

The Influence of First Language Acquisition on Early Childhood Language Literacy: The Case of Yaba Local Government Area of Lagos State

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Abstract

First language (L₁) is the language a person has learned from birth or within the critical period. The learner speaks L₁ fluently and it is often the basis for cultural identification. First language might not be the native language or mother tongue (MT) of an individual, but it might be the language of the environment in which an individual grows up. This study investigates the influence of L₁ on the early childhood language literacy and how it contributes to children's early years' language proficiency. A four Likert scale questionnaire was used to elicit information from 50 primary school teachers in Yaba Local Government Area of Lagos State. The data collected was analyzed using simple percentages and frequency counts, while Chi square was used to test the hypothesis formulated. The study found out that first language has great influence on early childhood language literacy. Recruitment and preparation of teachers who are proficient in L₁ and also have the knowledge of practices to teach the content areas are very crucial. These support the children learning the language. Parental support is also very essential to enhance the success of L₁ acquisition. Instructional materials for both teachers and students also need to be available in the language instruction.

1. Introduction and Background of Study

Language is very crucial in humans, especially the First Language. The First Language might not be the native language of an individual, but it might be the language of the environment in which an individual grows up. In some countries, *native language* or *mother tongue* refer to the language of one's ethnic group rather than one's first language. Language is also an important way to make sense out of past experience or to learn from. The age of language acquisition which acts as a predictor of ultimate language proficiency in humans is quite critical (Newport, Bavelier & Neville 2001; Singleton & Lengyel 1995; Penfield & Roberts, 1959).

The central role of language is communication (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Tabors, 1997). This is very crucial because a properly educated person, no matter his field, must be able to communicate ideas, principles and information about himself and his environment to the outside world using language. If the person has properly grasped the language of instruction, there is no doubt that he will appropriately apply the acquired knowledge as the need arises (Opara & Okudo, 2015:187-194). The chances of keeping children of early years in school, then, are significantly improved if they can understand and learn productively in the language of the classroom in addition to their already acquired L₁ thereby improving language learning outcomes (Okudo & Omotuyole, 2013:13-18). In the beginning, children's language growth comes from their direct experience. It is personal and related to the present. As their language understanding grows, children can relate to ever more expanding situations. Children use language metaphorically, providing evidence that for children's language it is creative as well as imitative. For children, language is a powerful tool for understanding the world around them. By questioning, children become active in their attempt to comprehend and learn (Au; Knightly; Jun; & Oh, 2002; Oh; Jun; Knightly; & Au, 2003). Language learning is not really something that the child does; it is something that happens to the child placed in an appropriate environment, much as the child's body grows and matures in a predetermined way when provided with appropriate nutrition and environmental stimulation. Mother tongue (MT) or native language is the language which the person acquires in early years and which normally becomes her natural instrument of thought and communication. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Suina, 2004) defines mother tongue as one's native language; the language learned by children and passed from one generation to the next; it is received at birth or from ancestors. The way children learn language follows a specific pattern and is inherently systemic in nature. It is clear that children must be exposed to language and are able to interact with others, but how that exposure and interaction occur is extremely variable. Even though young children are not formally taught first language, its acquisition is part of the overall development of children physically, socially, and cognitively. There is strong evidence that children may never acquire a language if they have not been exposed to it before they reach the age of 6 or 7 (McLaughlin, 1984). Children between the ages of 2 and 6 acquire language so rapidly that by 6 they are competent language users. By the time children are of school-age, they have amazing language ability; it is a seemingly effortless acquisition (Newport, 1991). Okudo and Omotuyole (2013:13-18) are of the opinion that the symbolic language which the children arrive at school with needs to be concretized with the use of locally made instructional materials. This would make them to participate fully in early childhood language learning literacy and also to be able develop communicative competence that is clear, meaningful, and culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Ball (2010) finds out that becoming literate and fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development, as well as for academic achievement. Chuo and Walter (2011) add that children who are taught in their mother tongue (Kom-language in Cameroun) perform significantly better than their peers who attend schools where English is the medium of instruction. Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) therefore suggest the use of games such as tongue twisters in MT to explore pronunciation, and poetry or song to rehearse grammatical information which would help to improve language literacy in the early years.

