First, Second, Native, Foreign, Heritage, Dominant, and Mother Tongue: Clear or Confusing?

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Identifying and naming the languages people use is more complicated than it may seem. The terms used to describe them, such as first language (L1), mother tongue (MT), native language (NL), second language (L2), foreign language (FL), heritage language (HL), and dominant language (DL), are often applied in overlapping or inconsistent ways. As a result, confusion can arise in research, classrooms, and policy discussions. To address this issue, 22 peer-reviewed articles published in 2025 that defined or compared these terms were reviewed. The findings show that each term has a distinct focus. For example, L1 refers to the order of acquisition. In addition, MT and HL emphasize culture and family ties. Moreover, L2 and FL differ in terms of everyday use. Finally, DL reflects social power and institutions. Clarifying these differences is important for improving research accuracy and helping schools and policies respect multilingual learners. Despite these insights, the study has limitations. It relied mainly on how terms are defined in literature and did not examine how teachers, students, and policymakers understand them in practice. Another limitation is that language practices such as translanguaging and code-switching often blur the boundaries between languages, making it difficult to place them into strict categories. For this reason, future research should examine how these practices intersect with language-related terms and to what extent they expose the limits of such labels in capturing real multilingual experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language and identity are inseparably intertwined, with linguistic practices functioning as markers of ethnic affiliation and cultural continuity (Guo et al., 2025; Gupta et al., 2025). Alsahafi (2025) also said the complex relationship between language and ethnic identity is well established. This link extends to shared cultural experiences, rituals, literature, and historical narratives, making language a highly visible symbol of an ethnic group (Alsahafi, 2025). In multilingual societies, languages are more than communication tools; they reflect thoughts, attitudes, and worldviews, having a sense

of belonging within communities (Alsahafi, 2025; Grigorieva & Protassova, 2025; Moraru et al., 2025).

In education, the language of instruction plays a critical role in both cognitive development and social interaction (Brown & Lee, 2025). Mother Tongue Education (MTE) is widely recognized as the most effective approach to early childhood learning, as children acquire knowledge more efficiently when taught in their native language (NL) (Mhindu, 2025; Osimen et al., 2025). Proficiency in the mother tongue (MT) also facilitates the acquisition of additional languages and strengthens higher-order cognitive functions such as executive control, planning, and problem-solving (Barbaran et al., 2025; Saldivar et al., 2025). Yet, the legacy of colonialism has often elevated foreign languages (FL) in educational systems, creating barriers to comprehension and providing access to global opportunities (Hamad et al., 2025; Tandih, 2025). This tension continues to fuel debates on the relative merits of foreign-language instruction versus native-language education.

On the other hand, language policy and planning add another layer of complexity. While policymakers often craft top-down frameworks, various agents interpret and enact these to reflect social power dynamics and shape actual language use (Lopera & Sierra, 2025). In higher education, the drive for internationalization has reinforced the dominance of English, sometimes at the expense of other languages (Lopera & Sierra, 2025; Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2025; Chang, 2025). So, scholars have called for a balanced multilingual approach that recognizes local and global languages and seeks to preserve linguistic diversity (Mendoza et al., 2025; Moraru et al., 2025; Karpava et al., 2025).

As observed, there is a proliferation of overlapping language terminologies, making such concerns even more complex. Terms such as first language (L1), native language (NL), and mother tongue (MT) are often used interchangeably, but their meanings differ depending on context. For instance, psycholinguistic research typically associates L1 with chronological order of acquisition, whereas MT and NL carry stronger sociocultural and emotional connotations tied to identity and heritage (Alsahafi, 2025; Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem, 2025; Grigorieva & Protassova, 2025). Similarly, distinctions between second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) are often blurred. Both refer to languages acquired after the L1, but L2 generally involves exposure in daily environments, whereas FL refers to school-based learning with limited opportunities for use outside the classroom (Hahl et al., 2025; Prasatyo et al., 2025). Aside from this, heritage language (HL) introduces another dimension. Unlike L1 and MT, HL refers to a language transmitted across generations, often marked by uneven competencies. Accordingly, HL speakers may be orally proficient but have limited literacy skills due to minimal formal instruction and language shift in dominant-language societies (Dünkel et al., 2025; Nurjaleka et al., 2025). This implies that language identity is not always tied to actual proficiency, wherein some individuals strongly identify with an HL they scarcely use, while others do not (Alsahafi, 2025; Giménez & Masid Blanco, 2025).

