The journey of language acquisition of third culture kids living in Indonesia

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

International mobility is a distinctive feature of the world of the 21st century. Individuals and their families are often moving due to business, job assignments, pursue further education etc. The children brought up in this mobility scenario are known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). They are often exposed to different languages and cultures, what gives them unique abilities, but also brings numerous challenges. The objective of this article was to have a better understanding of TCKs living in Indonesia and what their journey of language acquisition in the country looked like. To answer these questions we collected data from 2 TCKs living in Indonesia, through interviews and artefacts using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the TCKs living in Indonesia are traditional TCKs according to Pollock & Recken's framework of TCKs. Regarding to their journey of language acquisition the parents played an important role choosing schools and implementing a family language policies at home in order to teach them their first language, hence, parents language. However the TCKs chose to use English, as their first language due to the third culture environment they were surrounded with.

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Introduction

International mobility and interconnectedness between peoples and nations have been brought about by globalisation. People travel across borders for a variety of reasons, such as to pursue higher education, international assignments, business, migration, to seek refuge, among others. (Donohue, 2022; Magee, 2017; Ooi YP. et al., 2022; Pollock & Reken, 2017; Rustine, 2018; Wahyuni, 2023). The high mobility of today's world not just bring changes to the society, but it also impacts the lives of those moving and their respective families forever (De Vroedt, 2022; De Waal & Born, 2021; Désilets, 2015; Kwon, 2018; Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2017; Ong, 2018; Schmidt, 2017; Trethewy & Vanderburg, 2022). In this scenario of interconnectedness between peoples and countries the phenomenon of Third Culture Kids or TCKs, as we used in the research, emerged. Therefore, this research intends to raise awareness on their third culture identity and how their journey of language acquisition takes place in a country like Indonesia.

Previous researches showed that the term TCKs was first introduced long time ago. A sociologist named Ruth Unseem, went to India with her family to study the relationship between American men and their Indian counterparts in the 1950s (Doherty et al., 2023; Koros & Trentinne, 2022). Unseem found out that the American expatriates and the Indians with whom they worked with created ways of working across and between cultures (Pollock & Reken, 2017; Yuliani & Liyaanti, 2021). . While interviewing their wives and children, Unseem realized also that those children were being raised by a third culture (Cottrell, 2017). Pollock (2013) stated that Unseem noticed the expatriates had formed a lifestyle that was different from either their home or their host culture, but it was one that they shared in that setting. To describe the expatriate world, the Unseem defined the home culture from which the parents came from (home or passport culture) as First Culture, the culture where the family lived (India) as their Second Culture and the shared lifestyle of the expatriate community as an interstitial culture or culture between cultures and named it as Third Culture (Jones et al., 2022).

Since young age TCKs are introduced to new languages and cultures. The sociologists Pollock and Reken (2017) stated that people living and working in another culture today are affected not only by the host culture, but culture from colleagues from other places as well which may alter their world view, values, flexibility and inter cultural abilities. Tradicional TCKs (as they can also be called) are not members of the new culture (s) or place of residence (culture 2), but they are not what they would have been had they remained in their own country (culture 1). Which brings them a lot of advantages but also many challenges growing up. According to Sethi (2019) parents play a huge role in the development of their TCKs, as they are the ones who bring up their child and raising awareness about the third culture scenario they are bought up with, as well as, exposing them to their language, family teachings, traditions, customs, norms, and values that are rooted from the parent's culture.

When living abroad with school age children the system of education and language of instruction are some of parents concerns. They have to consider what kind of school should be suitable for their TCKs (Pollock & Reken, 2017; Wheeler & Eddy, 2013). Considering TCKs educational needs and school environment parents usually choose to send their TCKs to an International school (Huff, 2023). Another consideration is related to the country's culture that reflects in their educational system (Wheeler & Eddy, 2013). According to Pollock and Reken (2017), some countries corporal punishment is a common practice while others it would be unthinkable. Some schools system stress learning by rote (mechanical or repetition). Others use only problem-based learning. Research shows that Indonesia is a country where the majority of its citizens are considered bilingual or multilingual which is a perfect match for TCKs.

Indonesia is a multicultural and multilingual country. According to Zein (2018), Rini, 2014; and Silvhiany (2019), Indonesians are brought up with at least three languages and English is one of them. Nevertheless, to unify the country Bahasa Indonesia or Indonesian Language was chosen as the national language of the country (Repelita, 2018). Despite of its use in education around the country, English is still a foreign language according to Mappiasse and Sihes (2014), and it is used mostly in business, science, commerce and in International Schools or Local School Plus (Hafiza, 2020).

