

# Differences in Language and Communication Development Among Preschool Children Living in Urban and Rural Areas of Kien Giang, Vietnam

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the differences in language and communication development among preschool children living in urban and rural areas of Kien Giang province, Vietnam. Through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and parents, and vocabulary–communication skill assessments with children, the findings reveal that urban children generally possess a richer vocabulary, greater fluency of expression, and higher confidence in communication. These advantages stem from more favorable socio-economic conditions, access to modern educational environments, and stronger parental support. In contrast, rural children tend to experience slower language development, a more limited vocabulary, and fewer opportunities for diverse communication due to constraints in learning resources, educational facilities, and the surrounding living environment. The study further indicates that these disparities are influenced by multiple factors, including parental involvement, socio-cultural conditions, and the quality of preschool education in each setting. Based on these findings, the research proposes several solutions to reduce the gap, emphasizing the joint role of families, schools, and local authorities in creating a rich and diverse linguistic environment for preschool children.

**Keywords:** language development, preschool communication, urban preschool children, rural preschool children, language differences, vocabulary, communication skills, Kien Giang, Vietnam

## I. Introduction

Language development and communication skills in preschool children play a crucial role in shaping personality, cognition, and later learning abilities. Numerous international studies have demonstrated that the degree of linguistic exposure and the richness of communicative environments directly influence children’s vocabulary acquisition and expressive competence (Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009). Recent research has further emphasized the role of socio-economic factors and living environments in generating differences between urban and rural children (Pan et al., 2005; Hoff, 2013).

In Vietnam, several preliminary studies have addressed the influence of family environments, the quality of early childhood education, and local cultural contexts on children’s language development. However, research comparing urban–rural disparities remains limited. Kien Giang province, which encompasses both developed urban centers (such as Rach Gia, Phu Quoc, and Ha Tien) and rural as well as coastal areas, provides a representative setting to examine these differences.

Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the levels of language and communication development among preschool children in urban and rural Kien Giang, while analyzing the socio-cultural and educational factors influencing these outcomes. The findings are expected to contribute to practical solutions that enhance the overall quality of early childhood education in Vietnam.

## II. Literature Review

Over the past two decades, numerous international studies have examined the relationship between environmental contexts and children’s language development. Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrated that differences in the quantity and quality of linguistic input during early childhood strongly influence vocabulary acquisition and later academic achievement. Rowe and Goldin-Meadow (2009) further emphasized the role of gesture in communication, arguing that co-speech gestures serve as predictors of vocabulary growth. Hoff (2013) also found that children in urban environments tend to develop language skills more rapidly due to exposure to richer and more diverse forms of communication, whereas rural children often face limitations as a result of fewer interaction opportunities and restricted access to learning resources. Research conducted in several African and Asian countries, such as Mozambique, Ghana, and China, similarly confirmed that disparities in socio-economic status, parental education, and cultural environments play a decisive role in shaping differences in language development between urban and rural children.

Even within a single cultural context, substantial differences can exist between urban and rural communities. Keller (2012) argued that, in addition to prototypical Western urban communities, non-industrialized countries also exhibit distinct prototypical urban and rural communities. According to her, these two community types are characterized by fundamental differences. For instance, in rural areas, subsistence-based agricultural lifestyles predominate, and children are often expected to acquire motor skills and learn to comply with social norms rather than prioritize linguistic competence. In contrast, in urban settings, where educational attainment and literacy levels are generally higher, parents and society place greater emphasis on children’s access to quality education, making linguistic interactions central to child development (LeVine et al., 1996). Nevertheless, even in non-Western

urban communities, many cultural traditions with rural origins—such as the extended family system and communal responsibilities in childcare—continue to persist (Keller, 2012).

### III. Methodology

**Participants and Field Sites:** This study was conducted in Kiên Giang Province, Vietnam, across two main types of field sites representing contrasting socio-economic and educational contexts:

**Urban areas:** Preschools located in Rạch Giá, Hà Tiên, and Phú Quốc, where economic development is more advanced, educational facilities are well-resourced, and parental involvement in early childhood education is relatively strong.

