

Research Article

Parents' Language Beliefs and Attitudes toward the Indonesian Language in Transnational Families

¹Yuliana Angreini Syafruddin, *¹Marisa Yoestara, ¹Putri Nurul A'la

¹Universitas Syiah Kuala, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: marisayoestara@usk.ac.id

Submitted: 01/03/2025

Revised: 06/05/2025

Accepted: 18/05/2025

How to cite this article: Syafruddin, Y.A., Yoestara, M., & A'la, P.N. (2025). Parents' language beliefs and attitudes toward the Indonesian language in transnational families. *IJELR: International Journal of Education, Language, and Religion*, 7 (1), pp. 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.35308/ijelr.v7i1.11619>

Abstract

Parents' language beliefs and attitudes play a significant role in shaping language practices at home. This descriptive qualitative study focuses on the families' perspectives on multilingualism and their views on the necessity of learning the Indonesian language in order to find out parents' beliefs and attitudes toward Indonesian language. In collecting the data, this study used semi-structured interviews with 11 Indonesian-Australian families in Melbourne. The collected data were subsequently analyzed thematically using NVivo software, allowing for the identification of key patterns in parental beliefs and attitudes in the families. The findings indicate that all parents support multilingualism, recognizing its cognitive benefits, economic advantages, and the influence of their own multilingual experiences. However, variations exist regarding the inclusion of the Indonesian language in their children's multilingual repertoire. While eight families emphasized the importance of learning Indonesian to maintain family bonds and cultural heritage, three families perceived it as unnecessary due to their children's primary identity as Australian citizens, infrequent visits to Indonesia, and the limited global utility of the language. These findings suggest that while multilingualism is believed to be widely valued, parental attitudes toward specific languages are influenced by their personal experiences, perceived utility, and cultural connections. Further research into how these beliefs translate into actual language practices at home would provide deeper insights into family language management.

Keywords

Language beliefs, multilingualism, Indonesian language, parental attitudes

Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's cognitive development (Roy & Swargiary, 2024), cultural identity (Legarski, 2024), as well as social integration. This suggests that learning language, especially more than one language, will allow language learner to expand their cognitive



abilities. Besides, language is also related to culture, in which it shows the identity of the speakers, and at the same it will impact the way people interact with each other in their lives. In multilingual families, parents often hold strong beliefs about the importance of raising their children with multiple languages, yet the specific ways in which these beliefs shape multilingual practices remain underexplored. This study addresses the need to better understand the role of parental beliefs in fostering multilingualism within the family context. It is important because multilingual practices have been shown to promote cultural awareness, enhance academic and creative development, and support adaptation to diverse environments (Diaconu, 2022).

Several other recent studies on multilingualism have further underscored its cognitive, social, and economic benefits. Studies by Bialystok (2017) as well as Kroll and Dussias (2018) indicate that multilingual individuals exhibit enhanced executive functioning and problem-solving skills due to constant language switching. Similarly, research by De Houwer (2020) highlights the positive social and cultural implications of multilingualism, particularly in immigrant and multicultural settings. However, while these studies affirm the advantages of multilingualism, highlighting the cognitive and socio-economic benefits of multilingualism, they do not specifically address parental decision-making regarding which languages to prioritize for their children in multilingual households.

Some other studies have also focused on parental attitudes toward multilingualism in different cultural contexts. King and Fogle (2017) examine the role of parental beliefs in shaping children's bilingual development in the United States, while Curdt-Christiansen (2018) explores family language policies in European and Asian households. These studies found that parental attitudes are influenced by factors such as social mobility, cultural identity, and economic opportunities. However, they do not sufficiently examine how parents decide which specific languages should be included in their children's multilingual repertoire, particularly in cases where one language is associated with cultural heritage but has limited global utility.

While previous studies have thoroughly examined the benefits of multilingualism and parental attitudes toward bilingual development, they have not sufficiently addressed the selective prioritization of certain languages in multilingual households. Hence, there remains a gap in understanding how multilingual families navigate the balance between cultural heritage and practical language utility. Moreover, existing studies primarily focus on bilingualism rather than multilingualism, leaving room for further investigation into families where more than two languages are spoken. Most of the research on bilingual families explores parental attitudes in broad cultural contexts without detailing how specific languages are chosen or omitted in multilingual families. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating how Indonesian-speaking families in an English-dominant environment decide on the necessity of teaching the Indonesian language to their children. By doing so, it challenges the assumption that multilingualism inherently includes all heritage languages and extends the discussion on how language choices are shaped by identity, utility, and cultural relevance.