Throughout the years the Indonesian government made some major changes to the regulation of the country's international schools. According to Qodir (2013), the Constitutional Court (MK) dissolved the International Standard School Pilot (RSBI) or International Standard School (SBI) in government schools. Although it was claimed that Indonesian government initiates the RSBI/SBI schools to foster the quality education (Mirizon et al., 2019) the Constitutional Court stated that the article governing RSBI/SBI located in government schools was contrary to the 1945 Constitution and had no binding legal force. The Constitutional Court had the opinion that RSBI created dualism in education, high costs caused educational discrimination (Anjarsari, 2013; Suprianti, 2017). Since December 1, 2014 all schools labelled International in Indonesia had to change their name to the Cooperation Education Unit (SPK) (Torar & Wahono, 2016). Despite the extensive research on Indonesian schools there are limited studies concerning TCKs living in Indonesian and their educational journey in the country. Therefore, the objectives of this research is to raise awareness of the phenomenon of Third Culture Kids and their journey of language acquisition in Indonesia.

Method

This qualitative study used structured interviews and artefacts as supporting data. Interviews are a primary source of data in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The participants chosen to acquire the data from for this research were two TCKs currently living and studying in different educational institutions throughout Indonesia and their families. Specifically, one 12 years old boy, living in Jawa Island, currently in 5th grade and one 14 years old girl living in Sumatra Island, currently in 9th grade. The interviews started with general questions about the research project itself and designed by the researcher. Examples of questions were:

where have you lived? Which languages do you speak? Are you fluent in your parents' mother tongue? How was your experience attending an international school? Are the schools prepared to receive TCKs? What are some challenges you face or faced? Are there literacy practices followed by the family?etc.

As for artefacts the term is used to refer to things people use for their daily routine and rituals. They play an important role in the construction of identity. Examples of artefacts can be also different such as a photograph, an object, a song, a picture, or something else that can easily show people's identity, or make them feel comfortable etc. (Douglas et al., 2015). Understanding how precious artefacts are to people's identity they were chosen to be a means of data collection for this research alongside interviews. In order to make the TCKs comfortable and better able to express themselves the researcher previously asked them to bring along some of the artefacts that makes them comfortable, bring good memories or most represent them during the interviews. The researcher asked the TCKs questions about the reasons of choosing that specific artefact and the history or meanings behind it in order to be able to analyse the data from them well.

The data collected from the interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The TCKs parents were emailed to set up a time for interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and in previously agreed-upon locations or over zoom and whatsApp video calls, and one was collected in written form. The interviews were transcribed for data analysis. The interview transcriptions were then analysed. The researcher coded each transcript, highlighting important quotes or phrases that stood out or related to the initial research questions by thematic analysis.Themes were created in order to answer the research questions efficiently.

Results and Discussions

Based on the data analysis of the interviews and artefacts all the participants are Third Culture Kids that moved to Indonesian accompanying their parents from their early age in accordance to Pollock and Recken's framework. Their journey of language acquisition may or may not have started somewhere else, in their parents' passport country for example, before coming to Indonesia. However, they developed it here in Indonesia alongside additional languages. As shown in the Table below.

Table 1. Interview's coding

Themes	Categories	Examples
Languages	a. Multilingual	I can speak English, Portuguese and Indonesian. My English is better I can read, write and speak. (John's interview)
	b. Bilingual	I can speak both. My first language is English. I'm not confident in Indonesian. (Linda's interview)
High mobility	a. Constant travelling	"I just got back from Brazil. I brought the shark necklace cuz it reminds me of Brazil. It makes me remember that time. (John's artefact). " We go usually in December, in the middle of the semester holidays every 2 years. Every time that I go back to Australia or somewhere else I take Pinchie with me". (Linda's artefact)
Language approaches	a. OPOL	"My wife (Indonesian) has chosen to uh speak Indonesian as much as possible to the kids, so they can hear and then you know she expects them to respond in Indonesian". (Linda's father interview)
	b. Translanguaging	"We were always trying to help them to speak let's say in Portuguese or in English whatever they feel comfortable. (John's parents' interview)

Both families created a family language plan to help their children in their journey of language acquisition. Family Language Policy (FLP) specifies which language would be used by the family to raise their children (Hafizha et al., 2023). As stated by John's parents:

"We did not teach them Portuguese in a formal way. Cuz they went to school in English and started learning Indonesian and also Mandarin. So, we thought it would be too overwhelming for them. We did an informal thing in Portuguese. Reading books, watching tv programs in Portuguese. But we also tried to speak as much as we could in Portuguese. that's is how they learned Portuguese. Also, went to Brazil for one year and they attended school there. So, that was really helpful for their Portuguese.

