

## Understanding the Dynamics of Language Shift of Early Bilingualism in Acehese Children

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the factors influencing language shift and maintenance among young bilingual speakers in Aceh, Indonesia, amidst the increasing dominance of Indonesian. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through observation and questionnaires to explore how Acehese children navigate their bilingual environment. The study focuses on the interplay between home language use, educational policies, and socio-economic factors. Results reveal a significant preference for Indonesians in both formal and informal settings, driven by perceived socio-economic benefits and national educational frameworks. Despite this trend, strong community support and positive parental attitudes towards Acehese play crucial roles in mitigating language shifts. The findings underscore the importance of bilingual education and community initiatives in preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. This research contributes insights to global discussions on bilingualism, offering strategies for supporting minority languages in multilingual societies.

**Key words:** *Bilingualism; Acehese; language trend; language threat*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early bilingualism in children presents a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and social factors, particularly in regions with rich linguistic diversity such as Aceh, Indonesia. This study aims to investigate the factors influencing language maintenance and shift among Acehese children aged 9 to 11 who grow up in bilingual environments. Given the increasing prevalence of Indonesian as the dominant language, understanding these dynamics is critical for formulating strategies to preserve the Acehese language and cultural identity. The phenomenon of language shift, where a community gradually abandons its native language in favour of a more dominant one, is well-documented across the globe. In the context of Aceh, a region with a distinct linguistic and cultural heritage, the encroachment of Indonesian poses significant threats to the vitality of the Acehese language. Previous studies have shown that language shift often accelerates across generations, particularly when socioeconomic pressures and educational policies favour the dominant language (Fishman, 1991) (Crystal, 2000).

Aceh, located on the northern tip of Sumatra, has a rich linguistic tapestry with Acehese being the native language spoken by a significant portion of the population. Historically, the Acehese language has been a cornerstone of the region's cultural identity, with deep roots in its oral and written traditions (Sneddon, 2003). However, since the national language policy in Indonesia mandates the use of Indonesian as the medium of instruction and communication in most public domains, Acehese faces the risk of becoming endangered. The study is framed within the broader discourse on bilingualism and language maintenance.



Cummins' theory of linguistic interdependence suggests that proficiency in the mother tongue can positively influence second language acquisition (Cummins, 2001). Conversely, a lack of support for the mother tongue can lead to its erosion and a subsequent decline in cultural identity (Baker, 2011). This framework is critical for understanding how early exposure to both Acehese and Indonesian shapes children's linguistic competencies and cultural affiliations.

Research on bilingualism in minority languages often highlights the challenges of maintaining linguistic diversity in the face of dominant language pressures. Studies by Garcia and Wei on translanguage emphasize the importance of using both languages fluidly to enhance cognitive and academic performance (Ofelia Garcia; Li Wei, 2014). In Aceh, preliminary observations indicate a trend where younger generations, especially in urban areas, increasingly favour Indonesian, both in educational settings and daily interactions. Despite these insights, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies focusing specifically on the early bilingual experiences of Acehese children. Most existing research either generalizes the findings to broader Indonesian contexts or focuses on adult language use, leaving a critical gap in understanding the early stages of bilingual development and language shift among children. It is so easy for people today to ignore regional languages while our ancestors always protected ethnic languages by refusing to learn Dutch at school so as not to ignore regional languages (Groeneboer, 1999). Acehese elder generations had even succeeded whole life sector without leaving their Acehese language. A number of our eldest are even fluent in the Dutch language since Aceh was colonized by the Dutch a hundred years ago (Anwar, 2020).

The issue of the decreasing number of Acehese children who speak Acehese is not a counterfeit fact. Young generations today are reluctant to speak the Acehese language with their friends and colleagues. When we pass by them in streets, shopping malls, schools, campuses, cafes, and parks, all we heard was the Indonesian language (Zulbaidah, 2014). It is even worse knowing Acehese parents prefer to speak the Indonesian language with their children instead of the tribe's language. Indonesian language which is the national language of Indonesia has been widely acknowledged as a more prestigious language than Acehese by the majority of its people. It is a sad reality that they do not realize of losing their mother tongue by leaving it behind. Through our casual talks with several parents who speak the Indonesian language with their children, they assume that their children will show better progress at school if they are fluent in the Indonesian language at an early age. On the contrary, if the children speak Acehese at home, they will have trouble understanding their teachers at school.



