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Research Article

Language development and inequality in early childhood: a study in Caribbean Colombian contexts

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Received 12 Nov 2025, Accepted 13 Mar 2026, Published online: 11 Apr 2026

 Cite this article  <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450128.2026.2646858>



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ABSTRACT

Children growing up in structurally disadvantaged contexts face increased risks of delayed language development, yet evidence from the Latin American Caribbean

remains limited. This study examined how personal, prelinguistic, and contextual factors jointly shape expressive language among young children in Caribbean Colombia, a setting marked by sociocultural diversity, poverty, and inequality. A cross-sectional sample of 174 children aged 8–30 months attending early childhood development centers together with their primary caregivers, who completed caregiver-reported versions of the Colombian adaptation of the MacArthur – Bates Communicative Development Inventories. As an exploratory approach, Random Forest regression models were estimated separately for children aged 8–16 months (expressive vocabulary) and 16–30 months (vocabulary size and phrase complexity), including child characteristics, prelinguistic abilities, family composition, and socioeconomic indicators as candidate predictors. In the 8–16-month group, prelinguistic skills (gesture use, imitation, phrase comprehension), age, and caregiver education emerged as key contributors to expressive vocabulary, alongside markers of lower economic burden. In the 16–30-month group, model performance was weaker and less stable; exploratory patterns suggested a growing influence of socioeconomic disadvantage and caregiver education on vocabulary and early syntax, which requires cautious interpretation. Overall, findings highlight how early communicative environments, prelinguistic abilities, and structural constraints intersect in vulnerable communities. Strengthening context-sensitive early stimulation, supporting caregivers living in poverty, and improving access to linguistically rich services may help prevent the consolidation of language and learning inequalities in early childhood.

KEYWORDS:

Early language development prelinguistic communication socioeconomic disadvantage

caregiver education random forest model Caribbean Colombia

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge that this research was conducted within the ECOS Nord France–Colombia project (2021–2024), “Prevention of Communication and Language