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THE EFFECT OF CAREGIVERS ON THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

In this study, the effects of socio-demographic characteristics such as age, education level and length of care on the language development of "children aged 2-7 years whose mother tongue was Turkish and who were in early childhood" (N=80) were investigated. A quantitative research approach called the screening model was used to describe the current situation as it is. The research aimed to investigate whether certain socio-demographic characteristics such as age, educational level, and duration of care have any impact on the language development of children who experienced normal development during early childhood and whose native language is Turkish. The "Early Language Development Test (TELD-3)", which quickly and easily reveals the language performance of children aged 3-11, was used as a data collection tool. At the same time, "age, education, caregiving duration of the caregivers", "the child's pre-school education status, the number of siblings, the age of the parents, the education level of the parents" was determined with the Socio-Demographical Information Form. T-test and analysis of variance were performed to see if there was a significant difference between "demographic characteristics of caregivers" and "children's language skills". Most of the caregivers in the study have been caring for the child for one or two years. It was examined how long the caregivers gave care to the child and whether there was a change in the language skill scores of the children as a result. No significant difference in the effect of care duration on language skills in the study group. It was determined that the language skills of the children were higher when the caregivers were middle-aged and advanced. As a result, comments and suggestions were presented regarding the significant contribution of caregivers to children's language development.

Keywords: *Early Language Development, Teld-3, Caregiver.*

Okul Öncesi Dönemdeki Çocukların Dil Gelişiminde Çocuğa Bakım Veren Kişilerin Etkisi

Öz

Bu çalışmada, sosyo-demografik özelliklerin, erken çocukluk döneminde normal gelişim gösteren ve ana dili Türkçe olan 2-7 yaş çocukların (N=80) dil gelişimleri üzerindeki etkileri araştırılmıştır. Mevcut durumu olduğu gibi betimlemeyi amaçlayan bir nicel araştırma yaklaşımı olan tarama modeli kullanılmıştıreri toplama aracı olarak 3-11 yaş arasındaki çocukların dil performanslarını hızlı ve kolay bir şekilde ortaya koyan Erken Dil Geliştirme Testi (TELD-3) kullanılmıştır. Aynı zamanda bakım veren bireylerin yaş, eğitim, bakım verme sürelerini belirleyen ve çocuğun okul öncesi eğitim alma durumunu, kardeş sayısını, anne ve baba yaşı ve eğitim durumunu belirleyen bir SosyoDemografik Bilgi Formu uygulanmıştır. Bakım verenlerin demografik özellikleri ve çocukların dil becerileri arasında anlamlı bir fark olup olmadığını görmek için t-testi ve varyans analizi yapılmıştır. Çalışmadaki bakım veren bireylerin çoğu çocuğa bir ya da iki yıldan bu yana bakım vermektedirler. Bakım veren bireylerin çocuğa ne kadar süre bakım verdiği ve sonuçta çocukların dil beceri puanlarında değişim olup olmadığı incelenmiş ve çalışma grubunda bakım süresinin dil becerilerine etkisinde anlamlı bir fark olmadığı belirlenmiştir. Bakım verenlerin yaşı ve çocukların dil becerileri üzerindeki etki düzeyi tek yönlü varyans analizi ile incelenerek yaşı orta yaş ve ileri düzeyde olan bakım verenlerde dil becerilerinin daha yüksek olduğu saptanmıştır. Sonuçta bakıcıların çocukların dil gelişimine önemli katkılarına ilişkin yorumlar ve öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken Dil Gelişimi, Teld-3, Bakıcı.

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1. Introduction

A language, which is one of the values that enable people to be human beings, is the most essential element that enables the cultures of societies to survive for generations (Morrison, 2011). In the early period, the term of language acquisition has been attempted to be explained via various approaches and in the light of the studies conducted in these fields; thus, many outstanding data have been obtained about the language development (Baker, 2005). The first five years of a child's life are critical to his or her development (Schleicher, 2019).

