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Parental Involvement in Language-Delayed Young Children's English Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Global research has indicated that over half of children entering reception have language levels below expectations, a problem that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased cases of language delay. This has prompted parents to collaborate with educators to support their children's language development. This explorative case-based study, which was qualitative in nature, was intended to study how parents perceived language delay and the strategies they used at home in assisting their language-delayed children. Based on findings from the in-depth interviews, four major themes emerged surrounding the study's research questions: parents perceptions on 'language-delay', relationship between level of parental involvement and improvement of language proficiency, challenges faced in supporting English language acquisition among language-delayed children and successful strategies used by parents to teach English to their language-delayed young learners. On the theme strategies used by parents, it was found that Specific-Outcome Praise (SOP), Play-based

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Learning (PBL), Technology-Mediated Language Learning (TMLL), and creating a Language Rich Environment (LRE) contributed effectively towards children's language development. The findings of this study are crucial as these insights can guide educators, policymakers, and parents in developing targeted interventions and collaborative approaches to enhance early language acquisition among language-delayed young learners.

Keywords: Children; Language-Delay; Parents; English Language

1. Introduction

"Not every child is a mini orator in the making. For some, uttering even a word can feel like assembling a jigsaw puzzle!

-Gurdip Kaur Saminder Singh

Child development refers to the growth of physical, cognitive, psychological, and socio-emotional skills that lead to enhanced competence, autonomy, and independence[1]. The children's experiences during the early years, especially from prenatal development the age of 5 years, create a trajectory that extends across the lifespan. Unrecognized disabilities, harmful exposures, and neglectful experiences in early childhood enhance the risk of poor social, cognitive, and health outcomes. Growth discrepancies that are not diagnosed and intervened in at the early stages become increasingly difficult to reverse beyond early childhood. Hence, it is crucial for parents to understand children's developmental stages and the role they play in enhancing their children's growth and development[2, 3].

A child's life, from conception through the formative early years, represents a critical developmental phase. Various domains of growth, such as physical, social, emotional, and cognitive, serve as key components in this early journey[4]. Events and experiences occurring during these foundational days profoundly influence a child's subsequent development. Factors such as poverty, inadequate nutrition, unfavorable social conditions, parental influences, dietary deficiencies, chronic illnesses, lack of breastfeeding, improper feeding practices, and insufficient stimulation can hinder children from realizing their full growth potential[2, 4, 5].

Conversely, positive developments also play a crucial role. In numerous countries, early childhood education is vital in ensuring that children, including those with learning disabilities, receive high-quality learning experiences from an early age. This importance is underscored by the Convention on the Rights of the Child[6]. The objective is for most children to attain adequate functional abilities by the time they enter formal schooling, emphasizing that early years are the most significant phase in a child's developmental trajectory. In the case of Malaysia, just like any other country in the world, the teaching and learning at the early childhood has seen tremendous growth- from the establishment of more early childhood centres to cater the needs to provide quality early years education to the changes in curriculum to produce a more multiplicative generation and the increased involvement of community and parents to create a 'whole child'[7, 8]. One of the major emphases of children's development in Malaysia has always been on the importance of language development, specifically the English language, from an early age. This is parallel to various research studies that point out that language and communication skills underpin all other areas of learning and development in the early years[1, 9, 10].

As in many developing countries, the teaching of the English language in Malaysia was aggressive until the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 till early 2023. As put forward by Singh and Nagarajah[10], where once the teaching and learning of English was robust, with parents sending children to various learning centres and language intervention institutions from a very early age, the appearance of COVID-19 pandemic which brought in online learning, a rather new educational concept for early childhood education and one that was not favourable during the pandemic, caused children's English literacy level being disrupted immensely[11]. This caused major concerns not only to teachers but also to parents, both during and post=COVID-19, as more and more young children were being diagnosed with symptoms of speech and language delay[12–14].

The significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's speech and language development has led Malaysian parents to recognize the crucial role they play in fostering their children's language growth. With an evidenced decline in students' language proficiency, many parents have reassessed their responsibilities in supporting their

children's education at home[1, 10]. While these concerns underline the critical issue of language delays among young learners and emphasize the importance of parental involvement, research specifically focusing on parental engagement in language development in Malaysia remains limited. Furthermore, there is also a notable scarcity of studies addressing language delays in young learners in Malaysia.

With the above in mind, this study is a sequel to a continuous research on young children's English language development in Malaysia and parental involvement post-COVID-19. The first study was completed by Singh and Nagarajah[10], which focused on parents' roles in teaching English to primary school children at home, particularly after the impact of the pandemic. Embracing the fact from the earlier findings that there have been tremendous effects of COVID-19 on children's language development and limited research done on the area of language delay, this second study's main objective was to explore parental involvement in language-delayed young children's English Language acquisition.