Even at first glance, the reviewed studies point to concerns that deserve closer attention. The overlapping but non-identical nature of language-related terms shows

how unclear definitions blur our understanding of how these categories work in practice. For instance, equating MT with L1 can create the mistaken assumption that all children begin school with the same linguistic background, when many enter with heritage languages with little or no literacy support. Likewise, using FL and L2 as if they mean the same thing overlooks major differences in exposure and opportunities for use, like differences that matter for curriculum design and assessment. These kinds of slippages are not just academic quibbles; they influence classroom practices, shape policy directions, and ultimately affect how learners experience education (Atkinson et al., 2025; Hamad et al., 2025; Ortiz-Villalobos et al., 2025; Tandih, 2025). Thus, this study aims to clarify these concepts, which is vital because even the "basic" task of getting categories right underpins stronger theories, more accurate policies, and more inclusive teaching. This study's focus on this point is distinctive, achieved by carefully synthesizing and differentiating key language-related categories. It highlights how a clearer grasp of these terms can bridge debates, connect research with practice, and help create educational approaches that respond to multilingual realities.

2. METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to clarify and differentiate key language-related concepts such as first language, native language, mother tongue, second language, and others that are frequently used interchangeably or ambiguously in applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and multilingual education. An SLR was considered appropriate because it offers a structured and transparent process for synthesizing conceptual trends and definitions across disciplines (Okoli, 2021).

The search query used Boolean operators (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("first language" OR "native language" OR "mother tongue" OR "home language" OR "second language" OR "foreign language" OR "heritage language" OR "dominant language")) to capture literature referencing the target terms. It was screened using defined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1). Scopus provides automation tools that allow filtering based on available parameters such as subject area, document type, publication stage, source type, language, publication year, access type, keyword relevance, and topical relevance, including full-text availability.

Table 1. Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Articles in the Present Study

Parameter	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Database	Scopus	Other databases not included in this review
Subject Area	Articles classified under Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, or Psychology	Articles outside these subject areas
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Editorials, book chapters, conference papers, dissertations, grey literature
Publication Stage	Final-stage publications	Articles in Press (as of July 16, 2025)

Parameter	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Source Type	Journal articles only	Books, book series, trade journals, conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English articles
Publication Year	Published in 2025	Articles published outside 2025
Access Type	Open-access articles with accessible full-text (e.g., PDF)	Articles marked open access but without a downloadable or viewable full text
Keywords	Articles that explicitly include and conceptually engage with at least one of the target language-related terms in their keywords, abstract, or main discussion	Articles that do not reference or focus on these language-related terms in a meaningful or conceptual way
Topical Relevance	Articles that conceptually define, compare, or clarify key language-related terms	Articles that do not engage in definitional or theoretical discussion

Here, the Scopus database was selected as the primary source not merely because it was accessible to the researcher but due to its recognized credibility and extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences, arts, and humanities (Martín-Martín et al., 2021). In contrast to ScienceDirect, which is limited to Elsevier publications, Scopus indexes research from a wider range of major publishers such as Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley. This makes it more suitable for conceptual mapping and bibliometric analysis (de Rijke et al., 2022). Subject areas were limited to social sciences, arts and humanities, and psychology to reflect the study's focus on language, identity, and educational contexts, where precise understanding of language-related terms is especially important (Sato & Hasegawa, 2023). To ensure methodological rigor and the reliability of findings, only final-stage, peer-reviewed journal articles were included, in accordance with systematic review standards (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2021). Articles in press and grey literature were excluded to avoid relying on incomplete or non-peer-reviewed interpretations. English was used as the language filter to maintain consistency in interpretation and avoid translation-related ambiguity when analyzing complex terms (Okoli, 2021). The review was further limited to articles published in 2025 to ensure that the conceptual analysis reflects the most current academic discussions. Only open-access articles with full downloadable texts were included to support transparency and replicability. Keyword relevance served as an initial filter to identify studies that mention key language-related terms. After this, a manual review was done to assess topical relevance, focusing only on articles that clearly define, compare, or explore these concepts in depth, in line with the study's main goal of clarifying how these terms are used.