Based on the identified research gap, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How do parental language beliefs and attitudes influence the inclusion or exclusion of the Indonesian language in multilingual households? The objectives of this research are: (1) to examine the parents' beliefs regarding multilingualism, and (2) to analyze how these attitudes are reflected in actual language practices at home. The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the selective prioritization of languages within multilingual households, particularly the role of cultural and identity-based factors in determining language learning choices. Unlike previous studies that broadly discuss multilingualism, this research provides a detailed investigation into how language preferences are negotiated within families, offering a deeper understanding of the sociocultural and cognitive dynamics of language acquisition in multilingual environments. Furthermore, this study builds upon and extends the work of King & Fogle (2017) and Curdt-Christiansen (2018) by analyzing not just the attitudes of parents but also how these attitudes translate into concrete family language policies. It critically examines the role



of cultural background and personal experiences in language transmission, offering a nuanced perspective on the intersection between multilingualism and heritage language retention.

Method

Study Design

This study was descriptive qualitative in nature, allowing for an in-depth exploration of transnational parental beliefs and attitudes about language practices in multilingual families in Melbourne, Australia. By focusing on language attitudes and beliefs within the family context, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of multilingual upbringing in transnational Australian-Indonesian families.

Sample Population

The research participants consisted of 11 Australian-Indonesian families residing in the Melbourne area who are classified as *transnational* due to their sustained familial, cultural, and linguistic connections across national borders. In these families, at least one parent is of Indonesian origin and maintains regular contact—either through visits, communication, or cultural practices—with extended family members in Indonesia. The selection of participants was based on judgment sampling rather than random sampling, ensuring the inclusion of families with relevant linguistic and cultural configurations. The Indonesian spouses in these families came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Acehnese, Sundanese, Javanese, Sumatran, and Minahasan ethnicities. These families have children of preschool and school age, with parental ages ranging from 30 to 50 years. Purposive sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) was employed to ensure that participants shared similar characteristics, allowing for the identification of valid patterns in language practices across families.

A total of 22 participants (11 couples) participated in the study. Among them, seven families comprised an Indonesian mother and an Australian father, while four families consisted of an Indonesian father and an Australian mother. While some Australian spouses spoke Indonesian or even local languages, such as Minahasa and Padangnese, others are monolingual English speakers. The linguistic diversity within the sample provided a robust foundation for analyzing parental beliefs and attitudes toward the Indonesian language.

All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study before data collection began. They were assured of their voluntary participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant through a written consent form, which outlined the scope of the research, the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities, and the secure storage of all data collected. This ethical procedure was designed to ensure transparency and protect the participants' privacy throughout the research process.

Data Collection Techniques and Research Instrument

Data for this research were collected using semi-structured interviews. This interview format was developed based on the Family Language Planning (FLP) framework. This Family language planning (FLP) is considered appropriate because the framework was developed based on the home context language practice (Curd-Christiansen, 2009), exploring language ideologies or beliefs, language practices, and language management strategies (Spolsky, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their language beliefs and attitudes while ensuring that key themes were systematically explored. The interviews focused on several core areas, including parents' general beliefs about multilingualism, their attitudes toward specific languages (especially the Indonesian language), their motivations for including or excluding certain languages in the home environment, and the strategies they used to manage language use within the family. Participants were also asked about their own language learning experiences, their



aspirations for their children's language development, and any challenges they faced in promoting multiple languages at home.

The interviews were conducted either in person or online, depending on the participants' availability and convenience. Each interview session lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The participants interviewed included primarily one or both parents in each family — in most cases, the Indonesian mother and/or the Australian father. Children were not directly interviewed in this study due to ethical considerations and the focus on parental language ideologies.

All interviews were audio-recorded using a secure mobile recording application, with participants' informed consent. In addition to audio recordings, field notes were taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. These recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

To analyze the data, NVivo, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), was employed. The use of NVivo was instrumental in addressing challenges associated with conventional manual coding, such as difficulties in locating specific data and the inefficiencies of managing extensive printed documents (Baralt, 2012). This software enabled the researcher to interact with data dynamically, revisit coded segments efficiently, and conduct automated searches to identify emergent themes. The analysis focused on categorizing parental beliefs and language attitudes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the patterns and variations within the sampled families. By leveraging NVivo's functionalities, the study ensured a systematic and rigorous approach to qualitative data analysis.