The following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What is the parents' perception of 'language delay'?
2. How does the level of parental involvement relate to the improvement of language proficiency in young children with language delays?
3. What are the challenges parents face in supporting the English language acquisition of their language-delayed children?
4. What strategies were found successful by parents in teaching English to their language-delayed young learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Child Development

According to Kidsense[15], child development encompasses the physical, language, cognitive, and emotional transformations that occur from birth to the onset of adulthood. This progression involves a shift from reliance on caregivers to greater independence. Key influences on child development include genetic factors inherited from parents, experiences during prenatal life, environmental factors, and the child's capacity for learning (p. 1).

Child development is a complex and gradual process where children experience growth, learning, and maturation in physical, mental, and emotional aspects[3]. This developmental journey is divided into distinct stages. The first stage, infancy, lasts from birth to 24 months and is marked by swift physical growth. The next stage, early childhood (2-6 years), marks the development of motor skills, language, and cognitive capabilities. Middle childhood (6-11 years) is characterized by the acquisition of social-emotional and academic skills. Adolescence (11-18 years) is a period of identity exploration and preparation for adulthood. Each of these stages presents its own set of challenges and milestones. Gaining an understanding of these stages is crucial for effective parenting and education[3–5].

2.2. Factors that Influence Child Development

Child development unfolds gradually, driven by biologically determined characteristics and shaped by experiences[4, 5]. A child's health and development are influenced by various biological and environmental factors, including genetics, family dynamics, community conditions, and societal influences[1, 2]. Globally, over 250 million children under five in developing countries struggle to achieve their cognitive and social potential due to challenges such as poverty, poor health, inadequate nutrition, and insufficient care from parents or caregivers[16, 17]. This complex interplay of influences is described by the 'kaleidoscope model'[17]. Interactions can occur within single domains, such as behavior or social environment or transcend multiple domains. Changes in one factor can impact others, creating a complex interaction that plays a significant role in shaping a child's development both now and in the future.

Parenting and its Influence on Children's Development

Insufficient individualized care during early childhood adversely affects a child's health, development, personality, and cognitive abilities. The period from six months to six years is particularly critical for language and cognitive development. Children raised in less stimulating environments may experience hindered brain development, leading to cognitive, social, and behavioral delays[3, 5]. Regardless of whether they are cared for by parents, grandparents, or foster families, children require basic care, love, and attention to grow into well-adjusted individuals. Optimal development

occurs when families dedicate time, energy, and affection to their children through engaging activities such as play, reading, sports, and meaningful conversations. Conversely, neglectful parenting can have a profoundly negative impact on a child's development[16, 18].

Early in life, children undergo rapid growth and development, which is heavily influenced by the factors mentioned above. Children who have a good start in life will grow up to be well-developed adults, with better social, economic, physical, and cognitive outcomes, and they will live better for their families and communities.

2.3. Language Development Milestones in Early Childhood

Communication in infants initiates with the understanding that crying can elicit responses such as nourishment, comfort, and companionship. They also begin to distinguish significant sounds in their surroundings, such as their mother's or primary caregiver's voice. As they mature, babies gradually distinguish the speech sounds that constitute their language. Typically, by six months, most infants can identify the fundamental sounds of their native language[19]. Children exhibit variability in their speech and language development; however, they generally follow a natural sequence in acquiring language skills. A checklist of milestones outlining the typical progression of speech and language development in children up to five years old typically surrounds four main components, particularly phonetics and phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics[20, 21].

Speech and language development involves four main components, particularly phonetics and phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics. Phonetics and phonology are basically about learning to pronounce speech sounds, specifically understanding the rules about which sound sequences occur in a language. Semantics is related to studying vocabulary and understanding how concepts map onto words. Syntax and morphology, on the other hand, are about the rules for how to arrange words in sentences, and pragmatics is related to learning social rules for using language, including adapting your language for who you're talking to, taking turns to speak, and staying on topic. This also includes learning non-verbal communication, which includes facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice and how these interact with the words spoken[10, 19–23]. These milestones assist healthcare professionals assess a child's progress and determine if additional support is needed.

2.3.1. Language Delay in Young Learners During and Post-COVID-19

Occasionally, delays in language development may occur for various reasons, including exposure to more than one language, hearing loss, genetic disorders, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders and dysarthria, a problem with the muscles controlling speech. However, during and post-COVID-19, more and more young learners were diagnosed to have both a receptive and an expressive language problem[19, 24, 25]. The cause was solely due to the intense year of social distancing and isolation, which discouraged formal education and peer interaction during a crucial time frame in the life of a developing child[12]. More and more children are found to have language development issues related to both receptive and expressive language use. Young learners developed trouble understanding what others say (receptive language disorder) and faced even a greater problem on sharing their thoughts, ideas, and feelings (expressive language disorder). In almost all studies done on language development, young children after post-COVID-19 seem to have both a receptive and an expressive language problem[12, 19, 25, 26].

