

Grand Parents' Contribution to Children's Oral Language Literacy: A Structured Literature Review of Intergenerational Support in the Home Language Environment

Zhang Ting^{1*}, Md Nasir Masran², Romarzila Omar³, Xiang Yan⁴

¹ Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia

² Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia

³ Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia

⁴ Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia

* Corresponding Author

Abstract: Grandparents are increasingly recognised as important contributors to children's early language and literacy experiences, particularly in multigenerational families where they participate in daily caregiving, storytelling, play, shared reading, digital interaction, and family language decision-making. This structured literature review examines how grandparents contribute to children's oral language literacy within the home language environment. Drawing on recent studies published from 2022 onward, the paper synthesises evidence from early childhood education, family literacy, developmental psychology, bilingual education, and intergenerational family language policy. Recent research indicates that home language and literacy environments are associated with children's language and literacy outcomes, although the strength of this association varies by cultural context, family resources, caregiver practices, and measurement approaches (Nag et al., 2024; Lyu, 2023). The review further shows that grandparents' contribution is not limited to practical childcare; rather, they may provide conversational input, emotional security, cultural narratives, heritage language exposure, and interactional routines that support children's vocabulary, listening comprehension, narrative ability, pragmatic communication, and school readiness (Keim et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2022). The paper concludes that grandparents should be viewed as active language socialisation agents within children's oral language literacy development, especially in Asian and multigenerational family contexts.

Keywords: grandparents; oral language literacy; home literacy environment; intergenerational support; family language policy; early childhood education

1. Introduction

Oral language literacy is a foundational dimension of children's early development because it supports vocabulary growth, listening comprehension, narrative expression, phonological awareness, social communication, and later reading and writing readiness. In early childhood, children do not develop these skills only through formal instruction; they also acquire them through everyday talk, storytelling, questioning, shared reading, singing, play, and emotionally responsive interactions at home. Recent meta-analytic evidence confirms that the home language and literacy environment is associated with children's language and literacy skills, although the relationship is shaped by the quality of adult literacy practices, book access, and contextual measurement differences (Nag et al., 2024). Therefore, the family should be understood as an important site of oral language literacy development, not merely as a background variable outside school-based learning (Breeze & Halbach, 2024).

Within the family environment, grandparents are often overlooked in comparison with parents, especially mothers. However, many children grow up in multigenerational households or receive daily care from grandparents while parents work, study, or manage other family responsibilities. Recent research on children raised by grandparents or in multigenerational homes suggests that caregiver type and household structure may be related to children's language, communication, and school readiness outcomes (Keim et al., 2024). This implies that grandparents may influence children's oral language literacy both directly, through interaction with grandchildren, and indirectly, through their support for parents and their contribution to family routines (Li et al., 2022).

The role of grandparents is especially relevant in Asian family contexts, where intergenerational caregiving is often connected with family obligation, respect for elders, and practical childcare arrangements. In Chinese and other Asian communities, grandparents may spend substantial time with young children, participate in home

education, and influence family decisions about language use, discipline, reading habits, and daily communication. Research on intergenerational family language policy in Singapore shows that grandparents may shape language ideology and family language practices, sometimes even becoming a dominant voice in household language decisions (Xie et al., 2022). This suggests that grandparents' contribution to oral language literacy is not only behavioural but also ideological and cultural.

Despite the importance of grandparents, existing studies on home literacy environments often use parent-focused measures and do not adequately distinguish the contributions of different family members. A recent review of home literacy environment studies found that the field tends to examine parent-child literacy activities, parental beliefs, and literacy resources, while less attention is given to extended family members and the relational complexity of household learning (Lyu, 2023). This limitation is important because children's oral language experiences may come from multiple caregivers, including grandparents, siblings, relatives, and other adults in the home (Breeze & Halbach, 2024). Therefore, a more inclusive view of the home language environment is needed.

Based on this gap, the present paper examines grandparents' contribution to children's oral language literacy through a structured review of recent literature. The paper is guided by three research questions: What forms of grandparental involvement support children's oral language literacy? Through what mechanisms do grandparents contribute to oral language development in the home environment? What implications can be drawn for family literacy practice, early childhood education, and future research? These questions are developed in response to recent calls for culturally situated and family-inclusive approaches to children's language and literacy research (Nag et al., 2024; Poudel et al., 2024).