Results and Discussion

Parents' Language Beliefs and Attitudes toward Multilingualism

The study revealed that all 11 interviewed families hold a positive belief in multilingualism and its importance in their children's cognitive development. The parents viewed multilingualism as an essential tool for their children's intellectual growth, cultural enrichment, and future opportunities. Three key motivations were driven in their support for multilingualism: (1) the cognitive benefits associated with speaking multiple languages, (2) the disadvantages of monolingualism in a globalized world, and (3) the influence of the parents' own multilingual experiences.

Parents believed that multilingualism enhanced cognitive flexibility and brain function. As one Indonesian father stated:

Excerpt 1

Multilingual itu penting. Itu melatih otak untuk lebih berpikir out of the box. Jadi organ-organ otak itu lebih flexible untuk menerima hal-hal yang foreign gitu dari bahasa, jadi kemampuan dia untuk menyesuaikan diri ke depannya itu jadi lebih cepat.

'Multilingualism is important. It exercises the brain to think out of the box. Then, the organs in the brain will be flexible to receive some things foreign, and the [multilingual] children's ability to adjust to something in the future will be easier'.

(Indonesian father in Family 8; 08.37)

This statement highlighted the association between language acquisition and cognitive development. Many parents believed that exposing children to multiple languages enhanced their mental flexibility, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability. This belief aligns with prior research (Curdts-Christiansen, 2009; King & Fogle, 2006; Spolsky, 2009), suggesting that multilingualism fostered enhanced problem-solving skills and cognitive agility. Parents also saw multilingualism as an intellectual advantage that will benefit their children academically and socially in the long run.



Additionally, parents expressed concern over the limitations of monolingualism. They emphasized the economic and social disadvantages that their children may face if they are limited to one language. An Indonesian mother (Family 1) noted:

Excerpt 2

Kalo cuma bisa satu bahasa ya susah kemana-mana. Disini banyak teman-teman saya anaknya cuma bisa satu bahasa doang, Inggris. Saya gak mau anak saya seperti itu, kasian ya.

‘You will find it difficult to go anywhere if you can only speak one language. I have a lot of friends whose children can only speak English. I do not want my children to be like that’.

(Indonesian Mother in Family 1; 06.43)

This underscored the importance of multilingual competence in global mobility and career opportunities. Parents believed that knowing multiple languages would provide their children with a competitive edge in their future careers and allow them to integrate more easily into different cultural and professional environments. This belief is also supported by studies on globalization and language learning, which suggest that multilingual individuals have broader employment prospects and enhanced cross-cultural communication skills (Bialystok, 2017; Kroll & Dussias, 2018; King and Fogle, 2006)

Parents’ personal experiences with learning languages also shaped their beliefs about the necessity of multilingualism for their children. Some parents have studied multiple languages and found value in being multilingual, reinforcing their desire for their children to develop similar linguistic skills. The following excerpt illustrates how their own experiences influenced their language policies at home:

Excerpt 3

We [the parents] are also interested in learning languages. We [the parents] have learned German, Italy, and are also interested in the Japanese language.

(Australian Father in Family 5; 05.20)

Their personal engagement with language learning reinforces their belief that multilingualism is beneficial and valuable. Some parents also mentioned that their ability to speak multiple languages had opened doors for them in education and professional life, making them even more determined to provide the same opportunities for their children.

Discrepancies in Attitudes toward Learning Indonesian

Despite their strong support for multilingualism, parents differ in their views regarding the necessity of the Indonesian language in their children’s linguistic repertoire. Eight out of 11 families advocated for their children to learn Indonesian, while three families believed it was unnecessary.

Among the eight families supporting Indonesian language acquisition, two primary motivations emerged. First, they emphasized maintaining family bonds with relatives in Indonesia, as many family members did not speak English. This motivation is illustrated in the following statement:

Excerpt 4

Pertama bahasa Indo itu penting karena kalo kita pulang ke Indonesia, dia gak ada masalah sama bahasa kan, jadi kayak ngomong sama keluarga disana sama sepupu lah ya dia bisa berbaur sama mereka.