2.3.2. Language-Delay Diagnosis Post-COVID-19 in Malaysia

The enforced lockdown, according to Peters[27], also highly affected the already rising numbers of language development issues, especially among children with learning disabilities, as parents had no choice but to put their young learners through tele-therapies, meaning online speech therapies, which had very few success rates. Not only was the connection between the clinician and the child somehow lost, but parents were also not equipped to facilitate activities with their child. In addition, a study by Singh et al.[28] on the Implementation of tele-practice by Malaysian Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) during the COVID-19 pandemic found that the lack of knowledge, support, and training often led SLPs to have doubts about the effectiveness of tele-practice. To add to the already rising crisis among children with language delay, an alarming finding by a health data company known as Komodo Health discovered that speech delay cases among non-diagnosed children aged between 0

and 12 increased by 115 per cent in 2022 during the lockdown period. Where previously only nine children for every 100 speech assessments performed were diagnosed with language delay issues. Recent data showed an increase of 21 children for every 100 speech assessments [29]. As observed, the abrupt change in the environment due to COVID-19 removed young learners from familiar learning and growth settings, instead placing them in an environment that was less conducive to regression in skills like speech and language.

2.4. Vygotsky's Theory on Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO)

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is crucial in understanding how children with speech delays can enhance their language acquisition through parental support. Vygotsky [30] defined the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). ZPD represents the gap between a child's current abilities and their potential growth with the right assistance [31].

A child's willingness to learn plays a significant role in progressing through the ZPD. Vygotsky [30] emphasized that when a child is situated within the ZPD for a specific task, the right kind of support can provide the necessary encouragement to complete that task successfully. In cases where children have speech delay, parents must equally partner with teachers to enable the child to achieve appropriate language acquisition [32]. By engaging with their children while they are in the ZPD, parents can facilitate meaningful interactions that promote language development and help bridge the gap between where the child is and where they can potentially be. **Figure 1** briefly describes how parents scaffold a language-delayed child during their ZPD to improve their language acquisition.

3. Methodology

In view of the research aims and the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative methodology was adopted to understand parents' representations of language delay and the strategies they use in teaching English to their language-delayed young learners.

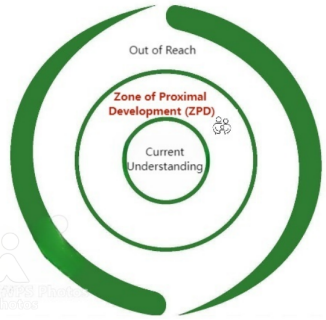

Figure 1. Parental influence during a child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

3.1. Participants

For the purposes of the present study, a purposeful sample was deemed appropriate [33–35]. The purposeful sampling provided the researcher with the exact population since the study participants needed to fulfil the following criteria:

i. to be a parent of a preschool-aged child;

ii. the child should be between the ages of 2 and 6 with language delayed issues and have an official diagnosis report from a paediatrician or child psychologist.

This sampling approach allowed the researchers to specifically target a population that met predefined inclusion criteria essential to the research objectives [33–35].

To broaden the reach and enhance the identification of eligible participants, the study also adopted a snowball sampling technique [34–36]. This method proved particularly valuable in accessing a relatively small and specific population. After initial participants were recruited based on the inclusion criteria, they were invited to refer other parents they knew who might also qualify and be interested in contributing to the study. This peer-referral approach not only increased participation but also strengthened community trust in the research process, as potential participants were introduced by someone they knew personally [36]. Through this method, a total of 26 parents were identified as possible participants. However, following a detailed and transparent explanation of the study's objectives, the nature of the interview process, ethical considerations, and participant rights (including confidentiality and voluntary participation), only 14 parents provided informed consent and agreed to take part in the interviews.

Having a relatively small sample size of 14 parents, however, restricts the generalization of the findings. While the insights gathered offer valuable depth and context, the limited number of participants may not fully represent the broader population of parents with children experiencing language delays. As a result, caution should be exercised when extending these findings to other settings or demographic groups without further research involving a more diverse and larger sample [35, 37].

A detailed demographic profile of these participants is presented in Section 4.0. To ensure the validity and reliability of the interview data, several measures were implemented. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing flexibility in probing for deeper insights while maintaining consistency across key thematic areas. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then cross-checked against the recordings to ensure transcription accuracy. To mitigate potential bias, several strategies were adopted. First, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal to document their personal assumptions and reflections throughout the research process, which helped them acknowledge and manage subjectivity. Second, triangulation was employed by comparing participant narratives with existing literature and relevant clinical documentation where available. Finally, member checking was conducted, where participants were given the opportunity to review the key findings derived from their interviews to confirm accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences. This step not only allowed them to verify their statements, a form known as 'member-checking' [37], but also served to validate the data [38].

3.2. Qualitative Data Collection Instrument

The interview guide consisted of seven questions, which were designed to answer the four research questions in this study. **Table 1** summarizes briefly the questions in the interview guide. The first two interview questions were solely on the parents and the child's demographic, education and speech-delay diagnosis details. Question 3 was designed to capture parents' understanding of the term language delay, whereas Question 4 discussed the level of parental involvement, while Question 5 mainly focused on the challenges parents faced in supporting English language acquisition. Lastly, questions 6 and 7 probed into the strategies parents used when teaching English Language to their language-delayed young learners and on improvements noticed.

Table 1. Description for Each Question in the Interview Guide.