As for Linda, her parents stated:

"We focused only on Indonesian we didn't have many resources but when we were reading books at night together like a family, a devotion book with, uh, you know with stories then the book is in English but we would read it in Indonesian. So, that was the only Indonesian kind of input."

Even though parents created a family language policy to help their children develop their first language the children ended up choosing a different language to use as their mother tongue and parents had to rethink their plan in order to help their children. When asked about First Language John stated:

"My first language that I learned was English and then Portuguese and later on Indonesian. I learned them from my parents, schools, movies and video games. I use it every day in school, with parents and my family."

Meanwhile Linda shared:

"I don't really remember speaking in Indonesian or my parents teaching me Indonesian first. I, well, I do because we have videos and then I just watched the videos. I remember and like, I hardly remember speaking in Indonesian properly. I can't find the confidence. I only just remember a few words; I don't remember how they taught me. But because we were living in Australia everybody used English. So, cuz we stayed there a long time first, so made me more comfortable cuz there is grandparents, there is cousins, everybody using English. So, felt more comfortable cuz everybody else used English and you have to find a way to talk to them and yeah, just because of my environment I just chose English."

In both cases the two families exposed the children to the language they decided to use at home, but because of the environment they were surrounded with, the children chose to use a different language. Both cases they choose to use English instead of Portuguese or Indonesian.

Based on the data collection the parents used OPOL and translanguaging approach to help their children in their journey of language acquisition. They created a home literacy environment that included literacy tools such as TV, computer and literacy materials such as books, stories etc. Linda's parents as stated by Mr. Lim, used OPOL approach as literacy strategy in teaching their children languages (Hafizha, 2020; Hafizha et al., 2023; Rizki & Fajri, 2021; Palvianainen & Boyd, 2013). It consists in one parent using one language to communicate with their children with the hope that it would help Linda acquiring her first language. Mr Lim, Linda's father explained it by saying:

"My wife (Indonesian) has chosen to, uh, speak Indonesian as much as possible to the kids, so they can hear and then you know she expects them to respond in Indonesian".

As for John's family they ended up choosing translanguaging to communicate. As stated by John:

"When I'm talking to my parents, I usually use mostly Portuguese, but I sometimes mix it with English. And don't use 100% Portuguese because my Portuguese is not that high level and I don't really know a lot of words in Portuguese".

Mr. Clay (John's Father) affirms that their children are exposed to different languages every day and that is decided to use translanguaging with their children. According to Erdin and Sali (2020), translanguaging embraces the use of the first language among others, and accepts that instead of being in competition with each other both languages can work well together. He explained:

"We mix it a little bit with English because English is their heart language. They feel more comfortable to express deep feelings and emotions in English. So, This is why sometimes we mix with English. It was challenging for the children dealing with different languages at the same time umm so in English and Indonesian language at school but then Portuguese at home and, of course, later Mandarin at school as well and even Sundanese language. So, it was very common for us to see our children speaking one sentence using three different languages".

What is most interesting is that both parents had expectations on choosing language policies at home. They expected that by exposing and teaching their children one language that language would become their children's first language. Even though that was their first expectation they would happily change the method, use translanguaging in order to help their children to communicate and not feel burdened.

Through the data analysis we found out that both parents often used books, TV shows, short videos, games and fun activities at home. They also created opportunities outside their homes for their children to socialize and practice the language they were having difficulties in. Asked about home literacies Mr. Lim said:

"We had some you know phonics, a lot of phonics resources and games and just little fun activities related to learning English so that was the primary thing. When they were young or primary, you know, we get

maybe a few cartoons like comics that they would enjoy and and so that was one of the ways they started learning English".

When asked about it Linda said:

"We did really a lot of books. There was some English book that we would read. We would be reading a story, we would play games and watch some Tv. We were not allowed to watch a lot, but there were some we would. We used to watch one called Play School. But now I absolute hate it cuz whenever we are trying to watch stuff, like the TV show, this thing takes so long. It is very boring".

Parents' Role in Their TCK's Journey of Language Acquisition
Besides introducing literacies that help the children develop their language skills, parents also play an important role creating environments where the kids feel safe, accepted and valued when trying to speak different languages. While talking about home environment Mr Lim stated that:

"How positive is it, can we integrate it into our home life, and that's I think that's helpful for us for example my wife has chosen to uh speak Indonesian as much as possible to the kids, so they can hear and then you know she expects them to respond in Indonesian. And that's is just a, a safe place to practice."

