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## Context Matters: An Autoethnographic Study on Scaffolding Approach to Improving Pragmatics in Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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### ABSTRACT

Pragmatic language—the social use of language in context—represents one of the most significantly impacted developmental areas in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).



This paper discusses how scaffolding instructional methods can be used to facilitate the acquisition of pragmatic skills in both Malay and English languages, including turn-taking, interpretation of indirect cues, and social rationale in autistic children. A qualitative autoethnographic single-case study was employed to examine structured communication activities in a twelve-month home-based intervention. Observational journals, familiar conversations, recorded photographs, and reflection notes were used as data collection tools. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis to identify patterns in communicative development and emotional regulation. Findings from this case indicated that consistent scaffolding strategies, such as verbal modelling, role-playing, daily routines, positively supported the child's ability to produce the contextually relevant answers and nonverbal communication signals. Additionally, emotional compensation, repetition, and provision of safe learning environment contributed to the development of pragmatic skills, as evidenced in the discussion. This paper contributes to the field of special needs education by presenting a culturally based, low-cost intervention strategy that can be implemented by parents and teachers in Malaysia. Future research is recommended to examine multilingual contexts with larger participant groups in order to improve the universal findings and to better understand the effectiveness of pragmatic language interventions across diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder, Communication, Contextual Language Use, Pragmatics, Scaffolding.

## INTRODUCTION

Effective communication involves the use of language to interpret and respond to social situations, which constitutes a key pragmatic skill. It requires not only knowing what to say, but how, when and to whom to say it (Bishop, 2000). In Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) research, pragmatic difficulties in children are well documented and often persistent. These challenges can be in the form of trouble taking turns during conversation, expression of proper greetings, nonliteral language and interpretation of the intentions and feelings of other people (Paul & Norbury, 2012). Although most interventions focus on vocabulary and grammatical development, little attempt has been made to address the social norms and contextual subtleties of language use, particularly within specific cultural contexts such as the Malaysia, where cultural values and special needs influence communication styles.

Being a mother to a child with neurodiversity and an educator, the first researcher has observed a significant discrepancy between her son's verbal abilities and his social use of language. During conversations with family members, her son frequently interrupted in an awkward manner with unrelated subject matter. His conversation would be rigid, and in many cases, he frequently engaged in repetitive questioning or commentary. For example, he would say, "I have watched *Papa Zola!* (an animated movie released in Malaysia); I have watched *Papa Zola*. Have you watched it, Aunty? Do you want to watch it Aunty?" He would continue to ask countless until someone responded, and he would cease to ask when he was content with the responses.

This is a common feature in the speech of autistic children and typically manifests in two main types: 1) immediate (or fast) echolalia, in which a child repeats words immediately after hearing



them, and 2) delayed echolalia, in which words or phrases are repeated after a period of time, sometimes hours, days, or even longer (Wijaya Purnama & Dewi, 2022).

This observation prompted a further study of how mothers can scaffold pragmatic development through real-life, everyday interactions and home-based activities. This study, in the light of Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding theory and the documented pragmatic challenges of children with ASD in Malaysia, addresses the following research questions:

1. How can parent-mediated scaffolding facilitate the development of pragmatic skills, such as turn-taking and social cues, in a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?
2. How do culturally familiar environments and emotional safety influence the child's transition from silence to intentional speech?

This autoethnographic study explores how a scaffold-based approach can support the development of contextually appropriate Bahasa Melayu and English language skills in a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It contributes to the ongoing discussion on inclusive, family-focused interventions, particularly within the under-researched Malay community in Southeast Asia.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Autistic children often experience pronounced difficulties in pragmatic communication, which involves the socially appropriate use of language (Tager-Flusberg et al., 2005). Contrary to structural language impairments (e.g., grammar or vocabulary), pragmatic impairments affect more subtle and dynamic aspects of communication, including turn-taking, topic maintenance, comprehension of sarcasm, and interpretation of nonverbal cues (Volden & Phillips, 2010). These skill areas are central to social integration and emotional health, yet they often remain undeveloped in autistic individuals, which consequently contributes to social isolation or a lack of understanding.

The interpretation of pragmatics in Malaysia and other non-Western societies is strongly influenced by cultural expectations, politeness norms and hierarchical interaction (Asmah, 1992). However, there is limited research on interventions in terms of cultural and familial scaffolding to support pragmatic development in autistic children. Most studies are conducted in a classroom, by clinicians, or using homogeneous modules. This creates a gap in research on home-based, naturalistic communication support facilitated by speech or occupational therapists (Law et al., 2022; Cirrin et al., 2010; O'Donoghue et al., 2024). However, Schreibman et al. (2015) argued that interventions embedded within daily routines are more effective in addressing social communication deficits compared to isolated training.

This paper draws on the sociocultural theory of learning by Vygotsky (1978), specifically the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children could learn best through guided interaction within their ZPD, especially tasks they cannot accomplish alone but can achieve with assistance. Within the framework of pragmatic language, learning becomes meaningful and personal as parents are able to model,



prompt and reinforce appropriate social communication strategies in their daily interactions. Scaffolding in a supportive emotional environment fosters both communication and emotional regulation, especially when aligned with the child’s interests and routines. Through visual action demonstrations provided by, the children can better comprehend and apply social communication instructions (Padmadewi et al., 2024).

Therefore, scaffolding in this study is seen as a valuable basis for understanding for the learning and development of neurodivergents, as it addresses the potential mismatch between their functional limitations and the cultural practices and opportunities in their environment. When cultural processes are not adapted, participation can be constrained, potentially influencing the children's future development (Tegler & Klang, 2026). Table 1 below highlights the different types of scaffolding the mother-researcher applied during the duration of the study. It is crucial for mothers with special needs children to determine environment, event or daily routine as she perceives appropriate and safe for an engaging activity for the child.