‘Firstly, the Indonesian language is important because if we travel to Indonesia, he [her son] will not have any problem with the language, so he can talk with the families and cousins there and adjust with them’.

(Indonesian mother in Family 7; 27.42)

This rationale aligns with research indicating that language maintenance strengthens familial and cultural ties (Guardado, 2008; Kheirkhah, 2016; Pavlenko, 2004; Tannenbaum, 2012). Parents argued

that being able to communicate with relatives in their native language fostered stronger relationships and ensured that their children did not feel alienated when visiting their extended family members.

Second, these parents considered the Indonesian language as an integral part of their children's cultural heritage. They argued that their children's Indonesian identity should be preserved through language use. The following excerpt demonstrates a belief in language as a means of maintaining cultural roots as argued by Utomo (2014):

Excerpt 5

It is important for him to learn the Indonesian language because he is half Indonesian, so we really like him to you know understand his culture.

(Australian Mother in Family 8; 15.35)

By ensuring their children learn Indonesian, parents believed they were preserving their cultural roots and allowing their children to embrace both their Indonesian and Australian identities.

Opposition to Indonesian Language Learning

Conversely, the three families opposing the necessity of learning Indonesian language provided three key justifications. First, they considered their children primarily as Australian citizens, identifying English as their only essential language. Despite one parent's Indonesian heritage, they perceived their children as fully assimilated into Australian society, making Indonesian language acquisition redundant.

Excerpt 6

Kita kan disini (Melbourne) udah tinggal dan menetap. Anak-anak juga sekolah disini, teman-temannya ya orang sini semua. Jadi yang penting itu ya belajar Bahasa yang dibutuhkan disini, kalo Bahasa Indonesia mungkin ya anak saya gak terlalu butuh lah.

We are here (Melbourne) already living and settling. The children also go to school here, their friends are all here. So, the important thing is to learn the language that is needed here. If it's Indonesian, maybe my child doesn't really need it.

(Indonesian mother in family 4; 15.19)

Second, these parents indicated that they rarely visited Indonesia, reducing the practical need for their children to learn the language, implying that bilingual mediation within the family was sufficient for communication.

Excerpt 7

Kalo penting ya gak terlalu juga sih soalnya kan kita jarang pulang Indo. Dan kalo pulang pun aku biasa yang translate kalo mereka ngomong ke dia atau dia ngomong ke mereka.

If you asked the importance [of learning the Indonesian language], I think it is not very important, and if we travel to Indonesia, I will be the one who translates the conversation between the families and him [her son].

(Indonesian Mother in Family 6; 27.42)

Third, these parents argued that Indonesian had limited global utility compared to other international languages. They prioritized languages with broader economic and social benefits, such as German and Spanish.

Excerpt 8

Bahasa Indonesia kan penggunaanya limited banget, tapi kalo bahasa internasional lain seperti bahasa german dan spanyol itu beda. Jadi ya kami pengen anak kami bisa bahasa-bahasa internasional lain selain bahasa Inggris.

The Indonesian language is very limited in use, but it is different from other international languages such as German and Spanish. So, we want our kid to speak other international languages after English.

(Indonesian mother in family 5; 05.14)

The findings indicate a unanimous belief in multilingualism's benefits among the 11 families; however, disagreement arose concerning which languages their children should learn. While eight families viewed Indonesian as essential for cultural and familial reasons, three families perceived it as non-essential, favoring globally dominant languages instead. This discrepancy highlights that support for multilingualism does not necessarily translate into support for maintaining heritage languages. To further explore the implications of these beliefs, an analysis of the families' language management practices at home is required.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on family language management by highlighting how parental language beliefs and attitudes shape multilingual language practices within transnational Australian-Indonesian families. The findings reveal that while all participating families strongly support multilingualism, their attitudes toward the inclusion of the Indonesian language vary based on cultural identity, perceived utility, and family bonds. The study underscores the cognitive, economic, and personal experiences that drive parental endorsement of multilingualism, reinforcing previous literature on the benefits of multilingual upbringing. However, the study also identifies a key discrepancy: despite a shared appreciation for multilingualism, not all parents view the Indonesian language as a necessary part of their children's linguistic repertoire.