It is prestigious to be a bilingual person. Someone who can speak more than one language is always considered more intelligent and talented than those who speak a single language. In job interviews, the participants who can show adequate proficiency beyond their mother tongue will get more chances to be accepted by the company. So, it is primary to speak another language fluently to build a promising career. Milambiling also stated that by using more than one language, people have different educational and career development, among others (Milambiling, 2011). It is increasingly believed that bilingual people can quickly learn or acquire other languages since they are well-trained in learning multiple languages (KÖKTÜRK et al., 2016). Thus, they need less effort than those who are monolinguals to acquire a new language.

To be excessively exposed to another language, on the other hand, will risk someone losing his/her mother tongue. There are situations in which bilingual people risk losing their first language (Baker, 2001). It depends on the circumstances and the context use of the languages. There is always an opportunity for people to acquire several languages but not harm their mother tongue if the speaker could switch the use of the languages equally. It is a blunder when someone masters a new language but leaves the mother tongue as if it is an old-fashioned language to speak. A person who abandons his mother tongue means he is abandoning his identity because language is identity (Alshehri, 2023). The language we speak always determines who we are. As an identity of a tribe, if the owners of the language itself are reluctant to use the language, then none are willing to preserve it. If the number of its speakers is decreasing, it gradually becomes extinct. Thus, focusing on parents' perspective in choosing the language to speak with their children, this study aims to scrutinize the number of Elementary school students who speak Acehnese language at home. Later, the data are linked to several issues relating to bilingualism context. This study aims to fill this gap by:

1. Investigating the patterns of language use among Acehnese children at home and in school.
2. Analysing parental attitudes towards bilingualism and language maintenance.
3. Assessing the impact of socio-economic factors on language preference and proficiency.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for the preservation of the Acehnese language but also for contributing to global discussions on bilingualism, language shift, and cultural identity.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

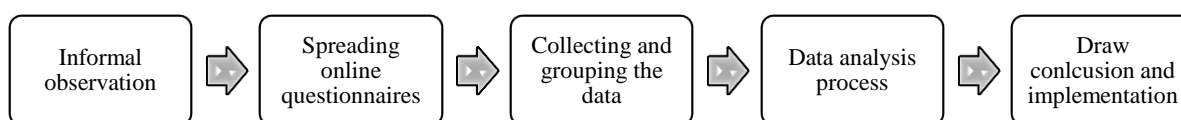


This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of language shift among Grade 4 students at MIT Darut Tahfidz Al-Ikhlās, which is one of the most prestigious elementary schools in Banda Aceh. The participants included 20 mothers, whose children are in grade 4, considering that the students at this grade have had adequate verbal proficiency. Focusing on the bilingual interplay between Acehese and Indonesian, the data were collected using two primary instruments: observations and questionnaires. Over one month, both structured and unstructured observations were conducted in daily life activity settings by paying attention to the interactions and communication between Acehese parents and their children. Structured observations targeted specific activities such as class participation and peer interactions, while unstructured observations provided a broader understanding of spontaneous language use. Field notes were meticulously recorded to document the frequency, context, and manner of language usage in both languages.

The questionnaires, consisting of 10 questions divided into three sections (language use, language attitudes, and perceptions of language shift) were administered in the classroom. The questionnaires were designed using the Google Form Application and were spread by sharing the G-Form link through the Parents' WhatsApp group of grade 4 students of MIT Darut Tahfidz Al-Ikhlās Banda Aceh. The questionnaire is recently regarded as a tranquil and portable data collection tool because it could be done online without the demand of conducting face-to-face meetings with the participants (Young, 2015). Moreover, it allows researchers to contact a large number of participants at a very low cost as they do not have to see each other (Kuphanga, 2024). Avoiding face-to-face interaction is not only less time-consuming but also allows participants to answer the questionnaires honestly and confidently as their identities are hidden (Roopa & Rani, 2012). Thus, the validity and reliability of the data are maintained. The questionnaires included both open-ended and close-ended questions to facilitate quantitative analysis and provide rich qualitative insights. Responses to close-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses were subjected to content analysis to identify common themes and insights into students' attitudes and perceptions.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed; informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured. The study was approved by the institutional review board of MIT Darut Tahfidz Al-Ikhlās Banda Aceh. Reliability was enhanced by piloting the observation schedule with a small group

before the main study, and validity was ensured through triangulation by comparing data from observations and questionnaires. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the language use patterns and the factors influencing language shift among Acehnese children in a bilingual educational context.