Guided by a PRISMA flowchart, Figure 1 shows the number of articles included in this study as of 2025. The initial search in the Scopus database yielded 105,409 documents using broad search terms related to language studies. The first major filter applied was subject area, which narrowed the results to 88,421 documents, specifically

within the fields of social sciences (80,928), arts and humanities (54,043), and psychology (12,038). This step excluded 16,988 documents from unrelated fields such as medicine and engineering.
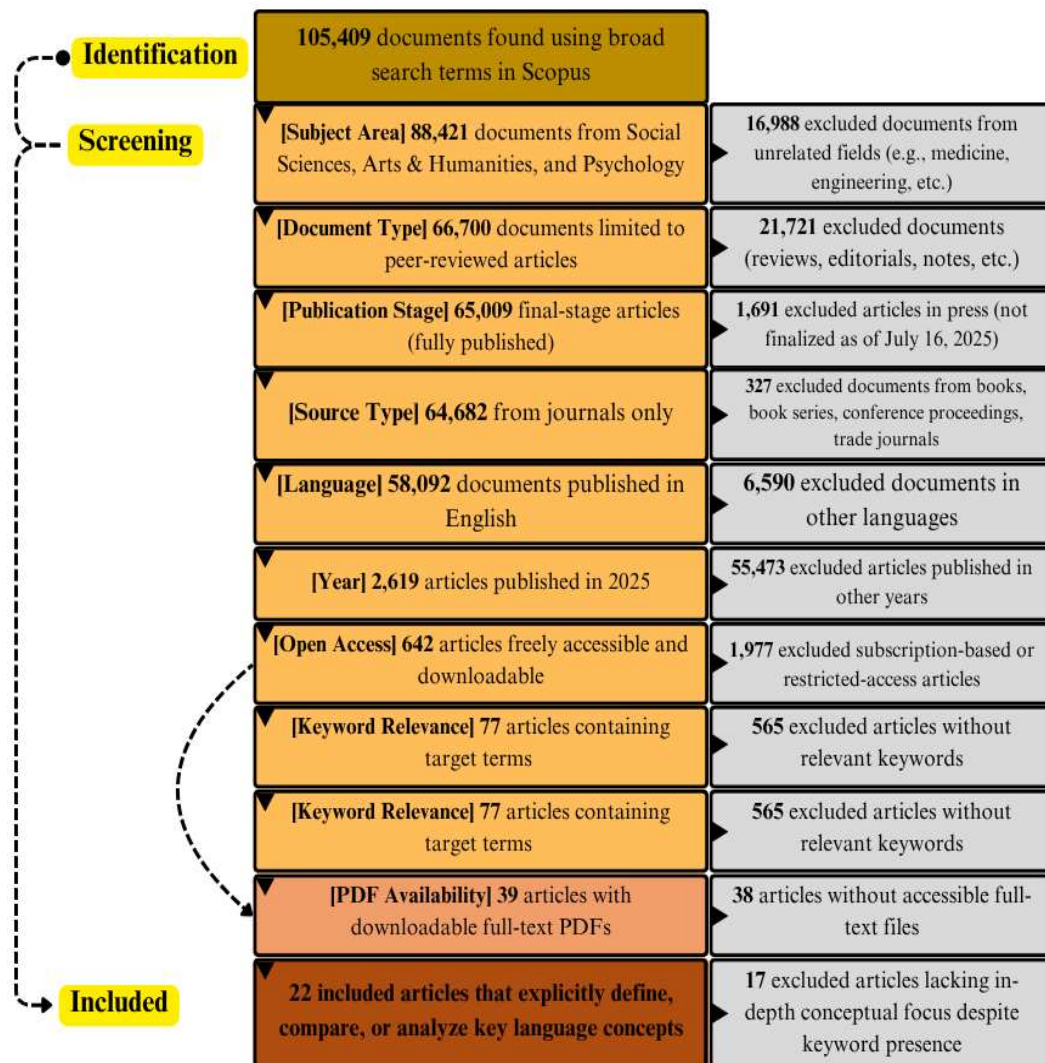

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart Illustrating in the Study

Next, the document type was limited to peer-reviewed articles, reducing the dataset to 66,700 documents, thereby excluding 21,721 items such as reviews, editorials, and notes. Filtering by publication stage removed 1,691 articles in press, leaving 65,009 fully published articles as of July 16, 2025. The source type was then limited to journal articles only, excluding 327 documents from books, conference proceedings, and trade publications, which resulted in 64,682 remaining articles.

