language competency and empowerment among young learners are identified, necessitating inclusive educational practices and targeted support. This research underscores educators' pivotal role, alongside engaged parents and inclusive curriculum design, in fostering language proficiency as a means of empowering children in early education. The study contributes to a holistic understanding of language's role in shaping the foundations of empowered, lifelong learners.

Keywords: *language competency; child empowerment; speaking skills; early childhood education; inclusive curriculum*

Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of early childhood education, the acquisition of language skills, with a particular focus on speaking proficiency, has emerged as a critical pillar underpinning the holistic development of young learners (McManis & Gunnewig, 2012). This research endeavours to delve into the intricate relationship between English language competency in speaking skills and the empowerment of children within the context of early childhood education (Diadha, 2015). Rooted in the realms of English Education, Applied Linguistics, and Parenting, this study employs the dual lenses of descriptive qualitative literature and literature review methods to illuminate the profound implications of language proficiency for young learners' empowerment, learning strategies, and overall language development (Teo, 2019).

The early years of a child's life constitute a crucial phase for linguistic and cognitive development. It is during this period that the foundations of language are laid, serving as a scaffold for future learning and empowerment. Language proficiency, particularly in speaking skills, equips children with the tools to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and ideas effectively, thereby enabling them to engage meaningfully with the world around them (Adisti & Marwiyati, 2023).

Speaking skills encompass the ability to express oneself fluently, coherently, and persuasively, thus fostering self-confidence and empowerment (Gan, 2012). Moreover, language proficiency is a cornerstone of learning strategies; it influences a child's ability to comprehend and convey information, participate in collaborative learning environments, and navigate the educational landscape (Ellsworth, 2021). Within the multifaceted arena of early childhood education, English language competency holds particular significance. English, often considered a global lingua franca, opens doors to a wealth of opportunities for young learners, enabling them to connect with diverse cultures, access global knowledge resources, and prepare for an interconnected world (Amini, 2015). Thus, understanding the nuanced relationship between English language competency, speaking skills, and child empowerment within the context of early childhood education is of paramount importance.

This research bears significant relevance for educators, policymakers, parents, and researchers in the field of early childhood education (Asmawati, 2021). The findings promise to offer invaluable insights that have the potential to reshape pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and parenting approaches. The implications of this study resonate across several dimensions:

1. Empowerment of Young Learners: The research holds the promise of unveiling how English language competency, particularly in speaking skills, can empower young learners by enhancing their self-confidence, self-expression, and active engagement in the learning process. This empowerment extends beyond language acquisition and plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's overall development and future prospects.

2. Learning Strategies: By exploring the learning strategies employed by young learners with varying levels of English language proficiency in speaking skills, this research can provide educators and parents with insights into effective approaches for facilitating language development and cognitive growth. Understanding how children harness language for learning is instrumental in designing tailored instructional strategies.

3. Multilingual Landscape: In an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, the role of English as a second language in early childhood education is paramount. The findings of this research can inform policy decisions and curriculum design, encouraging the inclusion of English as a valuable tool for empowerment and language development.

4. Parental Involvement: For parents, this research offers a deeper understanding of the role they play in nurturing their child's language proficiency and empowerment. Insights into best practices for promoting English language competency can guide parents in fostering a supportive home environment for language development.

By unveiling the profound relationship between English language competency in speaking skills and child empowerment within early childhood education, this study seeks to offer a fresh perspective on language development and its broader implications for young learners (Gordon & Browne, 2016). As we embark on this journey of exploration, we are poised to uncover the transformative power of language proficiency in shaping the future of our children, equipping them with the confidence and capabilities to thrive in an ever-changing world.

Methodology

The rigorous investigation into the intricate relationship between English language competency, specifically focused on speaking skills, and child empowerment within the context of early childhood education necessitates a methodological approach that ensures depth, validity, and reliability (Katz, 2015; Willig, 2014). To achieve these objectives, this research adopts a blended methodology encompassing descriptive qualitative research and literature review methods, strategically designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research subject. Central to this study is the utilization of descriptive qualitative research. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of language competency and its effects on child empowerment (Irwin et al., 2007). It offers a holistic perspective that captures the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and the complex interplay of factors contributing to language development and empowerment among young learners.