This research advances scientific knowledge by demonstrating that the decision to include or exclude a heritage language is not solely determined by broad acceptance of multilingualism but is also influenced by specific socio-cultural and practical considerations. The study challenges the assumption that multilingual families will automatically prioritize heritage language maintenance, revealing instead that language choices are negotiated based on personal experiences, migration patterns, and perceived economic and global utility.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. The small sample size of 11 families, all residing in Melbourne, limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, while the research captures parental beliefs and attitudes, it does not comprehensively examine how these attitudes translate into daily language practices at home. Future studies could adopt longitudinal approaches to track how these beliefs shape actual language use over time. Moreover, research in other transnational communities with different linguistic backgrounds could provide comparative insights into the factors influencing family language policies.

Recommendations

Building on the findings of this study, future research should further explore the intersection between language beliefs and language management practices within multilingual households. A longitudinal study examining how these beliefs evolve over time and influence children's actual language proficiency would provide deeper insights into family language transmission. Additionally, investigating the role of external influences, such as schools, peer groups, and media exposure, on language retention and use in multilingual families would enhance understanding of broader sociolinguistic dynamics.

Further studies should also expand the scope of research by including a larger and more diverse sample of transnational families from different socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. This would help determine whether similar patterns emerge in families from other heritage language groups.

From a practical perspective, policymakers and educators could use these findings to develop language support programs tailored to multilingual families, particularly those seeking to maintain heritage languages. Community initiatives, bilingual education programs, and parental workshops could be



implemented to reinforce the benefits of multilingualism while addressing concerns about the practicality of heritage language maintenance.

By expanding research into how language beliefs shape real-world language practices and incorporating diverse multilingual contexts, future studies can build upon the insights gained from this research and further contribute to the discourse on family language management in transnational settings.

References

- Baralt, M. (2012). Coding qualitative data: A tutorial for using NVivo software. *Florida International University*.
- Bialystok, E. (2017). The bilingual adaptation: How minds accommodate experience. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(3), 233–262. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000099>
- Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2009). Invisible and visible language planning: Ideological factors in the family language policy of Chinese immigrant families in Quebec. *Language Policy*, 8(4), 351–375. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-009-9146-7>
- Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2009). Invisible and visible language planning: Ideological factors in the family language policy of Chinese immigrant families in Quebec. *Language Policy*, 8(4), 351–375. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-009-9146-7>
- Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2018). Family language policy: Sociopolitical reality versus linguistic
- De Houwer, A. (2020). Harmonious bilingual development: Young families' well-being in language contact situations. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 24(1), 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006918766298>
- Diaconu, L. (2022). The impact of multilingualism on teaching modern languages: benefits, value and outcomes. *International Scientific Conference: 30 Years of Economic Reforms in the Republic of Moldova: Economic Progress via Innovation and Competitiveness* (Vol. 2, pp. 134–138). September 24–25, 2021, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Guardado, M. (2008). Language socialization and identity in bilingual families. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 64(3), 505–540. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.64.3.505>
- Kheirkhah, M. (2016). Family language policy and maintenance of Persian: The case of Iranian immigrant families in Sweden. *Multilingua*, 35(2), 195–218. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2014-0051>
- King, K. A., & Fogle, L. (2006). Bilingual parenting as good parenting: Parents' perspectives on family language policy for additive bilingualism. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9(6), 695–712. <https://doi.org/10.2167/beb362.0>
- King, K. A., & Fogle, L. (2017). Family language policy. In T. McCarty & S. May (Eds.), *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education* (pp. 315–327). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02344-1_22
- Kroll, J. F., & Dussias, P. E. (2018). The benefits of multilingualism: Cognitive, social, and professional advantages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 21(5), 675–679. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728918000588>
- Legarski, R. (2024) *Linguistics: The study of language*. SolveForce.
- Pavlenko, A. (2004). 'The making of an American': Negotiation of identities at the turn of the twentieth century. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 34–67). Multilingual Matters.
- Roy, K., & Swargiary, K. (2024). *Language and learning: The crucial role of language in the teaching-learning process*. Scholars' Press
- Spolsky, B. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (2012). Family language policy: The critical domain. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2011.638072>



- Tannenbaum, M. (2012). Family language policy as a form of coping or defense mechanism. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(1), 57–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2011.638074>
- Utomo, H. (2014). Language maintenance and shift among Indonesian migrant families in Australia. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 2(2), 37–51.