Restricting the language to English removed 6,590 non-English articles, leaving 58,092 documents. Limiting the publication year to 2025 further reduced the pool to 2,619 articles, excluding 55,473 published in other years. Filtering by open access

removed 1,977 subscription-based articles, yielding 642 freely accessible and downloadable articles. A keyword filter was applied to focus the selection on articles that addressed key concepts, resulting in 77 relevant articles and excluding 565 that lacked any of the target terms. These terms included Multilingualism (32), Bilingualism (15), Translanguaging (11), Heritage Language (9), Second Language (8), Foreign Language (6), Code-switching (5), and Family Language Policy (3).

However, upon further manual screening, 38 articles were excluded due to the unavailability of full-text PDFs, leaving 39 articles with accessible content. Finally, another screening was conducted to ensure relevance to the study's primary aim of clarifying language-related terminology. This step excluded 17 articles that lacked in-depth conceptual discussions despite keyword relevance. The final sample thus consisted of 22 articles that explicitly defined, compared, or analyzed key language concepts, forming the core dataset for the review (Table 2).

Table 2. Mapping Authors by Language Focus in the Included Literature

Authors	L1 / Native / Mother Tongue	L2 / Foreign Language	Heritage Language	Dominant Language
Abu-Rabiah (2025)	✅	✅		
Alsahafi (2025)	✅		✅	
Atkinson et al. (2025)		✅		
Bayram & Eryılmaz (2025)		✅		
Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem (2025)	✅	✅	✅	
Dünkel et al. (2025)				✅
Ghavam Rankohi et al. (2025)	✅	✅		
Giménez & Masid Blanco (2025)			✅	
Grigorieva & Protassova (2025)				✅
Hahl et al. (2025)		✅		
Jeon et al. (2025)		✅		
Karpava et al. (2025)			✅	
Mendoza et al. (2025)	✅	✅		
Moraru et al. (2025)	✅			✅
Muliana et al. (2025)	✅			
Nhac & Nguyen (2025)	✅	✅		
Osimen et al. (2025)	✅			
Prasatyo et al. (2025)		✅	✅	
Rokita-Jaśkow & Panek (2025)			✅	
Saldivar et al. (2025)	✅	✅		✅
Sibanda & Tshehla (2025)				✅
Wang & Zhang (2025)	✅		✅	✅

Following Hallinger's (2013) systematic review framework, the researcher adopted a conceptual synthesis approach guided by thematic keyword analysis to examine how key language-related constructions are defined and interpreted in recent scholarship. This approach aligns with Snyder's (2019) guidelines for conducting conceptual

literature reviews, which emphasize the value of synthesizing diverse theoretical perspectives to develop clearer conceptual understandings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results
First Language (L1)/Native Language/Mother Tongue
The terms first language (L1), native language, and mother tongue are often used interchangeably in current research to refer to the language(s) acquired during early childhood. Mendoza et al. (2025) describe the L1 as the language naturally learned in early environments such as the home or community, often before formal schooling. Similarly, studies by Nhac and Nguyen (2025) and Muliana et al. (2025) characterize the mother tongue as closely aligned with native language and L1, especially in contexts of familial and immersive language transmission.

These early-acquired languages are typically developed through rich sensorimotor experiences and social interactions, which serve as the basis for linguistic competence, identity formation, and cognitive growth (Ghavam Rankohi et al., 2025; Osimen et al., 2025). Wang and Zhang (2025) emphasize how these foundational experiences not only shape cultural belonging but also enhance metalinguistic awareness. Saldivar et al. (2025) further link proficiency in the mother tongue to improvements in executive functioning, suggesting that a strong L1 supports additional language acquisition. Conversely, Osimen et al. (2025) caution that neglect or marginalization of native languages, whether through social pressures or institutional policies, can erode cultural continuity and disrupt intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Sociolinguistic positioning also varies across national contexts. In Israel, for example, Hebrew is widely regarded as the native language for many students, and proficiency is evaluated across core areas such as reading, writing, and speaking (Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem, 2025; Abu-Rabiah, 2025). Nonetheless, even in multilingual societies, educational ideologies often privilege dominant languages while framing students' L1s as barriers to academic success. Moraru et al. (2025) point out that monolingual teaching practices persist despite increasing linguistic diversity. Beyond the classroom, the mother tongue holds symbolic value: Alsahafi (2025) notes that tools like the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised (MEIM-R) recognize it as a key marker of ethnic identity, reflecting its significance in cultural affiliation and self-definition.