This research design encompasses semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse sample of early childhood education students, educators, and parents or guardians. The interviews, conducted over a six-month period from January to June 2023, were thoughtfully crafted to extract rich insights into the participants' experiences, beliefs, and perspectives on language competency, speaking skills, and child empowerment. Open-ended questions, such as "Can you share instances where you've observed the impact of language competency on a child's confidence?" and "How do you perceive the relationship between speaking skills and a child's sense of empowerment?" were used to encourage participants to articulate their thoughts and experiences authentically, promoting a deeper understanding of the subject (Takunas, 2019). Classroom observations constitute an integral component of the descriptive qualitative research phase. These observations, conducted during regular class hours from March to May 2023, provide a real-time window into the dynamics of language use, speaking proficiency, and empowerment among young learners. They enable the researcher to explore non-verbal cues, peer interactions, and contextual factors that shape language development and empowerment within educational settings (Nurlaeni & Juniarti, 2017). Data analysis in the descriptive qualitative research phase adheres to established procedures, including thematic analysis. Transcripts of interviews and field notes from classroom observations are systematically coded and categorized to identify recurring themes and patterns. This rigorous approach ensures the extraction of nuanced and context-specific insights from the data.

Result and Discussion

Results

The research results presented herein illuminate the intricate interplay between English language competency, specifically focusing on speaking skills, and child empowerment within the landscape of early childhood education (Al-Hilal, 2022; Lisenbee & Ford, 2018). Through a carefully structured blend of descriptive qualitative research and a comprehensive literature review, this study unveils a multifaceted tapestry of insights that offer profound implications for the education and empowerment of young learners.

Assessment of Language Competency in Speaking Skills

Participants

The assessment of English language competency in speaking skills involved a diverse cohort of 50 early childhood education students, aged 4 to 6, drawn from three different schools. The participants represented varying linguistic backgrounds, exposure to English, and levels of speaking proficiency.

Procedure

The assessments were conducted through semi-structured interviews with students, educators, and parents. Interviews took place between January and March 2023, with each

interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. The content of the interviews centred around students' exposure to English, language use outside the classroom, and perceived challenges or strengths in speaking skills.

The findings underscored the heterogeneity of language competency among the young learners. Students with regular exposure to English, either through bilingual family backgrounds or immersion in English-speaking communities, exhibited higher levels of proficiency in speaking skills. Conversely, those with limited exposure faced challenges in expressing themselves effectively.

Table 1: Overview of Participants in Language Competency Assessment

Participant Group	Number of Participants
Early Childhood Students	50
Educators	15
Parents	15

Impact of Language Proficiency on Child Empowerment
Participants

The impact assessment involved observing 30 students identified from the initial cohort, including those with varying levels of language proficiency.

Procedure

Classroom observations were conducted from April to May 2023 during regular class hours. The observations focused on students' engagement in classroom activities, their participation in discussions, and their overall communication skills.

Students with advanced speaking skills demonstrated heightened self-confidence, active participation in learning, and a greater capacity for self-expression. This self-assuredness is indicative of the empowering potential of language proficiency.

Table 2: Overview of Participants in Impact Assessment

Participant Group	Number of Participants
Observed Students	30

Learning Strategies Employed by Young Learners
Participants

The exploration of learning strategies involved all 50 students from the initial cohort.

Procedure

Data regarding learning strategies were gathered through classroom observations and follow-up interviews conducted in June 2023. The interviews delved into the reasons behind the chosen learning strategies.

Students with advanced speaking skills exhibited a proclivity for active engagement with learning materials. Conversely, students with limited proficiency often employed passive learning strategies, suggesting the need for targeted support.

Table 3. Overview of Participants in Learning Strategies Exploration

Participant Group	Number of Participants
All Early Childhood Students	50

Best Practices and Strategies for Enhancing Language Competency and Child Empowerment

Participants

Educators from the three participating schools were involved in discussions and workshops.

Procedure

A series of workshops were conducted in July 2023 to discuss and refine best practices based on the research findings. Educators' feedback was incorporated into the final recommendations.

Best practices, such as creating a language-rich environment, cultivating supportive teacher-student relationships, employing inclusive pedagogical approaches, encouraging parental involvement, and providing continuous professional development for educators, were identified as effective strategies for enhancing language competency and child empowerment.

Table 4. Overview of Participants in Best Practices Workshops

Participant Group	Number of Participants
Educators	30

These findings, supported by participant data, collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between English language competency, speaking skills, and child empowerment in early childhood education.

The research findings and results presented herein illuminate the intricate interplay between English language competency, specifically focusing on speaking skills, and child empowerment within the landscape of early childhood education (McManis & Gunnewig, 2012). Through a carefully structured blend of descriptive qualitative research and a comprehensive literature review, this study unveils a multifaceted tapestry of insights that offer profound implications for the education and empowerment of young learners.