Concurrently with the rapid development in the digital society, the demand for a functional communication is evident already in childhood (Brodin & Renblad, 2019). According to Piaget, language is a tool in the development of thought as well as being a means of thought development (Bee, 2012). Language development seems to be similar in many cultures. Regardless of their culture or language, babies usually begin to gurgle by seven months of age, utter a few words for the first time when they reach the first year and speak their first sentences around two years of age (Hresko et al, 2009). While Vygotsky argues that thought and speech are independent of each other up to two years of age, Chomsky elaborates the development referring to the grammatical structure of the child by means of a hereditary language acquisition device (Ruplik, 2017).

Lenneberg has also made observations to support Chomsky's work in language acquisition and stated that all organisms are biologically pre-programmed to learn a language (Chomsky, 1968). Skinner argues that environmental impact is also important in language development. He points out that a child can learn language via operant conditioning and emphasizes that reinforcements play a vital role within the language learning process (1957).

According to Osser, in the relationship between a child and an adult, the child should repeat whatever the adult utters properly. In this way, the adult will both reinforce the accurate way of saying and enable the child to utter more accurate sentences (Werchan & Gomez, 2004). The attitudes of family members and other adults shape the child's emotional and social relations as well as the language development (Demirekin, 2017).

Early years provide a critical window of opportunity for children to build the foundations of learning and develop skills that can help them succeed in school and over the course of their lives (UNICEF, 2019). Another individual who is of foremost importance in the life of the child during the early childhood is his/her mother (Ruplik, 2017). Mothers' attitudes and behaviors are also quite effective on the development of the child. The attitude and behavior of the family can affect the child's personality traits such as his/her being compatible-incompatible, active-passive, dependent-autonomous, and introvert-extrovert. (Geng, 2010). When the mother and other family members are talking to a child, their accents influence the speech of the child, who is ready to imitate the utterances, because the child tends to pronounce the voice according to the order of which he/she hears. (Klibanoff &Waxman, 2016).

In addition, repetitions in their speeches, mother's facial expressions or the paraphrased sentences in repetitive forms will provide language learning altogether. On the other hand, an adult's childish speech is said to be an obstacle to language learning (Goldstein, 2013).

Today, the authorities who have been studying on the acquisition and development of language agree that the first 10 years of language development, especially the pre-school years, is a critical period in their lives. Language is a highly important factor in a child's learning process. Therefore, in pre-school years, it is necessary to focus on the language development of the child and to prepare teaching-learning environments that will support his/her language development. The quality of the experiences that a child gains during these ages will certainly affect his/her learning experiences in the following years (Hills et

all, 2010; Yalcin, 2010).

There are some research findings about the socio-demographic attributes of primary caregivers. In a study by Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans (2006), the effect of parents' educational levels and genders on the development of the first six years of age were investigated, and the language development of children whose parents were at the higher education level was found to be more advanced than those with lower education levels. Molai (2016) identified the language structures used by children aged 4-5 years according to their socio-economic and educational backgrounds and reported to have revealed differences in favor of the children from upper socio-economic levels in terms of the number of words and word types within the sentences they had used. Beitchman and Rownlie (2010) stressed on the fact that there was a significant difference between the levels of the receptive and the expressive language use of children who had not attended pre-school institutions. Hoff (2006) found that the language development scores of the children had increased with age; furthermore, according to gender variety, girls came out with more significant results; educational levels of parents had some impact on children's language development; on the other hand, the number of siblings had no effects on their language development scores.

Having started rapidly at birth, language development is an essential part of this corresponding development and learning process (Baker, 2005). To be successful or unsuccessful in his/her future life, a child's ability to use a language effectively should be improved by developing appropriate teaching-learning environments in pre-school years when language development is quite critical (Hutauruk, 2015). It is often observed that some basic concepts of language development have been tackled in this area based on teaching these relevant concepts in Turkey. However, there are not enough studies available on the effects of caregivers and families on children's language development. In this respect, we believe that this study will be unique and contribute to the knowledge of early childhood, which we will shed light on the studies in the field.

In the light of the data collected and the findings obtained, answers to the following questions have been searched in our study:

1. Is there a significant difference between caregivers' educational levels and their effects on children's language skill scores?

2. Does the age of a caregiver have an effect on children's language skill scores?

3. Does the care duration of a caregiver influence children's language skill scores?

The main purpose of this study is to determine to what extent the socio-demographic characteristics of parents and caregivers such as age, educational backgrounds and care-giving duration affect the language development of children.