*Flow Chart 1: Methodology Step*

### 3.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Language Trend amongst Acehnese Parents

The observation revealed that it is hardly heard parents talking Acehnese with their children in the city of Banda Aceh. Passing by streets, parks, beaches, schools, shopping centers, and hospitals, the great majority of Acehnese parents used the Indonesian language to speak with their children. This phenomenon was proven by the response of the parents towards the questionnaire no.4. Being asked to choose the language that they used to speak with their children, 57,9 % of parents used the Indonesian language when talking with their kids, while 42,1% admitted that they mix both Indonesian language and Acehnese. Interestingly, none of the parents chose the Acehnese language as the communication tool with their children. Based on their response to questionnaire no.3, 21,1 % of the participants admitted using the Acehnese language as a medium of communication with their spouses. It is a paradoxical situation where the majority population in Aceh is Acehnese, but the minority of them speak its language.

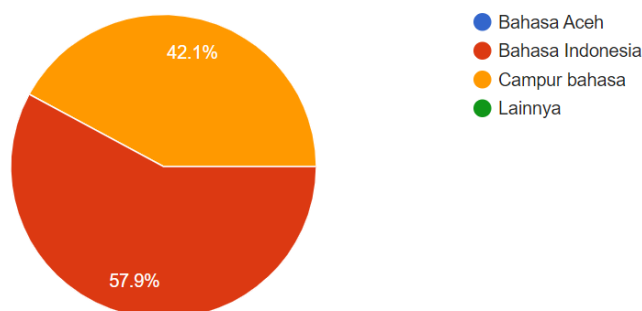


Figure 1. Communication tools between parents and children

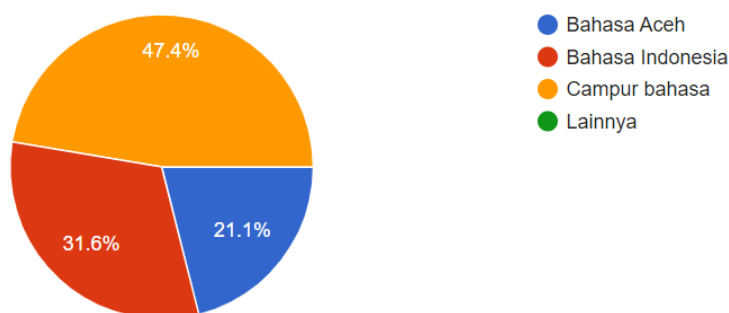


Figure 2. Communication tools between wives and husbands

### 3.2 Reasons for Leaving Acehnese Language

Since none of the participants used Acehnese as a single language when interacting with their kids, they were led to a question asking their perspectives about the effect on academic development if the children speak only Acehnese at home. The majority of the parents have an obvious agreement that their children will have trouble understanding lessons at school if they do not get used to the Indonesian language at home. They were convinced that children who speak only Acehnese at home will have lower self-confidence interacting at schools. Another interesting opinion is that one of the participants argued speaking only the Acehnese language with kids at home will later affect children's process of acquiring another language, and that the Acehnese accent will ruin the accent and fluency of the new language.

Being asked if there is a bad effect of talking only Acehnese language with children, one of the participants argued: "Yes. Because at school they tend to speak Indonesian so if they are not accustomed to Indonesian, it will be difficult for them to interact with other school members." This statement is an unfounded worry because our generation and our elder generation never spoke the Indonesian language with our parents and siblings at home, but then we did not find trouble understanding lessons at school, and we were fluent in both languages in our teens. So, why our youngsters should be worried about it?