Question	Description
Question 1	Parents' and child's demographic
Question 2	Child's education details and language-delay diagnosis
Question 3	Parents perceptions on 'speech-delay'
Question 4	The level of parental involvement
Question 5	Challenges faced in supporting English language acquisition
Question 6	Strategies used when teaching English Language
Question 7	Improvements noticed based on strategies applied

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this study involved conducting in-depth interviews with parents, a method particularly suited for gathering rich, nuanced insights into their thoughts and behaviors [37]. As suggested by Mero-Jaffe [39] on aspect of ethics in qualitative research, to ensure participants' comfort and openness, interviews were scheduled at times and locations of their choosing. Each session lasted between 25 and 35 minutes and was audio recorded with the interviewees' prior consent.

This study employed thematic analysis as the primary analytical framework, following the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke [40]. Thematic analysis is a structured method that facilitates a thorough understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives [41]. As outlined by Braun and Clarke [40], this method combines both inductive and deductive techniques, enhancing analytical rigor [42]. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following a six-phase framework, which involved:

1. familiarization with the data through repeated read-

ings,

2. generating initial codes across the entire data set,
3. searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes,
4. reviewing themes to ensure coherence and alignment with the coded extracts and the entire dataset,
5. defining and naming themes, and
6. producing the final report.

Throughout the analysis process, a second researcher independently reviewed a subset of transcripts to compare interpretations and ensure inter-coder reliability. The researchers primarily adopted an inductive approach, engaging in iterative and multi-directional readings of the transcripts to identify codes that emerged organically from the data. Concurrently, researchers employed a deductive lens, informed by the study's research objectives and questions, to deepen the analysis. This dual approach was particularly evident during the coding phase, where the study identified initial themes and sub-themes based on the codes. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion and consensus [43, 44].

After identifying the codes, researchers created a comprehensive chart that delineated the themes, sub-themes, and units of meaning, which underwent several rounds of revision. The analysis was collaboratively conducted by the researchers. Initially, each researcher analyzed the data independently, following the procedures. In the subsequent phase, all researchers compared the individual findings, which led to adjustments and the creation of a final thematic chart, as illustrated in **Figure 2**. This collaborative strategy, involving multiple researchers analyzing the same data, aligns with [42, 45] concept of 'investigator triangulation,' which enhances the validity of the analysis and findings.

Figure 2. Process of data analysis using thematic analysis through inductive and deductive techniques.

3.4. Reliability and Validity of Qualitative Data

In qualitative studies, the researcher is concerned with accuracy, comprehensiveness of data, and a fit between recorded data and what occurred in the setting under study [43]. Based on these perspectives, reliability in this study was ensured by confirming that the data analysis was systematic, sequential, verifiable, and continuous [46]. A careful transcription of the interview, member checking of the verbatim transcript and the coding process to check consistency further deposited the reliability of the data. Validity, as one of the strengths of qualitative research, is based on trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility [47]. Validity procedures for this study were assured by the researcher confirming that the sample befitted its purpose through iterative feedback. At the conclusion of the interviews, member checking was used. This technique allowed the parents an opportunity to assess intentions, correct errors, and volunteer additional information. Merriam [34] and Creswell [44] stated that using member checking is a crucial technique for establishing validity and

credibility.

4. Findings and Discussion

To gain a deeper understanding of parental involvement in teaching English to young learners with language delay, fourteen interviews were conducted with preschool children's parents from the states of Perak, Selangor, and Penang. A demographic illustration and explanation are provided below regarding the participants involved in this study. For this study, all parents were given a pseudonym based on their state and interview session, as illustrated in **Table 2**.

Parents were also interviewed regarding their child's age and the level of preschool, as indicated in **Table 3**. Pre-K is referred to as a classroom for children aged 3 and below, Pre-K1 indicates a classroom for 4-year-olds, Pre-K2 indicates a classroom for 5-year-olds, whereas Pre-K3 is for children aged 6.

Table 2. Parent's pseudonym, geographical data and children's age and level at preschool.

Parents' Pseudonym	Geograhical Data	Child's Age	Level at Preschool
PT1	Perak	4	Pre-K1
PT2	Perak	4	Pre-K1
PT3	Perak	5	Pre-K1
PT4	Perak	6	Pre-K1
PT5	Perak	7	Pre-K3
PT6	Selangor	4	Pre-K
PT7	Selangor	4	Pre-K
PT8	Selangor	4	Pre-K1
PT9	Selangor	7	Pre-K3
PT10	Selangor	5	Pre-K2
PT11	Penang	5	Pre-K1
PT12	Penang	5	Pre-K
PT13	Penang	7	Pre-K2
PT14	Penang	6	Pre-K2

Table 3. Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Description
Theme 1	Parents perceptions on 'language-delay'
Theme 2	Relationship between level of parental involvement and improvement of language proficiency
Theme 3	Challenges faced in supporting English language acquisition among language-delayed children
	Sub-theme 1: Knowledge of language development strategies
	Sub-theme 2: Emotional and psychological stress
	Sub-Theme 3: Bilingual and multilingual challenges
Theme 4	Successful strategies in teaching English-to language-delayed young learners
	Sub-theme 1: Specific-Outcome Praise (SOP)
	Sub-theme 2: Play-based Learning (PBL)
	Sub-Theme 3: Technology-Mediated Language Learning (TMLL)
	Sub-theme 4: Language Rich Environment (LRE)

In general, children's placement in Malaysian classrooms is age-specific. For example, if the child is five years old, the child should be placed with children of the same age, regardless of their ability. However, from the interviews conducted, there were cases where some children were placed at lower levels despite the age-specific requirement. One of the main reasons cited by parents was that the school could not place the child at the exact age level because the child had very little comprehension of the English language.