Second Language (L2)/Foreign Language
Languages learned after one's first language, commonly referred to as second languages (L2s) or foreign languages, are central to understanding multilingual development and language education. Although often used interchangeably, these terms differ based on the context of acquisition and use. According to Mendoza et al. (2025) and Bayram and Eryılmaz (2025), the distinction lies primarily in the sociolinguistic environment in which the language is learned.

A foreign language is typically acquired in formal educational settings and is not used for everyday communication in the learner's immediate surroundings. Learners may study English, for instance, in countries where English is not spoken outside the classroom, resulting in limited real-world application. Ghavam Rankohi et al. (2025), Hahl et al. (2025), and Jeon et al. (2025) describe this as a context of minimal immersion, which often places higher cognitive demands on learners and provides fewer sensorimotor experiences compared to first language acquisition. In contrast, a second language is learned in an environment where it is actively used in society, such as when individuals migrate and need to adapt to the host country's dominant language. The availability of authentic communicative contexts, across social, educational, and institutional domains, supports more integrated language learning (Mendoza et al., 2025; Bayram & Eryılmaz, 2025).

Despite differences in setting, both L2 and foreign language learning usually occur later in life and require the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Learners exhibit wide variation in proficiency across these domains (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem, 2025; Ghavam Rankohi et al., 2025). As Saldivar et al. (2025) note, language learning at this stage also involves significant cognitive effort and can benefit from strategies that enhance working memory, attentional control, and cognitive flexibility. However, excessive reliance on the first language may hinder the acquisition of the target language by limiting exposure to comprehensible input (Nhac & Nguyen, 2025).

Motivation plays a crucial role in shaping the learning experience. Foreign language learners are often motivated by instrumental goals, such as academic achievement, career advancement, or global communication (Prasatyo et al., 2025). In contrast, L2 learners in immersion or migration contexts are frequently driven by the need for social integration and participation in the host culture (Bayram & Eryılmaz, 2025). These motivational differences can influence not only language use but also attitudes toward learning.

The field of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLA/T) increasingly views L2 learning as a dynamic, relational, ecological, and embodied process (Atkinson et al., 2025). This perspective highlights the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social factors that shape the learner's development. Although second and foreign language learning emerge from distinct contexts, both present shared challenges that require responsive, context-sensitive instructional approaches.

Heritage Language (HL)

A heritage language (HL) is commonly understood as a minority language connected to an individual's family or ancestral roots, often within immigrant or diasporic communities. Although exposure typically begins in early childhood through familial interaction, it does not always result in full acquisition or long-term maintenance (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem, 2025). Giménez and Masid Blanco (2025) note that heritage language learners may not develop the language as their dominant or first language but instead acquire partial competencies, particularly in oral

comprehension and speaking, while often lacking literacy skills due to limited formal instruction.

Despite these uneven levels of proficiency, the symbolic and emotional value of heritage languages remains substantial. HLs are frequently cited as markers of cultural identity, belonging, and ethnic pride, even when not used regularly in everyday communication (Rokita-Jaśkow & Panek, 2025). However, maintaining a heritage language is increasingly difficult due to societal pressure to assimilate into dominant language cultures, limited institutional support, and reduced opportunities for intergenerational transmission (Karpava et al., 2025; Prasatyo et al., 2025).

HL preservation is therefore not only a linguistic concern but also a cultural and political act. Mothers often function as language brokers within the home, while community-based schools provide critical support for sustaining HL use across generations (Giménez & Masid Blanco, 2025). Silvestri (2025) contends that these grassroots initiatives reinforce language competence and actively resist dominant ideologies that marginalize minority languages.