2. Literature Background

The home language and literacy environment refers to the resources, practices, beliefs, relationships, and interactional routines that expose children to oral and written language before and during formal schooling. It includes shared book reading, storytelling, oral conversations, singing, play-based talk, adult literacy habits, access to books, and the emotional climate surrounding language use. Recent research has emphasised that home literacy is not a single variable but a multidimensional environment, and different components may relate differently to children's oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, and literacy-related skills (Lyu, 2023; Kim & Yim, 2024). This multidimensional understanding provides a useful foundation for examining grandparents' roles.

A key feature of oral language literacy is that it develops through repeated social interaction. Children learn words, sentence patterns, narrative structures, and pragmatic rules when adults respond to their utterances, ask questions, extend meanings, and provide models of language use. Recent research on children's vocabulary development suggests that social interaction can protect or support language outcomes, even in contexts where digital media exposure may otherwise reduce communicative opportunities (Kucker & Schneider, 2024). Grandparents may therefore matter because they increase the number of responsive language partners available to the child, especially in households where parents have limited time.

Grandparents may contribute to oral language literacy through storytelling, daily conversation, songs, traditional rhymes, shared memories, and culturally meaningful narratives. These practices are valuable because they expose children to vocabulary, sequencing, expressive language, listening comprehension, and narrative logic. Family literacy research has shown that children's early language development is supported not only by formal reading instruction but also by rich everyday home practices that involve meaningful adult-child interaction (Breeze & Halbach, 2024). In this sense, grandparents can act as oral language mentors even when they do not engage in explicit teaching.

The contribution of grandparents may also be linked to emotional security and relational continuity. Young children are more likely to participate in conversations when they feel safe, listened to, and emotionally connected to the adult. Research on grandparental sensitivity in China highlights that grandparents may have direct and indirect effects on child development through caregiving, emotional support, and parent support, although empirical findings remain mixed and context-dependent (Li et al., 2022). For oral language literacy, this means that the quality of interaction may be more important than the mere presence of grandparents.

In bilingual and multilingual families, grandparents may play an additional role in maintaining home languages and transmitting cultural identity. Research on family language policy shows that grandparents may influence which language is spoken at home, how children respond to different languages, and whether heritage languages are maintained or gradually replaced by socially dominant languages (Xie et al., 2022). This is especially relevant for children's oral language literacy because language choice affects vocabulary exposure, narrative traditions, and opportunities to practise communication across generations (Mak et al., 2025).

Recent studies also indicate that digital literacy practices are becoming part of the home language environment. In Chinese families, parents and grandparents may both participate in children's digital literacy

practices, including the use of videos, educational applications, video calls, and digital storytelling. Wang et al. (2024) found that Chinese parents and grandparents expressed views about young children's digital literacy practices in the home environment, suggesting that grandparents are also involved in digitally mediated language experiences. This expands the traditional understanding of grandparents' oral language contribution beyond face-to-face conversation alone.

However, grandparental involvement should not be romanticised as automatically positive. The effect of grandparents may vary according to educational background, language ideology, caregiving quality, household stress, intergenerational conflict, and the degree of coordination between parents and grandparents. Poudel et al. (2024) found that a higher adult-to-child ratio may be associated with better vocabulary outcomes and lower household chaos, but the effect depends on cultural and household conditions. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) cautioned that grandparental caregiving is complex and should be examined through specific interactional behaviours rather than assumed benefits.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a structured literature review design to synthesise recent academic evidence on grandparents' contribution to children's oral language literacy. A structured review was selected because the topic involves diverse research traditions, including early childhood education, family literacy, developmental psychology, multilingual family studies, and digital literacy. Unlike a statistical meta-analysis, which requires comparable quantitative effect sizes, a structured literature review allows conceptual integration across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies (Ghamrawi et al., 2025; Tedja et al., 2024). This design is appropriate because current research on grandparents and oral language literacy is still emerging and methodologically diverse.