Assessment of Language Competency in Speaking Skills

One of the primary objectives of this research was to assess the levels of English language competency in speaking skills among early childhood education students. This assessment encompassed a diverse cohort of students, reflecting a spectrum of linguistic backgrounds, exposure to English, and varying degrees of speaking proficiency (Llosa, 2016).

The findings underscore the heterogeneity of language competency among the young learners. Students who had regular exposure to English, either through bilingual family backgrounds or immersion in English-speaking communities, exhibited higher levels of proficiency in speaking skills. Their ability to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and ideas fluently and coherently was indicative of the empowering potential of language proficiency.

Conversely, students with limited exposure to English, especially outside the educational setting, demonstrated varying levels of speaking proficiency. While some exhibited competence, others faced challenges in expressing themselves effectively. These disparities highlight the impact of extracurricular language exposure on speaking skills and child empowerment.

Impact of Language Proficiency on Child Empowerment

The research findings underscore the profound impact of language proficiency, specifically in speaking skills, on child empowerment within the context of early childhood education. Child empowerment, as explored in this study, encompasses self-confidence, self-expression, and active participation in learning. Students with advanced speaking skills

demonstrated heightened self-confidence (Sovianti, 2021). They expressed their thoughts and ideas with conviction, engaged in classroom discussions actively, and demonstrated a willingness to take on leadership roles. This self-assuredness is a testament to the empowering potential of language proficiency, which equips children with the tools to communicate effectively and assert themselves.

Furthermore, language proficiency had a direct bearing on self-expression. Students proficient in speaking skills exhibited a greater capacity to convey their emotions, thoughts, and aspirations. This enhanced self-expression nurtured a sense of agency and autonomy, further contributing to child empowerment. Active participation in the learning process emerged as a pivotal dimension of child empowerment. Students with proficient speaking skills were more likely to engage actively in classroom activities, collaborate with peers, and express their opinions (Newton & Nation, 2020). This active participation fosters a sense of ownership over one's learning journey and contributes to overall child empowerment.

Learning Strategies Employed by Young Learners

The research also delved into the learning strategies employed by young learners with varying levels of English language competency in speaking skills. Understanding these strategies is crucial for tailoring instructional approaches that promote language development and empowerment (Plowman & McPake, 2013). Students with advanced speaking skills exhibited a proclivity for active engagement with learning materials. They sought opportunities to participate in discussions, ask questions, and share their insights. This proactive approach to learning enhanced their language development and empowerment. Conversely, students with limited speaking proficiency often employed passive learning strategies, such as listening and observing (Asmawati, 2021). While these strategies can be effective to some extent, they may hinder active participation and limit language development. These students may require targeted support to enhance their speaking skills and, consequently, their empowerment.

Best Practices and Strategies for Enhancing Language Competency and Child Empowerment

The identification of best practices and strategies for enhancing English language competency in speaking skills within early childhood education settings is a significant outcome of this research (Gordon & Browne, 2016; Niikko, 2020). These practices are rooted in the research findings and the broader academic literature:

> **A. Language-Rich Environment**: Creating a language-rich classroom environment where English is used as a tool for communication and learning enhances language competency and empowers students. Incorporating speaking activities, such as group discussions and presentations, encourages active participation and language development.
> **B. Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships**: Cultivating supportive teacher-student relationships is essential for child empowerment. Teachers who establish trust and provide encouragement create a safe space for students to express themselves confidently.
> **C. Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches**: Inclusive pedagogical approaches that value students' linguistic diversity and encourage peer collaboration are pivotal. These approaches promote language development and active participation, contributing to child empowerment.
> **D. Parental Involvement**: Engaging parents in language development activities at home, such as reading and storytelling, reinforces language competency and empowers children. Parents can serve as valuable partners in fostering speaking skills and self-expression.

E. Professional Development for Educators: Continuous professional development for educators to enhance their own language proficiency and teaching strategies is crucial. Educators well-versed in speaking skills can better guide students towards language development and empowerment.

Discussions

The research findings presented in the previous section illuminate the intricate relationship between English language competency in speaking skills and child empowerment within the context of early childhood education. This discussion delves into the implications of these findings, offering insights for educators, policymakers, parents, and researchers, and explores avenues for advancing the existing knowledge base in the field.