> *"My child is 6 years old, but he can't speak at all and hardly understood what was being taught in class. After consultation with the child psychologist, we were advised to shift my child into preschool aged 4 classroom to be able to start speaking and pick up learning."*
>
> *PT4*

Another parent, a mother of a five-year-old child, mentioned that although the school counselor had advised placing her child at a lower level, she was reluctant, as she felt she could help her child at home with appropriate guidance given by the school.

> *"I was advised by the school counselor to place my child in preschool for aged 3 children. That's two years behind! I refused and I am now trying to help my child build the language at home with teacher's guide."*
>
> *PT10*

Data from the fourteen interviews were then analyzed using Thematic Analysis procedures[40], which produced four major themes and sub-themes as summarized in **Table 3**.

The summary of the findings, as shown above, will be further discussed and aligned with the research questions of this study.

Theme 1: Parents' Perception on 'Language-Delay'

Throughout the interviews conducted, data (**Table 4**) shows that the majority of parents of language-delayed children (85.7%) experienced a range of emotions, including guilty (50%), frustrated (33%), and uncertain (17%).

Table 4. Summary of parents' perception on 'language-delay.

Parents' Perception	Number of Parents	Percentage (%)
Having guilt conscience	6	50
Feeling frustrated	4	33
Uncertainty on managing the situation	2	17
Relaxed approach	2	14

> *"I feel extremely guilty most of the time because I feel that I did not spend time at all to converse with my child in English. And the consequence…my son even though 7 years old is in 3 years old classroom…..because he cant speak a single word!"*
>
> *PT12*

The findings above coincide with the findings of Duval[12], Kyvrakidou et al.[13], Uğraş et al.[14], Choi et al.[25], Sato et al.[26], and Zubrick et al.[48] stating that parents feel guilt, believing that their child's delay is due to insufficient interaction or stimulation at home.

> *"I am so very uncertain on what my child is going to become. Will he ever succeed into year 1 in primary. If so, will he be able to have greater difficulty in English language?"*
>
> *PT4*

However, two parents (14.3%) expressed a more relaxed approach, viewing language delay as a temporary phase rather than a serious issue.

> *"Nah, I think this is temporary. Also because Covid-19, my babygirl stopped schooling. But I am sure she will catch up now since I have taken the proper actions."*
>
> *PT14*

> *"I know, with my support, my son can do it. Just have to focus. That's all."*
>
> *PT6*

Although at one point this belief can be seen as a parents' way of reducing unnecessary stress, if not managed well, it can also contribute to a delay in seeking professional support.

Theme 2: Relationship Between Level of Parental Involvement and Improvement of Language Proficiency

Parental involvement, as put forward by Singh et al.[8] and Epstein[49], is a critical factor in a child's development, particularly for children experiencing developmental delays[3, 50]. In terms of language-delayed development and parental involvement, various research have also indicated that children whose parents engage in frequent, language-rich interactions show significant progress in communication skills compared to those with minimal parental involvement[10, 51–53]. The findings of this study which explored the relation between the level of parental involvement and the improvement in language proficiency among preschool children with language delays, similarly found that all parents (100%) agree that parents who actively engage in language-rich interactions provide opportunities to their children for greater progress in their communication skills compared to those with minimal parental involvement. These findings

align closely with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)[3, 30]. The consensus among parents reinforces the notion that learning is socially mediated and that the adult's role is crucial in supporting the child to bridge the gap between current and potential developmental levels. Therefore, the improvement in language proficiency observed in children with greater parental involvement is not only expected but theoretically grounded in the ZPD framework, which emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning and guided participation in early childhood development.

However, an important finding emerged about the quality of interaction and its impact, which requires further study. Although, as stated above, findings indicated a strong positive relation between the level of parental involvement and the rate of language development in language-delayed preschoolers, the quality of interaction was equally important. Parents (57%) observed that their children exhibited significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition, sentence formation, and overall expressive language skills, only after they had provided the appropriate interventions, which was only probable due to their participation in workshops and training on teaching language to special needs children.

> *'Initially, my involvement was not very effective. But after I learned how to help, and use the right technique to help, I can see so much improvement.'*
>
> *PT8*

A few (43%) however, although conveyed the positive impact of interaction towards building language among their language delayed children, felt that they could have done better if they knew the appropriate techniques to provide highest possible support for language improvement, which ultimately brings this study into the discussion of theme 3.