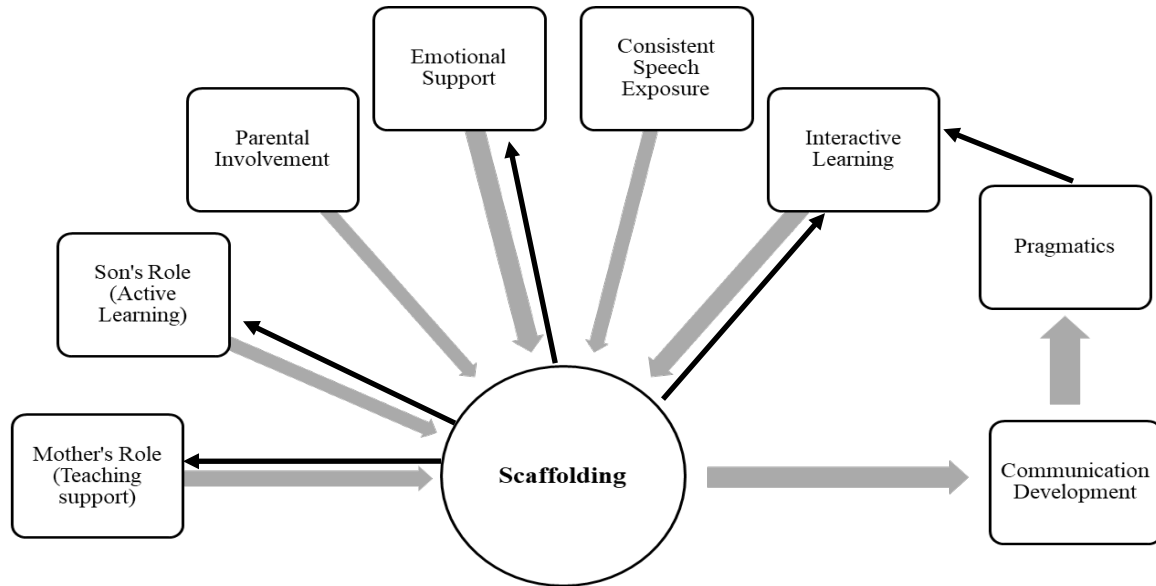
**Table 1.** Types of Scaffolding

Types	Location
Environmental Familiarity	Locations like the <i>hypermarket and park</i> provided a predictable, low-pressure setting where the child knew what to expect.
Cultural Familiarity	Using significant events like <i>Aidilfitri, Gong Xi Fa Cai, Deepavali, Christmas</i> or <i>Merdeka Day</i> provided a strong motivation to interact with others
Intentional Language	Speech was no longer just "practicing words"—it was a tool used to get food or show gratitude or appreciation, giving the child a reason to speak.

***Understanding the Role of Affective Filter and Emotional Safety in ASD***

The success of home-based interventions is the management of the "affective filter," which refers to the psychological barrier that can either hinder or facilitate language acquisition depending on the learner’s emotional state. According to Krashen (1982), high levels of anxiety, low self-confidence, and a lack of motivation increase this filter, effectively "blocking" the necessary input for language processing. In the context of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), this concept is particularly relevant as neurodivergent learners often face heightened social anxiety and sensory overstimulation, which can lead to communicative "silence". Reducing this filter through familiar, low-pressure environments is essential for social-communication growth, as highlighted in recent studies on parent-mediated interventions, such as the PACT model (Green et al., 2010) and Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (Schreibman et al., 2015).

When a mother-researcher creates an "emotional safe harbor" through warmth, humor, and predictable routines, the child's affective filter is lowered. This reduction in emotional volume allows the child to redirect cognitive resources from managing social anxiety toward interpreting complex pragmatic cues, such as turn-taking and honorific language. By fostering emotional safety, the learner feels secure enough to take linguistic risks within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Therefore, understanding the affective filter is not merely an auxiliary concern but a foundational prerequisite for operationalizing scaffolding strategies that support the development of pragmatic competence in autistic children.



**Figure 1.** The Scaffolding Model of Improving Pragmatics for An Autistic Son

Figure 1 demonstrates a theoretical model where the mother-child interaction acts as a central mediating process within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to convert mother-mediated support into functional pragmatic growth. The model represents the transition from supported social communication in real contexts to the internalization of these scaffolded rules into autonomous, independent communication for the autistic child. Scaffolding ensures that assistance is provided within the ZPD, the space between the independent functioning and the potential development of a child through interactions with knowledgeable individuals (Tegler & Klang, 2026). The proposed scaffolding model is supported by its theoretical grounding in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the researcher's lived experience supported by longitudinal school reports, and the peer-validation provided by the co-authors and supervisors.

### ***The Mother as the Primary Scaffolding Agent***

The role of the mother in Figure 1 extends beyond simple instruction, as it involves the responsive shaping of the child's social environment. The mother offers the external framework through the regular exposure of language and involvement of the mother that helps the child navigate complex social cues. This "mother-mediated" procedure is well recognized in autism research, as high maternal responsiveness has been associated with improved outcomes in joint



attention and expressive language development (Siller & Sigman, 2002). When the mother grounds the interaction in emotional support, the child experiences a reduced cognitive load and can focus on the subtleties of verbal communication rather than the anxiety associated with social performance (Green et al., 2010).

### ***Scaffolding as the Facilitating Structure***

The core circle of “Scaffolding” in Figure 1 represents the dynamic interaction between maternal input and the child’s developing communicative competence. In the context of autism, scaffolding is not a strict form of support but an adaptive process that provides “just-enough” assistance within the child’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Learning process in this context is interactive, where the mother will simplify the linguistic input and give visual or gesture feedback that will allow the child to see the linguistic input in a clear context. Research suggests that such responsive, scaffolded responses by mothers enable more synchronized communication and contribute to long-term development in pragmatic language skills (Adamson et al., 2012).

### ***The Mutual Participation of the Autistic Son***

The autistic child is not a passive recipient of information, but an active participant in a mutual feedback loop. As indicated in the "Interactive Learning & Emotional Support" curve, the son's communicative attempts, in spite of his eccentricity, inform the mother about his resultant scaffolding strategies. This circulation is essential in building pragmatics since it prompts the child towards realizing that his or her activities have an impact on other people socially. Children are also trained to use their basic communication skills by practicing listening to instructions in a real-world context, e.g. by saying something like "Please pull that pipe!" or "Please water that part!", and learning a real-life language (Padmadewi et al., 2024). This interaction is crucial for moving beyond rote speech toward functional communication, where the child learns to use language to meet social needs (Jones & Klin, 2013).

### ***Transition from Supported Interaction to Independent Communicator***

The last element of the diagram, Communication Development, is the internalisation of scaffolded support into autonomous pragmatic capability. The child starts generalizing these communicative rules, including turn-taking and topic maintenance, to wider natural contexts as the mother gradually “fades” the scaffolding. This progression aligns with the principle that context matters, whereby pragmatic skills develop most effectively through frequent, naturalistic interactions in everyday life. Current evidence-based practices emphasize that these naturalistic, scaffolded interventions result in more durable and generalized social-communication outcomes than traditional, isolated clinic-based training (Schreibman et al., 2015).

Eventually, this theory shapes an integrative approach to designing a daily home-based, culturally approachable scaffold to develop pragmatic skills in children with ASD.



## METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that combines the features of autobiography and ethnography. At its fundamental, it is an approach that employs the researcher's personal lived experiences as primary data to interpret, analyze, and understand broader cultural experiences and societal phenomena. Unlike traditional social science research, which has historically prioritized objectivity, distance, and the minimization of the researcher's self, autoethnography intentionally positions the researcher at the center of the inquiry.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography is an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). It is a reflexive practice where the researcher does not just observe a culture from the outside but uses their own deep involvement and emotional responses to a culture to illustrate it from the inside out. Therefore, the role of the mother-researcher in this study is defined as a dual-identity practitioner who utilizes her unique domestic access and emotional bond to facilitate and analyse the participant's pragmatic development.

By operating within this dual capacity, the researcher functions as a "responsive engineer" of the child's social environment, moving beyond mere instruction to provide a framework for navigating complex social signals. This position aligns with the autoethnographic tradition described by Ellis and Bochner (2000), where the researcher's lived experience serves as primary data to connect personal narratives to broader cultural phenomena. This dual role is advantageous because high maternal responsivity has been empirically linked to improved joint attention and expressive language in children with autism. As both the primary caregiver and the investigator, the mother-researcher can effectively lower the child's affective filter by creating an "emotional safe harbor," which reduces the cognitive load and communicative anxiety typically associated with social performance. Consequently, the mother-researcher serves as the primary scaffolding agent, ensuring that interventions are not only theoretically grounded in the Zone of Proximal Development but also culturally and emotionally tailored to the child's specific needs.

### Reflexivity and Positionality

In autoethnographic inquiry, the researcher's identity is closely linked to the data collection and analysis process. In this study, the primary researcher assumes the dual role of "mother-researcher," which provided deep, naturalistic access to the participant's communicative environment that an outside clinician might lack. While this intimacy allowed for a nuanced understanding of the child's "emotional safe harbor," it also introduced potential for bias. To mitigate this, the co-authors served as "critical friends," providing an external lens to validate the thematic analysis and ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than solely in maternal sentiment. This collaborative approach allowed the study to balance authentic lived experience with the academic rigor required for qualitative trustworthiness.

This study adopts a qualitative autoethnographic case study design to examine how a mother-researcher scaffolded the development of pragmatic communication in her autistic child through home-based, culturally contextualized interactions. The primary respondent and first researcher in this study is a 52-year-old educator at a public university. Despite over thirty years of tertiary-



level teaching experience, the first researcher initially had limited knowledge regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This professionalism contrasted sharply with her personal experience of struggling with her son after he was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, a speech delay, and little to no communication skills at the age of six when the diagnosis of his disorder was made. Not only that, he also has difficulties with his fine motors, sensory processing, and coordination of movements. The parent-mediated intervention began when the researcher was 43 years old and her son was six. At present, he is 15 years old and is the eldest and only child in the family.

In this study, the methodology was structured in three phases, guided by Vygotsky’s ZPD. The process of data collection is summarized in the Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Process of Data Collection

Steps	Tasks	Mother-Researcher	Participant (Son)	Audit Trail / Evidence
Step 1 Observational & Reflection	Naturalistic observation of pragmatic behaviors across home routines.	Kept detailed field notes, video recordings, and journals to identify the child's independent ZPD boundaries.	Participated in the daily activity	Field notes, video recordings, and reflexive journals.
Step 2 Scaffolding Interventions	Implemented culturally contextualized scaffolds within the ZPD.	Chose materials and settings, and executed the daily activity. Repeated the daily Activity	Stay-engaged in semi-structured interactions in culturally familiar settings.	Audio-visual documentation, dated photographs, and interaction transcripts.
Step 3 Reflection, Thematic Analysis & Trustworthi- -ness	Thematic analysis of behavioral and pragmatic changes.	Analysed all data (videos, journals, transcripts) thematically Conducted triangulation and peer debriefing with co-authors to ensure rigor	Continued to participate in the real-world activity	Coded raw data excerpts and longitudinal school assessment reports.

### Step 1: Observational & Reflection

The first phase, as shown in in Table 1, involved real observation of the child’s existing pragmatic behaviour across daily home routines, including mealtime, playtime, prayer, and grocery shopping. Detailed field notes and video recordings were collected to identify patterns in turn-taking, initiation, and non-verbal cues. The researcher also maintained a reflexive journal to



document personal emotions, challenges, and positionality as both mother and researcher. This phase established the child's baseline abilities and provided insight into the emotional and social context of communication. Figure 2 illustrates the child at a mango stall, ordering his drink while the mother guided him in making decisions and arranging his sentences.



**Figure 2.** The son with ASD was ordering his drink at a mango juice stall (13 June 2018)

Table 3 below provides a quantitative summary of the qualitative data collected during the twelve-month home-based intervention, conducted from 1 January to 31 December 2018. The researcher conducted a total of 30 structured observation sessions, amounting to approximately 30 hours of direct engagement within the child's natural environment. These sessions were supplemented by 30 reflexive journal entries, which served as a primary tool for monitoring the child's emotional state and the researcher's positionality as a mother-researcher.

To ensure the reliability of the thematic analysis, 25 video recordings were utilized to capture subtle shifts in pragmatic behaviors, including eye contact, gestures, and register adjustments. Furthermore, 30 photographic items were archived to document the child's participation in culturally specific settings, such as daily chores, hypermarkets and festive routines. This extensive volume of data provided a rigorous foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis, allowing for the triangulation of evidence across visual, written, and observational sources.



**Table 3:** Summary of Data Collection Quantity (12-Month Duration)

Data Source	Quantity/ Volume	Frequency	Purpose
Observation Sessions	30 sessions	Weekly	To identify baseline pragmatic behaviors and ZPD boundaries.
Total Observation Duration	30 hours	±1 hour per session	To capture real, context-based communication in daily routines.
Reflexive Journal Entries	30 entries	Weekly	To document the researcher's emotions and the child's affective filter status.
Video Recordings	25 recordings	Bi-weekly	To visually analyse non-verbal cues and turn-taking progress.
Photographic Items	Routine-based	30 photographs	To provide visual evidence of real-world scripts and cultural participation.

## Step 2: Scaffolding Interventions

The second phase in Table 1 implemented scaffolded communication strategies using tools such as toys and figurines, real items, role-playing, context-based verbal prompts, and storytelling anchored in daily Malaysian cultural life. These scaffolds were introduced gradually within the child's ZPD. Interactions were semi-structured but embedded in real situations (e.g., market conversations, greeting elders and shoppers, responding during prayer time). These sessions were audio-visually documented and transcribed. Figure 3 illustrates the researcher providing her son



with a hypermarket catalogue to read, identify household items, make selections, and plan purchases.



**Figure 3.** The son with ASD was reading and choosing items from a hypermarket catalogue before he and his mother went shopping for grocery (1 August 2018)

### Step 3: Reflection, Thematic Analysis & Meaning-Making

In Table 2, all data, including videos, journals, transcripts, were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. The behavioural changes, emotional responses, and new pragmatic abilities were organized into themes. The researcher reflected on the child's development and her own evolving identity through narrative entries, integrating both scientific inquiry and lived experience.