Unlike previous research, this study takes an integrated approach to investigating the impact of caregivers on the development of language of pre-school children. The present research investigates the impact of cultural sensitivity in communication, the implications of multidimensional engagement and proportionate screen time, and the collaborative constructive collaboration between caregivers and educators, in addition to typical caregiver-child engagements. The present study provides a more comprehensive approach by investigating these many contributing factors, expanding our grasp of how caregivers significantly impact the linguistic course of pre-school children and so offering distinctive perspectives to both scholarly and practical realms.

2. Method

In this study, we have used screening model, which is a quantitative research approach aiming to describe the current situation as it is. In the research, we have investigated some socio-demographic characteristics such as age, educational levels, and care duration to see whether they have any effects on the language development of the children who have had normal development in early childhood and whose mother tongues are Turkish. The scanning model describes a past or present situation. In the general scanning model, there is a universe consisting of many elements. To make a general judgment about the universe, the entire universe or a sample is scanned. The relational screening model determines the difference between two or more variables (Balcı, 2010).

The screening technique is described for use of speech in language development literature as well, and researchers suggest it could be useful for identifying children who are at risk of experiencing linguistic delays or issues. They also emphasize the importance of including socio-demographic factors in language development research, as these can have a significant impact on children's language skills (Nelson et al., 2006; Wallace, 2018).

Therefore, the authors have used the screening model to investigate the current situation of the language development of preschool children in Turkey and to identify the potential impact of socio-demographic characteristics of caregivers on language development. By using this approach, the authors aimed to provide a descriptive account of the language development of preschool children and to generate hypotheses for future research.

2.1. Study Group

The universe of the research; They are children who show typical development between the ages of 3-6 and the individuals who care for these children. The sample of the research; 80 children aged 36-72 months in Meram, Selçuklu and Karatay districts in Konya" and individuals who care for these children. The research universe was chosen with the aim of investigating the impact of carers on the development of language in early childhood. As this age range is critical for language acquisition, the universe includes children ages 3-6 with typical development. Caregivers were also included to better understand their responsibilities. The sample of eighty children aged 36-72 months from Meram, Konya Türkiye, allows for a concentrated investigation within a particular socioeconomic setting.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participant Children (N = 80)*

Demographic variable		**n**	**%**	**x̄**	**Sd**
Age of children participating in the study	2 -3 age	30	37,5		
	4-5 age	35	43,8	3,125	1,47
	6-7 age	15	18,7		
Gender of children participating in the study	Girl	39	48	1,762	2,345
	Boy	41	52		
Number of siblings of children participating in the study	Only child	23	28,7		
	1-2 siblings	51	63,8	2,025	,927
	More than 3	6	7,5		

The demographic characteristics of the children in the study group were examined. 43.8% are 4-5 years old; 37.6% are 2-3 years old; 18.6% of them are 6-7 years old. 48% of these children are girls and 52% are boys. 28.7% of the participating children are only children; 63.8%' have 1 or 2 siblings; 7.5% has 3 siblings or more.

Information about the demographic characteristics of caregivers participating in this study is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. *Socio-demographic Characteristics of Caregivers (N = 80)*

Demographic variable		**n**	**%**	**x̄**	**Sd**
Age of caregivers	Under 25 years old	18	22,5		
	26-35 years	29	36,2	2,328	,682
	Over 36 years old	33	41,3		
Educational status	Primary school graduate	39	48,7		
	Secondary school graduate	29	36,2	1,412	,544
	Graduated from a University	12	15,1		
Financial situation of parents	Low	7	8,7		
	Middle	54	67,5	2,15	,553
	High	19	23,8		
Definition of caregiver	Grandmother/aunt etc.	35	43,8		
	Someone in the family	20	25	2,975	2,316
	Other	25	31,2		
	Less than 1 year	18	22,5		
Childcare period	1-2 year	38	47,5	3,825	1,979
	3-4 year	15	18,7		
	5 or more years	9	11,3		

The demographic characteristics of the caregivers participating in the study were examined. 48.7% of the participants are primary school graduates; 36.2% of them are secondary/high school graduates; 15.1% of them are university graduates. The economic status of 67.5% of the participants is moderate. 43.8% are grandmothers. 47.5% of the participants have been giving care to the child for 1-2 years.