In the present day Nigeria, the average child does not speak more than one language (English) which is the language of instruction otherwise known as the official language of the nation. In a few cases there is addition of Pidgin English, which is the language of communication in most urban areas. This scenario puts Nigeria on the verge of cultural identity loss and damage which is a matter of national concern (Ohiri-Aniche, 2008; Njemanze, 2012). Most Nigerian parents do not encourage their children/wards to speak their native tongue or mother language. This leads to the problem of loss of invaluable identity of the nation as a whole. This study therefore examined the influence of first language (mother tongue in most cases) acquisition on early children's language literacy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the importance of First Language acquisition and its influence on early childhood language literacy. Specifically the study has the following objectives:

- 1 To examine the effects of first language acquisition on child's intellectual development.
- 2 To examine how the first language contributes to early childhood language learning education.
- 3 To find out whether parents influence the use of first language in the early childhood language literacy.
- 4 To find out the strategies that can be used to encourage first language in schools.

To achieve these objectives the following research questions were raised.

- 1 What are the effects of first language acquisition on child's intellectual development?
- 2 How does first language acquisition contribute to the early childhood language learning literacy?
- 3 How do parents influence the use of first language acquisition in the early childhood's language literacy?

4 What are the strategies that can be used to encourage first language in schools?

The following hypothesis was used for the study:

H₀: First language especially the mother tongue has no significant effect on early childhood's language literacy.

This study would be of great benefit as it will provide necessary information on the concept of first language (native language or mother tongue), it will expose parents to the benefits of mother tongue acquisition on children's language learning, and it will also contribute to field of early childhood language literacy and proficiency the society.

2. Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. Data were collected using questionnaire distributed to primary school teachers, on the influence of mother tongue acquisition on early childhood's language literacy in some selected primary schools in Yaba area of education district IV of Lagos State. The questionnaire was in a four Likert scale format.

The population of the study comprised all primary school teachers in Yaba local government area in education district IV of Lagos State. Simple random sampling technique was used to select ten primary schools and their classroom teachers. This gave a total of fifty primary school teachers. The primary six classroom teachers were exempted because the school authority maintained that the pupils were being prepared for external examinations (Common Entrance).

A total of 50 questionnaires with different items based on the variables of research purposes were constructed. The questionnaires were also distributed to the respondents in their various primary schools. The researchers collected the questionnaires the same day so as to achieve high percentage of returns. Responses were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics of percentages and frequency counts.

3. Analysis

The following research questions were used for the analysis of the data:

3.1 Research Question One

What are the effects of first language acquisition on child's intellectual development?

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the respondents' responses to research question one

	Items	S.A	A	D	S.D	TOTAL
1	Children who master their first language perform better in schools.	14 28.00%	18 36.00%	17 34.00%	1 2.00%	50 100%
2	First language can help children understand the world at an early age.	16 32.00%	23 46.00%	11 22.00%	0	50 100%
3	First language can help children's intellectual development thereby increasing their speed of reasoning.	21 42.00%	14 28.00%	15 30.00%	0	50 100%
4	Mastery of first language can contribute to children's intellectual development through social interaction with peers.	17 34.00%	26 52.00%	7 14.00%	0	50 100%

Table 1 portrays the distribution of responses to the performance of children who master their first language in schools. The table shows that 14 (28%) of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 18 (36%) agreed while 17 (34%) of the respondents disagreed and 1 (2%) strongly disagreed with the statement. This shows that a high percentage of the respondents (64%) agreed with the statement. The table also shows that 16 (32%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 23 (46%) of the respondents agreed, 11 (22%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This shows that a high percentage of the respondents (78%) agreed with the statement that language can help children understand the world at an early age. The table shows that 21 (42%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 14(28%) of the respondents agreed, 15 (30%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This show that a high percentage of the respondents (70%) strongly agreed with the statement that first language acquisition can help children's intellectual development thereby increasing their speed of reasoning. The table also depicts that 17 (34%) of respondents strongly agreed, 26 (52%) of the respondents agreed, 7 (14%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This show that a high percentage (66%) agreed with the statement that language contributes to children's intellectual development through social interaction with peers.