Dominant Language

The notion of a dominant language is not defined by when it is acquired but by the extent of its social, institutional, and communicative power in a given society. As Grigorieva and Protassova (2025) describe, it is the language that governs access to key societal domains, including education, government, and public discourse. This language is often the medium through which formal schooling takes place, public policies are articulated, and mainstream media communicates (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025).

For individuals from minority or immigrant backgrounds, proficiency in the dominant language is frequently a prerequisite for academic success and broader societal participation (Saldivar et al., 2025; Dünkel et al., 2025). Yet the power of this language is not always accompanied by a sense of personal or cultural belonging. It may differ from the languages spoken in one's home or community, leading to internal tensions and identity negotiations. Scholars such as Moraru et al. (2025) and Wang and Zhang (2025) caution that language policies favoring a dominant language can result in subtractive bilingualism. In such cases, heritage and indigenous languages are gradually devalued or lost as speakers shift toward the dominant tongue.

Some researchers attempt to capture the complexity of multilingual experiences through the concept of a "dominant language constellation." Grigorieva and Protassova (2025) use this term to refer to the set of languages that individuals actively use in different domains of life, each with its own level of functional importance and emotional attachment. Despite this plurality, the broader societal influence of one dominant language continues to shape linguistic hierarchies and ideologies, often determining which languages are nurtured and which are neglected.

Discussion

Clarifying language-related terminologies is essential for ensuring conceptual precision in multilingual education and research. At the outset, the terms "first language" (L1), "native language," and "mother tongue" are frequently used interchangeably in early language development discourse, as each refers to a language learned naturally during early childhood, typically within the home and immediate community before the start of formal education. These terms are unified by their emphasis on foundational linguistic development and their associations with identity, cognitive growth, and a sense of belonging.

Drawing on the perspectives of Ghavam Rankohi et al. (2025) and Wang and Zhang (2025), this study acknowledges that early-acquired languages often form the basis of an individual's self-concept and play a central role in shaping early communicative competence. However, the nuances among these terms become more apparent when examined across sociolinguistic, educational, and policy contexts. For instance, the concept of "mother tongue" often carries cultural or symbolic meaning, especially in discourses of ethnicity or nationalism. This view aligns with Alsahafi's (2025) argument that mother tongue usage is not only linguistic but also emblematic of deeper ancestral and cultural ties.

In contrast, researchers in applied linguistics tend to prefer L1 due to its analytical clarity, particularly in studies focused on acquisition sequences and cognitive processing. Meanwhile, the label "native language" serves as a more context-dependent construct, sometimes referencing the first language learned but also functioning as a marker of identification or proficiency, even when the language in question is not the speaker's earliest. From this perspective, it is useful to apply L1 in empirical research focused on acquisition and mental processing, mother tongue in contexts dealing with ethnic identity and symbolic resonance, and native language when addressing language policy, curriculum, or broader societal narratives in which definitions may vary across regions.

Moreover, while both second language (L2) and foreign language refer to languages acquired after the first language, their distinction lies primarily in the context of exposure and functional use. A second language is typically learned in environments where it is used for everyday communication, such as when a migrant acquires English in the United States. In contrast, a foreign language is studied in settings where it has little or no role outside the classroom, as is often the case with English instruction in countries like Japan. This contextual divide carries important implications for language acquisition and pedagogy. Here, exposure becomes a key differentiator: L2 learners often engage in authentic communicative interactions through immersion, while foreign language learners rely largely on formal instruction and textbook-based input.

As Prasatyo et al. (2025) point out, these conditions influence not only the nature of input and learning strategies but also learner motivation. Those acquiring a second language may be motivated by social integration, professional demands, or daily necessity, whereas foreign language learners are often driven by academic or aspirational goals. From a pedagogical standpoint, these differences call for tailored

approaches. Foreign language learners tend to benefit from structured input and explicit instruction, while L2 learners respond well to experiential learning and interactive environments. It is therefore conceptually useful to refer to a language as an L2 when it functions in the learner's broader social context, and as a foreign language when it is confined to formal academic settings with limited opportunities for real-world use.