Theme 3: Challenges Parents Faced in Supporting English Language Acquisition Among Language-Delayed Children

Language acquisition has long been recognised as a complex process, and it becomes even more challenging for children experiencing language delays. Although early intervention through parental involvement is one of the well-recognized pattern in facilitating language development, parents often confront barriers that obstruct their ability to provide optimal support[1, 54].Data analysis from this study developed three major challenges faced by parents, which are discussed in the sub-themes below.

Sub-Theme 3.1: Knowledge of Language Development Strategies

One of the most significant challenges conveyed by parents was the lack of understanding on effective strategies to assist their child's language development. More than half of the participants (64.3%) reported elements of struggle to differentiate between the various atypical language development patterns. This finding is similar to Singh and Nagarajah[10] and Hoff[55] and further denotes that this can lead to delays in seeking professional support when required. Just as the findings in this study, a study by Roberts and Kaiser[22] has also pointed out that most parents lack knowledge about language stimulation techniques such as interactive reading and play-based communication.

In addition, due to the lack of knowledge on strategies to assist children at home, many parents in this study often felt unprepared to support their child's linguistic growth, which resulted in them forming feelings of frustration and helplessness, further impacting their ability to engage in meaningful language interactions with their child.

Sub-theme 3.2: Emotional and Psychological Stress

Due to a lack of knowledge on how to help language-delayed children at home, many parents reported that caring for a language-delayed child can be emotionally and psychologically taxing. Parents reported having high levels of stress as they felt burdened by balancing their efforts to ensure appropriate therapy sessions, school accommodations, and home-based language interventions. Tamis-LeMonda et al.[56] in a study on parent–child interactions, in addition to emphasizing that quality and consistency of parental engagement significantly influence children's language acquisition, they also acknowledged that parents often feel ill-equipped and unsupported in fulfilling these roles. This emotional strain is compounded by limited access to professional guidance, societal stigma, and a lack of inclusive resources, which can leave parents feeling isolated and overwhelmed[27, 57].

Additionally, parallel to the findings of Leonard[58], this study also reported that some parents expressed guilt, believing that their child's language delay is a result of inadequate parental input. The pressure to help their child succeed academically and socially can cause anxiety, which in turn

affects the quality and frequency of language interactions. Studies suggest that high parental stress levels are correlated with decreased engagement in language-building activities, as parents may feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to best support their child's development [59].

Sub-Theme 3.3: Bilingual and Multilingual Challenges

As many of the parents in this study were not native speakers of English, they responded having difficulties in deciding which language to prioritize when supporting their child's language development. Parents conveyed a lot of uncertainty about whether speaking multiple languages at home might further delay English language acquisition, leading some to limit their child's exposure to their native language. The findings of this study are similar to those of De Houwer [60] and Genesee et al. [61], in which it was found that many multilingual parents experience confusion and anxiety over language choices, often fearing that the use of multiple languages might hinder rather than support their child's communicative abilities. Genesee et al. [61] emphasized that such concerns are often based on misconceptions, as research has shown that bilingual exposure does not cause language delays and may, in fact, support cognitive flexibility and long-term linguistic competence. Despite this, without proper guidance, many parents opt for English-only communication, inadvertently weakening the child's cultural ties and reducing opportunities for rich language interactions in the home environment. In addition, this study also found that parents get confused over the conflicting advice they receive from professionals, educators, and community members on not using multiple languages, which has further created inconsistency in language support strategies at home.

Research on bilingualism and second language learning, however, suggests that bilingualism does not inherently cause language delays and that maintaining a child's home language can strengthen overall linguistic and cognitive skills [61].

Theme 4: Successful Strategies in Teaching English to Language-Delayed Young Learners

The data analysis identified several ideas which have been coded into four sub-themes detailing the strategies parents use at home in teaching English to their language-delayed young children. These strategies have been categorized as Specific-Outcome Praise (SOP), Play-Based Learning (PBL), Technology-Mediated Language Learning (TMLL), and Language-Rich Environment (LRE). Each of these approaches plays a unique role in fostering language development, ensuring that children receive meaningful and consistent exposure to English in ways that align with their developmental needs.

Sub-Theme 4.1: Specific-Outcome Praise (SOP)

One of the most effective strategies parents identified in supporting their child's language acquisition was the use of Specific-Outcome Praise (SOP). Unlike general praise such as "Good job!", SOP involves providing explicit, descriptive feedback that reinforces language use, such as "I love how you said 'blue car' so clearly!"

> *"From some of the training that I have attended, we were told to give specific praise that repeats certain words to emphasize the words the child has spoken. This according to the specialist enhances language."*
>
> *PT13*

Similarly, past research on reinforcement and persistence in communication [62] has also suggested that when praise is specific and directly tied to a child's verbal attempts, it reinforces learning and increases motivation to engage in further language production.

Additionally, parents noted that this approach helped build their child's confidence, making them more willing to experiment with new words and phrases.