While interviewing John's parents Mrs. Clay comments is mostly about home environment or situations where they are together with John and they can help him when he has difficulties as follows:

"To build their confidence in speaking we mostly watched movies, read books, and helped them with their mistakes. We tried to help them to know with whom they would talk in Portuguese, English and Indonesian. We helped them to choose one language and we would help them as much as we could. We also encouraged them to ask when they were confused so they wouldn't be scared when they speak. We have 2 different boys at home, one gets encouraged really fast the other not so much. We also said some things when they were practising like: You have done a great job, you're doing great, good job. So, all of that helped to build up their confidence. Besides that, we always encouraged them to understand that language is connected to culture, so they would also be able to learn a bit of the culture (Brazilian, Indonesian) to understand others better and to communicate better with them. So far it has been helpful. Parents have to create environments that would help their kids to thrive".

Mr. Clay declared that in order to encourage the children to thrive parents are responsible for creating the environment or exposing children to environments that are helpful to their journey of language acquisition, but especially taking into consideration children's personality and what season of their lives they are in at the moment.

Another role exclusive to parents is related to choosing the right school for TCKs. Parents have to consider the setting and also the system of schooling that would suit better their TCK, the family finances etc. The Clay's chose a National Plus school to send their kids to. The school's medium of instructions is English. They chose this type of school in accordance to their expectations on the future of their children. But as we see on the interview there are other reasons, such as:

"To be honest our kids they don't go to a International School now. They attend a national plus. The national plus is a school that focus not only in an English curriculum like the International School, but also, it's not the National School that just used in local curriculum. So, they go something in between. They mix, some subjects are taught in in English and the others are in Indonesian. And I, we like this kind of combination because they can get a little bit of both the English and the Indonesian subject and depending on the school can bring a good balance for them. And this kind of school is also cheaper for us as a family."

Mr. Lim and his wife had other concerns for choosing a school with English a medium of instruction. Their concerns were related to being a high mobility family. They focused on the flexibility they get from the school when they need to go back to Australia and also their children's acceptance from the school setting (staff and peers). They stated:

"There's probably a couple of things. One, primarily an International School, is more likely to be more flexible for our situation. A school that's teaching using Indonesian they're likely to be catering to all the Indonesian students and they find it more difficult to uh accept that we may be away for months at a time and also be familiar with just dealing with the international family and being a culturally understanding. Whereas a school teaching English they're more likely to, I don't know if I appreciate it's the right word, to give some flexibility, some understanding to our situation. So firstly, our situation and the secondly to be a little bit more accepting of the children as well".

Both families did some research before making the decision of sending their children to a school with English as a medium of instruction. For the Lim's they stated that:

"Australian education system is really different from Indonesian system of Education and we had a friend who reminded us, you know, we were idealistic and wanted our kids to be you know immersed in Indonesian education experience, but the friends who had lots of experience in education in Indonesia reminded us that the that the the the whole, not just the language, but actually the whole system is going to be very different, thinking on the methodology of education in Indonesia and uh she recommended that we would probably actually struggle a lot as schooling our children in a national curriculum and we thought about that advice and that was that was an important factor".

For Linda's parents they also considered the methodology used for international schools or schools with English as a medium of instruction, before choosing the school to send their children to. As for the Clay's they state that they also did some research and they took into consideration the needs of their children.

Mr. Clay stated:

"For us we had to find a school where the children feel comfortable and can make friends. I think parents need to be aware of that and try to find the options that will make their children to flourish better in in their school so not just trying to find something that the parents think that is good for them, because some parents are really thinking about their career, for the future but try to think what's the best for your kids now, so that they can flourish they can they can thrive and they can enjoy going to school".

When talking about specific needs Mr. Clay stated:

"When they were very small you want to focus more on the social aspect. Where they can make friends, where they can build their social confidence. Because when they are going to school they are being separated from the parents for few hours. But as they grow up you start to see all the needs as well, like the academic aspect and then we start to see also um to find a school that could help them to grow and to thrive in the academic area".

It can be concluded that both parents had expectations about their children's future. But that was not only the reason they chose schools with English as a medium of instruction, but they considered the flexibility for a high mobility family, the system of the education, if the children feel more comfortable with the language and other needs they might have depending on their season in life. Maybe they would need to improve in the academic area or social area. Parents also have to take that into consideration.

Conclusion

This paper explored the journey of language acquisition of two TCKs living in Indonesia. It is evident from the findings that the two participants of this research are traditional third culture kids according to Pollock and Reken's framework. Despite of the fact that they are from different backgrounds and living in different provinces in Indonesia, they have been raised in a third culture that is different from their parents' passport culture or the host country's culture. The two TCKs are always coming back and forth between their parents' passport country and Indonesia, for that reason they have a higher awareness of future expatriation as well as that they live in a high mobility world. These TCKs are exposed to different cultures and languages which stimulated language learning as a means of communication and also to express their identity wherever they are. In addition, parents play an extremely important role in TCKs' journey of language acquisition whereas choosing the right schools to send their children to, or exposing them to different literacy practices environments.

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