**Rural areas:** Preschools situated in districts such as Hòn Đất, Giồng Riềng, An Biên, U Minh Thượng, and Gò Quao, where socio-economic conditions and educational resources remain comparatively limited.

The research sample comprised 500 preschool children aged 5–6 years, with an equal distribution of 250 children from urban settings and 250 children from rural settings. Selection criteria included:

1. Enrollment in either public or private preschools within Kiên Giang Province;
2. Age between 5 and 6 years, ensuring developmental comparability across participants;
3. Absence of language, intellectual, or sensory impairments that could affect communication ability;
4. Voluntary participation with informed consent provided by parents or guardians.

Demographic information regarding the children and their families (including gender, age, parental education, occupation, and household economic status) was collected through parent surveys. These data provided essential insights into the socio-economic status (SES) of participating families and served as a foundation for comparative analysis between urban and rural contexts.

Table A. Demographic Information of Participants

| Information                     | Rural (n = 250) | Urban (n = 250) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Gender (Male / Female)          | 128 / 122       | 130 / 120       |
| Mean Age (SD)                   | 5.5 (±0.3)      | 5.6 (±0.4)      |
| <b>Mother's Education Level</b> |                 |                 |
| – No formal schooling           | 32              | 5               |
| – Primary school                | 110             | 40              |
| – Lower secondary school        | 78              | 95              |
| – Upper secondary school        | 28              | 70              |
| – College/University or higher  | 2               | 40              |

Table A presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The gender distribution was balanced across both groups, with a nearly equal number of male and female children in rural (128 boys, 122 girls) and urban (130 boys, 120 girls) areas. The average age of participants was comparable, at 5.5 years (SD = 0.3) for rural children and 5.6 years (SD = 0.4) for urban children.

Notably, significant differences emerged in the educational background of mothers. While a substantial proportion of rural mothers had attained only primary education (44%) or lower secondary education (31%), a higher percentage of urban mothers completed upper secondary school (28%) or college/university (16%). Only 0.8% of rural mothers attained higher education, compared to 16% in urban areas. These discrepancies highlight the socio-economic and educational disparities between the two groups, which are likely to influence children's language and communication development.

### Research Instruments

To assess the language and communication development of 500 preschool children (250 urban and 250 rural, aged 5–6 years) in Kiên Giang province, the research team employed a combination of instruments as follows:

**Vocabulary Checklist:** This instrument was adapted from the MacArthur–Bates Communicative Development Inventories (MBCDI) to align with the Vietnamese language and cultural context. The checklist comprises approximately 400 core vocabulary items commonly encountered in the daily lives of Vietnamese preschool children. These items are categorized into thematic groups, including family, school, objects, animals, actions, and emotions. Both parents and teachers participated in the evaluation process to determine the extent to which children comprehend and actively use the listed vocabulary.

**Parent Questionnaire:** The parent survey collected demographic information, including educational attainment, occupation, income, and family status. In addition, it documented the level of language support at home, such as the number of hours parents

spend conversing with their children, habits of reading books or stories, and the frequency of participation in community-based communicative activities.

**Communication Skills Observation Checklist:** This instrument was developed based on the observational framework of Bakeman & Adamson (1984) as well as relevant Vietnamese studies. The criteria included: the child's ability to participate in conversations, respond to questions, recount events, and employ gestures and facial expressions to complement speech. Each child was observed across three different classroom sessions, during which the frequency and quality of communication with teachers and peers were recorded.

**Language Games and Storytelling Tasks:** Children participated in experimental activities designed to assess expressive and interactive competence. These included picture naming, sentence repetition, object description, and storytelling based on visual prompts. Such activities not only functioned as assessment tools but also provided a naturalistic context for evaluating the children's expressive abilities and communicative flexibility.