3.2 Research Question Two

How does first language (MT) contribute to the early childhood language literacy?

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the respondents' responses to research question two.

S/N	Items	S.A	A	D	S.D	TOTAL
5	Mastery of first language helps children understand diversity in the world.	18 36.00%	22 44.00%	10 20.00%	0	50 100%
6	Understanding of first language promotes intellectual development in other curriculum areas.	12 24.00%	25 50.00%	13 26.00%	0	50 100%
7	First language acquisition contributes to children speaking more than one language at an early age.	17 34.00%	18 36.00%	15 30.00%	0	50 100%
8	Acquisition of first language promotes pride and language literacy in the child in the early age.	14 28.00%	21 42.00%	11 22.00%	4 8.00%	50 100%

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents to how language helps children understand diversity in the world. Table 2 depicts that 18 (36%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 22 (44%) of the respondents agreed, 10 (20%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This shows that a high percentage (80%) agreed with the statement that mastery of the first language helps children understand diversity in the world. The table also shows that 12 (24%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 25 (50%) of the respondents agreed, and 13 (26%) of the respondents disagreed with the second statement. This shows that a high percentage 37(74%) of the respondents agreed with the second statement that understanding of first language promotes intellectual development in other areas of study. Table 3 also shows that 17 (34%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 18 (36%) of the respondents agreed, 15 (30%) of the respondents disagreed with the third statement. This shows that a high percentage 35(70%) agreed with the third statement that first language acquisition contributes to helping children to speak more than one language at an early age. The table portrays that 14 (28%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 21 (42%) of the respondents agreed, 11 (22%) of the respondents disagreed, and 4 (8%) of the respondents strongly disagreed with the last statement. This shows that a high percentage 35(70%)

agreed with the last statement that first language acquisition promotes pride in children’s MT literacy in the early years.

3.3 Research Question Three

How do parents influence the use of first language (especially MT) in the early childhood’s language literacy?

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the respondents’ responses to research question three.

S/N	Items	S.D	A	D	S.D	TOTAL
9	Language literacy can be promoted through the use of greeting in the MT.	9 18.00%	38 76.00%	3 6.00%	0	50 100%
10	Language literacy can be promoted through day-to-day verbal communication in MT.	28 46.00%	20 40.00%	2 4.00%	0	50 100%
11	Language literacy can be promoted when MT is being used as a subject matter in schools.	16 32.00%	30 60.00%	4 8.00%	0	50 100%
12	Language literacy can be promote by using storytelling and folktales in the first language especially the MT.	20 40.00%	25 50.00%	5 10.00%	0	50 100%

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents’ responses to acquisition of language through greeting. The table shows that 9 (18%) strongly agreed with the statement, 38 (76%) agreed with the statement and 3 (6%) disagreed with the statement. This shows that a higher percentage of the respondents agreed (94%) with the statement that first language acquisition can be promoted through greeting. The table shows that 28 (56%) of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 20 (40%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, and 2 (4%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This shows that a high percentage (96%) strongly agreed with the statement that language can be promoted through day-to-day verbal communication. Table 3 shows that 16 (32%) strongly agreed with the statement, 30 (60%) of the respondents agreed, 4 (8%) disagreed with the statement. This shows that a high percentage of the respondents (92%) agreed with the statement that language can be promoted through learning it and using it as a subject matter.

The table 3 also shows that 20 (40%) of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 25 (50%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, 5 (10%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This shows that a high percentage of the respondents 45(90%) agreed with the last statement that first language literacy and usage can be promoted through storytelling and folk tales in the first language especially through the MT.

3.4 Research Question Four

What are the strategies that can be used to encourage first language (especially the MT) in schools?