Table 4 shows the use of thematic coding and data triangulation to demonstrate a transparent and reliable framework for tracking the participant's transition from inactive to intentional communication. A raw data excerpt, such as the son saying *Nak tiup* (Want to blow) was initially coded as an initiation of speech, which eventually contributed to the broader theme of "From Silence to Intentional Speech". This specific finding was then triangulated using a 2018 video recording and the researcher's observational journal to confirm accuracy. Furthermore, advanced social cues like *Terima kasih Coach* (Thank you Coach) were triangulated against external sources, including a 2024 English Bootcamp photograph and formal school reports, to confirm the internalization of social norms. This triangulation process moderated the essential subjectivity of the mother-researcher role by cross-referencing personal observations with objective visual pictures and professional assessments. By aligning raw data with specific codes and diverse evidence sources, the researcher was able to prove that the pragmatic improvements were consistent across different social contexts and verified by external evaluators.



**Table 4.** Sample of Thematic Coding and Data Triangulation

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Code	Developed Theme	Triangulation Source
Son: <i>Nak tiup</i> (Want to blow).	Initiation of speech.	From Silence to Intentional Speech.	Video recording (Sept 2018) & Observational Journal.
Son: <i>Terima kasih Coach</i> (Thank you Coach).	Audience awareness & Honorifics.	Internalization of Social Norms.	English Bootcamp Photo (2024) & School Class Report.
Researcher Note: "His laughter during playtime reduced his anxiety".	Affective filter reduction.	Emotional Safety as a Catalyst.	Reflexive Journal & Co-author Analysis.

Ethical issues were thoroughly considered, and the core of the process was informed consent, privacy and respectful representation. The autoethnographic approach provided a comprehensive, contextualized insight into the ways in which pragmatic language could be fostered using culturally-conscious scaffolding back at home.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this autoethnographic work indicate how the scaffolded, scenario-based communication within home and outdoor settings in Malaysia supported the gradual and meaningful development of the child’s pragmatic language skills. The researchers identified three key themes obtained from the analysis, which was based on pictures, social media, journals, teachers, and speech therapist reports. Each theme is discussed alongside the corresponding results.

### Theme 1 - From Silence to Intentional Speech: The Power of Context

At the beginning of the result, the child exhibited low participation in conversational turn-taking and frequently used gestures or one-word replies (See Table 4). Nonetheless, when the verbal scaffolds were framed in familiar culturally-sensitive situations, greetings during *Aidilfitri* (Islamic Festival), shopping at the hypermarket, or having conversations about food, the child started to answer more deliberately. An example is his progress between passive observation and engaging in brief interactions such as *Nak tiup?* (translated as, want to blow), *Nak beli komik* (translated as want to buy a comic), and *Terima kasih Coach* (translated as Thank you Coach). These advances show the significance of the familiar environment and the intentional language use (See Table 5). Observations enabled the researchers to trace the child’s transition from passive observation to active, intentional speech. This progress highlights how shifting from a generic environment to a culturally familiar one acts as a catalyst for language development.

**Table 5.** Language Development & Interaction Progress

Timeline	Phrase	Interaction Level	Key Behaviors & Examples
Months 1 - 6	The Passive Phase	Minimal engagement and dependence on non-verbal cues.	Gestures: Using pointing or nodding instead of words. One-Word Responses: Limited to single nouns (e.g., <i>Komik</i> (Comic)). Observation: Watching others without participating in "turn-taking."
Months 7 - 12	The Proactive Phase	Intentional speech within familiar cultural settings.	Initiation: Starting exchanges independently (e.g., <i>Nak makan nasi</i> (Want to eat rice)). Social Scaffolding: Using polite formulas in context (e.g., <i>Terima kasih</i> <i>Coach</i> (Thank you Coach)). Contextual Agency: Using language to achieve a specific goal (playing games, shopping, greeting).

Figure 4 below shows the son was blowing straw in a familiar setting and items at home. Through this activity, he learnt the simple instruction from the mother by listening and following the repeated instructions (scaffolding), variety of facial expressions and hand gestures.



**Figure 4.** The son with ASD was playing a crafted football game (using straw) with his mother (12 September 2018)



Observations indicate that three specific scaffolds facilitated the child's transition from silence to intentional communication, as outlined in Table 5. This shift exemplifies situated learning, in which the environment does more than host the interaction, it actively shapes it. The environment provides rich sensory input that enhances the child's learning experience.

The current research study demonstrates that contextualised scaffolding is important in promoting pragmatic skills in children with autism. Learning can be best achieved through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as theorised by Vygotsky (1978), and in this instance, particularly when guided by a more competent other, in this case, the mother. Language development with regard to initiating speech, turn-taking, and adapting language to social conditions confirms the relevance of this supportive role to the child. Moreover, the comfort level and pragmatic expression ability of the child improved significantly in emotionally secure and culturally familiar environments.

## Theme 2 - Emotional Safety as a Catalyst for Communication

The second theme highlights the role of emotional safety in fostering communication. In the dual role as mother and researcher, she discovered that the most effective catalyst for her child's communication was the thoughtful creation of an "emotional safe harbor" that significantly lowered his affective filter. Warmth and steady acceptance are the qualities that allowed her to alter the emotional volume of the son communicative anxiety, enabling them to move the silent apprehension into a more natural and free-flowing discussion (Krashen, 1982; Dewaele et al., 2025) The repetitive predictability of brisk walking, playing, and storytelling that they engaged in on a daily basis served as safe linguistic scripts, offering the scaffolding needed for the child to take cognitive and communicative risks. This safe space also allowed him to go beyond mere imitation and start involving himself in unthought-out role-play and humor within his Zone of Proximal Development, and this demonstrates that linguistic venturing is impossible without emotional safety (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983).

Table 5 below demonstrates a significant development of his practical flexibility and circumstantial adaptability as the research grew into the seven-to-twelve-month range. He started showing a growing communicative competence, skilfully regulating tone, gestures, and honorifics according to the social hierarchies of the Malaysian cultural context (Hymes, 1972; Taguchi, 2015). This was evident in his respectful use of phrases such as *Thank you Coach* (Thank you Coach), or the adaptive use of *Makcik* (Aunty) and *Abang* (Brother) in the hypermarkets, or *Adik* (Younger brother/sister) in the English Bootcamp. His ability to differentiate his register that showed a strong inclusion of the sociocultural norms. This transition from passive to active agency suggests that when placed in a context of emotionally evocative and culturally recognizable situations, a child not only acquires vocabulary but also learns how to navigate the social environment (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

As the mother-researcher embraced her dual identity, emotional bonding and acceptance played a significant role in the child's willingness to speak. The researcher was allowed to create scenarios that involved warmth, humour, and repetition, such as short stories, playtime or prayer routines. These supportive contexts encouraged the child to participate more actively. His

growing confidence was evident in spontaneous role-play, laughter during play, and the ability to adjust greetings and expressions appropriately according to social context.