### Data Collection

Data were collected longitudinally over the course of one academic year (2024–2025) from two groups of preschool children aged 5–6 years: those enrolled in kindergartens located in urban areas (Rạch Giá City) and those attending schools in rural districts of Kiên Giang Province. A total of 500 children participated, evenly divided between urban and rural groups.

At each assessment phase, two rounds of data collection were conducted per classroom. During the first round, a short questionnaire was administered to parents to obtain basic demographic information (child's age, gender, parental occupation and educational attainment, and household income). In addition, brief classroom observations and video recordings of children's learning and play activities were carried out to help participants gradually adapt to the presence of the research team.

In the second round, we conducted systematic observations and video recordings of children's natural communicative activities for approximately 45–60 minutes. These included group learning sessions, free-play activities, and teacher–child as well as peer interactions. Teachers and parents were instructed to maintain normal daily routines to ensure the ecological validity of the data.

Following the completion of observations and recordings, children's vocabulary and communicative abilities were assessed using the adapted Vietnamese version of the MacArthur–Bates Communicative Development Inventories (MBCDI), in combination with direct interviews with teachers and parents. Observational video data were then cross-referenced with vocabulary checklist results to provide a comprehensive evaluation of language and communication development across urban and rural settings.

### Data Coding

We coded children's language and communication development within joint engagement contexts, defined as activities in which children engaged socially with one or more partners. These contexts included both dyadic interactions (child–caregiver exchanges) and triadic joint attention episodes, where the child and one or more individuals focused together on a shared object or event.

For language development, we operationalized growth as increases in vocabulary, utterance production, and the complexity of spoken structures used in everyday communication. The following components were coded:

- Utterances: All speech units with clear communicative intent, including single words, phrases, or short sentences used by the child to express meaning.
- Expressive vocabulary: The number and diversity of words the child was able to produce independently in communication.
- Conversational turns: Reciprocal exchanges between the child and an interlocutor, reflecting the child's ability to sustain and participate in back-and-forth dialogue.

For nonverbal communication, we defined communicative development as the expansion of children's use of gestures, facial expressions, gaze, and socially interactive behaviors to convey communicative intent. The following elements were coded:

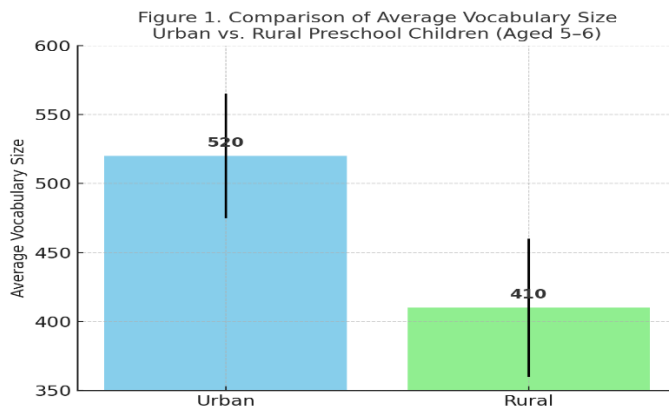
- Iconic gestures: Gestures that symbolically represent features or actions of objects, such as waving to indicate departure.
- Social interactions: Coordinated actions such as pointing, giving or receiving objects, or participating in turn-taking games.
- Interaction regulation: Behaviors aimed at attracting or maintaining a partner's attention, such as calling a name, gentle touch, or gaze signaling.

All verbal and nonverbal communicative data were aggregated to calculate the mean frequency of linguistic and communicative units produced by each child. Coding was conducted independently by two trained researchers, followed by cross-checking and reconciliation using a refined coding system to ensure inter-rater reliability and consistency of data interpretation.