### 3.3 Threat to Acehnese Language

The above phenomenon is an undeniable threat to the existence of the Acehnese language. When the number of its speakers is gradually decreasing, the language will be extinct at a time. Home is a real indicator of whether the ethnic language will survive in the future (Setiawan,

2015). The data tells the minimum exposure of the Acehnese language at home domain. Its use was below 25% which is only among husband and wife. Even though several parents confessed that they mixed both the Acehnese and Indonesian languages when talking with their kids, its percentage was below 50% which is a sad number.

### 3.4 Children's Innate Aptitude in Acquiring a New Language

The diagram below shows concrete proof that children do have an innate aptitude to acquire more than one language since they were born. Being asked whether their children have tendencies to master more than one language, 73,7% of the participants acknowledged a positive response towards the question.

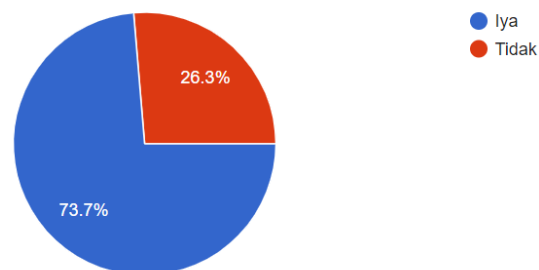


Figure 3. Children's tendency to acquire more than one language

One of our participants told her regret that if only her boy could speak Acehnese, he would have better verbal skills, especially when interacting with the eldest.

*"Because of my first experience of being a parent, I think speaking Indonesian makes it easier for me to talk to small children, especially in gentle matters. However, I also want my child to be able to speak Acehnese, but because I have predominantly used Indonesian with him since childhood, that has become his main language. Thank God, my second child, who is 5 years old, can speak Indonesian and Acehnese because we got used to it since childhood."*

## 4.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS



Research regarding infant bilingualism in Aceh had been conducted, it involved intense observation and interviews with a 1,5-year-old baby girl and her parents. The study revealed that the baby was exposed to both Acehnese and Indonesian languages equally, and she could speak both languages as well. Interestingly, the baby even could switch from one language to another depending on her interlocutors (Fajrinur, 2021). This finding is aligned with our data that told positive tendencies to early acquire another language beyond mother tongue. So, Acehnese children have innate capacities to be exposed to both Acehnese and Indonesian language at early ages. Thus, parents do not have to worry about their children's hardship in understanding lessons at school. More importantly, the Acehnese ancestor language is preserved by its descendants, which in turn will strengthen the identity of the Aceh people through the language being spoken. The language we speak expresses our identity which reflects the clues of our cultures (Alshehri, 2023). Supporting bilingualism not only aids in academic comprehension but also fosters a strong sense of cultural continuity and pride.

De Houwer promoted 2 settings for children's exposure to bilingualism. First, children may hear two languages from birth in what is known as a bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA). BFLA children have no chronologically second language but have two first languages: language A (LA) and language alpha ( $L\alpha$ ). These are typically both spoken to children at home. Second, children who are first raised with just a single language at home (language 1, L1) may start to regularly hear a second language (language 2, L2) at a later age, typically in a group setting outside the home, such as a daycare centre or a preschool. This is an early second language acquisition (ESLA). BFLA settings are about three times as common as ESLA settings where the L2 is a societal language (De Houwer, 2024). As it is suggested that BFLA setting is more familiar than that of ESLA, Acehnese parents should try to adopt the BFLA to lead their children into bilingual setting and for sure to preserve Acehnese language.

A study stated that the earlier children are exposed to two languages the more advantages they get (Rahayu, 2018). In addition to the BFLA term suggested by De Houwer above, people who learn two languages from birth are referred to as simultaneous bilinguals (Snape & Kupisch, 2017) in which they acquire both languages simultaneously from birth with equal exposure to the two languages. A huge advantage of being simultaneous bilinguals is they "tend to have better accents, more diversified vocabulary, higher grammatical proficiency, and greater skill in real-time language processing" (Rahayu, 2018). In her article, Rahayu suggested various methods that parents could adopt to promote early bilinguals to their



children; one of them is by applying a structured approach of “one person one language”. For example, mother speaks only Acehnese with their kids whilst father speaks only Indonesian language. By applying so, kids will have equal exposure as well as equal practice of using both languages. This moreover allows children to code-switch the language each time they interact with different people at home, as it is suggested that “young dual language learners have better executive functional abilities in switching tasks and inhibitory control than monolinguals” (Ruan, 2022). Correspondingly, a research regarding bilingualism context in the U.S indicated that bilingual infants were able to respond faster to a shift of learning condition than monolingual infants (Espinosa, 2015).