By integrating the concept of Emotional Safety with the cultural contexts mentioned previously, the researchers observed a clear shift from rigid, limited communication to natural, socially aware language use. During this phase, the child not only acquired new vocabulary, but also internalized the social rules of language—pragmatics—enabling meaningful connections with others.

**Table 6.** Interaction and Pragmatic Progress Tracking

Timeline	Interaction Progress (Engagement)	Pragmatic Development (Social Usage)
Months 1 – 6	<b>Unintended &amp; Dependent:</b> Primarily responds to direct prompts. Engagement is practical but lacks "spark" or spontaneity.	<b>Accurate &amp; Rigid:</b> Uses language in a "fixed" way. Reliant on single-word labels or basic gestures to express needs.
7 - 12	<b>Active &amp; Collaborative:</b> Initiates play and participates in repetitive routines (short stories, playtime, prayers) with warmth and humor.	<b>Adaptive &amp; Contextual:</b> Adjusts greetings and expressions based on who they are talking to. Understands social distinctions and uses humor/laughter to bond.

The practical use of his communication skills was evident during an English Bootcamp, where he gained the experience a transition from the role of student to that of leader, acting as a facilitator and referee (see Figure 5). This setting provided opportunities to practice social pragmatics, the ability to adapt language to the social context and the relationships between speakers. He used the honorifics and the age-based registers, which are critical elements of pragmatic competence in Malaysian social interaction, by addressing participants as *Adik-Adik* (Younger Siblings) while adopting the persona of an *Abang* (Older Brother).



**Figure 5.** The son with ASD was helping his mother at an English Bootcamp (a safe environment) (2024)



This confidence in the real world corresponds to his longitudinal school observations, which document his progress from mastering simple sound imitation in 2019 to successfully interacting with classmates in 2023 (SKBLM, 2019; SKBLM, 2023). His ability to navigate these roles effectively suggests that his verbal communication has evolved beyond academic mastery to practical, autonomous social leadership.

### Theme 3 - Scaffolding Shapes Pragmatic Growth

Visual prompts, real objects, storytelling, playtime, and real-world scripts were used to give the child an idea of taking turns, the correct tone, and awareness of the audience. Over time, he started distinguishing between the way to address peers and elders. Internalisation of the language norms of social behaviour was manifested in his polite expressions, such as *Boleh saya minta?* (Can I ask?) or *Pandai Abang buat Apom* (You are skillful at making a local dessert, Brother). Strategic scaffolding by the mother aligned with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), gradually supported the child in achieving greater linguistic independence. Table 7 below shows the interaction and pragmatic progress of the son over the one-year intervention period.

**Table 7.** Interaction and Pragmatic Progress: From Scaffolding to Independence

Timeline	Interaction Progress (Engagement)	Pragmatic Progress (Social Usage)
Months 1 – 6	<b>The Observer:</b> Minimal turn-taking; the child largely follows the lead of the adult. Relies on “one-way” communication or simple responses.	<b>Fixed Register:</b> Does not differentiate between audiences. Language is used for basic needs without adjusting for tone or social status.
Months 7 – 12	<b>The Active Participant:</b> High degree of “linguistic independence.” Initiates exchanges, engages in rhythmic turn-taking, and uses storytelling to connect.	<b>Audience Awareness:</b> Internalized social norms. Differentiates speech patterns between peers and elders (e.g., "Terima kasih cikgu" vs. informal peer talk).

All in all, pragmatic development was non-linear and characterized by repeated exposure, emotional regulation and the child’s active engagement. This paper highlights the role of identity, emotion, and environment intersection in providing an effective and safe learning context for children with autism to acquire pragmatic language skills.

The mother-researcher facilitated the child’s transition over a seven-to-twelve-month period by orchestrating the strategic scaffolding instruments tailored to the transition between silence and activity. Using crude visual cues and narratives, she provided a cognitive framework that enabled the child to develop a “mental map” which enabled him to anticipate and navigate abstract social rules such as turn-taking (Mercer, 2000; Wood et al., 1976). This process was further reinforced through real-life scripts, where the child learned to negotiate between the passive and active

competence within culturally rich environments, such as hypermarkets (Bruner, 1983). The key to this development was the creation of a “ZPD Bridge,” in which the mother-researcher carefully provided language support, such as *Boleh saya minta?* (May I ask?), and then gradually withdrew the support to promote linguistic autonomy progressively (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Table 8 shows the systematic application of scaffolding techniques within the participant’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) functioned as a primary mechanism in facilitating the child’s transition from a passive observer to an independent social communicator. As evidenced in the table, the researcher guided the participant from baseline behaviors, such as minimal engagement and an inability to differentiate social registers, toward greater communicative competence through targeted interventions. For example, by utilizing Verbal Modeling to provide sentence starters like *Boleh saya minta?* (May I ask?), the child eventually reached a level of independence where he could initiate requests for items, such as a comic book, without any prompting.

Similarly, role-playing, gameplay, and the use of cultural routines, such as practicing greetings for *Aidilfitri*, enabled the participant to gradually adjust his register and honorifics independently, successfully using phrases like *Terima kasih Coach* in real-world settings. This progression was facilitated by the researcher’s ability to "operationalize" the ZPD by providing "just-enough" support during interactions. Such support reduced the cognitive load and allowed the child to internalize complex social scripts. As the child gained confidence, the mother-researcher progressively "faded" or withdrew the support, transforming clinical-style practice into functional, situated learning within the family's daily routines. Therefore, the successful transition from supported interaction to autonomous pragmatic capability confirms that culturally relevant scaffolding is essential for fostering self-possessed social agency in children with ASD.