## IV. Results

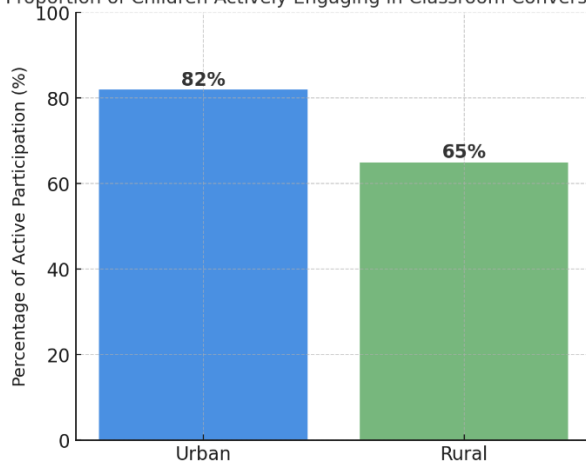
**Vocabulary Development:** The average vocabulary size of urban children was significantly higher than that of rural children. Specifically, urban children produced an average of 520 words ( $SD = 45$ ), whereas rural children produced 410 words ( $SD = 50$ ).

An Independent Samples T-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ( $t = 12.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings indicate that environmental conditions and the level of linguistic support play a substantial role in shaping children's vocabulary development.

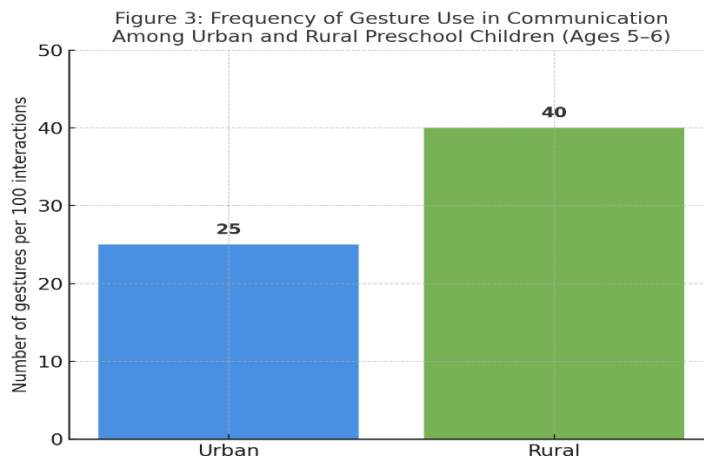


**Expressive and conversational skills:** Urban children demonstrated greater ability to answer questions and recount stories coherently (Mean score = 4.2/5) compared to rural children (Mean score = 3.5/5). The proportion of children actively engaging in conversations was also higher among urban participants (82%) than rural participants (65%). A Chi-square test indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups ( $\chi^2(1) = 15.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Figure 2: Proportion of Children Actively Engaging in Classroom Conversations (Ages 5-6)

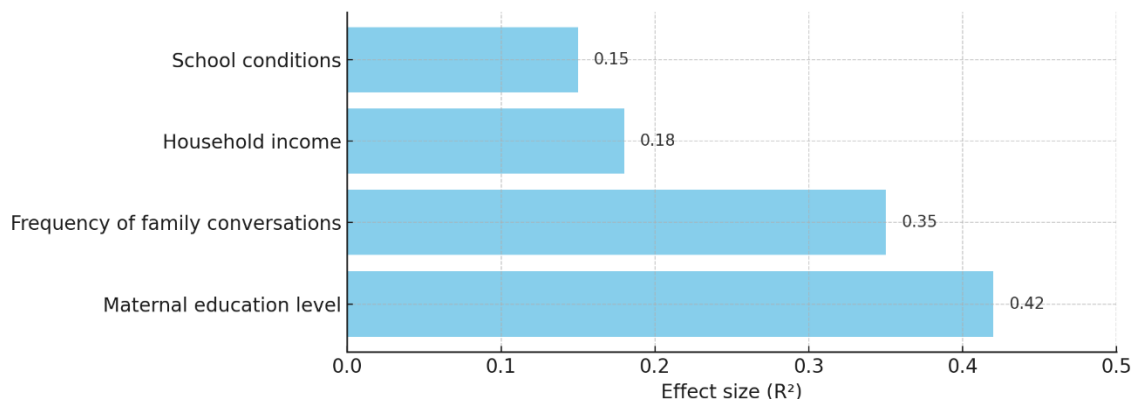


**Nonverbal Communication:** Rural children were observed to use gestures and facial expressions more frequently when expressing themselves, particularly in situations where their vocabulary was limited. In contrast, urban children typically employed gestures in conjunction with speech (co-speech gestures), indicating better integration between verbal and nonverbal communication. The Chi-square test revealed a significant difference ( $\chi^2(2) = 18.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that the urban environment supports children in developing the ability to coordinate language and nonverbal cues, whereas in rural settings, gestures are more often used as a compensatory strategy for limited vocabulary.