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of the respondents’ responses to research question four

S/N	Items	S.A	A	D	SD	TOTAL
13	Setting up of an MT language laboratory helps to promote the language.	12 24.00%	15 30.00%	18 36.00%	5 10.00%	50 100%
14	Availability of MT language textbooks promotes the language in schools.	16 32.00%	13 26.00%	17 34.00%	4 8.00%	50 100%
15	Employing language teacher for each common MT language in the environment promotes it.	14 28.00%	31 62.00%	5 10.00%	0	50 100%
16	Encouraging the speaking of local languages in schools helps to promote it.	19 38.00%	22 44.00%	9 18.00%	0	50 100%

Table 4 portrays the distribution of respondents’ responses on how setting up of local language laboratory could promote the early children’s language literacy. The table shows that 12 (24%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 15 (30%) of the respondents agreed, 18 (36%) of the respondents disagreed, 5 (10) of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. This shows that an average percentage (54%) agreed with the statement that setting up of a Mother tongue language laboratory could promote the language literacy in early childhood. The table also shows that 16 (32%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 13 (26%) of the respondents agreed, 17 (34%) of the respondents disagreed, 4 (8%) of the respondents strongly disagreed with the second statement. This shows that an average

percentage 29(58%) agreed with the second statement that availability of textbooks on L₁ promotes the language literacy of early childhood in schools. The table shows that 14 (28%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 31 (62%) of the respondents agreed, 5 (10%) of the respondents disagreed with the third statement. This shows that a high percentage 45(90%) agreed with the third statement that employing language teachers for each L₁, especially mother tongue languages, promotes language literacy in early childhood. The table shows that 19 (38%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 22 (44%) of the respondents agreed, 9 (18%) of the respondents disagreed with the fourth statement. This shows that a high percentage 41(82%) agreed with the statement that encouraging speaking of first language especially the MT in schools promotes its acquisition in the early years of children.

3.5 Test of Hypothesis

The hypothesis formulated in this study was also tested using Chi square (X^2) statistical method. The decision region was based on the rules that if the p value (i.e. asymptomatic value) is less than 0.05, then there is a significant relationship. But if the p value is higher than 0.05, then there is no significant relationship.

Table 5: Analysis of Hypothesis Testing

Language can be acquired through direct teaching	Language can help children understand the world at an early age			Total
	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Disagreed	
Strongly agreed	6.1 (20.00%)	8.7 (14.00%)	4.2 (4.00%)	19.0(38.00%)
Agreed	9.0 (12.00%)	12.9 (32.00%)	6.2 (12.00%)	28.0 (56.00%)
Disagreed	1.0 (.00%)	1.4 (00%)	7 (6.00%)	3.0 (6.00%)
Total	16.0 (32.00%)	23.0 (46.00%)	11.0 (22.00%)	50 (100.00%)
$X^2 = 16.385, df = 4, p\text{-value} = 0.003$				

4. Summary of Findings

It should be deduced from table 5 that the calculated value (X^2) is 16.385 and the 'p' value is 0.003 which is less than the level of significance of 0.05. Hence, the Null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected therefore first language has effect on children's years of language learning and literacy. This agrees with Nadine (2003) who asserted that first language (especially the mother tongue) has effect on children's language literacy. Similar results were also achieved in a programme in the Philippines, where children learning in their first language (mother tongue) showed statistically significant improvements in all subjects compared to children who were learning only in Filipino (Walter and Dekker, 2011).

5. Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made in order to improve first language acquisition, especially the mother tongue education, which would enhance the early years of children's language literacy.

Teacher recruitment and preparation: Availability of teachers who are speakers of L_1 (especially the mother tongue) fluently is a key consideration for early year children's successful language literacy. Teachers need to be proficient in the L_1 especially in the mother tongue and have knowledge of practices to teach the content areas in the mother language and have knowledge of practices to teach and support children learning first, second or foreign language.

Parental support is very essential to the success of a first language especially the mother tongue acquisition. Therefore, parents need to be well informed about the benefits of MT and be reassured that L_1 (especially mother tongue) acquisition would not hinder their children's opportunity to learn a foreign or national language which often remains a key goal for sending their children to school.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study was restricted to Yaba Local Government Area of Lagos State. There is need for more intensive research to be conducted in other areas of Lagos and among other communities to establish the influence of mother tongue on child's learning in the environment. The study focused on the positive effects of first language on early childhood's language literacy so there is need for other researchers to make further study on its negative effects.

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