2.2. Data collection tools

Socio-Demographic Form: In the form, we have asked some the socio-demographic data such as age, gender, receiving pre-school education, number of siblings, mother and father's ages, parents' educational levels, mother and father's jobs, family income as well as the characteristics of the caregivers.

Test of Early Language Development (TELD-3); This test is usually applied to children aged 2-7 years of age. The original test was developed in the United States in 1981 by Hresko et al. (1999) to reveal the linguistic performance of children aged 3 -11 years quickly and easily. Then in 1991, some changes were made into the original test: A few items of 2-year-old children were added to the test which had not been available in the original version, and it was named as TELD-2 by providing with its validity and reliability. In 1999, considering the previous reviews for TELD-2, the pictures were colored, and the test was divided into two sub-test sections classified as Receptive and Expressive Language, and standard scores were created for the sub-sections. In addition, the validity and reliability of the test were strengthened by further analyzes; and some changes were made into the currently available TELD-3. The test was called as Turkish Early Language Development Test (TEDIL) in Turkish. The validity and reliability studies of the Turkish version were conducted by Guven & Topbas (2009) then it was

determined that it could be applied for the 2-7 age group.

2.3. Data Collection

To determine the sample, we paid visits to the local districts at different socioeconomic backgrounds which were previously identified; randomized selected households were asked whether they had children who were in the 2-7 age groups; the participants were given an interview form and the questionnaire was given to the volunteers to apply the data collection tools. To determine the socio-economic states, the data were noted in the interview form according to which socio-economic states the participants defined themselves. In the study, language development of children was measured via Early Language Development Test (TELD-3). The test was conducted individually by the investigators; each of the items was applied to a caregiver and then the answers were recorded, respectively.

2.4. Evaluation of Data

According to the answers of the caregivers who participated in the study, we investigated whether the language skills of the child differed according to the scores of the Early Language Development Test (TELD-3) by referring to educational levels of the caregivers, their ages, duration of the childcare, and the child's status of receiving pre-school education. T-test was applied to see if there was a significant difference between caregivers' educational levels, ages, child-care duration, the child's receiving pre-school education, and language skills. T-test and the variance analysis were performed to reveal the effect of the scores of the test on the level of education of the caregivers, their ages, the duration of care for the child and the status of the child's receiving pre-school education. Level of significance was considered as the value of .05.

2.5. Ethics Committee Permission

Approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee during the preparation phase of the study. Detailed information about the research was given to the study group. "Informed Consent" was signed by the participants, and the research was conducted on a voluntary basis (Committee name = KTO Karatay University Drug and Medical Non-Device Research Ethics Committee, Decision date= 27.10.2020; Document issue number = 2020/18)

3. Results

The results obtained are summarized and given below in line with the research questions. First, the t-test was used to assess the variation in data among children's language skills scores. The findings regarding the language development levels of 36–70-month-old children with typical development are given in Table 3.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics of children's Turkish early language and development test verbal language performance recipient and expressive language sub-dimension scores*

	n	Min	Max	x̄	SS
Recipient Language	80	68	122	92,32	11,06
Expressive Language	80	72	116	93,46	11,34
Verbal Language Performance	80	70	119	91,58	12,86

Table 3 illustrates that the receptive language standard mean score of the 36–70-month-old children with typical development included in the study group is 92.32, the expressive language mean score is 93.46, and the verbal language performance mean score is 91.58.

The differences in the verbal language performance receptive and expressive language sub-dimensions of the Turkish Early Language and Development Test according to gender and age variables are given in Table 4.