The Empowering Potential of Language Proficiency

The findings unequivocally affirm the empowering potential of language proficiency, specifically in speaking skills, for young learners. Language serves as a conduit for self-expression, confidence-building, and active participation in learning. Students proficient in speaking skills demonstrate higher levels of self-assuredness, assertiveness, and the capacity to express their thoughts and ideas (Gan, 2012). This empowerment extends beyond the classroom, shaping a child's overall development and future prospects. The ability to communicate effectively not only enhances academic achievement but also equips students with essential life skills, such as negotiation, problem-solving, and critical thinking. These skills, rooted in language proficiency, empower children to navigate an ever-evolving world with confidence and competence.

Disparities in Language Competency and Empowerment

The research findings also highlight the disparities in language competency and, by extension, child empowerment among young learners. Students with limited exposure to English or those facing language barriers may struggle to articulate themselves effectively, potentially experiencing lower levels of self-confidence and active engagement. These disparities raise important questions about educational equity and inclusivity. It is imperative for educators and policymakers to recognise the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students and provide targeted support to bridge language gaps. In doing so, they can ensure that all students have equitable access to the empowering benefits of language proficiency.

The Role of Educators in Fostering Empowerment

Educators emerge as key agents in fostering child empowerment through language proficiency. The establishment of supportive teacher-student relationships is a cornerstone of empowerment. Teachers who create a safe and encouraging learning environment enable students to express themselves confidently, nurturing a sense of empowerment. Furthermore, the pedagogical approaches employed by educators play a pivotal role. Inclusive teaching methods that value students' linguistic diversity and promote active participation are instrumental in enhancing language competency and empowerment. By adopting strategies that encourage student voice and collaboration, educators can foster a sense of ownership over the learning process. Continuous professional development for educators is also crucial. Equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to enhance their own language proficiency and teaching strategies empowers them to facilitate language development and child empowerment effectively.

Parental Involvement and Language Development

Parents emerge as vital partners in the journey to empower children through language proficiency (Gan, 2012). The research findings emphasise the importance of engaging parents in language development activities at home, such as reading, storytelling, and open

communication. Parental involvement not only reinforces language competency but also fosters a supportive home environment where children feel encouraged to express themselves. This partnership between home and school is a powerful catalyst for empowerment, as it reinforces the value of language proficiency and self-expression in both contexts.

Implications
Inclusive Curriculum Design

The findings underscore the need for inclusive curriculum design that values linguistic diversity and promotes active participation. Curriculum developers and policymakers should consider integrating speaking activities, group discussions, and collaborative projects into early childhood education programmes. These activities offer opportunities for students to enhance their speaking skills while fostering empowerment through engagement.

Targeted Support for Language Development

Educational institutions should provide targeted support for students with limited language proficiency. English language support programmes and resources should be accessible to all students, ensuring that language barriers do not impede their empowerment. Personalised support plans can help bridge language gaps and promote self-confidence.

Professional Development for Educators

Professional development opportunities for educators should prioritise the enhancement of their language proficiency and pedagogical strategies. Equipped with strong language skills, educators can better foster language development and empowerment among their students. Training programmes should also focus on creating inclusive classroom environments and building positive teacher-student relationships.

Encouraging Parental Involvement

Parents should be encouraged and equipped to play an active role in their child's language development. Parenting workshops and resources can provide guidance on effective ways to support language proficiency at home. Schools can also foster partnerships with parents through open communication and involvement in school activities.

Future Research Directions

The research findings open the door to several potential avenues for future research:

Long-Term Effects of Language Proficiency

Future studies could investigate the long-term effects of language proficiency on academic achievement, socio-emotional development, and career prospects. Understanding how language competency in early childhood impacts a child's trajectory into adolescence and adulthood can provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Comparative research across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts can offer a broader perspective on the relationship between language development and child empowerment. Exploring how language proficiency interacts with cultural factors and societal norms can deepen our understanding of this complex relationship.

Technology and Language Development

With the increasing integration of technology in education, future research could examine the role of digital tools and online resources in enhancing language competency and child empowerment. Investigating how technology can be leveraged to provide targeted language support and promote self-expression is an area ripe for exploration.

The findings have far-reaching implications for educators, policymakers, parents, and researchers, offering insights that can inform practice and policy decisions. By prioritising language development as a vehicle for empowerment, we can equip young learners with the linguistic and cognitive tools to excel academically, express themselves confidently, and actively engage in their own growth and development.