**Table 8:** Operationalization of Scaffolding within the ZPD

Scaffolding Technique	Baseline (Independent Level)	Intervention Action (ZPD Support)	Evidence of Mastery (Fading)
Verbal Modeling & Prompting	Participant remained silent or used single-word echoes like <i>Komik</i> (Comic).	The mother provided sentence starters or polite formulas like <i>Boleh saya minta?</i> (May I ask?).	Participant independently initiated <i>Nak beli komik</i> (Want to buy a comic) without prompting.
Role-Playing & Real-World Scripts	Inability to differentiate between peer and elder registers.	Mother practiced "market conversations" and greetings for elders (e.g., using <i>Makcik</i> ).	Participant independently adjusted register by saying <i>Terima kasih Coach</i> to a facilitator.
Visual Cues & Real Objects	Minimal engagement with auditory instructions alone.	Mother used hypermarket catalogues and toys to provide a "mental map" of	Participant navigated high-stakes negotiation at English Bootcamp using toys, tools



Scaffolding Technique	Baseline (Independent Level)	Intervention Action (ZPD Support)	Evidence of Mastery (Fading)
Cultural Routines	Low participation during unfamiliar social events.	the interaction. Mother embedded language into familiar events like <i>Aidilfitri</i> or prayer routines.	to persuade a choice. Participant initiated specific cultural greetings independently during festive visits.

The most significant change that was observed during the second half of the year was the child’s internalization of sociopragmatic norms, as he began to demonstrate a greater awareness of cultural etiquette. This development was evident in his ability to adjust his tone and volume according to the social setting, indicating a shift from memorized language use to more autonomous social communication (Thomas, 1983; Taguchi, 2015). The researchers also witnessed a high-level pragmatic shift when he began to navigate social hierarchies through the accurate use of honorifics and by adjusting his register when addressing peers or elders, as illustrated by his spontaneous use of *Terima kasih Coach* (Thank you Coach). This shift implies that he had internalized the sociocultural scripts of his environment through situated interaction and had begun to transform them into a personal communicative repertoire for navigating diverse cultural contexts (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Other than pictures, the findings are supported by three assessment reports below in 2019, 2022, and 2023 have demonstrated the analysis below (See Figure 6 and 7). These reports provide further evidence of pragmatic and verbal development of communication of the child over the period from 2019 to 2023.

### 2019 School Report: Initial Verbal Skills

During his early schooling, he exhibited a good ability in basic verbal interaction and receptive language. He was rated as *Menguasai* (Mastering) in several key communication skills, including responding to auditory stimuli with words and sharing simple information about himself (see Figure 6, SKBLM, 2019). At this stage, his pragmatic language use was primarily reflected in his capability to comprehend and answer the functional senses of “yes” or “no” (SKBLM, 2019). Although he was able to produce vocal sounds and imitate those, he heard around him, the use of formal social-pragmatic markers, such as polite greetings, still required further guidance and instruction (SKBLM, 2019).



**SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK**  
08000, SUNGAI PETANI,  
KEDAH DARUL AMAN

**BAHASA DAN KOMUNIKASI**  
**MASALAH PEMBELAJARAN SPESIFIK**

Nama Murid	M
No. MY KID	94
Jantina	
Kelas	2
Nama Guru	N
Tarikh Pelaporan	2

Tahap Penguasaan Keseluruhan: **93.33 %**

Berikut adalah pernyataan bagi Tahap Penguasaan keseluruhan: **Menguasai** : Murid dapat menguasai semua/ hampir semua kemahiran dengan baik dan berkesan

MATA PELAJARAN	KEMAHIRAN	TAHAP PENGUSAHAAN	TAFSIRAN
Bahasa Melayu	1. Memberi tindak balas pada perkara yang didengar	3	Menguasai
	2. Memberi tindak balas mengenai diri sendiri	3	Menguasai
Bahasa Inggeris	3. memahami makna perkataan ya atau tidak dan boleh memberi tindak balas	3	Menguasai
	4. Mengeluarkan bunyi secara bebas	3	Menguasai
Matematik	5. Mengajuk bunyi yang didengar	3	Menguasai
	6. Mengecam objek secara rawak	3	Menguasai
Pendidikan Seni Kreatif	7. Melafazkan ucapan bertatasusila secara berpandu	2	Menguasai dengan bimbingan
	8. Menamakan objek di persekitaran murid	2	Menguasai dengan bimbingan
Seni Muzik	9. menyebut huruf vokal secara rawak	3	Menguasai
	10. menyebut huruf vokal secara berpandu	3	Menguasai

Ulasan guru:

**NUR ZAHIDAH BINTI SUBRI** (GURU KELAS)      **ENCIK MOHAMAD FAZLEEL BIN SAMAT** (GURU BESAR)      **FAZLIHATI HADIN** (IBU BAPA / PENJAGA)

SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK      SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK      SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK

TARIKH:      TARIKH:      TARIKH: 14/7/2019

Figure 6. A School Report by Class Teacher in 2019

### 2022 School Report: Social Integration and Receptive Pragmatics

By 2022, the child’s communication skills had developed to facilitate more effective social integration in the classroom (See Figure 7). He indicated a growing level of pragmatic competence in everyday interactions when his teachers mentioned that he could “socialize with his classmates well” (SKBLM, 2022). Receptive language was his strength, and he was reported to be able to follow verbal instructions correctly (SKBLM, 2022). His assessment results during this evaluation period show that he was at a Mastery Level 3 (TP 3) in both the Bahasa Melayu and the English language, which means that he had achieved a satisfactory level of verbal and written communication according to the national curriculum standards (SKBLM, 2022).

### 2023 School Report: Practical and Narrative Communication

The 2023 School Class Report in Figure 7 indicates further improvement in the child’s pragmatic communication skills. He progressed beyond simple replies to more intricate narrative tasks, like reading stories and speaking about the information that he sees in literary and non-literary texts (SKBLM, 2023). His response to basic information in “easy communication” situations indicates increased confidence in routine verbal interactions (SKBLM, 2023). Moreover, his teachers noted that he continued to “communicate well with peers” and demonstrated good listening skills. This highlights the ongoing development of the practical aspects of turn-taking and interactions with peers (SKBLM, 2023).

**PELAPORAN PENTAKSIRAN BILIK DARJAH**

NAMA MURID: IMAN HARITH BIN AZMAN  
 KELAS: 4 MAWAR  
 JAJINTAN  
 PELAPORAN: BENTAKSIRAN PERTINGKSAHAN TAHUN  
 SEKOLAH: SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK  
 06000 SUNGAI PETANI, KEDAH