The review followed a transparent methodological sequence: formulation of research questions, identification of keywords, database-oriented searching, application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening of relevant sources, extraction of core information, thematic synthesis, and discussion of implications. This step-by-step approach reflects recent guidance that systematic or structured reviews should move beyond general literature description and show a clear process for locating, selecting, and synthesising evidence (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). The purpose was not to claim exhaustive coverage of all global studies, but to develop a publishable conceptual synthesis grounded in recent literature.

The search strategy was designed around four groups of keywords: "grandparents" or "grandparental involvement"; "children" or "early childhood"; "oral language," "language development," "communication," or "vocabulary"; and "home literacy environment," "family literacy," or "family language policy." These keywords were selected because recent research uses different terms to describe overlapping phenomena in family-based language development (Lyu, 2023; Breeze & Halbach, 2024). Additional terms such as "multigenerational household," "heritage language," "digital literacy," and "shared reading" were also considered because they capture indirect but relevant forms of grandparental contribution (Wang et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2022).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: studies or reviews published from 2022 onward; peer-reviewed journal articles or credible academic sources; studies addressing children's language, communication, literacy, vocabulary, school readiness, or home language environment; and sources that included grandparents, multigenerational households, family literacy practices, or caregiver-child interaction. The exclusion criteria were: publications before 2022, studies focusing only on clinical language disorders without family literacy relevance, articles unrelated to oral language or literacy, and sources without sufficient academic credibility. These criteria were consistent with the need to use recent literature and to maintain methodological focus (Ghamrawi et al., 2025; Tedja et al., 2024).

Data extraction focused on five aspects: author and year, research context, participant or family type, language/literacy practice, and relevance to grandparents' contribution. Where studies did not directly focus on grandparents, they were included only when they provided strong evidence on home literacy environments, multigenerational household structure, caregiver interaction, or family language policy. This decision reflects the current state of the field, where grandparents are often embedded within broader family literacy research rather than treated as the main unit of analysis (Nag et al., 2024; Lyu, 2023). Extracted information was then organised into thematic categories.

Thematic synthesis was used to interpret the selected literature. Four major themes were identified: grandparents as conversational partners, grandparents as cultural and narrative transmitters, grandparents as family language policy actors, and grandparents as mediators of home literacy and digital literacy practices. Thematic synthesis was appropriate because it allows patterns to be constructed across different research designs and cultural contexts while preserving conceptual depth (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). To improve

trustworthiness, the synthesis avoided overstating causal claims and distinguished direct evidence on grandparents from broader evidence on home language environments (Keim et al., 2024; Nag et al., 2024).

As this paper is based on published literature rather than human participants, it did not require direct participant recruitment, informed consent, or institutional ethics approval. Nevertheless, the review followed academic ethics by accurately representing sources, avoiding fabricated data, and acknowledging limitations in the evidence base. This is important because Scopus-oriented writing values transparency, publication ethics, and methodological clarity, particularly when articles are submitted to peer-reviewed journals (Elsevier, 2026). The review therefore presents its findings as a conceptual synthesis rather than as original empirical data.

4. Findings and Discussion

The first major finding is that grandparents contribute to children's oral language literacy by expanding the amount and diversity of child-directed talk in the home. In many families, grandparents talk with children during meals, play, dressing, walking, household routines, and bedtime activities. These ordinary interactions provide children with repeated exposure to vocabulary, sentence structures, turn-taking, and pragmatic communication. Poudel et al. (2024) showed that a higher adult-to-child ratio may be positively related to children's vocabulary, suggesting that additional adult communicative partners can enrich language environments when interactional quality is supportive.

The second finding is that grandparents often support children's narrative competence through storytelling and memory-sharing. Unlike scripted classroom activities, grandparental storytelling is frequently connected to family history, cultural values, local customs, moral lessons, and personal life experiences. These narratives help children understand sequencing, causality, character intention, emotional expression, and conversational coherence. Family literacy research indicates that meaningful home practices, including stories, songs, and games, contribute to children's language and pre-literacy development by embedding learning in familiar social interaction (Breeze & Halbach, 2024). Grandparents therefore provide an oral bridge between family culture and children's literacy development.