> *"My son actually gets more motivated when I use praises and repeat what ever words he has spoken. He then tries to add few more or ask me to add and he then repeats them."*
>
> *PT1*

Recent studies have highlighted that children with language delays often experience frustration in communication. Still, when they receive immediate and specific praise, they are more likely to persist in their efforts to communicate [62]. The effectiveness of SOP is particularly evident in structured home-learning activities, where parents consciously use praise to highlight progress, leading to incremental improvements in their child's verbal expression.

Sub-Theme 4.2: Play-Based Learning (PBL)

Findings also generated that a significant number of parents (85.7%) incorporated Play-Based Learning (PBL) as

a strategy to teach English to their language-delayed children. Some of the PBL used include storytelling, role-playing, and interactive games, which, according to parents, provided an engaging and low-pressure environment for children to develop their language skills.

Parents reported that structured play sessions, such as pretend play involving real-life scenarios, such as grocery shopping or cooking, helped children expand their vocabulary and improve sentence formation.

> *"I used play to teach language to my child such as role-play. She really enjoys and learns a few new words every time."*
>
> *PT7*

> *"My son likes role-play in a fun way. He feels like he is really doing it and tries to use the language."*
>
> *PT2*

Research has shown that language acquisition is more effective when children are actively engaged in meaningful and enjoyable activities [1, 63].

> *"Play-dough is an activity I can relate to when teaching language to my kids."*
>
> *PT5*

Parallel to past studies, the findings of this research also found that the social interaction embedded in play helps to enhance conversational turn-taking and pragmatic language use [7, 10, 32, 63]. Particularly, parents reported that sensory-based play activities, such as using play-dough while naming colors and shapes, were identified as effective in reinforcing language comprehension and production. The findings align with prior research emphasizing that play is an essential tool for natural language learning, especially for children with developmental language delays [7, 56, 64].

Sub-theme 4.3: Technology-Mediated Language Learning (TMLL)

Another prominent strategy identified in the data was the use of Technology-Mediated Language Learning (TMLL). Parents utilized various digital tools, including educational apps, interactive videos, and AI-powered language games, to support their child's English learning, which parallels past studies that digital interventions can significantly enhance language development by providing multimodal learning experiences that cater to different sensory needs [41, 65, 66]. Applications such as Endless Alphabet, Khan Academy Kids, and Lingokids provided interactive vocabulary games, phonics activities, and storytelling sessions.

In addition, the data also showed that several parents found certain applications, such as speech-to-text tools, digital storytelling platforms, and AI-based pronunciation software, to be helpful for children's articulation and word recognition. AI-powered platforms such as Duolingo ABC and Speech Blubs were cited as instrumental in promoting word recognition, phonological awareness, and pronunciation accuracy. Additionally, video-based learning, particularly animated storybooks with subtitles, was also found to improve word retention and listening comprehension, aligning with the findings of Hirsh-Pasek et al. [66] on the use of apps to enhance education. These apps employ gamification techniques to maintain engagement and reinforce repetition through visually stimulating and auditory-rich content. For instance, Endless Alphabet uses animated monsters to act out vocabulary words, which parents noted as particularly effective in helping children remember definitions and correct spelling. Speech Blubs, which uses voice-activated mirroring and speech-recognition software, enables children to practice articulating words and receive immediate feedback, fostering greater self-correction and confidence.

Findings also found that parents frequently used Google's Read Along app as they stated it provides real-time reading assistance and uses speech recognition to offer encouragement and correction, highlighted as beneficial for children with emerging literacy skills.

Digital storytelling platforms such as Epic!, Storybird, ChatterPix Kids, and FarFaria were also reported to be highly effective. These applications offered a vast library of animated storybooks, many with embedded subtitles and narration, which promote dual-channel learning, engaging both visual and auditory pathways. Animated storybooks with subtitles were found to enhance word retention, sight vocabulary, and listening comprehension, corroborating the findings of Hirsh-Pasek et al. [66], who demonstrated that video-based literacy tools improve emergent reading outcomes in early learners.

Furthermore, speech-to-text applications such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking and the built-in Google Voice Typing tool were mentioned as supportive aids for children

with articulation disorders. Parents observed that these tools helped children recognize the connection between spoken and written language, reinforcing phoneme-grapheme correspondence.

This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the ZPD framework [30], which posits that children learn most effectively when supported by a more knowledgeable other. The data thus reinforce existing research advocating for scaffolded digital learning, where parent-child interaction during technology use facilitates deeper processing, retention, and application of language skills.

However, parents also highlighted the need for active mediation and supervision when using technology. Unstructured screen time was not as effective in promoting language acquisition, whereas guided engagement, where parents interacted with their child while using the technology, led to greater learning outcomes. These findings reinforce existing research that stresses the importance.

Sub-theme 4.4: Language Rich Environment (LRE)

The creation of a Language-Rich Environment (LRE) was another key strategy employed by parents. This approach involved immersing the child in a setting filled with diverse linguistic inputs, such as conversations, labelled objects, music, and books. Studies have consistently shown that children with language delays benefit significantly from increased exposure to spoken and written language in their daily environment [25, 55, 63]. Parents implemented LRE in various ways, as shown in the data curation in **Table 5**.