TARIKH: 31/7/2022

MATA PELAJARAN	TAPAK PENGIKHTISAN KESELURUHAN	PENYATAAN
BAHASA MELAYU	TP 3	Iman mencapai pengetahuan dan kemahiran bahasa yang memuaskan. Dia dapat berfikir dan memberi maklum balas dan maklum ringkas dalam komunikasi mudah untuk memberikan alasan mudah di samping membaca, memahami serta dapat berfikir tentang maklumat dalam karya sastera dan karya bukan sastera secara ringkas di samping menulis, mencairi ayat mudah dan menghasilkan serta mengedit penulisan mudah dengan tanpa bimbingan guru.
BAHASA INGGERIS	TP 3	Iman Can display satisfactory achievement to understand and answer simple questions, instructions, main ideas and supporting details of texts given. Shows satisfactory ability to use picture dictionary, and to organise words to communicate and to write understandable words and phrases with correct punctuation and spelling, with appropriate language form and style with some guidance.
MATEMATIK	TP 3	Iman Murid menggunakan pengetahuan untuk melaksanakan sesuatu kemahiran pada suatu situasi
PENDURUSAN KESEHATAN	TP 3	Iman Murid boleh menjaga kebersihan dan keselamatan diri semasa berada didalam atau diluar rumah serta boleh menggunakan serta dan anggotia tubuh.
PENDURUSAN KESEHATAN (PENGUNJUKAN)	TP 3	Iman Murid boleh menjaga kebersihan dan keselamatan diri semasa berada didalam atau diluar rumah serta boleh menggunakan serta dan anggotia tubuh.
PENDIDIKAN ISLAM	TP 3	Iman Murid boleh memberi respons tentang ilmu al-Quran hadis, akidah, ibadah, sirah dan akhirah dengan betul
PENDIDIKAN MORAL	TP 3	Iman Tidak Berkenaan
PENDIDIKAN JASMANI DAN PENDIDIKAN SUKSES	TP 3	Iman Mengaplikasikan pergerakan dan manipulatif atlatn dalam aktiviti rekreasi atau permainan tradisional bagi meningkatkan keceriaan dan kesihatan.
PENDIDIKAN SENI VISUAL	TP 3	Iman Mengaplikasikan pengetahuan dan kemahiran kesenian dalam aktiviti penerokaan dan amali seni dengan bimbingan dan sokongan yang minima.
PENDIDIKAN SAINS, SOSIAL DAN ALAM SEKITAR	TP 3	Iman Murid menggunakan pengetahuan untuk melaksanakan sesuatu kemahiran pada suatu situasi
PENDIDIKAN TEKNOLOGI MAKLUMAT DAN KEMAHIRAN HIDUP ASAS	TP 3	Iman Mengaplikasikan Kemahiran asas Teknologi Maklumat Komunikasi (TMK) dalam aktiviti penerokaan dengan bimbingan dan sokongan yang minima.
		Iman boleh mengononekan penerokaan kemahiran user komputer untuk mengononekan serta menggunakan pengetahuan dan kemahiran asas untuk memilih peralatan dan membuat tugasan beresuaian dengan jenis kerja di bengah.

ULASAN GURU KELAS: Iman dapat beresolasi dengan baik bersama rakan di dalam kelas dan mendengar arahan dengan baik

EN. NICHARAD FAZLEI BIN SAMAT  
GURU BESAR  
SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK

MUHAMMAD HANIF BIN RAZI  
GURU KELAS

Tanda Tangan Ibu Bapa/ Penjaja

**PELAPORAN PENTAKSIRAN BILIK DARJAH**

NAMA MURID: IMAN HARITH BIN AZMAN  
 KELAS: 4 MAWAR  
 JAJINTAN  
 PELAPORAN: BENTAKSIRAN PERTINGKSAHAN TAHUN  
 SEKOLAH: SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK  
 06000 SUNGAI PETANI, KEDAH

TARIKH: 17/9/2023

MATA PELAJARAN	TAPAK PENGIKHTISAN KESELURUHAN	PENYATAAN
BAHASA MELAYU	TP 3	Iman mencapai pengetahuan dan kemahiran bahasa yang memuaskan. Dia dapat berfikir dan memberi maklum balas dan maklum ringkas dalam komunikasi mudah untuk memberikan alasan mudah di samping membaca, memahami serta dapat berfikir tentang maklumat dalam karya sastera dan karya bukan sastera secara ringkas di samping menulis, mencairi ayat mudah dan menghasilkan serta mengedit penulisan mudah dengan tanpa bimbingan guru.
BAHASA INGGERIS	TP 3	Iman Can display satisfactory achievement to understand and answer simple questions, instructions, main ideas and supporting details of texts given. Shows satisfactory ability to use picture dictionary, and to organise words to communicate and to write understandable words and phrases with correct punctuation and spelling, with appropriate language form and style with some guidance.
MATEMATIK	TP 3	Iman Murid menggunakan pengetahuan untuk melaksanakan sesuatu kemahiran pada suatu situasi
PENDURUSAN KESEHATAN	TP 3	Iman Murid boleh menjaga kebersihan dan keselamatan diri semasa berada didalam atau diluar rumah serta boleh menggunakan serta dan anggotia tubuh.
PENDURUSAN KESEHATAN (PENGUNJUKAN)	TP 4	Iman Murid boleh menjaga kebersihan dan keselamatan diri semasa berada didalam atau diluar rumah serta boleh menggunakan serta dan anggotia tubuh dengan betul.
PENDIDIKAN ISLAM	TP 3	Iman Murid boleh memberi respons tentang ilmu al-Quran hadis, akidah, ibadah, sirah dan akhirah dengan betul
PENDIDIKAN MORAL	TP 3	Iman Tidak Berkenaan
PENDIDIKAN JASMANI DAN PENDIDIKAN SUKSES	TP 3	Iman Mengaplikasikan pergerakan dan manipulatif atlatn dalam aktiviti rekreasi atau permainan tradisional bagi meningkatkan keceriaan dan kesihatan.
PENDIDIKAN SENI VISUAL	TP 3	Iman Mengaplikasikan pengetahuan dan kemahiran kesenian dalam aktiviti penerokaan dan amali seni dengan bimbingan dan sokongan yang minima.
PENDIDIKAN SAINS, SOSIAL DAN ALAM SEKITAR	TP 3	Iman Murid menggunakan pengetahuan untuk melaksanakan sesuatu kemahiran pada suatu situasi
PENDIDIKAN TEKNOLOGI MAKLUMAT DAN KEMAHIRAN HIDUP ASAS	TP 3	Iman Mengaplikasikan Kemahiran asa Teknologi Maklumat Komunikasi (TMK) dalam aktiviti penerokaan dengan bimbingan dan sokongan yang minima.
		Iman boleh mengononekan cara penerokaan kemahiran dan kemahiran di bengah, serta menggunakan pengetahuan dan kemahiran asas untuk memilih peralatan dan membuat tugasan beresuaian dengan jenis kerja di bengah.