Heritage language (HL) occupies a unique and often ambiguous space in the language learning spectrum, sitting between the boundaries of L1 and L2. It typically refers to a language learned informally at home during early childhood, particularly within immigrant or minority communities. However, unlike a fully acquired L1, a heritage language is not always completely developed or maintained across all modalities. Many heritage speakers exhibit strong oral fluency but limited literacy, and some may only retain passive understanding (Giménez & Masid Blanco, 2025). Despite these varying levels of proficiency, the heritage language is deeply tied to one's sense of ethnic identity and the transmission of culture across generations. Rokita-Jaśkow and Panek (2025) emphasize that the emotional and symbolic weight of a heritage language often surpasses its practical utility, making it a powerful marker of belonging even when it is not the speaker's dominant or socially functional language. For this reason, the term heritage language is best applied when referring to ancestral or minority languages learned informally at home but not used as the primary medium of education or communication in wider society.

Lastly, the concept of the dominant language is rooted not in the age of acquisition but in institutional and social power. It is typically the language used in formal education, government, media, and public discourse, often serving as a gatekeeper for academic and economic success (Grigorieva & Protassova, 2025). While individuals may acquire this language later in life, they are frequently required to learn and use it for integration, especially when their L1 or HL lacks broader societal recognition. As Moraru et al. (2025) caution, policies that enforce the use of a dominant language often contribute to subtractive bilingualism, wherein home or heritage languages are displaced rather than supported. This creates a tension between personal linguistic identity and public language demands. Therefore, the dominant language is best understood as a macro-level category reflecting societal hierarchies and language policy pressures, intersecting with but not reducible to L1, L2, or HL.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the quadrant chart organizes key language-related terms along two axes: mode of acquisition (vertical) and domain of use (horizontal). The vertical axis ranges from early natural acquisition to later formal learning, while the horizontal axis spans from personal or home use to societal or institutional use. In the upper-left quadrant, Mother Tongue, First Language (L1), and Native Language cluster around early home-based acquisition, with subtle differences in placement. Mother tongue appears closest to the axis, highlighting its strong cultural and symbolic ties; L1 follows, reflecting its use in research and technical contexts; native language is positioned slightly farther, indicating broader associations with fluency or identification, even when not learned first. Heritage Language (HL) appears in the lower-left quadrant, representing partially acquired ancestral or home languages

typically learned informally and maintained orally with limited formal support. Second Language (L2) and Foreign Language (FL) occupy the lower-right quadrant, both associated with later formal learning for societal communication. L2 is closer to the axis, signifying functional use in daily life, while FL sits farther out, reflecting academic learning with limited real-world exposure. Dominant Language spans both right-hand quadrants, as it may be acquired early or later, but its defining feature is societal and institutional dominance rather than personal acquisition history.
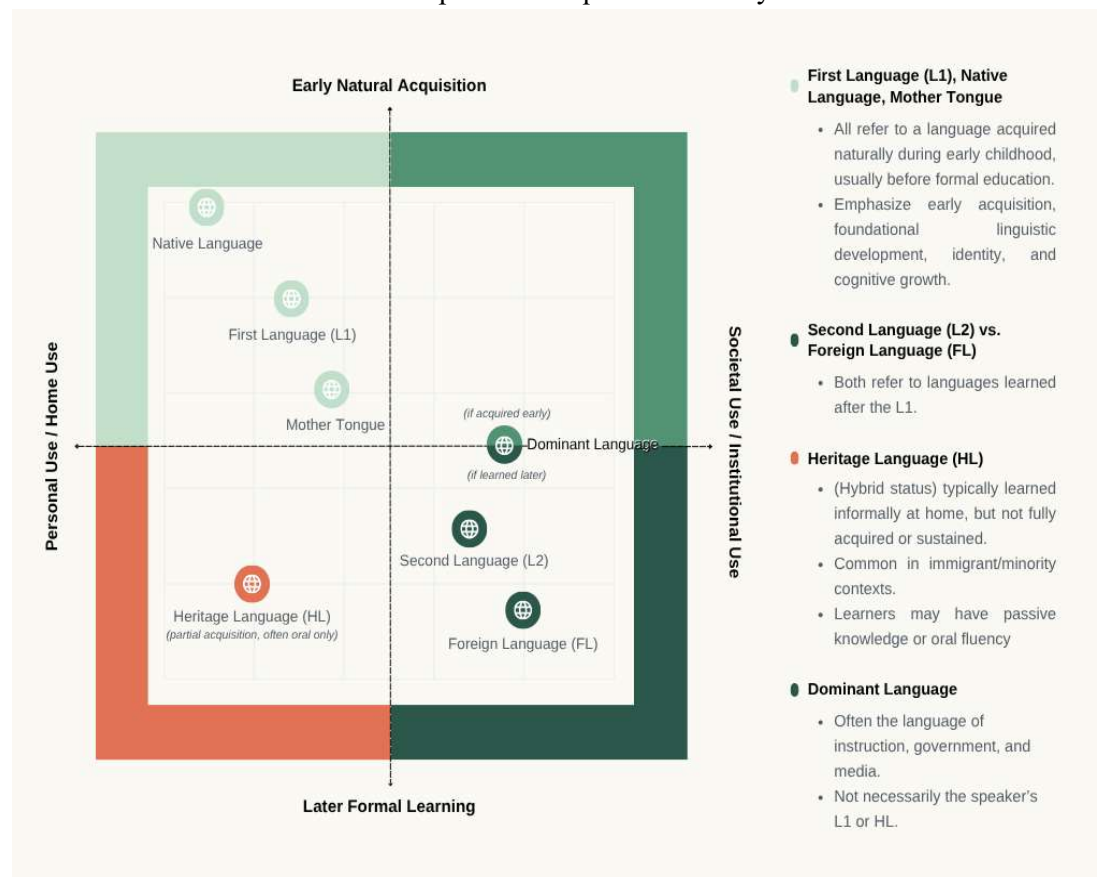