Research confirms that the quality and quantity of language exposure in a child's environment play a crucial role in their linguistic development [2, 21, 67]. Additionally, the presence of print-rich materials, such as flashcards, posters, and visual schedules, was found to be beneficial in reinforcing language concepts. Parents who consistently engaged their children in verbal interactions rather than relying solely on corrective feedback observed more spontaneous language use and improved conversational skills over time [1, 9, 20, 68].

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study revealed that the majority of parents experience a range of emotions dealing with their language-delayed children. Although a positive relation between the level of parental involvement and improvements in language acquisition was found, the quality of intervention was questionable. Parents who lacked training expressed concerns about the quality of language intervention at home, in addition to facing daily emotional and psychological stress when dealing with bilingual and multilingual contexts. The findings from this study also underscore the importance of using diverse, evidence-based strategies to support English language acquisition among language-delayed young learners. The four key strategies identified were Specific-Outcome Praise (SOP), Play-Based Learning (PBL), Technology-Mediated Language Learning

Table 5. Language-Rich Environment (LRE) implementation at home.

LRE Method	Sample Statements	Percentage(%)
Labelling household items to reinforce vocabulary recognition	- stick words on items - label items they use everyday - paste spelling of items	71
Using descriptive talk to narrate daily activities	- tell story on activity - talk on things happen	85
Playing background audio of rhymes and songs to familiarize children with phonetic patterns.	- singing songs using YouTube - dance along songs - do rhymes using music	79
Engaging in interactive reading, where children were encouraged to ask and answer questions while reading books.	- use audio reader to read aloud - ask questions after every few sentences - match pictures after reading using flashcards - play interactive quiz after reading	92

(TMLL), and Language-Rich Environment (LRE), which offer practical and effective approaches for parents to implement at home. While SOP encourages persistence and confidence, PBL fosters natural language development through interactive and engaging experiences. TMLL leverages digital resources to enhance learning, and LRE ensures consistent exposure to language-rich interactions. However, the success of these strategies is contingent upon consistent parental engagement, structured implementation, and individualized support tailored to the child's needs. Moving forward, it is crucial for educators, therapists, and policymakers to support parents by providing training, resources, and community networks to enhance their ability to implement these strategies effectively. By fostering a collaborative approach between parents and educators, children with language delays can receive the best possible foundation for successful language acquisition.

6. Implications and Future Research

This study provided critical insights into the disposition of parental involvement in the English language development of preschool children with language delays in Malaysia. From a theoretical perspective, this research advances the sociocultural understanding of language acquisition by demonstrating how cultural perceptions of delay, coupled with bilingual and multilingual dynamics, influence parental decision-making and instructional behaviour. It extends Vygotskian constructs of mediated learning and Epstein's framework on parental involvement by showing how emotional, linguistic, and technological resources interplay in diverse, real-world contexts. As for practical implications, the findings urge educators, policymakers, and clinicians to view parents not merely as auxiliary supporters but as co-educators in a collaborative model of intervention. Structured training modules, culturally sensitive counselling, and school-based partnerships should be developed to equip parents with pedagogical tools and emotional support systems. Public policies should also prioritize inclusive early childhood programs that address the unique needs of language-delayed children within multilingual societies. Overall, this study reaffirms the irreplaceable role of parents in early language intervention and provides a holistic framework for enhancing English language proficiency among young learners with developmental delays. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of parent-led interventions and expand to include diverse linguistic communities across Southeast Asia.

Author Contributions

G.K.S.S. is the main author of this study and has contributed rigorous analysing, curation and writing. The following are author's and co-authors' contributions in specific: Conceptualization, G.K.S.S.; methodology, G.K.S.S.; formal analysis, F.N.A.Y., R.D.R.S. and V.J.; resources, G.K.S.S., M.K. and R.R.; data curation, G.K.S.S., M.K. and R.D.R.S.; writing first draft, G.K.S.S., V.J. and F.N.A.Y.; writing final version G.K.S.S.; writing for publication, G.K.S.S., and M.K.; corresponding, G.K.S.S.; corrections for publication, G.K.S.S., F.N.A.Y. and M.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the research forms part of an ongoing longitudinal study that had already obtained full ethical clearance from the relevant institutional review board at the initial stage. As the present study involved minimal risk to participants, focused solely on collecting non-sensitive interview data, and did not introduce any new procedures or interventions beyond what was approved in the initial protocol, additional ethical review was deemed unnecessary. Informed consent was obtained from all participating parents, and strict confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process in accordance with the ethical guidelines established at the start of the longitudinal project.

Informed Consent Statement

All consent forms were duly obtained and are securely maintained by the study's committee. Written informed consent was also obtained from the parents for the publication of this paper.

Data Availability Statement

All data are maintained in strict confidence and are the exclusive property of the researcher and the respective parents, with no unauthorized access or dissemination permitted.

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Confict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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