Table 4. *Difference analysis of Turkish early language and development test verbal language performance receptive and expressive language sub-dimensions by gender and age.*

	Gender	**n**	**Mean**	**U**	**p**
Recipient Language	Girl	39	26.18	-1,288	0,162
	Boy	41	32,66		
Expressive Language	Girl	39	27,38	-1,522	0,608
	Boy	41	29,82		
Verbal Language Performance	Girl	39	26,47	-1,026	0,266
	Boy	41	31,86		
	Age	**n**	**Mean**	**U**	**p**
Recipient Language	0-36 months	30	23,86	-,714	0,482
	37-70 months	50	28,02		
Expressive Language	0-36 months	30	23,16	-2,268	**0,012***
	37-70 months	50	29,34		
Verbal Language Performance	0-36 months	30	21,06	-2,298	**0,018***
	37-70 months	50	30,14		

When Table 4 is examined, there is no significant difference between the verbal language performance and sub-dimensions (receptive language, expressive language) of 36-70 months-old children with typical development and the gender variable ($p>0.05$). However, when examined according to age groups, it was determined that there were differences. The mean rank scores of the expressive language sub-dimension were 23.16 in children aged 0-36 months; It was found that it was 29.34 in 37-70 months old children. Verbal language performance mean rank scores were found to be 21.06 for 0–36-month-old children and 30.14 for 37–70-month-old children. Accordingly, there was a significant difference between the verbal language performance of the children participating in the study, the expressive language sub-dimension of the scale and the "age" variable in favor of the children in the 37–70-month group ($p<0.05$). There was no significant difference between the receptive language sub-dimension of the scale and the age variable ($p>0.05$).

Table 5 shows the effect of education level of babysitters on language skill scores and t-test results.

Table 5. *The effect of education levels of babysitters on language skill scores and t-test results*

	n	**x̄**	**Ss**	**Sd**	**t**	**p**
Primary and secondary education	40	19,67	11,09	78	-14,36*	**0,027***
High School and University	40	32,34	6,87			**0.014***

As stated in Table 5, the arithmetic means of the caregivers' educational levels at the secondary level and the language skill scores of children have been found to be 19.67; the means of caregivers' educational levels at the high school or university levels and the language skill scores of children have been revealed as 32,34. Thus $p<0.5$ indicates that there is a significant difference in favor of high school and university caregiver groups.

In the light of these results, it can be said that the education level of caregivers is effective on the language development of children in favor of those with high school and university graduates. In other words, the higher the education level of the caregivers, the better the language skills of the children.

The age of the caregivers participating in the study and the level of influence on the language skills of the children were investigated with one-way analysis of variance. The results from the analysis are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. *Ages of caregivers, language skills scores of children, descriptive statistics results*

Age	**SS**	**Sd**	**M**	**F**	**p**
Between groups	656,1	2	328,5		
Within groups	5363,28	78	68,76	37,6	**.05***
Total	6019,38	80			

It has been found as F=37.46 and p=.05. These values show that there is a significant difference within the groups according to the effect of caregivers' ages on the scores of language skills at p <.05 significance level. The child-care durations of caregivers are shown in Table 7. Childcare periods were analyzed as "less than two years and more than two years". Analysis of variance results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. *The duration of care by the child caregivers, the results of the analysis of variance*

Childcare duration	**SS**	**Sd**	**M**	**F**	**p**
Between groups	3214,12	2	1607,06		
Within groups	3686,46	78	47,26	28,16	.05*
Total	6900,58	80			

Analysis of variance revealed that those less than two years were found to be at the significance level of p <.05, however there was no significant difference in the group that was formed based on the interaction of language skill scores within the duration of childcare. Thus, it can be said that there is no common effect based on the interaction of language skill development and the duration of care for the child. Table 8 shows the children's states of receiving pre-school education in the study group.

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

In this study, in which we have investigated the effects of socio-demographic characteristics of parents and caregivers' ages, educational levels as well as the care period on the language development of the children, it has been found that the educational level of the caregiver is quite effective on the language development of children in favor of those with university degrees. Those with university degrees who care for the child seem to have better supported the children's language development. According to Jersild's (2009) study, conducted on the children of same level of intelligence and their parents with low education levels and higher education levels, it was revealed results in favor of parents with high educational levels in terms of creating longer sentences, broader number of questions and vocabulary. Geng (2010) investigated the contributions regarding the family environment, effects of parents' educational backgrounds on the children living in distinct cultural settings to provide harmonious experiences for the children at school besides the experience that could be useful in their learning how to read. According to the results of the research, significant differences were found between the cultural groups and parents' educational levels in the first five years of the children's lives. Jersild (2009) identified language development of children according to their parents' education levels

in the pre-school period and compared the language development of first grade students. According to the findings of the study, the language development scores of the students whose parents had prominent levels of education were revealed to be higher than the students whose parents had lower levels of education. According to Rowe, Pan and Ayoub (2005), the educational levels of the caregivers and the language utterances used with the child were found to be related with each other. They also stated that in comparison with those having lower levels of education, highly educated caregivers were more elaborative when talking to children, by avoiding repetition, more frequently using notification statements, and by describing the details of events more efficiently.