Figure 2. Quadrant Chart of Language Terms By Acquisition and Usage Context

In other words, to ensure clear delineation among language-related terms, it is recommended to use First Language (L1) in empirical and psycholinguistic research focused on acquisition order and cognitive processes. Mother tongue should be reserved for discussions involving cultural identity, ethnicity, or symbolic connections to language. Native language is appropriate in broader policy or educational discourse where definitions tend to be more flexible. Second Language (L2) is best used when the language is functionally integrated into daily communication and societal life, while a Foreign Language (FL) should be used in academic contexts in which the language is not used outside the classroom. The term heritage language is recommended when referring to early-learned but non-dominant languages maintained within families or communities, often with limited formal literacy or institutional support. Finally, the dominant language should be employed in analyses of language policy, institutional

authority, and sociolinguistic power, particularly in cases where language use is shaped more by societal pressures than by personal linguistic history. These distinctions are essential for promoting conceptual precision in multilingual education, informed language planning, and cross-cultural research.

Essentially, this study has important value both in theory and in practice. Theoretically, clarifying these terms helps researchers avoid confusion and speak a common language when studying how people learn and use multiple languages. It provides a framework for future linguistics, education, and language policy studies. On the practical side, the results can guide teachers, schools, and policymakers in making better decisions. For example, teachers can design lessons recognizing students' different language backgrounds, while policymakers can create more inclusive programs that respect dominant and minority languages. By being more precise about what we mean by these language-related terms, this research helps improve how languages are taught, supported, and valued in real-life classrooms and communities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study clarifies how key language-related terms such as first language, native language, mother tongue, second language, foreign language, heritage language, and dominant language are conceptually distinguished in current literature. The findings show that while these terms often overlap in everyday and academic usage, each carries unique meanings depending on the context in which it is applied. Some refer more to how a language is acquired, others to how it functions in society, and others to how it connects to personal identity or institutional power. Understanding these differences is important for making research more accurate and helping schools and policies become more inclusive and respectful of different cultures and languages.

While this study clarifies how these terms are used across research and practice, it also has limitations. The discussion has been mainly conceptual, relying on how terms are defined in the literature rather than how they are understood or applied by learners, teachers, or policymakers in everyday settings. Another limitation is the focus on labeling and categorization, which may not fully capture the fluid and dynamic ways multilingual speakers use their languages in practice. For example, translanguaging and code-switching show that people often mix and move between languages, making it difficult to neatly fit their language use into fixed categories. These limitations point to two important directions for future research: first, conducting studies that clearly distinguish between translanguaging and code-switching, and second, examining whether key stakeholders (such as teachers, students, and policymakers) can accurately understand and apply these language-related terms.

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