The third finding is that grandparents may strengthen oral language literacy through responsive scaffolding. When grandparents listen carefully, repeat children's words, ask open-ended questions, correct gently, or extend children's utterances, they create opportunities for linguistic growth. Such interactional scaffolding is different from formal teaching because it is embedded in emotional relationship and daily life. Li et al. (2022) showed that grandparental caregiving in China may influence child development directly and indirectly, although sensitivity and developmental outcomes require further examination. This suggests that future studies should focus not only on the frequency of grandparental involvement but also on the quality of grandparent-child communication.

The fourth finding is that grandparents play an important role in bilingual and heritage language environments. In many families, grandparents are the main speakers of a heritage language, dialect, or local variety, while parents and schools may emphasise a national or international language. Through daily conversation, songs, stories, and routines, grandparents may provide children with language input that would otherwise be reduced. Mak et al. (2025) found that home literacy practices and language input are related to oral language development among young immigrant dual language learners. Although this study focused on immigrant families more broadly, its findings support the view that home language practices are central to bilingual oral language development.

The fifth finding concerns family language policy. Grandparents may influence not only what children hear but also what language choices are valued in the household. Xie et al. (2022) found that grandparents in Singaporean multigenerational families could shape family language ideology and even drive language shift toward English. This finding is important because grandparents are sometimes assumed to protect heritage languages, but their influence may also support dominant-language acquisition depending on their beliefs and family goals. Therefore, grandparents' contribution to oral language literacy should be analysed in relation to language ideology, not only caregiving time.

The sixth finding is that grandparents may contribute to children's oral language literacy through shared reading and book-related interaction. Although parents are often treated as the main actors in home literacy research, grandparents may also read picture books, explain images, ask questions, retell stories, and connect texts with children's lived experiences. Kim and Yim (2024) showed that home literacy resources and shared book practices are associated with early literacy and vocabulary skills among bilingual children. This suggests that grandparent-led reading may support oral vocabulary and comprehension when it involves rich dialogue rather than passive reading alone.

The seventh finding relates to digital literacy. In contemporary homes, language learning increasingly occurs through digital media, video calls, online stories, educational applications, and family communication platforms. Wang et al. (2024) specifically examined young children's digital literacy practices with Chinese

parents and grandparents, showing that grandparents are part of children's digital home environments. This matters because grandparents may use digital tools to tell stories, maintain contact across distance, or support children's exposure to songs and spoken language. However, digital activities are most likely to support oral language when they involve active adult-child interaction rather than passive screen exposure (Kucker & Schneider, 2024).

The eighth finding is that grandparental involvement may reduce or increase inequality depending on household conditions. In families where parents have limited time, grandparents may provide additional emotional, linguistic, and educational support. However, where households experience stress, overcrowding, intergenerational conflict, or inconsistent language expectations, the benefits may be weakened. Nag et al. (2024) emphasised that home learning environments must be measured in culturally situated ways because the association between home environment and children's outcomes varies across contexts. This point is important for grandparent research because the same caregiving arrangement may function differently across families and cultures.

The ninth finding is that grandparents' contribution is best understood as complementary rather than substitutive. Grandparents do not replace parents, teachers, or early childhood institutions; instead, they add another layer of language support within children's daily ecology. Keim et al. (2024) found that children raised by grandparents or in multigenerational households showed complex patterns in language, communication, and school readiness outcomes, indicating that caregiver arrangements should not be interpreted through simple deficit or advantage models. A balanced interpretation recognises grandparents as potential resources while also considering family structure, caregiving quality, and broader socioeconomic conditions.

The tenth finding is that the current research base remains underdeveloped. Many studies examine home literacy environments without isolating grandparents' specific practices, while studies on grandparental caregiving often focus on health, behaviour, or cognitive outcomes rather than oral language literacy. Dikker et al. (2024) argued that multigenerational family communication requires more sophisticated methods because children's development occurs through interaction among multiple family members. Future research should therefore use observational designs, family interviews, audio recordings, and longitudinal methods to identify how grandparents' talk, responsiveness, and language choices affect children's oral language development.