ULASAN GURU KELAS: Iman dapat berinteraksi dengan baik bersama rakan di dalam kelas dan mampu mendengar dan

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GURU BESAR  
SK BANDAR LAGUNA MERBOK

MUHAMMAD HANIF BIN RAZI  
GURU KELAS

Tanda Tangan Ibu Bapa/ Penjaja

TP 1      TP 3      TP 4

Faham sepenuhnya terarah      Faham sepenuhnya terarah      Faham sepenuhnya terarah

Figure 7. A School Class Report by Class Teacher in 2022 and 2023

Pragmatic skills were never taught in isolation but incorporated into daily life interactions such as exploring toy shops, shopping at hypermarkets, participating in prayers, and engaging in storytelling, where language served a clear social function. This emphasizes the idea of “context counts,” particularly in the case of the learner who may not necessarily learn unwritten social rules through incidental exposure. Consistent with the scholastic achievements recorded in his school reports, Figure 8 depicts a significant advancement in the child’s practical use of communication. During a visit to Mr. DIY, the son demonstrated not only basic expressive language but also emerging persuasive and negotiation skills. In the attempt to influence a purchasing decision, he presented several toy options and actively argued for his preferred choice. This two-way interaction involved more than the use of words, in which it required interpreting subtle cues, tailoring arguments to the listener, and applying emotional awareness to guide the conversation toward a desired outcome.

Such practical implementation is consistent with his longitudinal evaluations. In 2019, school reports described him as a student who rarely engaged with classmates during interactions (See Figure 6), but in 2023, he was described as a student “who interacts with classmates well” (SKBLM, 2019; SKBLM, 2023). Although his reports consistently show a Mastery Level 3 in language, indicating he meets national standards, his ability to handle more complex social interactions, like negotiation, suggests his confidence and verbal reasoning skills are gradually improving (SKBLM, 2023).

### Limitation of Study

While this autoethnographic case study offers deep, culturally grounded insights into pragmatic development, its findings are limited by issues of generalizability and potential researcher subjectivity. As a single-case design focusing on one eight-year-old participant (during the data collection), the outcomes represent a specific individual journey within a unique Malaysian



familial context, which may not be statistically representative of the broader ASD population. Furthermore, because the study utilizes longitudinal data spanning several years, it is difficult to isolate the specific effects of scaffolding from natural developmental maturation. The dual role of the mother-researcher, while providing unparalleled real access and an "emotional safe" also introduces subjectivity that could influence interpretations of the child's social progress. Additionally, the study's heavy reliance on culturally specific scripts—such as *Aidilfitri* greetings and local hypermarket interactions—limits the direct applicability of findings to other cultural contexts. Consequently, these limitations highlight the need for future research to apply similar scaffolding frameworks across larger, more diverse groups and multilingual settings to validate the scalability of home-based pragmatic interventions.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The researcher's experience navigating her dual identity as both mother and investigator was particularly noteworthy and extended beyond mere language acquisition. Initially, the child existed in a state of "Silence," with communication largely limited to basic gestures and one-word echoes. However, through the deliberate integration of verbal scaffolds into familiar daily routines, the researcher observed a transformation, as these early silent responses gradually developed into intentional, purposeful speech.

This autoethnographic study demonstrates that pragmatic language development in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a non-linear process driven by the intersection of identity, emotion, and environment. By the end of the twelve-month intervention, the following answers to the research questions were established:

### Facilitating Pragmatic Skills through Parent-Mediated Scaffolding

The study confirms that parent-mediated scaffolding—utilizing verbal modelling, role-playing, and daily routines—acts as a primary mechanism for transitioning an autistic child from passive observation to intentional speech. By operationalizing the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the mother-researcher provided "just-enough" support, such as sentence starters like *Boleh saya minta?* (May I ask?), which the child eventually internalized to initiate requests independently. This systematic assistance enabled the child to master complex social cues, including turn-taking and the use of age-appropriate honorifics such as *Terima kasih Coach*.

A pivotal moment occurred when clinical-style practice was embedded in culturally rich, real-world settings, such as the *Bazar Ramadhan* (Ramadhan Food Stall), *pasar malam* (Night market) or the music of *Aidilfitri*. In these contexts, language became meaningful and functional. The child moved beyond rote repetition to purposeful communication, using language to navigate his environment. His ability to switch to active listening and confidently express phrases such as, *Nak komik*, or say a polite, *Terima kasih Coach*, provided a strong demonstration of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) at work.



## The Influence of Culturally Familiar Environments and Emotional Safety

The findings indicate that the creation of an "emotional safe" significantly lowered the participant's affective filter, thereby reducing communicative anxiety and enabling spontaneous use of humor and role-play. Shifting the intervention from generic settings to culturally recognizable Malaysian contexts—such as the *Bazar Ramadhan* or local hypermarkets—provided the child with "mental maps" that made abstract social rules predictable and manageable. Consequently, the combination of emotional security and cultural familiarity acted as a catalyst, facilitating the child's progression from reactive silence to self-directed social agency.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of this journey was observing the internalization of social norms. By combining the careful application of visual clues and practical scripts, the mother-researcher provided the child with the "mental maps" he required to know about the intricacies of *Budi Bahasa*. Observing him independently adjust tone and register, addressing a teacher politely with *Terima kasih cikgu* and a coach with *Terima kasih Coach*, demonstrated that his communication had progressed beyond functional speech to a level of genuine pragmatic mastery.

The researchers concluded that the strongest weapon was not a textbook, but the emotional protection of being in the connection. The mother-researcher turned the son's warmth, humor, and the familiar comfort of playtime and prayer routines down to reduce his "affective filter," so that he had a safe place to fail, and later, to succeed. This emotionally supportive environment gave him freedom of spontaneous role-play and humour, which are key indicators of genuine linguistic confidence.

This research confirms the relevance of scaffold, context-based interactions in the development of pragmatic communication in children with autism. Systematic routines have also been shown to influence the socio-communicative requirements of the autistic learner (Chhetri, 2025). The child in the present study showed quantifiable improvements in the use of language in a social and purposeful way through real, emotionally safe, and culturally relevant interactions. The role of the mother as a facilitator who was sensitive was very critical in creating meaningful learning opportunities and supporting the child's communicative development.

This research provides a practical, low-cost model for caregivers and educators in Malaysia. It adds to the growing body of research on culturally responsive, parent-led interventions for neurodivergent learners. It also provides actionable insights for teachers, speech therapists, as well as caregivers who aim to develop pragmatic competence through personalised, real-life-based, and emotionally supportive approaches.



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## **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of Gemini for the purpose of organizing research observations into theoretical frameworks and ensuring APA citation accuracy. The tool supported the author in structuring the "mother-researcher" narrative and refining the linguistic synthesis of the child's pragmatic growth. The authors reviewed all AI-generated suggestions for academic rigour and assumed full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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## **Authors' Contributions**

The contributions of all authors are recommended to be described in the following manner: The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Bakar, R. A. Kasim, A. A. M., Mohamad, N. H.S., data collection: Nordin, R.; analysis and interpretation of results: Nordin, R. and Bakar, R. A.; draft manuscript preparation: Nordin, R. A. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.