Conclusion

This research underscores the pivotal role of English language competency, particularly in speaking skills, in empowering young learners in early childhood education. Proficient speakers demonstrate heightened self-confidence, active participation, and improved self-expression. However, disparities in language competency highlight the need for concerted efforts by educators, policymakers, and parents to ensure equitable language support for all students. Educators are key influencers in fostering child empowerment through language proficiency. Supportive teacher-student relationships, inclusive teaching methods, and ongoing professional development contribute to a conducive learning environment. Parents also play a crucial role, as engaging them in language development activities at home reinforces competency and encourages self-expression. The implications of this research extend beyond academia, calling for inclusive curriculum design, targeted support, and increased parental involvement. Embracing a holistic approach to education is essential, empowering young learners with linguistic and cognitive tools for academic success and confident self-expression. Ultimately, this research encourages recognition of the profound impact of language proficiency on child empowerment, advocating for a future where each child is equipped to shape a brighter, more engaged society.

Acknowledgment

References

Adisti, A. R., & Marwiyati, S. (2023). Developing Children's Language Skills through Storybooks Based on Religious Moderation. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *7*(4), 4349–4359. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i4.3614

Purba, R., Resmi, R., Saputra, N., & Herman, H. (2022). Exploring the teaching of language variation use from early children's acquisition at school. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *6*(6), 5447–5453. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v6i6.2907

Amini, M. (2015). Profil keterlibatan orang tua dalam pendidikan anak usia TK. *Jurnal Ilmiah Visi*, *10*(1), 9–20. https://doi.org/10.21009/jiv.1001.2

Asmawati, L. (2021). Peran Orang Tua dalam pemanfaatan teknologi digital pada anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *6*(1), 82–96.

Diadha, R. (2015). Keterlibatan orang tua dalam pendidikan anak usia dini di taman kanak-kanak. *Edusentris*, *2*(1), 61–71. https://doi.org/10.17509/edusentris.v2i1.161. https://doi.org/10.17509/edusentris.v2i1.161.

Ellsworth, A. M. (2021). A New Generation of Teachers. In *Research Anthology on Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Students* (pp. 1183–1207). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-3022-1.ch061

Gan, Z. (2012). Understanding L2 speaking problems: Implications for ESL curriculum development in a teacher training institution in Hong Kong. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, *37*(1), 43–59. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n1.4

Gordon, A., & Browne, K. W. (2016). *Beginnings & beyond: Foundations in early childhood education*. Cengage learning.

Irwin, L. G., Siddiqi, A., & Hertzman, G. (2007). *Early child development: A powerful equalizer*. Citeseer.

Katz, J. (2015). A theory of qualitative methodology: The social system of analytic fieldwork. *Méthod (e) s: African Review of Social Sciences Methodology*, *1*(1–2), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/23754745.2015.1017282

Lisenbee, P. S., & Ford, C. M. (2018). Engaging students in traditional and digital storytelling to make connections between pedagogy and children's experiences. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *46*, 129–139.

Llosa, L. (2016). Assessing Students' Content Knowledge and Language Proficiency. In *Language Testing and Assessment* (pp. 1–12). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02326-7_33-1

McManis, L. D., & Gunnewig, S. B. (2012). Finding the education in educational technology with early learners. *Young Children*, *67*(3), 14–24.

Newton, J. M., & Nation, I. S. P. (2020). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429203114

Niikko, A. (2020). Examining images of teacher students. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *28*(6), 884–897. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2020.1836587. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2020.1836587.

Nurlaeni, N., & Juniarti, Y. (2017). Peran orang tua dalam mengembangkan kemampuan bahasa pada anak usia 4-6 tahun. *Jurnal Pelita PAUD*, *2*(1), 51–62

Plowman, L., & McPake, J. (2013). Seven myths about young children and technology. *Childhood Education*, *89*(1), 27–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2013.757490

Sovianti, D. A. R. (2021). The Correlation Between Critical Thinking Ability And Self-Confidence Toward Speaking Skill Among The Third Level Students At Language Center Pare-Kediri. In *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Proficiency* (Vol. 2, Issue 2, p. 17). Universitas Islam Kadiri. https://doi.org/10.32503/proficiency.v2i2.1406

Takunas, M. (2019). *Peran Lembaga Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) Sukma Dalam Meningkatkan Kreativitas Anak Di Desa Lelang Matamaling Kec. Buko Selatan Kab. Banggai Kepulauan*. IAIN Palu. http://repository.iainpalu.ac.id/id/eprint/668

Teo, P. (2019). Teaching for the 21st century: A case for dialogic pedagogy. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, *21*, 170–178. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2019.03.009

Willig, C. (2014). Interpretation and analysis. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, *481*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243.n10