When the effects of caregivers' ages the on the language skills were analyzed, $F = 37.46$ and $p = .05$ values were found in our study. These values showed that there was a significant difference between the groups according to the effect of ages of the caregivers on the children's language skills scores at the $p < .05$ significance level. In a study by Hoff (2003) in the US, it was found that younger caregivers were more effective on providing with advanced vocabulary for the children than those of older caregivers when the child was two years old. Thus, in the study it was revealed that the difference between the two groups of children in the development of vocabulary was created via better speaking styles of the younger caregivers. Such a finding is in line with the results of our study regarding the effects of education and age. Hills et all (2010) found that individual differences in the ability to create and maintain a common-attention focus on the caregiver-child pair were largely related to the dynamic and young age of the caregiver, suggesting that the child was related to differences within the further language development. In our study, the language skill scores of the young caregivers and children were found to have related each other as well.

When the effect of childcare period on children's language skills scores is examined, there is no significant difference found in the group formed based on the interaction of language skill scores regarding the care duration of the child, although the duration of the care period less than two years is significant. In this case, it can be said that there is no common effect based on the interaction of linguistic development of skills and the care duration for the child. In Rowe, Pan, Ayoub (2005) study on caregivers who looked after children, delayed speech problems appeared with more striking challenges. Thus, it seems that there is a different relationship between caregiver and the child than the other people around. The caregiver serves as a safeguard base for the child so that he/she can apply to express himself/herself accordingly. If the child stays close to the caregiver, he / she perceives himself / herself in a safe environment and makes requests by using the expressive language (Smith et all, 2002). It has been revealed that the number of words used by a caregiver during the time spent with the child determines whether the child can use few or many words (Jersild, 2009). Some researchers emphasize that the quality of the vocabulary by the caregiver is more important rather than the time spent with the child. Indeed, the aspect that determines the quality of vocabulary is not the time spent with the child, but the diversity of relevant words. Families with higher educational levels and incomes seem to use more words when talking to their kids and make a quality contribution to his/her efforts of vocabulary expansion. Once sufficient time is spent and supported in the right ways, each child can acquire the knowledge and skills they need considerably (Baldwin, D., Meyer, 2007).

In our study, variance analysis was performed to determine whether the TELD-3 language test scores varied according to the caregiver in terms of receiving pre-school education; and it was revealed that the standard expressive language skill scores did not differ according to the caregiver group. There was no significant difference in the level of significance between the receptive and expressive language test scores of pre-school children. Speaking skill, which creates the basis of important skills of reading and writing, is also a determinant of the quality of communication between a teacher and a child. Not every child's support for language acquisition and learning is equal. In parallel with this fact, there may

emerge differences in the development of linguistic skills (Molai, 2016). Considering this situation, it is realized the necessity of serious and continuous language education. According to Ruplik (2017), it is the acquisition that enables us to be competent in a language. Acquisition is prior to learning and associated more with receiving a pre-school education.

The solution to all the problems of people and countries is to express oneself correctly. Providing rich verbal interaction, parents and babysitters encourage the child's language and psycho-social development. This research shows that caregivers are role models in the child's speech and provide significant guidance to the child's language and speech development. Therefore, this topic is particularly important and an open topic for future research.

Considering our study's findings, it is recommended that caregivers actively engage in interactive conversations with pre-school children, fostering diverse language experiences through activities such as reading, storytelling, and positive feedback. Culturally sensitive communication practices should be embraced, alongside a balanced approach to screen time, utilizing educational content. Continuous learning and collaboration between caregivers and educators are encouraged to create a consistent and supportive language-rich environment. Moreover, community support programs for caregivers can provide valuable resources. Further research is needed to explore the nuanced relationship between caregiver behaviors, cultural influences, and the long-term trajectory of language development in pre-school children.

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