**Impact of Socioeconomic Status (SES):** Linear regression analysis revealed that maternal education level and the frequency of parental conversations with children were the strongest predictors of vocabulary size ( $R^2 = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Household income and school conditions also exerted an influence, though to a lesser extent.

Figure 4: Impact of Socioeconomic Factors on Vocabulary Development in Preschool Children (Aged 5–6)



## Discussion

Beyond lifestyle factors, additional variables contribute to the observed disparities in children's language development. For instance, differences in maternal educational attainment, though not substantial, may nonetheless reflect variations in socioeconomic status (SES), which has long been identified as a significant determinant of language development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009). Furthermore, under the influence of globalization, urban communities tend to adopt Western-oriented child socialization models that emphasize individuality and early linguistic stimulation (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1989). Moreover, it is possible that mothers in rural settings maintain a relatively lower degree of social interaction with their children during early childhood, increasing such engagement only when children reach a certain developmental stage.

The findings of this study reveal marked differences in language and communication development between preschool children residing in urban and rural areas of Kiên Giang province. Specifically, urban children exhibit richer vocabularies, greater coherence in expression, and higher levels of conversational initiative. In contrast, rural children demonstrate more limited vocabularies, reduced participation in verbal exchanges, and a tendency to rely on nonverbal gestures to compensate for gaps in spoken language.

## V. Discussion

These findings are consistent with prior international research (Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009), which has demonstrated that the degree of linguistic exposure and cognitive stimulation from both the family and the broader environment directly influence children's language development. At the same time, the study reinforces domestic evidence suggesting that parental education—particularly that of the mother—plays a pivotal role in shaping children's linguistic and communicative skills.

A noteworthy point is that the regression analysis identified maternal education and the frequency of family conversations as the strongest predictors of vocabulary development. This underscores the central role of the family during the early stages of language acquisition. Meanwhile, family income and school infrastructure also exerted effects, albeit to a lesser extent, suggesting that formal educational environments cannot fully substitute for the language-rich interactions that take place within the home.

In summary, the results indicate that preschool children in rural Kiên Giang are less frequently exposed to direct speech and co-speech gestures from adults compared to their urban counterparts. This difference is closely related to disparities in vocabulary size and communication skills during the critical ages of 5–6 years. These findings align with theoretical predictions regarding differences in language development environments: urban children are typically raised in contexts that are more communicative, academically oriented, and language-focused, whereas rural children are more strongly influenced by labor-centered lifestyles and have fewer opportunities for rich linguistic stimulation.

While the outcomes for urban children parallel those reported in prior studies conducted in developed countries (Hart & Risley, 1995; Pan et al., 2005; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009), the results from rural children suggest inconsistencies. This points to the potential role of socioeconomic, cultural, and familial structural factors in shaping language outcomes. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The data were collected within a single province, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to all Vietnamese children. Moreover, the influence of local cultural-linguistic contexts (such as Khmer and Chinese-speaking communities in Kiên Giang) was not examined separately, which may have implications for children's vocabulary development and communicative skills. More in-depth analyses are required to clarify the underlying causes of these differences and to pave the way for broader comparative research between rural and urban communities in Vietnam.

Overall, the study confirms significant disparities in language and communication development between urban and rural preschool children. These results highlight the urgent need for language-support programs in rural preschools, particularly initiatives aimed at enhancing parental awareness and involvement in their children's early language learning.

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