Another case study where a mother speaks Acehnese with her children since they were in her womb, but her husband often mixes both Acehnese and Indonesian language when talking to children. None of the children have troubles understanding Indonesian language. They acquire the language from their cousins, uncles and aunts, television, schools, and friends. The oldest and the middle one are now fluent in both Acehnese and Indonesian language. The four-year-old boy still has limited Indonesian words but could understand Indonesian language well.

In fact, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Millennial generations (*Beresfod Research.Pdf*, 2024) of Acehnese are all bilinguals in Indonesian and Acehnese languages. They were raised speaking Acehnese language and started being exposed to Indonesian language at primary schools. However, they keep talking Acehnese language at home domain or outside schools, thus they do not lose their mother tongue. Unfortunately, those mentioned generations who are parents of the Gen Z generations treated their children differently. They exposed their children too early into Indonesian language, and let it be the mother tongue of the children. Therefore, it is crucial to raise parents’ awareness of the possibility of the Acehnese language disappearing if its speakers diminish gradually.

The decline in the number of regional language speakers seems happening not only in Aceh. The similar situations in which Javanese parents in Surabaya seem do not pay much attention to the survival of their ancient language. “This can be seen from their view toward Javanese, also from the children's language proficiency in Javanese and its use in the home domain” (Setiawan, 2015). This is a miserable fact that the owner of the language refuse to speak the language. How dare a person want to admit his identity as a Javanese whilst he does not speak Javanese language? So, home as the very first media for children’s education should be a starting point in preserving the ethnic language. Speak your ancient language with parents,

children, and siblings, take it as a mother tongue and let other languages get in to you as secondary languages. You will find yourself as proud descendants of your ancestors.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that in the United States, hundreds of programs exist to revitalize indigenous languages (Haynes, 2010). They promote the ethnic languages to be used by future generation. A number of programs, such as bilingual classes in schools, informal gatherings and immersion programs in schools and camps were offered to support this campaign. These actions could be adopted by Acehnese educators and schools in order to preserve their ethnic language. For example, scheduling language use of school or boarding school students per week: Acehnese week, Indonesian week, English week and Arabic week, the students should only speak the determined language of each week in order to enhance their proficiency of every language. Otherwise, the identity of the Acehnese will be lost because of our neglect of the importance of preserving regional languages today.

Further research involving not only parents but also teachers is worth conducting to figure out both sides point of view regarding the issue of bilingualism context and the overuse of Indonesian language in Aceh. Thus, the combination of both perspectives and experiences is expecting to raise awareness of Acehnese parents to preserve regional language, and to make restrictions on the use of both Acehnese and Indonesian languages. Consequently, the children become fluent bilinguals in Acehnese and Indonesian language which are virtuous provisions.

This study investigates the dynamics of language shift among Acehnese children in early bilingual environments, aiming to elucidate patterns of language dominance and usage. Findings reveal that while Acehnese remains integral to familial and cultural contexts, Indonesian increasingly asserts itself in formal educational and societal spheres. This nuanced bilingual landscape underscores the complex interplay between linguistic proficiency, societal pressures, and cultural identity among Acehnese youth. Importantly, the study contributes new insights into the mechanisms of language maintenance and shift within minority language communities, shedding light on factors influencing language preference and proficiency trajectories. However, limitations include the study's reliance on a specific demographic sample, which may restrict the generalizability of findings to broader Acehnese populations. Methodological constraints, such as self-reporting and the static nature of cross-sectional data, also temper the study's comprehensive understanding of long-term language development. Nonetheless, the study's implications are significant, advocating for tailored educational policies that support bilingualism while preserving Acehnese cultural heritage. Furthermore, it calls for community-driven initiatives aimed at fostering intergenerational language

transmission and reinforcing cultural identity. These findings contribute not only to theoretical frameworks of bilingualism and language shift but also inform practical efforts to sustain linguistic diversity and cultural vitality within Acehnese society.

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