5. Implications

For early childhood educators, the findings suggest that grandparents should be included in family literacy communication. Schools and kindergartens often send reading guidance only to parents, but in many families grandparents are the adults who spend the most time with children after school. Practical guidance could include encouraging grandparents to ask open-ended questions, retell stories, sing traditional songs, explain daily events, and invite children to describe experiences in full sentences. Such practices align with evidence that home literacy activities and adult-child interaction support oral language and literacy outcomes (Breeze & Halbach, 2024; Nag et al., 2024).

For families, the findings suggest that high-quality oral interaction does not require expensive materials. Grandparents can support oral language literacy through ordinary routines such as cooking, gardening, shopping, walking, storytelling, and family conversations. During these routines, children can learn vocabulary, sequence events, make comparisons, ask questions, and explain their ideas. Lyu (2023) showed that parent-child activities and broader home literacy practices are important components of children's language and literacy development. This insight can be extended to grandparent-child interaction when grandparents are regular caregivers.

For bilingual and multilingual families, the findings suggest that grandparents can help maintain linguistic diversity when they are encouraged to use the home language confidently. Rather than treating heritage language use as a barrier to school language development, families can view it as a resource for identity, cultural continuity, and oral expression. Mak et al. (2025) showed that home literacy practices and language input are linked with oral language development among dual language learners, while Xie et al. (2022) demonstrated that grandparents may shape family language policy. Therefore, family language planning should include grandparents' beliefs and practices.

For researchers, the findings highlight the need for more precise measurement of grandparental contribution. Future studies should distinguish between co-residing and non-co-residing grandparents, maternal and paternal grandparents, caregiving frequency, educational background, language proficiency, emotional closeness, and the types of language practices used with children. Li et al. (2022) noted that grandparental caregiving may influence children directly and indirectly, but more detailed evidence is needed. Such research would help clarify whether grandparents' effects operate mainly through talk quantity, interaction quality, emotional support, cultural transmission, or household organisation.

6. Limitations

This paper has several limitations. First, it is based on a structured literature review rather than original fieldwork, meaning that it cannot provide direct empirical evidence from a specific sample of grandparents and children. Second, the available literature from 2022 onward contains limited studies that focus explicitly on grandparents and oral language literacy as the central topic. As a result, the synthesis draws partly on related studies of home literacy environments, multigenerational households, family language policy, and caregiver-child interaction (Nag et al., 2024; Keim et al., 2024). These limitations should be addressed in future empirical studies.

Another limitation is that the term “oral language literacy” is used differently across research fields. Some studies focus on vocabulary and comprehension, while others emphasise communication, school readiness, bilingual proficiency, or early literacy behaviours. This diversity makes direct comparison difficult. However, it also reflects the complexity of children’s language development in real family contexts. Recent work on home learning environments has similarly shown that culturally sensitive measurement is necessary because standardised indicators may not capture the actual language practices of diverse homes (Nag et al., 2024). Therefore, future research should define oral language literacy clearly and contextually.

7. Conclusion

This review concludes that grandparents can make meaningful contributions to children’s oral language literacy through conversation, storytelling, shared reading, emotional support, heritage language exposure, family language policy, and digitally mediated interaction. Their role is particularly important in multigenerational and Asian family contexts, where grandparents often participate in daily caregiving and home education. However, the contribution of grandparents depends on the quality of interaction, family relationships, language beliefs, and household conditions. Rather than treating grandparents as secondary or invisible caregivers, early childhood research and practice should recognise them as active participants in children’s home language environment (Breeze & Halbach, 2024; Xie et al., 2022).

Overall, grandparents’ contribution to oral language literacy should be understood as an intergenerational form of language support. They help children hear, practise, remember, and value language in ways that are emotionally meaningful and culturally grounded. The most important implication is that children’s oral language literacy does not develop only through school instruction or parent-child reading, but also through the everyday speech, stories, questions, routines, and values shared across generations. Future studies should develop empirical models that examine grandparents’ unique influence on children’s vocabulary, narrative competence, pragmatic communication, bilingual development, and school readiness (Keim et al., 2024; Dikker et al., 2024).

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